

March 27-31, 2023 Edition

Following The Year(s) Of ^Jesus Part 65

Showdown @ Jerusalem

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March 25/26, 2023



When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;O) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday: This week we're going to spend looking at a battle that took place between Jesus and the power structures of first century Israel. In Mark chapter 12 (and Matthew gives a corresponding view of this battle in Matthew chapter 22) we see 3 heavyweights coming at Jesus trying to trip Him up and get Him to say something that will give these elite power brokers a reason to get rid of Jesus:

When the leading priests and teachers of religious law heard what Jesus had done, they began planning how to kill him. But they were afraid of him because the people were so amazed at his teaching. Mark 11:18 (NLT)

What had Jesus done? Well throughout the gospels Jesus prods the powerful in first century Israel. But now He had gone too far- at the beginning of Mark chapter 11 we read about Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. We commemorate that day on what we now call Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday took place on what the Jews called "preparation day"- the day the selected the lamb that they would sacrifice and then eat to commemorate the Passover a few days later. I find it fascinating that it was on preparation day that the first century Rabbis taught that the Messiah would come to Jerusalem and make himself known at the Temple. The priests even left the doors of the Temple opened on that day and made a great show of waiting for the Messiah's arrival. On that day as Jesus rode down from the mount of Olives across the Kidron valley and then up into Jerusalem thousands greeted Him:

As he was coming close to Jerusalem, on the way down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of followers began joyfully shouting praise to God for all the miracles they had seen. They said, "God bless the king who comes in the name of the Lord! There is peace in heaven and glory to God!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell your followers not to say these things." But Jesus answered, "I tell you, if my followers didn't say these things, then the stones would cry out." Luke 19:37-40 (NLT)

I always wondered why the Pharisees asked Jesus to tell the people to shut up. I just thought it was jealousy. Turns out the Jews weren't the only ones who were on watch on the day of preparation- so were the Romans. The Jews were notoriously likely to revolt- especially around a would-be-messiah. Everyone could remember the time a would-be-messiah tried to come to Jerusalem on preparation day and the people celebrated in the Kidron valley and Roman soldiers dispatched from the Antonia (the Roman fortress built right next to the Temple) came out and killed everyone involved. The Pharisees are genuinely afraid of what might happen if the people don't shut up. Jesus' response always amazed me. There are parts of me that wish I had been there to tell everyone to be quiet so we could see the stones cry out. That might have been pretty cool, right?

So Jesus rides into Jerusalem and the Romans don't send a detachment to stop Him. So what does Jesus do? He does what the Messiah is supposed to do- He heads for the Temple but when He gets there the priests are not filled with joy:

Then Jesus entered the Temple and began to drive out the people selling animals for sacrifices. He said to them, "The Scriptures declare, 'My Temple will be a house of prayer,' but you have turned it into a den of thieves." Luke 19:45-46 (NLT)

The religious elite of first century Israel THOUGHT they wanted the Messiah to come but when He came He was nothing that they were expecting and (as far as they were concerned)

He did all the wrong things and none of the right things. That's why they want to kill Him. Not only is the all wrong from their religious points of view but He was a real and present danger to the nation of Israel and the people. They were just sure He was going to get everybody killed. They actually had very good reasons for wanting Jesus gone- IF (and this is a very big if) He wasn't the true Messiah that Israel had been waiting for. And they could not believe Jesus was the One.

Tuesday: So if you read yesterday's reflection then you are all caught up with why the religious elites of Jesus' day wanted Him dead. It wasn't only jealousy and religious disagreements- they were also worried about what Rome would do to Jerusalem if Jesus continued on the course they thought He was on. So in Mark chapter 12 the power brokers of first century Israel (Pharisees, Sadducees & Herodians) attack in wave after wave of attempts to get Jesus to do or say something that will allow them to get rid of Him. In order to do this they have to accomplish two things- they have to get the Romans on board (who will do the actual execution) and they have to get the people on board so that when Rome executes Jesus there isn't a revolt that causes Rome to destroy Jerusalem and kill all the people (exactly what the power brokers are trying to avoid). We looked at the first 3 rounds of what would become a 7 round heavy-weight bout between Jesus and the elites and today I want to go back and look at one of those rounds:

Later the leaders sent some Pharisees and supporters of Herod to trap Jesus into saying something for which he could be arrested. "Teacher," they said... "tell us-is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay them, or shouldn't we?" Mark 12:13-15 (NLT)

The first thing to talk about is the tag-team that is coming up against Jesus- the Pharisees and the Herodians. The Herodians were the supporters of Herod. They were basically a secular/political non religious group that wanted things to remain as they were. They weren't looking for a Messiah to change everything- they liked things the way they were. They supported paying taxes. The Pharisees were ultra-conservative-religious-fanatical-rule-keepers. They longed for the Messiah to come and return Israel to its rightful place in the world (on top). These two groups had zero in common and would have had nothing to do with one another in ordinary circumstances. The Herodians would have thought of the Pharisees as religious holier than thou fanatics and the Pharisees would have thought of the Herodians as scum bag sinners.

But they've put all that aside for this one common goal- getting rid of Jesus. So they ask about taxes. I always thought this was just some random question and never thought of it as a trap but it turns out it was a very clever trap. They weren't just asking about taxes in general but a particular kind of tax called the "head tax". Jesus' response makes this clear:

Jesus saw through their hypocrisy and said... "Show me a Roman coin, and I'll tell you."
Mark 12 15-17 (NLT)

In this translation Jesus asks for a "Roman coin" but literally what He asks for is a denarius. The head tax was a tax imposed by Rome on all subjects of the Roman Empire (with the exception of Roman citizens) and cost each individual one denarius per year. It was a controversial tax and nobody in the Roman Empire (except Caesar) liked it. In fact, it was often the rallying cry of people trying to advocate for rebellion. Twenty years earlier when

Jesus would have been 13 a would-be-messiah named Judas the Galilean gathered a small army to begin his rebellion. The first thing Judas the Galilean did was cleanse the Temple (sound familiar?). He rode down from the mount of Olives into Jerusalem and kicked out all the foreigners (not the same thing Jesus did but to the casual observer similar). Then he called on Jews throughout the empire to refuse to pay the Roman head tax. That was the final straw for Rome- they dispatched soldiers who caught Judas the Galilean and killed him.

Now Jesus is approached by this unlikely coalition and asked about the tax. What they're getting at would have been obvious to everyone there. Basically they're saying, "you've already cleansed the Temple- now are you calling for us to stop paying the head tax too?" This is no rando question about taxes in general- they're asking Jesus if He's a revolutionary. Jesus' response is revolutionary but not in the way they hoped:

When they handed it to him, he asked, "Whose picture and title are stamped on it?" "Caesar's," they replied. "Well, then," Jesus said, "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God." His reply completely amazed them. Mark 12:15-17 (NLT)

It's not obvious to us but what I've read in many different commentaries is that it would have been obvious to everyone there that day- that Jesus makes a subtle revolutionary statement that would end up turning this world upside down but not in the expected way. When He asks whose "picture" is stamped on the coin Jesus uses the word, "icon" or image. As cryptic as ever in some ways and yet as plain as could be Jesus says that if something has someone's image stamped upon it then that thing belongs to them so the right thing to do is give them back what belongs to them. Caesar's image is stamped on the denarius so go ahead and give that to him. But what I missed for most of my life was what I imagine everyone gathered that day thought of immediately- the Jewish creation narrative:

So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. Genesis 1:27 (NLT)

The image of God is stamped upon every human being. That means (according to Jesus) that we should be giving ourselves to God. All of ourselves (which would include our money but that's just something Jesus takes for granted and doesn't point out). We will see later in chapter 12 how Jesus illustrates this with a poor widow but for today maybe spend some time thinking about what it would even look like to give unto God what belongs to God recognizing that we have stamped upon us the very image of our Creator.

Wednesday: Today we'll look at round 4 in the attack on Jesus by the power elites of first century Israel in an attempt to get Him to say something that will allow them to get rid of Him once and for all which starts out like this:

Then Jesus was approached by some Sadducees-religious leaders who say there is no resurrection from the dead. They posed this question... Mark 12:18 (NLT)

First of all, who are these guys and why do they have such a strange name? What does Sadducee even mean (when I was little we sang a song in Sunday school that told us we don't want to be like Sadducees... cause they're so sad you see). For years I figured sadness had to have something to do with why these guys were called Sadducees. But I was wrong. Their name stems from the high priest of Israel during the building of Solomon's Temple- a priest

named Zadok. I know that in English that name is pronounced with a hard "Z" sound but in Hebrew it's a softer "sz" so it sounds like something in between an English "s" and a "z". The Sadducees were the priestly faction in first century Israel but any power they wielded came only from their control over the Temple. When Babylon destroyed the Temple of Solomon in 586 BC the power of the priests went away until Herod rebuilt the Temple in the years just prior to Jesus' birth and while He was growing up (construction on the Temple was ongoing from about 16 BC until it was eventually destroyed for good by the Roman in 70 AD). So when the priests suddenly found themselves in power again they started calling themselves the Sadducees (the ones or sons of Zadok). The Sadducees only considered the first 5 books of the Old Testament to be holy scriptures. They rejected the rest of the 39 Old Testament scriptures that the Pharisees considered to be inspired by God. Since the first 5 books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers & Deuteronomy) do not contain any mention of resurrection or angels the Sadducees believed in neither- the Pharisees believed in both.

So when this group of people who don't believe in the resurrection or angels approach Jesus and ask Him a question about the resurrection you should feel the sarcasm dripping off their words. Here's the (ridiculous) question they asked Him:

"Teacher, Moses gave us a law that if a man dies, leaving a wife without children, his brother should marry the widow and have a child who will carry on the brother's name. Well, suppose there were seven brothers. The oldest one married and then died without children. So the second brother married the widow, but he also died without children. Then the third brother married her. This continued with all seven of them, and still there were no children. Last of all, the woman also died. So tell us, whose wife will she be in the resurrection? For all seven were married to her. Mark 12:19-23 (NLT)

Seems like a ridiculous question, doesn't it? Until you realize this is a question the Pharisees and Rabbis argued over all the time (by the way, the Pharisees had "decided" that the woman would belong to the first husband/oldest son at the resurrection- I have no idea how they came to this decision just that they did ;o). My question was always, "why are they asking this?" What do they hope to gain? If they're trying to get Jesus killed how does this question help them further their goal? Short answer is, it doesn't (at least not that I can see). This is a question by the Sadducees aimed at making Jesus look ridiculous in the eyes of the people. It's a question aimed at showing how ridiculous the idea of a resurrection was. How would all of that work itself out? They're hoping to knock Jesus down a few pegs in the eyes of the people and take a swipe at their old rivals (newly formed allies) at the same time. Here's Jesus answer to their "question":

Jesus replied, "Your mistake is that you don't know the Scriptures, and you don't know the power of God. For when the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage. In this respect they will be like the angels in heaven. Mark 12:24-25 (NLT)

"Your mistake is that you don't know the scriptures or the power of God"-
HAHAHAHAHAHA! I guarantee you there were some gasps from the Sadducees and maybe some snickers from the Pharisees when Jesus said this. The Pharisees are probably thinking, "that's what we've been saying all along!" I wonder if they started to wonder about this plan they had to get rid of Jesus? Probably not. But Jesus does drive a wedge further between this

tentative alliance. As far as what Jesus means by no marriage in heaven- I don't know. That's weird. But I would point out this is the only time He mentions this and I've been taught (and experience has proven how wise this counsel is) not to make a hard and fast doctrine based on one confusing thing that Jesus says. He says this at one point in His ministry:

Don't imagine that I came to bring peace to the earth! I came not to bring peace, but a sword. Matthew 10:24 (NLT)

What does that mean? Does that negate all the times He said He came to bring peace and love and mercy? I don't think so. I'm not sure exactly what it means but I'd warn anyone to be careful about making a fully fledged doctrine out of that one strange remark of Jesus'. Same with this business about marriage. One of my favorite preachers to listen to while I was growing up was named Jim McGuiggan. I once heard someone ask him what this thing about marriage that Jesus mentions here meant and I'll never forget what he said, "I have no idea what He meant by that but I'll tell you this- it has nothing to do with my Mildred and me." HAHAAHAHAHAHAHA!

If you're asking me what that business about marriage means I'll just quote Jim- it has nothing to do with my Judy and me. Beware making a doctrine out of weird things the Bible only mentions once. What I think is most important to point out here is that if we get all hung up on this strange thing about no marriage and us being like the angels then we're in danger of missing what Jesus is really getting at:

"But now, as to whether the dead will be raised-haven't you ever read about this in the writings of Moses, in the story of the burning bush? Long after Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had died, God said to Moses, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' So he is the God of the living, not the dead. You have made a serious error." Mark 12:26-27 (NLT)

Our God is the God of the living- not the dead. That. Is. Amazing.

And Jesus uses the Sadducees own scriptures to prove His point- that quote comes straight out of the second book of Moses- Exodus. The Sadducees stagger away wondering what hit them and Jesus takes another round. Maybe for today spend some time thinking about what it means that our God is the God of the living and not the dead. Don't get too hung up on what the afterlife will/might look like- instead focus on what Jesus might have in store for all of us when we finally get there.

Thursday: Today I want to look at something Jesus says in a round verses the elites that I didn't have time to mention last weekend. It happens after the last question is asked of Him and the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Herodians stagger away to figure out where to go from here and so Jesus asks a question:

Later, as Jesus was teaching the people in the Temple, he asked, "Why do the teachers of religious law claim that the Messiah is the son of David? For David himself, speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, said, 'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit in the place of honor at my right hand until I humble your enemies beneath your feet.' Since David himself called the Messiah 'my Lord,' how can the Messiah be his son?" The large crowd listened to him with great delight. Mark 12:35-37 (NLT)

What's going on here? How is this helping Jesus in His battle royale with the elites? Well, it's mostly Him teaching the crowd- the average citizens of Israel- that the elites aren't infallible. In the first century everyone believed that the Messiah who would come and rescue Israel would be the son-of-David. In other words a descendant of David's. A completely human figure. But Jesus points out that David himself calls this Messiah, "Lord" which doesn't make any sense at all. A man would never call one of his descendants "lord" let alone the King of Israel. They would always always always refer to a descendant as "my son." But David calls his descendant, "Lord". Why? What gives?

Well it wouldn't make any sense to call your descendant "Lord" if your descendant was a purely human figure. But (and as a friend of mine likes to say this is a REALLY BIG BUT) if this descendant was son of man AND son of God? Well, then that changes everything. But there's something even deeper going on here I think- here when Jesus is taking the chance to prove Who He is He uses a very strange argument to "prove" Himself- and really He doesn't prove Himself at all. Yes He points out a flaw in the reasoning of the religious elite but He doesn't really offer proof. In the end what He offers as proof is nothing more and nothing less than Himself. Over and over He was asked to prove Who He was and He wouldn't do it. Why not? Well because every culture that has ever existed has its own standard for deciding whether something is "true" or not. Paul put it this way:

It is foolish to the Jews, who ask for signs from heaven. And it is foolish to the Greeks, who seek human wisdom. So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense. 1 Corinthians 1:22-23 (NLT)

What's Paul saying? That for the Jews to decide whether something is "true" or not they want to see a miraculous "sign". The Greeks Paul says (and the Corinthian church was a Greek church by the way) want an airtight argument that will "convince" them. Different cultures- different standards by which "truth" was gauged. How about in America? What do we use to gauge truth? Maybe power? Maybe success? Maybe prosperity? Show me those things (or their lack) and I'll gauge whether what I'm looking into is true or not. The thing about every culture's basis upon which they gauge the truth of something is that none of our measuring sticks instill faith. They can all be "signs" that point to the truth of something but the Jews were shown miracle after miracle and many of them walked away amazed but without faith. The Greeks were given many persuasive arguments by Paul (who was a master at philosophical debate) but many of them walked away tickled but not trusting in Jesus. In America it happens all the time- we see "evidences" of Jesus' work in the lives of His people but folks still walk away unconvinced and skeptical.

What Jesus offered the Jews listening to Him in Mark chapter 12 is the same thing Paul offered to the Greeks and the same thing countless preachers offer to Americans- not an airtight argument but an airtight person. In the end there is only one thing that will instill faith- Jesus Himself. Christianity is an experiential, relational religion. You will only ever know the truth of it if you try it. You have to jump in. You will never find enough "proof" to outweigh any doubt you might currently be experiencing or the doubts that most certainly will come as you walk-with-Jesus. Think about it- have you ever seen an American who decided to follow Jesus but as soon as their lives had any problems within the areas of power, success or prosperity then their faith shattered and they walked away bitter and crushed?

Why? Because so many American preachers promise a Jesus who will fix all your problems. Turn on any religious TV station and you will find a preacher telling you that if you're following Jesus the "right way" then you won't have any problems- not relational, not physical, not health, not financial- zero. Jesus will fix it all. No wonder when troubles come our way and Jesus doesn't "fix" them all we are left crushed and wounded and wondering, "either there's something wrong with me or there's something wrong with God..."

But there's a third possibility- there's something wrong with our preaching in America. Not all American preachers do this but it's seeped so far into our American consciousness that it's hard to get around. Maybe that's why Jesus (and the writers of the New Testament) spent so much time warning us that trouble was just part of this life. That Jesus' promise is not a trouble-free life but a life where you never have to walk through trouble alone:

I have told you these things so you can have peace in me- in this world you will have trouble, but be brave! For I have defeated the world! John 16:33 (NLT)

Jesus doesn't offer us an airtight argument any more than He offers us a trouble free life. He offers us Himself. He offers us an airtight person. Each culture and each person has a different criteria for deciding what's true and what isn't. Skip the culture wars and focus on Jesus. What would that even look like?

Friday: The final round of Jesus' battle with the elite of first century Israel is again initiated by Jesus Himself and not by the elite. He has followed them to the Temple and there is a familiar scene playing out there:

Jesus sat down near the collection box in the Temple and watched as the crowds dropped in their money. Many rich people put in large amounts. Mark 12:41 (NLT)

This is the way people gave-back-to-God in first century Israel- they brought their gifts to the Temple and dropped them in an offering box. Turns out at the top of every hour a trumpet would blow and everyone's attention would be turned toward that part of the Temple- that's probably the moment the rich and powerful took to bring their gifts to the offering box so everyone will notice and be appropriately impressed. It's fascinating to me that what's happening here is basically a snapshot of something Jesus said in the Sermon On The Mount:

Watch out! Don't do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven. When you give to someone in need, don't do as the hypocrites do- blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I tell you the truth, they have received all the reward they will ever get. But when you give to someone in need, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Give your gifts in private, and your Father, who sees everything, will reward you. Matthew 6:1-4 (NLT)

I wonder if Jesus' disciples are recalling those words from His most famous sermon as they watch it play out before their very eyes? I wonder if they were asking themselves whether there were any of us humans who didn't make a big show of their "good deeds"? Enter the widow:

Then a poor widow came and dropped in two small coins. Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has given more than all the others who are

making contributions. For they gave a tiny part of their surplus, but she, poor as she is, has given everything she had to live on." Mark 12:42-44 (NLT)

The rich drop in their fat-stacks-of-cash (as the youngsters would say ;o) and Jesus is basically yawning (they're lucky He didn't actively go after them, right?). Then this widow drops in two cents and Jesus sits up and says, "did you see that? That was impressive!" Why? Why was that impressive? I always thought it was because she gave everything. That those two cents were her last two cents but she didn't care because she trusted God. To be honest that understanding of the story always made me feel vaguely unsettled. And to be even more honest the only reason I was only vaguely unsettled is because I refused to really compare my life and how much I give to God with what the widow gives.

But recently I was reading in several commentaries and just about all of them were saying the same thing- the English translations of this story don't do it justice. What Jesus literally says is that this widow gave her "bion". Bion is the word for "life" in Greek. It's where we get the word "biology" which is the study of life. English translators filled in what they considered to be the blanks that Jesus didn't in this story by adding "everything she had to live on" but Jesus doesn't say that. According to the commentators I read this might be a better translation of Jesus' words:

"I tell you the truth, this poor widow has given more than all the others who are making contributions. For they gave a tiny part of their surplus, but she, poor as she is, has given [herself]" Mark 12:42-44 (REV)

What's the "REV" version you ask? Why the Revised Ed Version of course. I didn't add anything to the scriptures- I just translated them a little differently and you can take it or leave it but I think now that this is more what Jesus was getting at- especially in light of that story about taxes from earlier in this chapter. Do you remember when Jesus said to give what belongs to Caesar to Caesar but give to God what belongs to God? Do you remember all that talk about how Caesar's image was stamped on the denarius but God's image was stamped upon every one of us (including you by the way)? Now here we find someone doing exactly what Jesus was talking about way back in Mark 12:17- she's giving herself. She's giving her life to God. The more I think about it the more I don't believe the two cents she gave were her last two cents. They were just a sign of a much bigger gift that she had already given- herself. Her entire life. Paul says this when writing to the Corinthian church about the church in Macedonia that gave so generously:

And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. 2 Corinthians 8:5 (NIV)

Isn't that cool? First the widow, then the Macedonian church. Now what?

I guess that brings us to... well... us. I am not trying to make this reflection about money but I guess it's impossible not to think about money as I think about giving all of my life to God. What would that even look like? The rich and powerful gave lots of money but Jesus saw they refused to give themselves to the One Whose image is stamped upon their entire lives. The widow gave very little but blew Jesus away with her generosity. What would it look like to give myself to God? My entire life? Big questions.