



HOMETOWN

WHERE JESUS LIVED

BY

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PREFACE

The Old Testament foretold that the Messiah would be associated with four specific regions:

Bethlehem (Micah 5:2)

Egypt (Hosea 11:1)

Nazareth (Isaiah 11:1)

Capernaum (Isaiah 9:1-2)

How did Jesus fulfill all of these?

Why were these locations chosen?

What difference does it make?

Hometown consists of four study guides for personal or group discussion and twenty-four devotions for further insight. You will appreciate the uniqueness and power of God's Word as you understand the numerous prophecies that are all fulfilled in the life of Jesus. Your faith will be strengthened as you realize how every transition of Jesus' life had meaning.

A stylized, high-contrast illustration in shades of gray. On the left, a woman (Mary) is shown in profile, wearing a long robe and a head covering. On the right, a man (Jesus) with a beard and long hair is shown from the chest up, wearing a robe. The background features faint, geometric shapes suggesting a building or architectural elements.

LESSON ONE

JESUS IS FROM: BETHLEHEM

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

I was raised speaking of distance in blocks, not miles. My girlfriend (and now wife) lived six blocks (not a half-mile) from me until she was in tenth grade when her family moved to the “boonies” of Sterling Heights. She was not blocks or miles away; she was a whole different city away. Although it was “only” eight miles, in my world, it was forever away. That is almost 100 blocks.

We anticipated going to college, getting married, staying in the Detroit Metro Area, and having our children who would be born at Royal Oak Beaumont. The hospital was a little ways away, but it would be the right choice.

With that being said, our son was born in Dallas, Texas, and our daughter was born in Traverse City, Michigan (1250 miles or 15,000 blocks apart from each other).

It has been said, “You can take a boy out of the country, but you can’t take the country out of the boy.” That may be true, but you normally can’t take a man out of the city.

1. Where you raised in the city or country? What was it like?

2. How often have you moved? Do you prefer city or country?

There are over 330 prophecies recorded in the Old Testament concerning the Messiah that have been fulfilled in Jesus. One of the most amazing ones is found in Micah 5:2, ***“But you, O Bethlehem***

Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.” Micah says that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

There are three important items about Bethlehem.

Jesus being born in Bethlehem related to prophecy.

Micah was written about 700 years before the time of Jesus. Angela and I could not even predict where our children would be born 15 years ahead of time. I would have laughed if my grandfather had told me when I was young where my children would have been born. However, Micah's prophecy being 700 years before Jesus, would mean Micah was speaking at about the time of Jesus' great, great grandfather. Although it was a town that boasted of having only hundreds of people, Bethlehem would be honored as host of the birth of the Messiah.

3. How far back have you or a relative traced your family tree?

People were anticipating the coming of the Messiah. Matthew 2:4-6 says, *“And assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: ‘And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’”*

4. How did the chief priests and scribes know where the Messiah would be born?

5. Does this imply that initially some thought Jesus was the Messiah? Who would this include?

In Luke 2:8-15, angels directed shepherds to go to Bethlehem, ***“And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!’ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.’”***

6. Who did the angels say was born?

7. What significance can there be in God including the shepherds into the scene?

“The miracle of Christmas is not on 34th street;
it's in Bethlehem.”
Rick Warren

Jesus being born in Bethlehem related to world events.

Luke 2:1-7 describes the circumstances surrounding the birth of the Christ, ***“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”***

8. Why did Joseph go to Bethlehem?

9. Why would Joseph have his pregnant wife make such a difficult trip?

God said the Christ would be born in Bethlehem. So, He needed to have Joseph take Mary there even though she was “great with child.” God chose that year at that time because He knew the whole known world would need to be registered in their home towns. God’s timing is always precise and right.

10. Do you remember a time when God’s timing surprised you?

“Look at the Bethlehem birth.
A king ordered a census.
Joseph was forced to travel.
Mary, as round as a ladybug,
bounced on a donkey’s back.
The hotel was full.
The hour was late.
The event was one big hassle.
Yet, out of the hassle, hope was born.
It still is.”
Max Lucado

Jesus being born in Bethlehem related to history.

Jesus' birthplace tied Him to royalty. In Luke 2:10-11, we read, ***"And the angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.'"***

11. What name did the angels use for Bethlehem?

12. What do we know about David?

Jerusalem could have been a natural choice for the birth of Jesus (probably more inns). However, God chose a city five miles (about 60 blocks) south. He chose Bethlehem. Luke 2:4 says, ***"And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David."***

David was from Bethlehem. In 1 Samuel 17:12, we read, ***"Now David was the son of an Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah, named Jesse, who had eight sons. In the days of Saul the man was already old and advanced in years."*** John 7:42 adds, ***"Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?"***

Jesus, being born in Bethlehem, aligned Him with everyone from shepherds to royalty. It is an amazing picture.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer made an interesting observation, "There are only two places where the powerful and great in this world lose their courage, tremble in the depths of their souls, and become truly afraid. These are the manger and the cross of Jesus Christ....No priest, no theologian stood at the cradle of Bethlehem. And yet, all Christian theology finds its beginnings in the miracle of miracles, that God became human."

13. What does the birth of Jesus mean to you?

"One response was given by the innkeeper
when Mary and Joseph wanted to find a room
where the Child could be born.
The innkeeper was not hostile;
he was not opposed to them,
but his inn was crowded;
his hands were full;
his mind was preoccupied.

This is the answer that millions are giving today.

Like a Bethlehem innkeeper,
they cannot find room for Christ.

All the accommodations in their hearts
are already taken up by other crowding interests.

Their response is not atheism.

It is not defiance.

It is preoccupation and the feeling of being able
to get on reasonably well without Christianity."

Billy Graham

LESSON ONE | JESUS IS FROM: BETHLEHEM

SIT TO MY RIGHT

BETHLEHEM, DEVOTION 1

Pastor Ryan Story

I have an odd pet peeve - I am a grown adult, and I hate when someone tells me to move seats. I do not like losing the ability to choose where I want to sit. I love that the movie theatre near my house allows me to choose where I sit when I enjoy a movie. I love that planes allow me to choose if I want the window or an aisle. A waitress can win me over from moment one if she just asks me, "Booth or table?" I actually have a desired place at the dinner table as well, but it seems my children switch the assigned seating every few days, so I begrudgingly submit to them out of reverence for Christ. For me, where I sit matters.

Give Psalm chapter 110 a read at some point today. Do not make excuses; it is only seven verses! In the 110th Psalm, we see in two different verses (again, it is a seven verse Psalm) the notion of where we should be sitting and where the Lord sits. Both times it is to the right of God. Psalm 110:1 says, ***"The Lord says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.'"*** Verse five reiterates, ***"The Lord is at your right hand; he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath."*** In both these verses, it tells us that we should sit to God's right, and He sits on our right. God is both king and servant. He is the One who deserves the utmost honor and yet honors others.

This is an amazing concept if one understands the importance of sitting to the right of someone. If you are sitting to the right of someone, that person is recognizing the one to the right with dignity and honor of sitting, hence the term "right-hand man." During the martyrdom of Stephen in the Book of Acts chapter seven, there is the

fulfillment of this prophecy. At the moment of Stephen's last breath, he looks to the heavens and says, ***"And he said, 'behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God'"*** (Acts 7:56). There are many ideas as to why Jesus was not sitting at this moment, and I tend to believe it was Jesus standing out of respect for watching His faithful servant Stephen being killed by rocks because he was preaching the truth about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet, here we see Jesus at the right hand of the Father.

Stephen was obedient to the calling God put on his life. While I cannot say that you were called for such a fate as him, I also cannot say that you are not. The reality is sitting at the right hand of a king was a place reserved for trusted and obedient servants.

So on what side is Jesus going to ask you to sit?

LINE OF DAVID

BETHLEHEM, DEVOTION 2

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.” Jeremiah 23:5

The ***“righteous Branch”*** refers to the Messiah. The Jews knew the Messiah was coming and that He would come from the line of David. If someone claimed to be the Messiah, one way of checking was to make sure their family tree included David. If they were not of the line of David, they failed one of the 330 tests (prophecies) and could be scratched off the list of potential candidates. A score of less than 100% was an automatic failure.

In 2 Samuel 7:12-13, Nathan tells David about the Lord’s covenant with him, ***“When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”*** He not only said David’s “offspring,” but he simplified it by saying “from your body.” The promise was not vague. Verse 16 adds, ***“And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.”*** In both places, it is stated the kingdom would be forever. This happened by the Messiah.

God likes to make things clear. Therefore, He recorded both the genealogy of Joseph and Mary. Both families are from the line of David.

Matthew chapter 1 records the genealogy of Joseph. Verse 1 gives a great summary, ***“The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.”*** Matthew then starts with Abraham (verse 2), goes to David (verse 6), and ends up with a great summation in Jesus, ***“and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ”*** (verse 16).

Luke chapter 3 records the genealogy of Mary. This genealogy begins with Mary’s family (verse 23) and works backward to finally reach David (verse 31).

I imagine as a child, Jesus always did all the extra credit homework. In coming to Earth, He needed to fulfill some 330 prophecies to be considered the Messiah. One of those was to be from the line of David. He fulfilled it twice!

In Acts 13:22-23, Paul gives a history lesson saying, ***“And when he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king, of whom he testified and said, ‘I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will.’ Of this man’s offspring God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised.”***

Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is the Savior!

THEY FELL SILENT

BETHLEHEM, DEVOTION 3

Pastor Ryan Story

Anytime I hear or read about “The Day of the Lord,” I instantly get flashbacks of my time in college working my way towards my Bachelor in Biblical Studies. I internally shriek at being reminded of the number of papers I had to do on this subject. This devotion may or may not have just caused me to eat a whole bag of popcorn and ten Oreos out of remembrance of this subject. The central theme of the entire book of Amos revolves around when “The day the Lord” comes back. Now for all you eschatology junkies out there, this devotion will leave you a bit wanting for more, but feel free to have some great conversations in your Growth Community. However, for those less informed with “The Day of the Lord,” it is the day that Jesus is coming back for His Church.

In Amos chapter 9, God’s Word tells us about the destruction of Israel. Israel, at this time, was becoming increasingly disobedient, faithless, sinful, lustful, and idolatrous. Our Heavenly Creator does not tend to take this kind of sin lightly, so He declares that destruction was coming Israel’s way. God uses the Assyrian army to sack and destroy Israel. I am coming to find there is a constant theme in the Bible that when God is in the midst, when there is death, there is also life that follows after destruction. Amos 9:11-12 says that after God’s swift judgment there will be a ***“day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old, that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name,” declares the Lord who does this.***

Amazingly God fulfills this prophecy in two ways. The first was through divine circumstance as Ezra and Nehemiah are tasked by

pagan kings to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and eventually the temple. At the time of Amos, the temple that Solomon constructed for the Lord was destroyed by the Babylonian army. The booth that Amos talks about in verse 11 is the tabernacle of David. The first thing Ezra and Nehemiah built when they returned to Jerusalem was a place to worship God, and this is where the tabernacle resided.

The way Amos' prophecy comes true is when James speaks with the rest of the leaders of the Church at the Jerusalem Council. A major subject this council talked about was the issue Gentiles brought to the notion of what salvation looked like. James says that salvation from God has come to Gentiles as well as Jews. Acts 15:12-17 says, ***“And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, ‘Brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, “After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things.””***

The prophecy of David's booth being rebuilt was ultimately fulfilled because, upon the death of Jesus, the veil in the temple that separated people from the presence of God was torn. The tabernacle was always the place where God's presence dwelt. Because of Jesus, the presence of God was now the wealth inside of man. It was no longer a place.

THRONE OF DAVID

BETHLEHEM, DEVOTION 4

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

Several verses speak of the Messiah (Jesus) as He establishes the throne of David forever:

“You have said, ‘I have made a covenant with my chosen one; I have sworn to David my servant: I will establish your offspring forever, and build your throne for all generations.’ Selah.”

Psalm 89:3-4

“His offspring shall endure forever, his throne as long as the sun before me. Like the moon it shall be established forever, a faithful witness in the skies. Selah.” Psalm 89:36-37

“Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.” Isaiah 9:7

This can also be seen in God's covenant with David (1 Chronicles chapter 17).

The angel Gabriel told Mary about the Son she was going to have (even though she was still a virgin), ***“He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end”*** (Luke 1:32-33). The angels must have been excited to watch Jesus leave Heaven to come to Earth to fulfill prophecy and be the Savior.

Hebrews 1:8 adds, ***“But of the Son he says, ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom.’”*** The throne of David became the throne of the Son (Jesus). We know He is the ***“King of kings and Lord of lords:”***

“To keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will display at the proper time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords.”

1 Timothy 6:14-15

“They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.” Revelation 17:14

“On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.” Revelation 19:16

The Messiah (Jesus) will establish the throne of David forever. He is the ***“King of kings.”*** We are His people. He leads; we follow. We are honored to be able to serve Him.

RIGHT KEY, RIGHT DOOR

BETHLEHEM, DEVOTION 5

Pastor Ryan Story

The Burton location has a box full of keys. There literally is a box of unlabeled keys. For the most part, I have been able to figure out what each key is for, but some doors I have yet to figure out what key goes to what lock. One day, the cleaning ladies came to my office to tell me that both of the doors for the bathroom in the kids' hall were locked. Kids will be kids, and I told the ladies I would find the key. I was really hoping that God would guide my hand to the correct key in the first attempt, but He had better plans. It took me about thirty minutes to thoroughly try each key, on both doors, twice. This was another confirmation to me why children's ministry might not be for me. Busting down the door seemed like the only logical and most effective stress-relieving solution. Luckily, I realized I could take the doorknob off and open the door that way before I pulled a Kool-Aid Man on a door in Burton.

Having the right key to the right door is essential. In Isaiah chapter 22, God's Word talks about the key to the house of David. The one thing I love about this verse is that the word key is singular, meaning there is only one key to enter this house. Isaiah 22:22 says, ***"And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open."*** If you want a good way to understand the Bible, after you read something, put it in words that a four-year-old could understand. In this verse, God says there is one key to open the house of David. Once that door is open, no one can shut it. Understanding prophecy can be hard, but this is a pretty straight forward one. So the next question we have to ask is, "Where can we find that key?"

Revelation 3:7-8 says, ***“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: ‘The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens. I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.’”*** The one who has the key of David is the Holy One, the True One, the One who opens doors that no one (person or demon) can shut, whose words are repeated by angels. This is the “Jesus is the answer moment.” Jesus is the one who fulfills this prophecy and has the key to open the house of David.

Jesus has the key referred to in Isaiah 22:22, with one slight change. Revelation 3:7 refers to ***“the key of David”*** and not the ***“key of the house of David.”*** The phrase ***“the house of”*** is missing. This is for a major reason because ***“the house of David”*** was a tomb. The house of David was synonymous with the resting place of the faithful. When we look at Revelation 3:7, death is not the final outcome. The angel talking about the One who opens the door to the house of David is talking about how to enter the house of God, and the angel is expressing the amazing fact that there is only one way to get into this house. The key is putting your faith in the One who is the key. There is only one key that allows us to go to Heaven. There is only one door to get into Heaven. Do you put your trust in the key? Going through a box of keys to open this door is not going to work. Trying to bust the door down will not work. You need the right door and the right key.

REJECTED BY BROTHERS

BETHLEHEM, DEVOTION 6

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

Even though the Messiah (Jesus) would be from the line of David and establish the throne of David forever, it was prophesied that He would be rejected by His brothers.

Psalms 69:6-8 says that the Messiah would be treated like a ***“stranger”*** and an ***“alien”*** (foreigner, not family), ***“Let not those who hope in you be put to shame through me, O Lord God of hosts; let not those who seek you be brought to dishonor through me, O God of Israel. For it is for your sake that I have borne reproach, that dishonor has covered my face. I have become a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my mother’s sons.”***

John 7:1-5 shows that His brothers knew Jesus was special but did not yet believe in Him, ***“After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He would not go about in Judea, because the Jews were seeking to kill him. Now the Jews’ Feast of Booths was at hand. So his brothers said to him, ‘Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples also may see the works you are doing. For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.’ For not even his brothers believed in him.”***

Mark 6:1-4 records that Jesus’ hometown (Nazareth) and relatives did not honor Him, ***“He went away from there and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, ‘Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary***

and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?’ And they took offense at him. And Jesus said to them, ‘A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household.’”

Jesus being rejected fulfilled prophecy.

It is horrible to realize that friends and relatives will reject us because we choose to follow Jesus. However, it is encouraging to know that James, the brother of Jesus, placed his faith in his brother (Jesus) after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. There is hope.

They rejected Jesus. They may reject us because of Jesus.

Some of Jesus' brothers repented later. There is hope.

Galatians 6:9 says, ***“And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.”***

A stylized, dark-toned illustration serves as the background. On the left, a figure in a long robe and head covering stands near a structure resembling a staircase. On the right, a figure with a beard and long hair, wearing a long robe, stands with one arm raised. Behind him, another figure is partially visible. The overall style is minimalist and graphic, using shades of gray and black.

LESSON TWO

JESUS IS FROM: EGYPT

PASTOR RYAN STORY

April 5, 2014, was one of the happiest moments of my life. It was the day a woman was willing to take one for all women everywhere and marry me. My wife truly took one for the team.

With the most impactful moments of our lives, we are able to remember them very clearly. I remember being yelled at when I attempted to wipe the cupcake I just smashed in Cathy's face. Apparently, that messes up makeup; who knew? I remember bringing a Nintendo 64 and playing Mario Kart 64 before the big moment. Truly the most amazing moment of the day would have been when all the groomsmen, bridesmaids, ring bearers, and the flower girl finally all made their way into their spots and the doors shut. A thousand eternities went on in my head while I anxiously waited for my soon to be wife to come through those doors. All of a sudden, "whoosh," as the doors opened and there she was. You can say what you want about any bride you want, but my wife was the most gorgeous woman in the entire world.

1. What was your favorite memory from your wedding? What was your favorite memory from a loved one's wedding?

As I have grown in maturity (not by much I can assure you that) since my wedding day, the moment Cathy was walking down the aisle has become more and more significant. On the day of our wedding, I was marrying my best friend, the one whom my soul loves (Song of Solomon), my helper, my ride or die, my boo, and the one God gave me to love until death does us part.

2. What is a covenant?

This week's lesson is focusing on Jesus living in Egypt for a short time. The original prophecy was spoken by the prophet Hosea. Hosea 11:1 reads, ***"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son."***

3. What are some things you know about the prophet Hosea?

Matthew chapter two records what the world was like when Jesus was born. It was not a peaceful, loving place.

Matthew 2:13-15 records, ***"Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'"***

4. Why did the angel instruct Joseph to flee to Egypt?

5. Fun detail: Notice when it describes Mary, the Bible says ***“His Mother.”*** When it describes Joseph the Bible simply states his name. Why do you think the Bible would want that known?

So the completion of this prophecy on the surface level is right there. God said, His son would come out of Egypt, and Jesus did. One of the harder things about understanding prophecy is that everything does not always completely match up in our minds. While by no means I am saying there is an error in God's Word, but there can be some contextual aspect of the Bible we need to understand to gain a deeper understanding of the Bible.

We live in a world of skepticism. If a person was asking about the validity of Christ's birth, simply using Hosea chapter 12 and Matthew chapter 2 could leave them asking a few more questions. Just because the Bible says “son” does not always entail contextually that it means Jesus. While in this case, it does; however, there is more meat on these bones.

6. Why is it important to keep digging in the Bible even if we understand the surface level truth?

To fully unlock where Matthew was coming from, and why God gave him the truth about the prophet Hosea, we need to know a bit more about the history of Egypt.

LESSON TWO | JESUS IS FROM: EGYPT

Luckily for us, we just did an entire summer study about Moses, so hopefully, these questions will be a breeze.

7. Who did Moses lead out of Egypt?

8. What makes this people group significant?

9. What did God make with Moses and this people group?

If you answered, Hebrew or Jews, they were chosen to be God's people, and God made a covenant with them, give yourself a sticker. Out of Egypt came God's chosen people who had the covenant of God with them.

Please read Hosea chapter 11.

10. What are the ways you see God fulfilling His promise to a disobedient Israel?

The entire 11th chapter of Hosea is about God's love for His people coming out of Egypt. Fast forward to the time of Jesus. There is more

significance than just Joseph and his family returning to their home country.

11. What similarities do you see with Moses and the nation of Israel coming out of Egypt and Jesus coming out of Egypt?

It is time to bring it home. On the day my wife walked down that aisle, there was a deeper significance than just marrying my best friend, or marrying the love of my life. The person walking down the aisle was the person who I would promise to love, help, guide, lead, sacrifice for, and die for. My wife walking down the aisle represented something which at the time, I did not see the deeper meaning.

12. What is the significant life change that happens after a person enters the covenant of marriage?

13. What is the significant life change that comes when the covenant of God walked into your live?

IMMANUEL

EGYPT, DEVOTION 1

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

If we could condense all the truths of Christmas into only three words, these would be the words: ‘God with us.’” John F. MacArthur

I do not think it is even possible to comprehend those three words fully. We should feel encouraged and challenged once we realize that God is with us.

Isaiah 7:14 mentions several things about the Messiah, ***“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”*** The Messiah would be born of a virgin. That is obviously mind-blowing in itself. The Messiah would be a son. The Messiah would be called Immanuel, which means God with us. Therefore, the Messiah is God.

Isaiah 8:8-10 starts by referencing Immanuel and closes with the phrase, ***“for God is with us.”*** It is a great gift to have God with us. Matthew Henry makes such a beautiful distinction in saying, “By the light of nature we see God as a God above us, by the light of the law we see Him as a God against us, but by the light of the gospel we see Him as Emmanuel, God with us.” God is transcendent and judge; yet, He is right beside us. He is with us.

Matthew 1:18-25 reads, ***“Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just***

man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel' (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus."

Mary is the only virgin ever to give birth. She fulfilled prophecy and gave birth to the Messiah, Jesus, Immanuel. God came into the world and joined us. He is Jesus.

Charles Spurgeon reminds us of both the realities of today and the glory of tomorrow, "Immanuel, God with us in our nature, in our sorrow, in our lifework, in our punishment, in our grave, and now with us, or rather we with Him, in resurrection, ascension, triumph, and Second Advent splendor."

God is with us!

WEIRD BUT AUTHENTIC

EGYPT, DEVOTION 2

Pastor Ryan Story

Everyone has that weird family member. It is that odd uncle, overly abrasive aunt, or cousin with the socially out-there taste in everything. Every family has that overly political, contradictory, black sheep of the bunch. One of the theological facts about Jesus that I cling to is that He purposely was born a human. The fact that Jesus was 100% man and 100% God is a mind-blowing comfort. The Book of Hebrews discusses this idea that Jesus understands everything we deal with as mere creations of God. Amazingly enough, Jesus understood what it was like to have an odd family member.

Mary had a relative by the name of Elizabeth. In the Gospel of Luke, we can see that Elizabeth bore a son who would be used by God in an amazing way. Elizabeth had a son by the name of John. God's plan for John was laid out in the Book of Isaiah. Isaiah 40:3-5 reads, ***"A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'"*** John was born with one major mission to tell people about the coming of the Messiah (Jesus).

Even in the womb of his mother, John was super excited about all things Jesus. John became the fulfillment of God's prophecy that a person would be the foreteller of the Messiah. In Matthew 3:3, God's Word says, ***"For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness:***

‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’” John fulfilled this prophecy with gusto, even earning the title “Greatest Man who had ever Lived” by our Lord and Savior Himself.

When you study John, he was a bit of an odd fellow. He ate bugs, wore weird clothes, and lived in the woods. His clothes consisted of camel skin. He seemed to get into heated arguments with the government. On the surface, John the Baptist was all the crazy family members rolled into one. However, if you dig a little deeper (cue “Princess and the Frog” soundtrack), you see that John was one of the most authentic Christ-followers ever to walk this Earth. John did not care about how society viewed him; he cared about being obedient to what God called him to do. There is a growing trend that Christians do not want to seem weird to the world. While I understand the notion of wanting to be relatable, the world will always view Christ’s followers as peculiar people. As Christians, I think we need to be okay with the notion that we are weird by worldly standards, but if we are going to be weird, we might as well be authentic in our walk with Jesus.

WISE MEN

EGYPT, DEVOTION 3

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

Angela and I have always started decorating for Christmas right after Thanksgiving. Years ago, we were given a beautiful nativity set. Our daughter, when she was young, took it upon herself to move the wise men an inch closer every day to the manger scene. Finally, they arrived on Christmas day (she understands the timeline better now). It has always been a special part of our holiday season.

Matthew chapter 2 describes the journey of the wise men. Verses 1-4 mention how they first came to Jerusalem looking for the newborn King, ***“Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.’ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.”*** The wise men followed the star and came to Jerusalem. The birth of a potential rival intimidated Herod. He sought for more information.

In verses 5-6, Herod is introduced into prophecy, ***“They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: “And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.”’”*** The Jewish leaders read Micah 5:2 to him. They had known for hundreds of years that the Messiah (Jesus) would be born in Bethlehem.

Matthew 2:7-11 continues the story, ***“Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.’ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.”***

We used to decorate the outside of our house with just a star. I love the simplicity of the star and the amazing complexity to realize the solar system focused on Jesus.

The wise men arrived at the house where Jesus was. They worshiped Him and gave Him gifts.

Solomon wrote Psalm chapter 72 about 900 years before the wise men began their adventure. In verses 10-11, he described their trip this way, ***“May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands render him tribute; may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts! May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him!”*** Royalty and gifts surrounded the baby Jesus, the King of kings.

The religious leaders knew the Messiah was coming and ignored Him. Eventually, they mocked, beat, and killed Him. Pastor Rick Warren wrote, “Don’t be like the religious leaders who were more concerned with tradition. Follow the example of the wise men, and seek God this Christmas. It’s the reason we celebrate Christmas - God wants to connect with you!”

Wise men still seek Him.

Wise men still bring Him gifts.

Wise men still fall down before Him.

REJECTION

EGYPT, DEVOTION 4

Pastor Ryan Story

Could you imagine what being siblings with Jesus must have been like? I am the middle child of three. I have one older brother and a younger sister. While I have a good relationship with my siblings, there was always that tension that comes with having siblings. There was always the sibling code, “If you nark on me, I nark on you.” There was always that feeling or statement, “Why do they get to do that?” There seems to be an influx of the notion of justice within the sinking dynamic. If we are all honest, for those with siblings or without, jealousy can rear its ugly head within this relationship. People who grow up resenting their siblings are hurting the prospect of a solid relationship. I can recall being jealous of my brother because he got all the “firstborn attention” and jealous of my sister because she got “baby of the family and only girl” attention. The sin of jealousy affected my relationship with my siblings while we were growing up.

Imagine for a second; your older brother was perfect. It is not just in the adolescent, angry outbursts where you say, “You think they are perfect.” He is literally perfect. Imagine your sibling is so special that you hear stories about how wise men traveled from far lands to meet him. Imagine your older brother being smarter than every teacher. Imagine your brother being Jesus. A little Bible “Trivial Pursuit” factoid, Jesus had siblings. Mary and Joseph had children after the miraculous virgin conception of Jesus. Matthew 13:55-56 records a conversation between the Nazarene townspeople. They say, ***“Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?”***

At a minimum, we can hold to the truth of the Bible and say Jesus had four brothers and at least two sisters. Could you imagine how that sibling relationship must have looked? Add to the fact that most Bible scholars say Joseph passed away at some point before Jesus' crucifixion.

We all have family drama in some way, but amazingly this family drama was foretold five hundred years before this family existed. Psalm 69:8 says, ***"I have become a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my mother's sons."*** Jesus brothers fulfilled this prophecy when they told Jesus, ***"Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples also may see the works you are doing. For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.' For not even his brothers believed in him"*** (John 7:3-5).

While family drama is nothing new, and sibling rivalry has been around since Cain and Able, we cannot just overlook this prophecy as just "one of the little ones." There are over 300 prophecies concerning the Messiah that Jesus Christ fulfilled. The amazing fact that Christ fulfilled them all is an astonishing truth. On the deeper aspect of this prophecy, Jesus was part of a broken home. There was death, disunity, a single parent, and poverty. I come from a broken home, and those who are a part of that club understand the difficulties of moving forward in that victorious Christ-centered living. I take so much comfort knowing that God's plan to bring completion back to humanity started in a broken home. Jesus brought restoration and forgiveness to those who rejected Him. Jesus shows us that the work He did on the Cross is what can fix a family.

MASSACRE OF THE CHILDREN

EGYPT, DEVOTION 5

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

I hated writing the title of this devotion. I know children have a special place in God's heart. Matthew 19:13-14 says, ***"Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.'"*** God loves children; Jesus welcomed them.

We celebrate the story of Moses, but might forget Pharaoh's command that affected others. Exodus 1:22 records, ***"Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, 'Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live.'"*** Children died, but even though God's heart ached, His plan moved forward in Moses.

Jeremiah prophesied of another time when children would be massacred, ***"Thus says the Lord: 'A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more'"*** (Jeremiah 31:15).

Matthew 2:16-18 documents the fulfillment of Jeremiah's words, ***"Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and***

loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.” Matthew quoted Jeremiah as foretelling Herod’s horrendous command to kill all the male children.

The Pharaoh and Herod were both selfish. They would do anything to exalt themselves or to stop others from being exalted as “high” as them. They were weak and lived in fear.

Jonathan Edwards, a leading preacher in the revival of the Great Awakening, challenges all of us to not be like the Pharaoh or Herod. He said, “Some persons are always ready to level those above them down to themselves, while they are never willing to level those below them up to their own position. But he that is under the influence of true humility will avoid both these extremes. On the one hand, he will be willing that all should rise just so far as their diligence and worth of character entitle them to; and on the other hand, he will be willing that his superiors should be known and acknowledged in their place, and have rendered to them all the honors that are their due.”

We need to, ***“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep”*** (Romans 12:15).

We also need to follow Paul’s command in 1 Thessalonians 5:11, ***“Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.”***

The massacre of the children is horrible. Jeremiah probably cringed as he penned the words. Fulfilled prophecy is amazing even when it is negative.

A positive take is to help kids and those who cannot help themselves. We should give others a helping hand.

SINLESS MOUTH

EGYPT, DEVOTION 6

Pastor Ryan Story

I love the movie, *“Home Alone.”* The older I get, there are two things that crack me up more and more. The first is how in the world a family forgets to take their child with them on vacation. This whole movie has a premise that should psychologically destroy a young kid, and all is made well because he sets up traps to thwart some robbers. This is laughably the greatest inaccurate children’s movie of all time. The second thing I love more and more with age is the sound Harry makes when he is angry or gets hurt. It has taken me 35 years to realize that the words that Harry uses were less than edifying. Also thinking about it, if I had my hand burned, a blowtorch used on my head, and countless amounts of pain brought upon me, I cannot say that I would not be saying the same words as Harry.

The amazing thing about the prophecies about Jesus is that they cover a multitude of aspects of who He is. There are prophecies about where He would come from, His parents, His family, His mission, and how He would handle situations. Isaiah 53:9 says, ***“And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.”*** The fact that no deceit ever came out of Jesus’ mouth is often an overlooked miracle. No lie, no corruption, and nothing subtle every came out of Jesus’ mouth. For a guy whose vocal box gets him in trouble, this is an amazing example.

Peter writes to the ***“elect exiles of the Dispersion”*** (1 Peter 1:1) about this prophecy. In 1 Peter 2:21-23, he says, ***“For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He***

committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.” Peter elaborates a little bit on Isaiah’s prophecy by saying that when Jesus was being mocked, He never mocked back. When Jesus was being beaten, He never threatened the Romans or the Jewish leaders.

I have read countless books, articles, and commentaries on the perfection of Jesus. I cannot think of how many times I have preached on that subject. Taking time to realize that there was a prophecy that would state that the coming Messiah would not allow any deceit, violence, or foulness to come out of His mouth while simultaneously having prophecies that have to do with the suffering He would endure, is mind-blowing. I can hardly stub my toe without choice words running through my mind. When I get cut off in traffic, I may have a nanosecond of wanting to exact vengeance. This prophecy is an amazing reminder of just how amazing our Jesus was and is.

A stylized, dark gray background illustration. On the left, a woman (Mary) in a long robe and head covering stands near a wooden structure. On the right, a man with a beard and long hair (Jesus) in a robe stands with his arms slightly out. Another figure is partially visible behind him, raising their hand. The overall style is minimalist and graphic.

LESSON THREE

JESUS IS FROM: NAZARETH

PASTOR RYAN STORY

I do not know if I have ever seen a dedication in a Growth Community lesson. I need to dedicate this lesson to an awesome young man named Dallas. A few years ago, Dallas and I sat down each week and talked about the Bible. I told him he could pick any topic he wanted to learn about, and we could do a ten-week study on it. This kid went for the gusto and picked prophecies that had to do with Jesus. This entailed I could not rely on my bag of tricks, and I actually had to put some time in studying and preparing lessons. If it was not for Dallas, I would never have stumbled on an amazing truth in the Bible. Thank you, Dallas, for pushing me in my walk with God.

I love it when people call an impossible shot. There is none more iconic than Babe Ruth. With two balls and two strikes, the Great Bambino pointed to the center field. Little known fact, Charlie Root was the pitcher for the Chicago Cubs on this historic day. Root must have thought, "The Colossus of Clout" had lost his mind. Who can possibly call the seemingly impossible? On October 1, 1932, Babe Ruth called his shot, hit a home run, and this moment went down as one of the most historic moments in sports and American history.

1. What was the most iconic sports moment you have ever witnessed?

The amazing thing about the Bible is, the more you scratch at the surface, the more God can teach you. The prophecies about where Jesus' childhood home town would be show just how amazing the Bible is.

The original prophesy about Jesus coming from Nazareth is found in Isaiah 11:1-2, **"There shall come forth a shoot from the stump**

of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.”

2. What are some details that stick out to you about these verses?

3. What key detail about Nazareth is missing from these verses?

Often times, people ask ministers, “What version of the Bible should I read?” (If you are curious, start with the one you can read and go from there.) My answer to that question is, “The one that is closest to the original language of the text.” The Bible was not written in English. The Bible was originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Over the centuries, it was translated into Latin, then to more common languages like German, French, Spanish, and English. Amazingly, the majority of the translations of the Bible have held the test of time. While there are still some language discrepancies, the Word of God that Isaiah wrote is still the same as what we read today. So, what do we do with the fact that the word or town Nazareth is nowhere to be found in Isaiah chapter 11?

To unlock the depth of this prophecy, you have to do a little bit of a study of the original Hebrew language. Isaiah 11:1 says, ***“A shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.”***

To understand how this is a messianic prophecy about Jesus, we have to look at the word “branch.” In this prophecy, the word we translate as “branch” is “naser” or “netzer.”

There are obvious similarities of “naser” to Nazarene, and “netzer” to Nazareth. Many early church leaders and theologians point to this as a bit of play on words that fulfill the Scriptures.

This prophecy is fulfilled in Matthew 2:19-23, ***“But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, ‘Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead.’ And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.”***

4. Why do you think Isaiah just did not say, “Jesus is going to live in Nazareth?”

We live in a skeptical world; maybe you are not blown away by that. Well, let us look at another amazing part of this prophecy. Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would come from Nazareth about 600 years before the village existed!

5. How true is the Word of God in your life?

God can call his shoot 600 years before a town was even planned. He placed the name within something a prophet wrote. He then used crazy men like Herod and Archelaus (the son of Herod the Great) to ensure that the safest place for Jesus to be raised would be in the town of Nazareth.

However, what was significant about Nazareth? If we read John 1:43-46, we see a real insight to what people thought of Nazareth and its residents. ***“The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.’ Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’”***

6. How would it make you feel if someone said, “Nothing good comes from (insert your home town)?”

I grew up in Waterford as a kid. I grew up in the Elizabeth Lake area of Waterford. A few years ago, I read an article saying that it is one of the worst areas of Waterford, and the school district was struggling to find bus drivers because the people were so horrible. Needless to say, I wanted to punch the writer of that article, but that made me, a grown man, feel horrible.

7. Why would God's plan be for Jesus to grow up in a place that was looked down on?

God always had a purpose for the pain. He did not just send Jesus to be born a social outcast. I always believe that God has the logic behind His plan. Nazareth was located between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea. While the Bible does not record all of Jesus' childhood, it would be a safe bet to say that Jesus grew from childhood to manhood there. In the city of Nazareth, there was a Roman military post. In Jesus' time, that post was pretty much all that Nazareth was known for. There was no special temple, no amazing restaurants, and no great archeological masterpiece. Nazareth was known for a place where the Roman army was encamped. Romans were the overlords of the Jews in Jesus' time. There was a lot of distrust and tension between the Romans and the Jews. So much so, that most Jews avoided any association with the town of Nazareth. The Jewish people who lived in Nazareth were viewed by their fellow people as spies or traitors.

8. Why does God allow us to be in situations where people look down on us?

As I said, I think there is always an extremely logical reason why God does what He does. Jesus was from Nazareth because it was the best place for Him to grow up. Jesus grew up in a place where Roman soldiers were constantly around, that is the last place Herod Archelaus would send troops to look for Jesus.

LESSON THREE | JESUS IS FROM: NAZARETH

I know this lesson was a bit deep. Whenever I preach or write something, I go with two concepts. "What do I want people to know, and what do I want them to do." For this lesson, if your brain is a bit exhausted, that is a good thing.

9. Why is it important to understand how amazing God's plan is for us?

God is in complete control. God was able to tell the world that His Son would be from a town that was not even a concept yet.

10. What is God capable of doing with a church that is relentlessly obedient to what He calls us to do?

LESSON THREE | JESUS IS FROM: NAZARETH

LESSON THREE | JESUS IS FROM: NAZARETH

RULERS AGAINST HIM

NAZARETH, DEVOTION 1

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

You are probably familiar with the idiom, “Don’t bite the hand that feeds you.” There are people who tend to mock and cause discord with the very ones who are providing for them. It does not make sense.

The Jewish scribes and rulers knew the Messiah was coming. They knew the prophecy, and they were anticipating the Anointed One, yet when He arrived, they took counsel against Him.

If one is not careful, they could skip right past Matthew 12:14, ***“But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.”*** Jesus had just healed a man. Verse 13 says, ***“Then he said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, healthy like the other.”*** Instead of celebrating, the Pharisees focused on Jesus healing on the Sabbath and wanted to ***“destroy”*** Him.

I guess this should not surprise us as Psalm 2:1-2 says, ***“Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed.”*** The kings and rulers chose to go against the Lord. Instead of receiving the Anointed One, they plotted against Him. To go against Jesus is to go against God. It is clearly a losing battle.

Matthew 26:3-4 says, ***“Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by***

stealth and kill him.” Matthew 26:47 continues, “While he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people.” Luke 23:11-12 adds, “And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him. Then, arraying him in splendid clothing, he sent him back to Pilate. And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other.”

Religious and secular leaders were against Jesus – the chief priest, the elders, Herod, and Pilate. Even one of His disciples turned on Him. This is sad, but it was stated that it would happen hundreds of years earlier.

Jesus comforts us in John 15:18 by saying, ***“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.”***

Christianity is not about a popularity contest. All other religions are against Jesus being God. We need to know there is a battle and be willing to fight the good fight. Be encouraged; He wants you on His team.

PERFECT TIMING

NAZARETH, DEVOTION 2

Pastor Ryan Story

God's sovereignty is something that leaves me in a constant state of awe. To know that God is in complete control, and there is not a rogue atom in our universe is one of the most perplexing and comforting truths there is. For many of us, the moment tragedy or adversity strikes, we frantically try to figure out what to do. Most of the time, in the heat of the moment, we do some peculiar things. I remember during a family crisis, I felt it necessary to bring my sister's cat with me in my car. At that moment, I was not able to think clearly and had no plan; I just reacted. This is not how God acts.

The worst day for all mankind is the day sin entered the world. Because of Adam and Eve's rebellion against God, all of humanity now had a separation between them and their creator. Sin brought spiritual death into the world. Since humans were now spiritually dead, actions such as pride, murder, rage, lust, and envy became a part of man's daily routine. At this moment, everything God created, everything that He deemed "good," was now thrown into chaos. At the moment sin entered the world, God cursed man, woman, creation, and the serpent (who is the devil). At this moment, God tells the serpent, ***"Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel"*** (Genesis 3:14-15).

One of the hardest truths I have had to come to grips with in life is the fact that I am not God. I love my methods; I think I am good at making

plans, but the reality is I am not God. His ways are vastly higher than mine, His insight is perfect, His plan is perfect, and His timing is perfect. There are many people who question God's plan. In the case of sin entering the world, we see God respond instantaneously with a perfect plan. Galatians 4:4-6 says, ***“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’”***

God's timing is perfect. God's ways are perfect. When God says He is going to do something, it will happen. In Genesis, when God says that the serpent was going to be crushed, it was not something that happened right away. Eventually, ***“the fullness of time had come,”*** and God sent Jesus. Amazingly, God knew other things had to happen before it was the perfect time for Jesus. God needed to ensure that humans knew they could not keep the law. He needed mankind to understand that they could not crush the serpent's head on their own merit. God waited for the perfect moment to fulfill this prophecy.

THE POOR

NAZARETH, DEVOTION 3

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

I love watching videos of people who are oblivious to what is going on around them. Typically, they are so consumed with their phone that they miss crazy events happening or walk right into a pole or wall.

Jesus is observant. Obviously, being all-knowing makes it impossible to be oblivious, but still, realize He noticed and notices everything.

Luke 21:1-4 records such a precious observation, ***“Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box, and he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. And he said, ‘Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.’”*** Everyone noticed the rich as their gifts loudly clanged in the offering box, but Jesus noticed even the poor. His heart was touched by the poor widow.

Psalm 72:11-14 records that the Messiah (Jesus) will care for the poor, ***“May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him! For he delivers the needy when he calls, the poor and him who has no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life, and precious is their blood in his sight.”*** This might not initially sound significant, but it is not the way leaders operate. They normally seek out “people of influence.” Jesus sought the poor and needy.

John the Baptist asked if Jesus was the Messiah. Luke 7:22 records the answer, ***“And he answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you***

have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them.” Prophecy recorded that the Messiah would perform miracles, and Jesus did that. However, it also stated that the Messiah would go to the poor and include them in His plan, and Jesus did that too.

Jesus regularly went to the synagogue. On one specific Sabbath, He got up and read from Isaiah. Luke 4:18-19 records the passage, ***“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*** He then sat down, but said, “Yeah, that’s me!”

Jesus would heal, but He also went to the poor and proclaimed the Good News.

Jesus fulfilled all the prophecies attributed to the Messiah. Jesus is the Messiah. He is God.

His entire mission revolved around the Gospel. He cares about “people of influence,” but He also remembers forgotten people. He loves all of us. All of us need the same amount of the Gospel.

MOST POPULAR DONKEY EVER

NAZARETH, DEVOTION 4

Pastor Ryan Story

I am a detailed-oriented person. Small details are oftentimes overlooked. Through the entire Gospels, Jesus is doing amazing things. He was being obedient to God's will and fulfilling prophecies throughout the time of His earthly ministry. I feel I have missed one amazing detail every time I have read about Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. I think I have always focused on the crowds of people, the praising, and the plotting Pharisees that I overlooked the humblest of God's creation.

Zechariah 9:9 says, ***“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”*** This whole verse depicts Jesus entering into Jerusalem. We see a call to rejoicing. God's Word tells us that our king has come for us, and then we see what He is riding. Last time I checked, kings ride in on something luxurious. I have never seen the Queen of England rolling around in an '89 Ford Taurus. No disrespect to Ford Taurus fans, that was my first car. That Taurus was for sure the car equivalent of a donkey.

I have enjoyed the study that has gone into each devotion this month. Once again, we see that God says something is going to happen, and Jesus fulfills God's Word. The Gospel of Mark records how Jesus uses a donkey to prove, in fact, Jesus was the Christ. Mark 11:2-6 reads, ***“And said to them, ‘Go into the village in front of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ say, ‘The Lord has need of it***

and will send it back here immediately.” And they went away and found a colt tied at a door outside in the street, and they untied it. And some of those standing there said to them, ‘What are you doing, untying the colt?’ And they told them what Jesus had said, and they let them go.”

There are so many amazing things about this prophecy. The first is that Jesus knew exactly where this donkey would be. For all the farmer types out there, you know that even if you tie up an animal, there is still a chance that it gets loose. Amazingly, Jesus tells the disciples that there was a donkey, tied up, and waiting for them. The second thing about this donkey that is an amazing work from God is that the owners of this donkey let it be used for the glory of God. Most people in Jesus’ time were not overly wealthy and did not have many beasts of burden. The fact that the owners did not put up much fuss when a few strangers came to borrow this donkey is noteworthy. I do not know how well you do with loaning your stuff out to other people, but the fact that the owners of this donkey are totally good with the honor system because the disciples name-dropped Jesus is amazing!

Prophecy shows God’s sovereign hand over creation. God is in control of massive stars and in control of microscopic atoms. Nothing is outside of God’s control, even the smallest of details. As silly as it may be, if Jesus did not come into town riding on a donkey, that would erode the truth about who He was. The fact that Jesus fulfills every prophecy about Him proves without a blemish that He is who He says He is, and He will do exactly what He says He will do. God is in the details of everything, and that includes your life. If He can say that a donkey is going to be in a town, and its owners are good to let Him borrow it, I would argue we could trust Him with our small details as well.

PERFECTION

NAZARETH, DEVOTION 5

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

I was raised with an appreciation for boxing. My high school even had boxing as part of our gym class requirement. It clearly was not for everyone, but everyone had to strap on the gloves and go three rounds. I spent many Tuesday nights with my dad in Auburn Hills at Fight Night at the Palace. We saw some of the top fighters of our time; however, some of the fights in the stands were more entertaining than those in the ring.

Just over ten years ago, Kieran Mulvaney wrote an article for *ESPN* listing the “50 Greatest Boxers of all Time.” I do not necessarily agree with his list, but here are his top five. Fifth, was featherweight Willie Pep whose ring record was 230-11-1 (65 KOs). Fourth, was Detroit’s own Joe Louis with a career record of 68-3 (54 KOs). Third, was Henry Armstrong (Featherweight, lightweight, and welterweight at the same time) whose ring record was 151-21-9 (101 KOs). Second, was the one who floated like a butterfly, but stung like a bee. Muhammad Ali (Cassius Clay) astounded a 56-5 (37 KOs) record. First, was Sugar Ray Robinson. Robinson had an amazing record of 175-19-6-2 (109 KOs).

What caught my attention was that none of the top five fighters was undefeated. I realize some went professional too soon, did not know when to retire, or came out of retirement when they should have stayed home. Yet, they all lost.

An amazing item about prophecy in the Bible is that it has to be correct 100% of the time!

One of the most amazing prophecies comes from Daniel 9:24-26, ***“Seventy weeks are decreed about your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place. Know therefore and understand that from the going out of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of an anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks. Then for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again with squares and moat, but in a troubled time. And after the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing. And the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed.”***

Please fasten the seatbelt of your mind and get ready to be blessed.

Daniel talks about a decree to restore and build Jerusalem. Ezra chapter 7 details King Artaxerxes (reigned 464-424 BC) and specifically the seventh year of his reign (457 BC). Daniel referenced ***“seven weeks.”*** Theologians use the word “heptad” for this week as it represents seven years. Therefore, “seven weeks” (7 x 70) means the work was finished in 49 years (408 BC). The walls, streets, and moats were completed.

Please stay with me; Daniel said, “the coming of an anointed one” would be “after the sixty-two weeks.” If we take the year 408 BC and subtract 434 years (7 x 62 “weeks”) of prophecy (while realizing there is no year “0”), we end up with 30 AD. That is the year Jesus, ***“an Anointed One,”*** was baptized and began His public ministry. Jesus was crucified for our sins in 30 AD.

Daniel's prophecy has so many levels, but they all line up perfectly.

An amazing item about prophecy in the Bible is that it has to be correct 100% of the time!

The people knew the Messiah was coming. Scripture repeatedly recorded He was coming. They were anticipating His arrival, yet far too many missed Him. As Jesus (the Messiah) weeps over Jerusalem, He says, ***“Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes”*** (Luke 19:42).

Jesus is coming again. We do not have a prophecy detailing the date, but we know He is coming. He has already warned us. We need to be ready!

STUMBLING BLOCK

NAZARETH, DEVOTION 6

Pastor Ryan Story

One of the hardest prophecies for me to wrap my mind around is one found in Isaiah chapter eight. I saved this one for last because it has taken me this long to be able to write a thought that proves the point, in about 500 words, that is applicable, and still not boring. Isaiah 8:14-15 reads, ***“And he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many shall stumble on it. They shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken.”***

In the first half of the Book of Romans, Paul has to straighten out Gentiles who became Christians and Jewish people who professed to be Christians to what it truly meant to follow Jesus. Former Gentile Christians would look down on former Jewish Christians for their practices. Romans chapter nine explains the fulfillment of the prophecy found in Isaiah by stating that salvation is only found by having faith in Jesus. Romans 9:30-33 reads, ***“What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, ‘Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.’”*** If you ever read the book of Romans, you should always have a commentary with you because it can be difficult to break down. Paul is teaching that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a stumbling stone for Jews because

they did not pursue living for God by faith, rather the Jews began to base their living for God solely on their works.

The part that gets me is that God knew He was going to be a stumbling block for people, not just any people but His chosen people. God **“so loved the world,”** the Jewish people were His chosen people up until Jesus came and died on that cross, and the veil of the Holy of Holies was torn. The part that had me scratching my head for a few weeks was why God would allow Himself to be a stumbling block. In 1 Corinthians 8:9, we are told, **“But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.”** So God’s Word tells us not to be a stumbling block, and yet, Jesus Himself was a stumbling block. Welcome to the brain; it is like a herd of cats running around sometimes.

If you have questions for God, take them to Him. In a moment of pausing, reflecting, and studying, God showed me the answer. It is not that God was trying to be a stumbling block, in fact, just the opposite. There are some things that have happened since God said, **“let there be”** that God did not intend to happen. They were not part of His perfect will. The biggest would be sin entering the world. Since sin entered the world, it causes God’s creation to rebel. This state of rebellion is engrained in every heart of every man, woman, and child. Because we have rebellion in our hearts, eventually, we are going to want to do it our own way. That is what happened to the Jews. They were given the law, and they turned it into something it was not meant to be. Also, preceding the law would have been the father of the Jewish nation, Abraham. Abraham was told to follow God, and Abraham displayed the model of faith before works. That is what God desires to see. Ultimately, God made it so everyone could have faith in what Jesus did for us by dying on a cross and resurrecting three days later as the essential components to salvation. God did not make Himself the stumbling block; He never changed His methods.

Jews changed their obedience to God. Truth should never be a stumbling block, and Jesus told the Jews the truth.

A stylized, high-contrast illustration in shades of gray. It depicts Jesus with a beard and long hair, wearing a robe, standing on the right. To his left is a woman in a long robe and head covering. The background features architectural elements like a staircase on the left and a wall with a small opening at the top.

LESSON FOUR

JESUS IS FROM: CAPERNAUM

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

In elementary school, you basically had assigned seating at lunch. The guys sat together with other guys from their class. Sometimes, we even ate in the classroom at our desks. We had to wait for recess to hang out with our friends who had a different homeroom.

Middle school, and especially high school, was a whole different story. You got to choose where you would sit. It may not be an easy choice. It could define you. There was the table where the “queen bee and wannabes” posed (this may be the cheerleader section, too). Close by them was the “jock” table. They were loud and maybe obnoxious. Be careful; food may come from that area through the air. Across the room, in a quiet tone, were the “nerds.” The table had more books on it than lunch boxes or trays. By the door, so they could sneak out for a smoke, were the “rockers” or “burnouts.” In another corner were the “freaks” (self-appointed label). They liked to be different (hair color, black clothes, piercing, and ink). Although they are different from the norm, they are all alike in how they choose to be different. The preppies, choir, and band kids filled the center area. Of course, there are those few who are just lost.

Maybe I am overthinking this. Today, you just sit with everyone and play with your phone. You can even text someone sitting across the table from you.

1. What did your school lunchroom look like?

2. Where did you sit?

We have already discussed how Jesus was from Bethlehem, Egypt, and Nazareth. One thing those all have in common is that they are places where His parents took Him. Capernaum was the only place He chose to live.

Jesus chose to live in Capernaum.

After being tempted by the devil (Luke 4:1-13), Jesus went back to Nazareth. Verse 16 says, ***“And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read.”*** Those could have been such exciting times for the people; however, that was not their response, ***“When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff”*** (verses 28-29). Jesus brought the truth, and they tried to kill Him.

In the midst of His message, Jesus said, ***“And he said, ‘Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown’”*** (verse 24). Jesus refers to Nazareth as His hometown, but it is time to leave. Matthew 4:13 says, ***“And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali.”*** As Jesus was starting His public ministry, He chose Capernaum.

3. Have you experienced the phrase, ***“no prophet is acceptable in his hometown?”***

4. Some say they would have believed in Jesus if they saw Him firsthand. How does this contradict that thought?

Some feel it would have been easier to be a Christian while Jesus was on Earth. However, Jesus chose to limit Himself to being in one place at a time. When He left, He sent the Holy Spirit to be in us and with us at all times.

Jesus living in Capernaum fulfilled prophecy.

The move from Nazareth, overlooking the valley of Armageddon, to Capernaum, on the Sea of Galilee, happened at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. He chose to live and minister in Capernaum. The site is located at the north corner of the Sea of Galilee. It had a larger community as the water brought more opportunities for commerce.

However, there is more to the story. Jesus' move to Capernaum fulfilled prophecy. Hundreds of years before Jesus was born, Isaiah wrote, ***"But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone"*** (Isaiah 9:1-2).

Isaiah prophesied that ***"a great light"*** would come to the land that Zebulun and Naphtali occupied. That area is Capernaum, and we know who that Great Light is.

The prophecy may seem vague to us, but Matthew could see it clearly, ***“And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ‘The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned’”*** (Matthew 4:13-16). Matthew literally quotes Isaiah.

Jesus is the ***“great light:”***

“The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.” John 1:9

“Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’” John 8:12

“I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.” John 12:46

5. How is light a good picture of Jesus?

Matthew 5:14-16 challenges us, ***“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”***

6. What does it mean for us to be a light?

Jesus began His public ministry in Capernaum.

As Jesus began His work in Capernaum, He chose His disciples. Capernaum is the home town of the apostles Peter, James, Andrew, John, and the tax collector Matthew. The calling of Matthew (Levi) is recorded in three places:

“As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he rose and followed him.” Matthew 9:9

“He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he rose and followed him.” Mark 2:13-14

“After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.” Luke 5:27-28

7. What stands out to you in these passages? (See also Mark 1:16-20)

In Capernaum, Jesus healed many.

Peter's Mother-in-Law

Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law. Mark 1:29-34 says, ***“And immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law lay ill with a fever, and immediately they told him about her. And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them. That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. And the whole city was gathered together at the door. And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. And he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.”***

8. How did Peter's mother-in-law respond to Jesus?

9. Who else does this passage say Jesus healed?

Apparently, Peter was married. That must have brought some challenges. However, church tradition lets us know that she remained faithful and was martyred right before Peter was crucified upside down.

A Leper

In Matthew 8:2-4, we read about Jesus healing a leper, ***“And behold, a leper came to him and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, if you***

will, you can make me clean.’ And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, ‘I will; be clean.’ And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus said to him, ‘See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a proof to them.’”

10. What does this say about the Leper’s faith?

11. Why do you think Jesus touched him?

A Paralytic

In Mark 2:1-12, we read about Jesus healing a paralytic, “***And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. And many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door. And he was preaching the word to them. And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and when they had made an opening, they let down the bed on which the paralytic lay. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’ Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ‘Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, ‘Why do you question these things in your hearts? Which***

is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk?’ But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’— he said to the paralytic— ‘I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.’ And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We never saw anything like this!’”

12. Who all shows great faith in this passage?

13. Why was the crowd present? Did they already believe Jesus was the Christ?

Jesus cursed Capernaum.

Jesus chose to live in Capernaum; He fulfilled prophecy and brought light to an area of darkness through His words and actions. However, the people of Capernaum still did not receive Him.

Capernaum is one of the three cities cursed by Jesus for its lack of faith. Matthew 11:23-24 says, ***“And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.”***

15. What is Sodom?

16. How harsh is the curse?

Jesus did a lot in Capernaum, and He expected them to respond appropriately. Luke 12:48 reminds us, ***“But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.”***

17. How does this apply to us? Be specific.

“Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see;
hail the incarnate Deity.
Pleased as man with men to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel.”
Charles Wesley

“The Son of God became man
to enable men to become the sons of God.”
C. S. Lewis

SON-LIGHT

CAPERNAUM, DEVOTION 1

Pastor Ryan Story

Many of us have heard the Isaiah chapter 9 verses about the birth of Jesus because we have grown up in the church, or we heard it because of “A *Charlie Brown Christmas*.” Most likely, everyone has heard the Bible verse that tells us that “unto us this day, a child was born.” However, most of us have never looked at that whole prophecy. The second verse in chapter 9 of Isaiah reads, ***“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.”*** While all the prophecies involving Jesus are important, this one is the top tier for sure.

Jesus came to Earth on a mission. While the main goal of that mission was to restore the relationship between the perfect God and His fallen creation, there were a few more “perks” mankind got because of Jesus. Isaiah tells us that the coming Messiah would bring light to those who walk in darkness. Just so we can all be on the same page, that is all of humanity. Every person, other than Jesus, who has ever lived on this planet, is infected by sin. Sin causes us to be strangers to God. Sin causes us to walk around in pitch darkness. One thing about darkness is we sometimes forget how dark darkness is because we enjoy the light so much.

John chapter 1 also has a familiarity to it. John 1:1-5 fulfills this prophecy, saying, ***“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and***

the darkness has not overcome it.” This prophecy is fulfilled in the coming of Jesus when the true light of the world is born. I love the idea that the life that Jesus brings, brings light for men, and that because of Jesus, the light He brings is so strong that darkness will never overcome it.

God knew mankind was stumbling around in the darkness. From the moment Adam and Eve sinned, mankind had an issue; they never had light. I am talking more about a spiritual light in this sense, not the sunlight. Sunlight comes and goes, it can get blocked by objects, and it has a time limit on how long it is around. The beautiful thing about Jesus is He does not bring sunlight into a person's world; He brings “Son light.” The light that Jesus brings to a person is strong enough to bring life, to bring guidance, and this light is never blocked or overcome. We live in a world that has darkness in it. My hope is that the light you cling to is the light that Isaiah talks about. My prayer for you is that you have accepted the Son of God into your life as Lord. My challenge for you is that if you are in the midst of darkness, you will find where the true light of the world is.

CHIEF SHEPHERD

CAPERNAUM, DEVOTION 2

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

Some things are hard for me to understand. It is well documented that there are over one billion sheep in the world today. That seems like a lot. I have also read that sheep are not the brightest creatures. Hence, rises my question, “Why is that the animal science chose to clone?”

Due to the popularity of sheep, I am not surprised they are referred to often in Scripture (198 times). Sheep are a good representation of mankind, and shepherds portray the heart and work of the Chief Shepherd (Jesus).

The word shepherd is listed about 111 times in the Bible. It can even be seen in prophecy about the Messiah. Isaiah 40:10-11 says, ***“Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.”*** The Messiah will come in the full power of God but will be gentle, caring, and loving.

In Micah 5:2, we saw that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Two verses later, we read, ***“And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth.”*** God chose the concept of a shepherd to describe the Savior of the world.

Jesus accepted the call as the shepherd. In John 10:11, Jesus says, ***"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."*** Jesus fulfilled all the prophecies of the coming Messiah, which included being a shepherd. As the shepherd, He did lay down His life for us. He died so we could live.

Hebrews 13:20 adds, ***"Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant."*** Jesus died for our sins, but He is alive. He offers an eternal covenant for those who place their faith in Him.

Peter also referred to Jesus as a shepherd. He said, ***"For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls"*** (1 Peter 2:25). Jesus is the ***"Shepherd and Overseer"*** of our souls. He later wrote, ***"And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory"*** (1 Peter 5:4). The Chief Shepherd loves us and is coming back for us.

In the fourth century, Jerome wrote, "I am like the sick sheep that strays from the rest of the flock. Unless the Good Shepherd takes me on His shoulders and carries me back to His fold, my steps will falter, and in the very effort of rising, my feet will give way."

Jesus welcomed the prophetic calling of being the shepherd. When His sheep wander, He directs them back on track. When they fall, He reaches out to help them up. When they are too weak to walk, He carries them.

He is the Chief Shepherd. His job is to lead; our job is to follow.

I WILL TAKE THE TAB

CAPERNAUM, DEVOTION 3

Pastor Ryan Story

I love food. I feel after just three words, I got a resounding praiseworthy “amen.” However, I still have a 497-word quota to meet. I love Thai food. The thing I love about Thai food is it hits all five major tastes (sweet, sour, salty, bitter, and hot) all in one bite. A few years ago, my wife and I were on a date (totally off-topic, but dudes go on dates with your wife!), and we were at our favorite Thai spot in Grand Blanc, enjoying each other’s company. We saw a friend of ours who attends The River Church. We waved, smiled, and told each other that we would “see each other Sunday.” He left, and my wife and I continued our night. When it was time to get our bill, our waitress just told us, “that man told us he would take your tab.” I was beyond blessed at his generosity, and I gave him a big hug the next time I saw him.

Humanity has a major issue. We have this thing called sin. Because of sin, we all are owed God’s wrath to be poured out on us. An all-powerful, all-knowing, all-holy, and perfectly just creator of the universe does not take kindly to His creation’s rebellion. Thankfully, this all-powerful, all-knowing, all-holy, and perfectly just creator of the universe loves us more than we can comprehend. The only means of totally fulfilling the price of this rebellion is that God Himself had to take this punishment. Isaiah 53:12 says, ***“Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.”*** God sent His Son to be the one who would bear the weight and shame of our sin.

Luke 23:34 records the moment when Jesus paid the price for mankind's sin. It reads, ***"And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' And they cast lots to divide his garments."*** Even in the last moments of Jesus' life, the people leading in His crucifixion were gambling off His clothes. At this pivotal moment for all of humanity, while sin and darkness seemed to be victorious, God's perfect Son sacrificed Himself and interceded for our sins. Intercession means to intervene on behalf of someone else. Jesus intervened for all of humanity. Jesus bore the punishment for every sin ever committed by every person who ever walked on this Earth. That is the ultimate, "I will pick up their tab."

Love is purposeful. You cannot love accidentally. Love is a choice. You cannot force love. Jesus loves you, regardless if you reject that notion or not. He proved how much He loved humanity when He bore our sins on that cross. It is such a mind-boggling feeling to know that Jesus chose to pick up my tab. I have done so many horrible things in my life.

Luckily for me, the guy who paid for my Thai food was a friend. I can grasp that concept of him loving me enough to bless me. However, Jesus took my tab when I was an enemy of God, lived a rebellious life of sin, and my only focus was on myself. Prophecy can be a hard thing to understand, but amazingly God picking up our tab was His plan from the very beginning. Take some time to thank God for paying the debt you could not pay, and be gracious to the truth that His love was purposeful. Jesus paid your tab to bring you back to Him. Let us never forget that.

MIRACLE MAN

CAPERNAUM, DEVOTION 4

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

I like how John MacArthur speaks about miracles, “A miracle is an extraordinary event wrought by God through human agency, an event that cannot be explained by natural forces. Miracles are always designed to authenticate the human instrument God has chosen to declare a specific revelation to those who witness the miracle.”

Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would be a miracle worker. Isaiah 29:18 says, ***“In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see.”*** He adds in Isaiah 35:4-6, ***“Say to those who have an anxious heart, ‘Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.’ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.”***

In Matthew chapter 11, John the Baptist is in prison. In verses 2-3, he has one specific question, ***“Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?’”*** He wanted to know if Jesus was the promised Messiah. Jesus’ answer shows He is the miracle man, ***“And Jesus answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me’”*** (Matthew 11:4-6). Jesus knew that John the Baptist knew

the Messiah would perform miracles. His actions spoke as loud as any words.

Jesus healing someone is recorded about 40 times in Scripture. Matthew 9:30, ***“And their eyes were opened. And Jesus sternly warned them, ‘See that no one knows about it.’”*** Matthew 12:22 adds, ***“Then a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute was brought to him, and he healed him, so that the man spoke and saw.”*** Mark 7:37 says, ***“And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, ‘He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.’”*** John 9:39 continues the list of healings performed by Jesus, ***“Jesus said, ‘For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.’”***

One characteristic of the Messiah was that He would perform miracles. Jesus fulfilled that prophecy time and time again.

C.S. Lewis gives another reason Jesus performed miracles, “Miracles are a retelling in small letters of the very same story which is written across the whole world in letters too large for some of us to see.”

God loved us so much that He sent His only son to die for us. The chasm that was created by our sin was bridged by the work of Jesus. His miracles showed His love. His life showed His love. His death showed His love.

PRIORITIZE AND EXECUTE

CAPERNAUM, DEVOTION 5

Pastor Ryan Story

Over the last few years, I have begun to add leadership books to my reading list. One of my favorite statements used in one of those books is “prioritize and execute.” This idea comes from a Navy SEAL concept that, in the heat of conflict, a leader must be able to assess the situation properly, make the call, and move forward to complete a mission. This idea is something that I feel many Christ-followers should put in their walks with God. The reality is most every follower of Christ is going to say that they want to be in God’s will for their life. Most every Christian is well-meaning enough that they know sin is not acceptable, and serving Jesus with all they have is essential to growing in their walks with God and being used to further the Kingdom of God. However, we struggle with two simple concepts, prioritizing and executing.

Psalm 40:7-8 reads, ***“Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me: I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.’”*** David is able to say these words only because God is guiding his heart to where we should all be. Every Christ-follower should be at a place where they are delighted to do the will of God. While a study on the will of God is vast, I believe the best way to narrow down what applicably the will of God looks like is believing what the Bible says and living out what the Bible tells us to do. Too often, we get in arguments about what is most important in the Bible. Should we grow or serve? Should we focus on young people or older people? Should we focus on purity or prayer? Should we evangelize to many, or should we disciple a few? The reality is, if we believe what the Bible tells us, we should do it all.

The example that Jesus leaves us is infinitely vast in the ways we should apply it to our lives. Jesus was the perfect example of what taking delight in doing God's will entails. Even in a state of blood-soaked sweat, Jesus was still focused on being obedient to the Father's will. Matthew 26:38-39 reads, ***"Then he said to them, 'My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.' And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, 'My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.'"*** Jesus is the fulfillment of David's words that even in the worst situation, He was able to be obedient and delight in what God instructed Him to do. Jesus was showing His humanity, both physically and emotionally, in a state of fear. Hebrews 12:2 says that Jesus was looking to the cross with ***"joy that was set before him."***

In moments of peril, in moments where Jesus only had the trust in His Father to hang on to, in moments where Jesus Himself asked if there was another solution, Jesus did not waiver in what had to be done. "Your will be done" is one of the statements that every follower of Christ should declare during every situation. Jesus was perfectly obedient, despite not being thrilled about the plan. Jesus understood the next step that was necessary to defeat the sin that plagued humanity. Jesus' priority was to stay obedient to the Father, die on a cross for humanity's sin, and to reconcile our relationship to God. There was a mission to complete, and Jesus took delight in what was before Him. He knew the pain, He knew what was to come, and He knew the Father would have to look away from Him when He bore the sins of all of humanity. Yet, He executed God's plan perfectly.

ARRIVAL ANNOUNCED

CAPERNAUM, DEVOTION 6

Dr. Randy T. Johnson

There are over 330 prophecies in the Old Testament about the Messiah that are only fulfilled in Jesus. As if that was not enough, God told them He would send someone ahead of the Messiah to announce His arrival.

Malachi 4:5-6 says, ***“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”***

Every year during the Passover, the Seder meal is celebrated. Typically, a cup of wine is set on the table as an invitation for Elijah to join the family. They were waiting for one to come in the spirit of Elijah to prepare the way for ***“the great and awesome day of the Lord.”***

Matthew 11:13-14 boldly speaks of John the Baptist as being the Elijah who was told would come, ***“For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.”*** John opened the door for the Messiah (Jesus).

In Mark 9:11-13, the people are told that John came as Elijah and was not received well, ***“And they asked him, ‘Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?’ And he said to them, ‘Elijah does come first to restore all things. And how is it written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated***

with contempt? But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him.” Mark acknowledged that they knew Elijah would come and that they ignored him.

Luke 1:17 speaks about John the Baptist by saying, ***“And he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”*** He later adds, ***“This is he of whom it is written, ‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.’ I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he”*** (Luke 7:27-28).

After 400 years of silence between the Old and New Testament, God sent a prophet to pave the way for His Son. John came in the spirit of Elijah. He pointed all who would listen to Jesus. We should do the same.

OUR MISSION

Matthew 28:19-20: ***“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”***

REACH

At The River Church, you will often hear the phrase, “we don’t go to church, we are the Church.” We believe that as God’s people, our primary purpose and goal is to go out and make disciples of Jesus Christ. We encourage you to reach the world in your local communities.

GATHER

Weekend Gatherings at The River Church are all about Jesus, through singing, giving, serving, baptizing, taking the Lord’s Supper, and participating in messages that are all about Jesus and bringing glory to Him. We know that when followers of Christ gather together in unity, it’s not only a refresher it’s bringing life-change.

GROW

Our Growth Communities are designed to mirror the early church in Acts as having ***“all things in common.”*** They are smaller collections of believers who spend time together studying the Word, knowing and caring for one another relationally, and learning to increase their commitment to Christ by holding one another accountable.

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