

September 2-6, 2024 Edition

Following The Year^(s) Of ^Jesus Part 139

Death, Taxes & Jesus (Conclusion)

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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 you knew the rest ;0) 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 Reflection: Two weeks ago we looked at two stories in our 3 part mini-narrative that we looked at two weekends ago at Riverside. We saw Jesus explain to the disciples what the tiniest amount of faith could do (move mountains). And this is after we see Jesus respond to a dad's lack of faith (I do believe but help me with my unbelief!). Then we saw Jesus tell His disciples again that He would be killed but on the third day He'd rise from death. Today we're going to look at what happens when Jesus and his disciples arrive back in Capernaum:

On their arrival in Capernaum, the collectors of the Temple tax came to Peter and asked him, "Doesn't your teacher pay the Temple tax?" "Yes, he does," Peter replied. Then he went into the house. Matthew 17:24-25 (NLT)

So if you remember Jesus left Capernaum (His home base during His ministry years and the home of Peter, James & John and probably Matthew as well) and took His disciples on an epic road trip when He got tired of dealing with the harassment of the Pharisees. He goes to Tyre (a gentile town outside of Israel in modern day Lebanon) where He encounters a woman with a sick daughter. Then when He comes back to Israel it appears He's going back to Capernaum (where the Pharisees are undoubtedly waiting for Him to return so they can pounce on Him again) but then bypasses it and goes to the Eastern shore of the Sea Of Galilee (Capernaum is the far northern shore of the Sea Of Galilee). Then after He feeds 4,000 gentiles there He ends up in Bethsaida (a few miles east of Capernaum) and when it appears that word has gotten out about where He is He once again leads His disciples to the far north and goes to Caesarea-Philippi (the most pagan city in all of ancient Israel).

There He asks His disciples who they think He is. Peter confesses that he believes Jesus is the Christ. Jesus then tells them that He will be killed but rise again on the third day (which gets a violent reaction from Peter). Next He goes to the top of a high mountain and the Transfiguration (nobody can agree where this mountain was/is but since He was in the far north chances are pretty good the mountain in question was somewhere in the range where Mt. Hermon is- about 80 miles away). Nowadays 80 miles doesn't seem like much but if you couldn't drive that distance and had to walk it how long do you think it might take you? After the Transfiguration He finally goes back to Capernaum. And guess who's waiting for Him? The Temple tax collectors. These guys almost assuredly are not Pharisees (the Pharisees and the Sadducees- who were the priests of Jerusalem- couldn't stand each other and in fact the only thing they could agree on is their hatred of Jesus) but they are all part of the plot to kill Jesus.

So what do they want from Jesus? The Temple tax. The Temple tax was about two days worth of pay for a common laborer and was collected by the priests from every Jew in Israel once a year. More than likely these particular tax collectors had a specific mission- to demand that Jesus pay the Temple tax (which they would have figured He would refuse to do) and then report back to Jerusalem so the news could be spread far and wide that Jesus hates the Temple and won't pay the tax. But what does Jesus do?

Jesus asked him, "What do you think, Peter? Do kings tax their own people or the people they have conquered?" "They tax the people they have conquered," Peter

replied. "Well, then," Jesus said, "the citizens are free! However, we don't want to offend them, so go down to the lake and throw in a line. Open the mouth of the first fish you catch, and you will find a large silver coin. Take it and pay the tax for both of us." Matthew 17:25-27 (NLT)

We could spend a bunch of time focusing on Jesus' words about who does and doesn't pay taxes in ancient kingdoms but I'd prefer to focus in on what Jesus decides to do in this situation- even though He demonstrates to Peter that the children of the king don't pay taxes He then instructs Peter to pay the tax. How He tells Peter to find the money to pay the tax is very strange. Go throw a line in the lake and catch a fish. It's worth mentioning that this is the only time this method of fishing is mentioned in the gospels. It's also worth mentioning that Matthew is the only gospel that tells this story. Neither Mark nor Luke nor John mention this story. Why do you suppose Matthew decided to include this strange story in his gospel? Maybe because of Matthew's former occupation- he was a tax collector. It would make sense that this story would capture Matthew's imagination. And finally it's worth mentioning that while Jesus tells Peter what to do to find the money to pay the tax we're never shown that it actually happens. I figure it must have happened or that would have been mentioned but it's still strange that we never get confirmation that Peter followed through. A very strange story. But what's it supposed to teach us?

Maybe this is another exercise in learning to trust/believe/have-faith-in Jesus. Maybe it was a way to grow Peter's faith and that it would remind him of the time Jesus provided Peter with a miraculous catch of fish by instructing him to cast his nets on the other side of his boat. Yes it's a strange story but if we're not careful we'll miss the headline of this story- Jesus had Peter pay the tax for both of them. Why? If Jesus said the children of the king shouldn't have to pay the tax and if Jesus is the Son of God then why would He tell Peter to go ahead and pay? Because Jesus says He doesn't want to offend them.

Seriously? Since when did Jesus worry about offending the Temple priests? Never- that's when. If you remember way back to the 11th lesson in our megalithic lesson series going through the chronological story of Jesus' life then you'll recall that He "cleansed the Temple" and infuriated the Temple priests. He flipped tables and made a whip out of cords and chased everyone out. Now He doesn't want to offend them? Isn't it too late for that? Yeah, probably. But Jesus is on a journey now that will end in Jerusalem. He's been traveling for weeks- maybe months- and while they are currently back in Capernaum they won't be staying for long. Soon they will continue their journey into the heart of the land of the Temple priests. Jesus doesn't seem to think it's strategic to annoy them about this- yet. I'm not sure why but He's got a real specific timeline in mind where He is going to make the religious leaders so angry that they will go to any lengths to kill Him. He must know that refusing to pay the Temple tax will disrupt His timeline and so He instructs Peter to just go ahead and pay the man.

This isn't the first time the Jerusalem priests (the Sadducees) get involved in the plot to kill Jesus but this marks the beginning of the Sadducees becoming MUCH more involved in the execution of their plot- the end game of which would have been Jesus' execution. Why are they suddenly so involved? What moved them to the top of the list of the groups who

wanted Jesus dead? I think it's because it was the Sadducees who had the most to lose if Jesus was the true Messiah. Why would that be? Well we'll look at that tomorrow but for today maybe you and I could spend some time reflecting on why Jesus has Peter pay the tax and what the lesson of the coin in the mouth of the fish is trying to teach you.

Tuesday Reflection: Today we will wrap up our look at 3 mini-travel-narratives found in the 17th chapter of Matthew by looking at why the Jerusalem priests (the Sadducees) were so determined to get Jesus killed. They don't seem to play as large a role in opposing Jesus in the gospels as the Pharisees but it turns out it's the Sadducees who are the most threatened by Jesus' claims. Why would that be? And why do we seem to read much more about Jesus' run-ins with the Pharisees than we do His run-ins with the Sadducees?

It's probably because the Sadducees are based strictly in Jerusalem. If we're not careful we'll get the impression that Jesus despised the entire priesthood of ancient Israel but it's just not true. The humble priests scattered throughout first century Israel were for the most part loyal priests to Yahweh and didn't use their position to get rich. But the Jerusalem priests had tremendous power over the Temple and over time that led to some pretty serious abuses of their power. If you wanted to sacrifice at the Temple- and it was every Jews dream to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Temple at least once in their lifetimes to fulfill their lifelong dream of worshipping Yahweh at His Temple- then you had to go through the Sadducees. The Sadducees had also used their position to cozy up to the Roman authorities which gave them even more power. And Jesus hated that they used their position of power to take advantage of God's children.

And the Sadducees were put on notice by John The Baptist that Jesus' main objective would be to deal with their corruption. When John was baptizing out at the Jordan river the Sadducees went out to see what all the hubbub was about and John noticed and called them out:

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming to watch him baptize, he denounced them. "You brood of snakes!" he exclaimed. "Who warned you to flee the coming wrath? Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God. Don't just say to each other, 'We're safe, for we are descendants of Abraham.' That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Abraham from these very stones. Even now the ax of God's judgment is poised, ready to sever the roots of the trees. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire. Matthew 3:7-10 (NLT)

Now I know he is yelling here at both the Pharisees and the Sadducees but the warning that comes next would have made the Pharisees smile and it would have made the Sadducees blood run cold:

"I baptize with water those who repent of their sins and turn to God. But someone is coming soon who is greater than I am- so much greater that I'm not worthy even to be his slave and carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. He is ready to separate the chaff from the wheat with his winnowing fork.

Then he will clean up the threshing area, gathering the wheat into his barn but burning the chaff with never-ending fire." Matthew 3:11-12 (NLT)

Do you see why the Pharisees would smile at this warning the Sadducees would see it as an existential threat to their continuing power over the Temple and therefore, over all the Jewish people? If you don't that's ok- I never saw it either until I got to go to Israel back in January of 2020 (did I ever mention I went to Israel? Judy keeps telling me I bring that up so often people have to be getting sick of me mentioning it but I learned SO much there so yeah... I went to Israel y'all ;o). On the day that we went up onto the Temple Mount I learned something that I never knew before that I couldn't believe nobody ever pointed out to me and it changed the way I read the gospels.

If you go up on the Temple Mount today you wouldn't see the Temple- it was completely destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD when Israel rebelled for (almost) the last time. That Temple Mount was covered over by Emperor Vespasian with a pagan Temple dedicated to Jupiter. Eventually that temple was destroyed and the Temple Mount stood empty until around 700 AD when the Dome Of The Rock was built as a shrine by the muslim conqueror of Jerusalem. That shrine is still standing and if you've seen pictures of Jerusalem you'd recognize the multicolored building with a giant golden dome on top. So today when you stand upon the Temple Mount it's the Dome and not the Temple of Yahweh that you will see.

But what' blew me away the day I was there was what our guide told us about what the Temple Mount had been before it was the site of the Temple of Yahweh. Turns out it had been a threshing floor owned by a guy named Araunah the Jebusite (the Jebusites were the people who held the city of Jerusalem before David conquered them and made it the capital of his kingdom and eventually the location of the Temple of Yahweh):

That day God came to David and said to him, "Go up and build an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite..." "So David paid him fifty pieces of silver for the threshing floor. 2 Samuel 24:18-24 (NLT)

When I heard that my mind was blown! Blown I tell you! BLOWWWWWWWNNNNNNNN (you'd have to be a big fan of Seinfeld to read that last statement in George Steinbrenner's voice and if you're completely mystified I'm sorry but I couldn't help myself). Why was my mind blown finding out that the Temple Mount had been a threshing floor? Because of John's warning to the Pharisees (so I thought) and the Sadducees. Do you remember the warning we just read a few minutes ago? What did John say this coming Messiah was coming to do? John said the Messiah would separate the wheat from the chaff and clean up His... wait for it... THRESHING FLOOR! Sorry about all the digital yelling but this is paradigm shifting stuff here. Who controlled a Temple that was built on a threshing floor? The Sadducees, right? What does John say the Messiah is going to do? Clean up His threshing floor. And John also says He's going to separate the wheat from the chaff using His winnowing fork- believe me that would have made the Sadducees blood run cold. Why?

Well to understand that we have to talk about how ancient farmers processed wheat. When a farmer had harvested his wheat crop he had a dilemma. How to get at the valuable and nutritious wheat that was covered by a hard, thin shell. The way they did that was to run a

heavy stone over the wheat on something they called a threshing floor. When the heavy stone ran over a kernel of wheat it would break the shell and release the edible wheat within. But now they had another problem. How do we separate the wheat from the shell (they called it the "chaff")? It turns out that the chaff is much lighter weight than the grains of edible wheat and so they would take what they called a winnowing fork (or a winnowing fan) and they'd use it as a fan to stir the air and create some air movement aimed directly at the commingled wheat and chaff. If you're trying to picture what this must've looked like picture a large leaf rake and you'll have a pretty good visualization of what was going on.

They'd fan the wheat and the chaff but since the wheat was heavier than the chaff the grains would stay on the ground but the chaff would float away leaving only the valuable, edible grain behind. When John tells the Sadducees that the Messiah is coming to His threshing floor everybody would have known John was referencing the Temple. When John says He's coming to clean His threshing floor everybody would have assumed John was talking about the Sadducees- including the Pharisees who hated the Sadducees with a passion and didn't agree with them about anything other than the desire to see Jesus dead. John's warning told the Sadducees that the Messiah was coming and He was not happy with them. They wouldn't have been shocked to learn that the Messiah was unhappy with them because they knew full well what they were doing with that threshing floor. That's why John's warning was taken so seriously by the Sadducees and why when Jesus shows up and "cleanses the Temple" in John chapter two He suddenly becomes enemy number one for them. The only reason we read more about the Pharisees run-ins with Jesus is because the Pharisees were found scattered throughout ancient Israel but the Sadducees were found exclusively in Jerusalem. So we only read about conflicts between Jesus and the Sadducees whenever He's in Jerusalem.

There are so many lessons in all of this but maybe what you and I can reflect on today is how people sometimes do today in the church what the Sadducees did with the Temple. Have you ever experienced those who were supposed to be working for Jesus using their authority and position to enrich themselves and gain ever more power and riches? I know it's easy to look elsewhere and point our fingers but maybe spend some time looking at our own lives and reflect on whether we've ever done something like that. I know it's a nebulous concept and you might never have done this but reflecting on it for a while just might stop us from doing anything like this in the future. Because if we ever do the warning would be the same for us- God still cleans His threshing floor when He really needs to.

Jesus is awesome.

Wednesday Reflection: Last week we learned from Joshua that courage isn't the absence of fear- it's the unwillingness to let my fear become my master. We've also learned that the secret to success is following the Leader- studying the Bible, thinking about what it says and then putting it into practice in my own life. The next thing we learn from Joshua is that sometimes following the leader is seems crazy.

After God gave Joshua His epic pep talk in chapter one, Joshua sends two scouts across the Jordan river to scope out the city of Jericho. Remember- this is the city that tripped up the people of Israel 40 years before. The 12 scouts Moses sent in came back convinced that they could never take the city or the land (well... to be fair only 10 of the scouts believed that- the

other two (Joshua & Caleb) were ready to roll in there and claim their destinies). Now Joshua sends only two scouts in. Why only two? Maybe he'd learned it's tougher to work with a larger committee than it is a small one? Whatever the reason he sends in two scouts- we don't know their names. They make their way into the city of Jericho and stay the night with a woman name, Rahab. Now the Bible says Rahab was a prostitute. Scholars believe that means she would have had room to spare in her "house". The reality of Rahab's profession makes telling this story to a children's Sunday school class tricky. I'll never forget when I first started teaching the fourth and fifth graders at the church I would eventually work for first as a youth minister and then as pastor.

I had found a series of VHS tapes by Hanna-Barbera. They were cartoons bases on the great stories of the Bible. I was showing the video of Joshua and Jericho to the class one Sunday when they got around to talking about Rahab. As the narrator told us that, "Rahab was a..." I got very nervous. What is this guy going to say about Rahab? Am I ready to answer the question about what a prostitute is? Am I ready to face angry parents when their child's answer to the question, "what did you learn about in Sunday school today?" was, prostitution? It turns out I needn't have worried. The narrator didn't skip a beat- he simply said, "Rahab was... an entertainer!"

Problem solved! Catastrophe averted! So back to our story. The spies are staying with Rahab and the king of Jericho hears there might be Israelite spies hiding within the city. He sends soldiers to Rahab's house and she hides the Israelite scouts and saves their lives. The scouts promise to spare her and her family when they take the city. They head back to the encampment and tell Joshua that the people of Jericho are terrified and it's ripe for the plucking. So God tells Joshua what's next:

Today I will begin to make you a great leader in the eyes of all the Israelites. They will know that I am with you, just as I was with Moses. Give this command to the priests who carry the Ark of the Covenant: 'When you reach the banks of the Jordan River, take a few steps into the river and stop there.' Joshua 3:7 (NLT)

Notice God doesn't tell Joshua that He'll stop the water BEFORE the priests cross the Jordan. It will only stop AFTER they put their feet in. And did I mention the Jordan river was at flood stage at that point? This would have been a terrifying test for Joshua and especially the priest who were at the front of the line. Can you imagine laying out your plan to the Israelites and the priests? How will he convince them to buy into the plan. What happens if they resist the plan? What then? But Joshua trusts God and because of that the people and the priests trust Joshua:

As soon as the feet of the priests who were carrying the Ark touched the water at the river's edge, the water above that point began backing up a great distance away at a town called Adam, which is near Zarethan. And the water below that point flowed on to the Dead Sea until the riverbed was dry. Then all the people crossed over near the town of Jericho. Meanwhile, the priests who were carrying the Ark of the Lord's Covenant stood on dry ground in the middle of the riverbed

as the people passed by. They waited there until the whole nation of Israel had crossed the Jordan on dry ground. Joshua 3:15-17 (NLT)

And the people learn an important lesson- we should listen to God and to God's servant, Joshua. That is our secret to success. But now that they are on the other side of the Jordan what will happen? Their feet are walking on promised land at this point for the first time in over 440 years. Now things start to get very interesting. More tomorrow.

Thursday Reflection: Another lesson Joshua teaches us is that God intends for us to have our own stories. Joshua is taking over as the leader of God's people but it's not going to be easy to the guy who takes over after Moses. Moses had so many fantastic stories- the burning bush, the plagues, the Passover, the Red Sea crossing, the 10 Commandments, etc., etc., etc. Now Joshua is ready to lead and God makes it pretty clear that His intention is that Joshua would compile his own list of great stories. First we see that when Israel crosses the Jordan river the water stops and Israel crosses over on dry land. And once the Israelites are on the eastern side of the Jordan, God gives Joshua another story to tell. Joshua leaves the camp and goes out to scout the city of Jericho by himself. While he's out there all alone this happens:

When Joshua was near the town of Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with sword in hand. Joshua went up to him and demanded, "Are you friend or foe?" "Neither one," he replied. "I am the commander of the Lord's army." At this, Joshua fell with his face to the ground in reverence. "I am at your command," Joshua said. "What do you want your servant to do?" The commander of the Lord's army replied, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did as he was told. Joshua 5:13-15 (NLT)

So much to talk about in this one little snippet of scripture. First of all, let's talk about Who this commander is. I think it's pretty obvious it's Jesus. Some people disagree and believe it's an angel but let's look at that. There's a lot we don't know about angels but one thing we do know is, you're NEVER supposed to worship them. In fact, in the book of Revelation there's a moment when the apostle John encounters an angel and his first reaction is to bow:

Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said, "No, don't worship me. I am a servant of God, just like you and your brothers and sisters. Revelation 19:12 (NLT)

But when Joshua meets the commander of the Lord's army not only does he bow down in "reverence" which is the same word as "worship" but he even asks the commander to tell him what to do. What Joshua literally says to the commander is, "command me." And not only does the commander not correct Joshua and tell him to stand up and don't worship Him- He takes it one step further. The commander tells Joshua to, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy."

Does that sound familiar to you? Maybe something that the angel of the Lord told Moses before it turned out it wasn't just an ordinary (if you can use that word in reference to angels) angel but actually God Himself. Now God gives Joshua a very similar story to tell and a very similar experience to live out in his own life. It's the stuff that makes choosing God's way and trusting that God knows what He's doing possible. The commander gives Joshua specific instructions on how God wants Israel to take the city of Jericho:

You and your fighting men should march around the town once a day for six days. Seven priests will walk ahead of the Ark, each carrying a ram's horn. On the seventh day you are to march around the town seven times, with the priests blowing the horns. When you hear the priests give one long blast on the rams' horns, have all the people shout as loud as they can. Then the walls of the town will collapse, and the people can charge straight into the town." Joshua 6:3-5 (NLT)

Pretty specific, huh? Have you ever thought about why God does things this way? Why doesn't He just have Joshua and the nation of Israel win the battle the old fashioned way? Through superior tactics and strength. Why all this marching around the city for 6 days and then 7 times on the seventh day? Maybe because this would be one of those stories that the people of Israel would tell their children for the rest of their history. And maybe because this battle isn't just about giving Israel a great story but it was also about teaching them to trust God. These tests that God gives His people are opportunities to become stronger. To forge a more fierce trust in our own hearts. When we hear God asking us to do something that seems completely backwards and upside down and sure to fail because it makes no earthly sense and then we see God's plan succeed it does something within us. It gives us this faith that chooses God's way even when doing so proves to be beyond difficult.

Joshua and people of Israel did what God asked. And because of that on the seventh day when the priests blew their shofars and the people shouted as loud as they could the walls of Jericho came tumblin' down. How about you? Is God asking you to do something that you have a hard time understanding? That maybe makes no sense? Maybe He's asking you to do something that just seems backwards and upside down. Maybe you've been hesitant to actually follow through and obey. Maybe today is a great day to take a page out of Joshua's book and do what God asks.

Friday Reflection: I always thought genealogies were boring.

Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren; And Judas begat Phares and Zara of Thamar; and Phares begat Esrom; and Esrom begat Aram; Zzzzzzzzzzzz. Huh? What? Oh, sorry... I fell asleep. At least that's how I used to look at the genealogies of Jesus. But then I noticed in Matthew's genealogy there are four women mentioned (that was unheard of... nobody cared about the women in the ancient world... who cares what women were in the family tree... all that mattered were the men). For some reason God wanted to make sure we knew of at least four women in Jesus ancestry. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth & Bathsheba.

Now all four of those women have something in common. They all had questionable sexual exploits that they were involved in. Tamar tricked her father-in-law into sleeping with her by pretending to be a prostitute and she got pregnant that way (her husband/husbands had all died before giving her a son and... well, go read the story... it's incredibly sad and messed up), Bathsheba was the woman King David committed adultery with and then tried to cover it up by arranging to have her husband killed, Ruth's story is a little tamer but still, there's some interesting stuff about her "uncovering" her future husband's "feet" before they even really started dating (go ahead... google what "uncovering the feet" was a euphemism for in

ancient Hebrew), and Rahab was the former prostitute who married an Israelite after the battle of Jericho.

Salmon was the father of Boaz (whose mother was Rahab). Matthew 1:5 (NLT)

All of them in Jesus' family tree. All of them ancestors of Jesus. All of them singled out in the Bible to make sure we remembered they were there in that incredibly dysfunctional family tree.

Why? Well, I'm guessing God wanted to make absolutely sure that we knew that there is nobody that is too far gone for Jesus to save them. And that Jesus' story was a story about the power of God to pick up the broken pieces of our lives and turn them into something brand new, something beautiful, something whole. He's the master at that as it turns out. He did it in the New Testament. He even did it in the Old Testament (just ask Tamar, Bathsheba, Ruth & Rahab). And He's still doing it to this very day:

We are made right in God's sight when we trust in Jesus Christ to take away our sins. And we all can be saved in this same way, no matter who we are or what we have done. Romans 3:21 (NLT)

I'll be the first to admit that there are some confusing things in the Bible. This scripture is not one of them. This is as simple as it gets. No matter who you are or what you've done- Jesus saves you when you trust Him. And then He gets busy making something beautiful out of your future no matter what's in your past. It doesn't mean the past goes away. It doesn't mean you won't have to deal with consequences from your past. But He will take the good, the bad and the ugly and mix it up and make something of it you never would have dreamed was possible. Just ask Rahab.