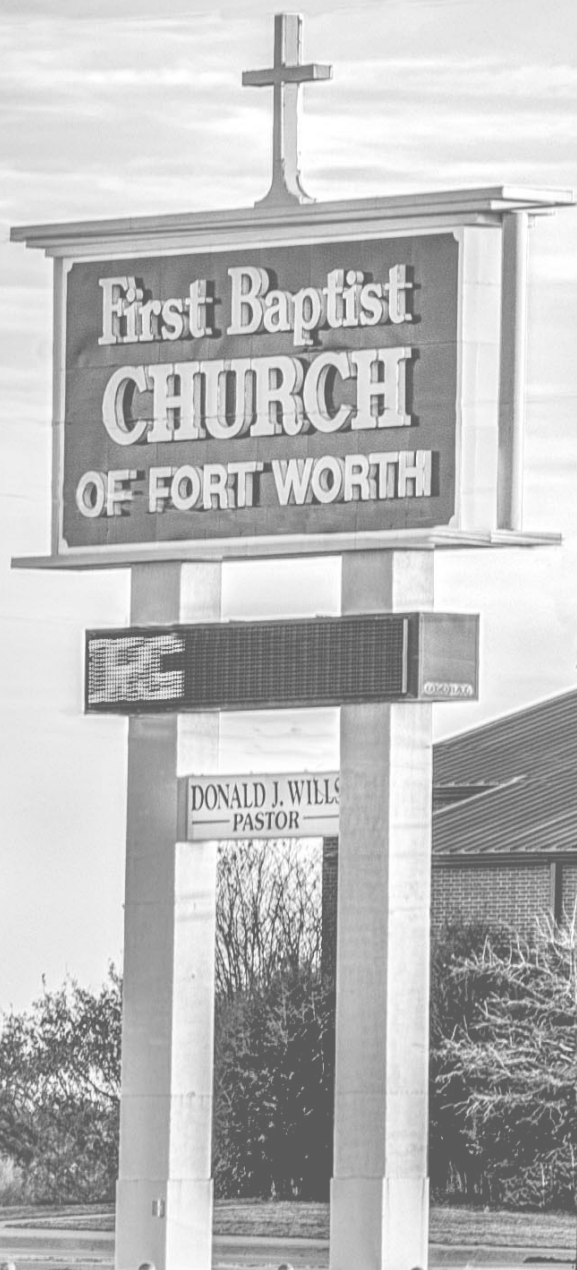
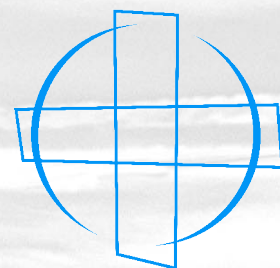


DECEMBER  
2024

Donald J. Wills  
*Senior Pastor*

# WORSHIP



The purpose of First Baptist Church of Fort Worth is to **introduce** people into a loving relationship with Jesus, **instruct** them in spiritual growth through God's Word, **inspire** them to serve for God's kingdom, and **incorporate** them in authentic worship to glorify God.

# Letter Coming Soon!



## *Suggested Plan for Using this Bible Study Guide Effectively*

### *Introduce*

**Day 1:** Read and meditate on the Scripture, asking God to guide you throughout the week as you study His Word and allowing Him to speak to you through the Spirit. Read the **INTRODUCE** portion of the lesson commentary.

### *Instruct*

**Day 2:** Read the Scripture, meditate on it, and read the **INSTRUCT** portion of the lesson commentary. Concentrate on memorizing the focal verse for that particular week.

**Day 3:** Read the Scripture, meditate on it, and answer the focal questions in the **INSTRUCT** portion of the lesson commentary.

### *Inspire*

**Day 4:** Read the Scripture, meditate on it, and begin thinking about tangible ways you can incorporate the principles you learned in your daily life. Read the **INSPIRE** portion of the lesson commentary.

### *Incorporate*

**Day 5:** Read the Scripture, meditate on it, and apply the theological principle that you learned from this week in a tangible way. Use the **INCORPORATE** portion of the lesson commentary to guide you.

**Day 6:** Read the Scripture, meditate on it, and in the journal section describe how God allowed you to apply this passage in a real and tangible way this week.

**Day 7:** Review the Scripture and share with others in your Connect Class on Sunday morning at 9:30am. Be ready to share your experience about how God allowed you to apply the lesson for that week.

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*December 1, 2024*



*Worship with the  
Right Spirit*  
*John 4:5-26*

Focal Verse:

“God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

John 4:24

## Introduce

Of all the pursuits in which we engage as humans, there is one that consistently eludes us. We chase it, but we can never catch it. We crave it, but we never get enough. We desperately seek it, but we can never truly find it. We constantly strive to attain it, but, like the proverbial carrot dangling before a donkey, it always remains just out of our reach. In this life, it's impossible for us to achieve it on our own! In 1985, the Rolling Stones even had a number one song atop the Billboard Charts that described the futility of this pursuit: "I Can't Get No Satisfaction." After describing all their failed attempts to find it, the chorus laments, "I can't get no satisfaction 'cause I try and I try and I try and I try."

We have companies, like Snickers, who have marketed their product as satisfying for years. But, in reality, their candy bar leaves us craving more, especially after the sugar-high wears off and our hunger returns with even more vengeance. It may temporarily quell our desire, but it doesn't truly satisfy!



Everyone constantly joins this quest to find satisfaction because sin has left a void in our lives which we desperately want to fill. Some try to find satisfaction in relationships, but then encounter dysfunction. Others try to find satisfaction in their possessions or money, but quickly discover they can't buy it. Others also try to find satisfaction in hobbies or recreation, but boredom strikes and they inevitably lose interest even in something they love. Still, others look for satisfaction in nature or travel, but soon realize it too is imperfect and fraught with problems. Finally, some may nobly attempt to find fulfillment in serving or volunteering, but these things only quench our desire momentarily. Nothing, not even Snickers, truly satisfies!

God created us with an innate purpose—the desire to have an intimate relationship with Him manifested through our service. Sin, however, severed that relationship and distorted that purpose, leaving us trying to find ways of fulfilling it on our own by trial and error. The woman we'll meet here in chapter 4 did just that. She tried to find it in her relationships, but couldn't. In some ways, she tried to find it

## Introduce

through her people's religious traditions, but didn't. Nothing satisfied her. She stood as an outcast of her community. She had no hope until she met Jesus who offered her "living water" that would forever satisfy everything she would ever need! Only Christ can satisfy our every longing—not through mere religious ritual, but through a personal relationship with Him whereby He cleanses us of our sins and sends His Spirit to fill that empty void in our lives with His daily presence. Authentic worship, therefore, is not primarily something we do, but rather who we have become in Christ. Our daily pursuit of Christ may be difficult at times in this world, but only through it can we truly have satisfaction no matter what may transpire!

Key  
Question

In what pursuits have you tried to find satisfaction in the past, but failed?



#### **THE DIVINE APPOINTMENT:**

After the Pharisees had heard that Jesus' disciples had baptized more than John which began to draw suspicion and create confrontation with these religious leaders, our Lord departed Judea for Galilee, but He didn't take the customary route—for Jews would avoid going through **Samaria** at any cost even if it meant traveling a much longer distance. Instead, Jesus intentionally took a route that led Him through **Samaria** near the town of **Sychar** (v. 5). The Greek phrasing here highlights the deliberate nature of Jesus' journey. It literally reads, "It was necessary for Him to go through Samaria" (v. 4). Jesus chose this route strategically; He had a mission. There He would have a divine appointment with a woman at a well at mid-day.

Although this may seem like an insignificant introductory detail to many, it has major implications on how we should conduct ourselves as Christ's followers. We must consciously look for opportunities to share the gospel. We must make an effort no matter how much it may seem to take us out of our way or how much it



may seem to alter our schedule. Jesus specifically arranged His entire trip and whole day just so that He could meet this one woman. But this single interaction at the well also positively impacted the entire town ([John 4:39-42](#))! Like Jesus, we must also be intentional and strategic in communicating the gospel to a hurting world who desperately needs it. We must make it a priority in our lives. God gives us divine appointments every day to minister to others, but this requires that we deliberately act upon them. Where or to whom has Jesus directed that "it is necessary" for you to go?

Question  
# 1

How intentional are you about seeking opportunities to share the gospel and minister to others?

Even though Jesus took the more direct route to Galilee through **Samaria**, it was still an arduous trek which would have taken a full day of travel at around sixty miles. So, when Jesus arrived at **Jacob's well** just outside the city limits of **Sychar**, He was naturally tired and stopped to rest and refresh Himself (v. 6). He arrived in **the sixth hour** or noon according to our modern reckoning of time. One would expect to encounter no one else at the **well** at that **hour** except perhaps a weary traveler stopping for a brief respite. Just after daybreak and once again around dusk, however, the **well** would have bustled with activity when the women of the town would have come to draw water for their family's daily needs. They would all congregate there to avoid the heat of the day and the sun beating down on them making their task even more miserable as they carried their heavy pots of water.

Unsurprisingly to Jesus, a local **woman** from **Samaria** came to draw water as He **sat** nearby (v. 7). Why would this **woman** come at such an inhospitable and odd hour? Why would she not come with all the others during the cool of the morning? We later learn the answer when Jesus confronts her about her sin. She had become a social outcast because of her failed marriages and immoral lifestyle. Jesus acknowledges the truthfulness of her statement that she indeed has "**no husband**" by adding that she's actually had **five** and **the one** with whom she no cohabitates **is not her husband** (v. 17). The woman had undoubtedly become the talk of the town. They ostracized her or, as we would say today, "canceled her." They callously pushed her aside, condemned her, and treated her with contempt. The citizens of the town, particularly the other women, regarded her as hopeless and they had nothing to do with her whatsoever.

Jesus, however, didn't regard her as hopeless. He didn't begin immediately condemning her, for He certainly knew what she had done (v. 29). He didn't kick her to the curb so to speak. On the contrary, Jesus saw a **woman** in desperate need of salvation. He saw a **woman** who needed a transformative encounter with Him as the Source of life! So, he engaged her in a conversation about



the gospel! Every one of us has once stood in the same place as this **woman**. Although we may have not had **five** failed marriages or have cohabitated with someone, we still have all sinned. It doesn't matter how great or small. We've all still sinned according to God's standard. Therefore, we need His transformative power extended by His grace. We need the life only He can offer!

When we look at the world around us, may we see people through Christ's perspective with His discerning eyes. May we not write them off as hopeless. May we not "cancel" people or kick them to the curb based on what we perceive they have done. May we not condemn them and define them according to their sins. But rather may we engage them in a conversation about the gospel because we recognize they desperately need the salvation which only Jesus Christ can offer.

Question  
# 2

When you see or hear about people who have obviously sinned, what is your first response? How would you compare it to Christ's response here in John 4?

In order to share the gospel with this **woman**, Jesus had to overcome two significant culture barriers—one of which she herself alludes to. As the **woman** approached the **well**, Jesus asked her to **give** Him a **drink**. As both an eyewitness and a narrator, John notes that they (i.e., the **disciples**) **had gone into town to buy food** when this conversation initially began to take place. Shocked at the request, the woman responded, "**How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman**" (v. 9)? For his Gentile audience perhaps unfamiliar with the customs and culture in the region, John explains that the **Jews have no dealings with Samaritans**. They would have considered them unclean just like any Gentile or foreign nation and tried to avoid any close contact or fellowship. Therefore, to eat a meal with them or even share eating or



## Instruct

drinking utensils would have defiled a pious Jew!

Even though Jesus had many cultural barriers and customs against Him, He nevertheless interacted with the **woman** in order to share the gospel. First, Jewish men generally did not speak to women in public. Conversing with a woman could easily be misconstrued as flirtatious and considered improper, especially if it were not one's wife. Moreover, culture would tend to view such "gregarious" behavior negatively, especially at a **well**, as an attempt to pick up a lady. After all, this particular **well** named after Jacob reminds us of the story about how he met his future wife, Rachel, under similar circumstances ([Gen 29:1-14](#)). The stigma put upon this particular **woman** by the community given her well-known past would have heightened this stereotype even more.

While the **woman** herself doesn't mention this specific cultural barrier, she does mention another that plays an even greater role: the relationship between the Jews and Samaritans. The animosity was equally reciprocal amongst both groups. The Jews regarded the Samaritans as inferior because they had remained in the land during the exile and intermarried among the local nations (Gentiles). The Jews also took issue with their religious traditions. Thinking that they were obeying God's commands and safeguarding the Scripture, the Samaritans only accepted the Torah (first five books of the Bible) as divine. From these books, they drew all their doctrine, including building a temple on Mount Gerizim ([Deut 27:4-6](#)). In the second century BC, the Jews destroyed that temple calling it illegitimate and claiming that worship could only be properly conducted in Jerusalem. Consequently, the Samaritans also despised and resented the Jews whom they in turn considered to have corrupted the Scripture.

Question  
# 3

What are cultural barriers that we must sometime overcome to share the gospel?

All kinds of barriers exist in our culture today. In fact, we have as many cultural barriers as we do people with opinions. They have their own set of expectations and beliefs which we must overcome in order to share the gospel. And their beliefs shift and change about as quickly as the weather here in North Texas. Although we must put aside cultural customs and barriers to share the gospel, we cannot do two things. First, we cannot change the message of the gospel to make it more palatable to people. We must remain consistent with what Scripture says. We cannot bend or compromise, but

we must stand firm soundly rooted in the unchanging Word of God. Second, we cannot tolerate or accept sin—especially the sin which the culture has attempted to normalize. Even though we should never condemn or stand in judgment of another person, we must still help them come to the realization that they need a Savior to overcome their sin. We will address this point further later in the lesson.

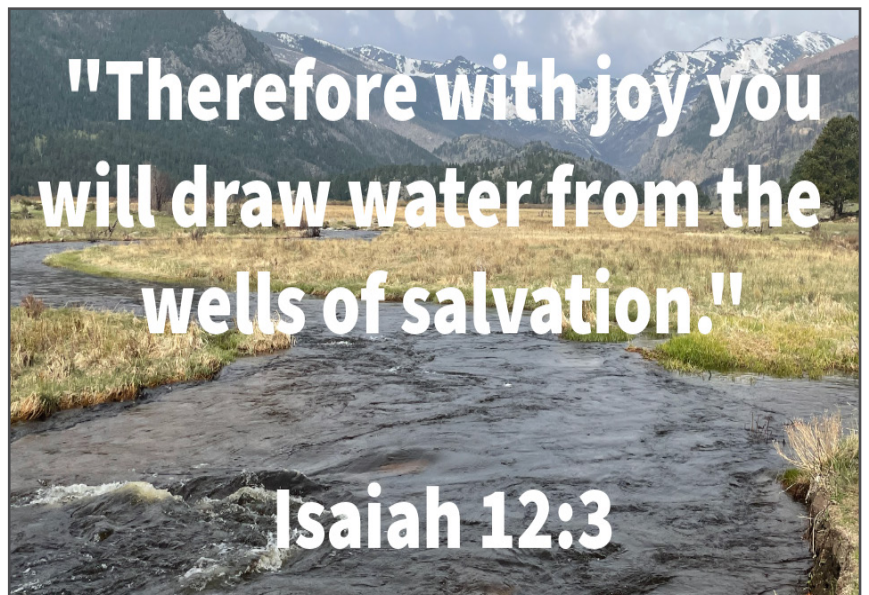
### *John 4:10-15*

#### **THE DIVINE OFFER:**

Suddenly, Jesus turns an ordinary, mundane conversation between a weary traveler and a social misfit into a spiritual one—further piquing the woman’s interest. Instead of asking her for **a drink** again after initially overcoming these social barriers, Jesus emphatically states that she **would have asked Him** for one had she known **the gift of God** and the identity of the One to whom she is speaking (v. 10). Perhaps based upon Isaiah 12:3, He then interjects that **He would have given** her **living water** in order to draw her further into the conversation. Perplexed, the **woman** respectfully challenges Jesus’ ability to **give** her any type of **a drink** because He has **nothing to draw with** and **the well is deep** (v. 11). So, she politely asks, “**Where then do you get this living water,**” followed by another poignant question: “**Are you greater than our father Jacob who gave us this well**” (v. 12)? Unbeknownst to her at the time, she makes exactly the right assessment of Jesus through this question. During the course of their dialogue, she will indeed come to realize that Jesus is **greater** than **Jacob** and **the gift of God** is nothing less than salvation made available through Him to all who will accept it!

Rather than answer her question directly, Jesus describes the benefits of drinking this **living water** (v. 13). Eventually, however, the **woman** will discover the answer when Jesus declares definitively that He indeed is the Messiah (see vv. 25-26 ), but for now He tailors the discussion to what the woman needs rather than

address ancillary issues. Jesus must help her progress from purely physical thinking to a



## Instruct

spiritual mindset! Therefore, He informs her that **whoever drinks of this physical water** from the well **will** become thirsty **again**, but **whoever drinks the water** He offers will **never thirst again** (v. 14). Jesus further states that this **water will become** within them **a fountain springing up into everlasting life**. Still, the **woman** doesn't make the spiritual connection (see [Isa 12:3](#)). Although ecstatic at Jesus' offer, she still thinks concretely in physical terms. So, she pleads with Him to **give** her from that **water** so that she **may never thirst again** nor have to **come** to that well **to draw water** (v. 15)!

From this interaction, we can learn two principles which we can apply in our own lives when sharing the gospel. First, we can take an ordinary, everyday conversation and turn it into something spiritual in order to point people to Christ. As we learned earlier, we must act with intention because this doesn't come naturally for most of us, but Jesus set the example we should follow. It may take a little practice and thought, but we can turn any conversation into something spiritual which we can then use to glorify Christ in sharing the gospel. The possibilities are truly limitless. The key for any conversation is to help people see what Jesus offers (eternal) in contrast to what the world offers (temporal).

For example, the activities in which we participate often become a primary focus in our conversations. People love to talk about what they enjoy doing! It may be sports, gaming, hobbies, or entertainment. None of these things can truly satisfy us, however. We will still get bored with them and then inevitably seek something else as our next venture. So, we could spark a conversation by simply asking, "Don't you ever get bored of that?" And follow it by saying, "There's only one thing that I've found that always satisfies me. I've never gotten bored with it at all." Hopefully, this will capture their attention and they'll respond, "What's that," giving us an opportunity to elaborate. Such a simple question can lead to a spiritual conversation about Christ. Although this is a rather broad and generic example, the principle remains clear. We can do this for any conversation if only we would take the time and make the effort!

Question  
# 4

In what other ways can you, or have you, taken an ordinary conversation and turned it into something spiritual?

Second, we must purposefully direct people to think about the eternal (spiritual) rather than only the temporal (physical). Human nature compels us to focus primarily on the

tangible things we can see, touch, and obtain in this life. Most people concentrate on their immediate physical needs and desires, such as food, shelter, clothing, possessions, and relationships. Rarely do they look past what they want in the moment. For instance, Adam and Eve knew the ramifications of eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; God had commanded that they would “surely die” when they ate of it ([Gen 2:17](#)). Yet, when Eve “saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and desirable to make one wise,” she and her husband with her ate of it ([Gen 3:6](#)). At that time, they gave little thought to the future consequences of their sin! They took only delight in the moment.

The phrase *carpe diem*, or “seize the day,” has become a guide for most people seeking to live in the moment and make the best of their current circumstances. In our day, we may even see the acronym YOLO (“you only live once”) as a license to indulge in carnal desires without the fear of



“judgment” or an excuse to try something dangerous (foolish). But this mindset isn’t something new to our generation. Throughout Scripture, people have held this same mentality. King Solomon, for example, put it this way, “I commended enjoyment, because a man has nothing better under the sun than to eat, drink, and be merry; for this will remain with him in his labor all the days of his life which God gives him under the sun” ([Eccl 8:15](#); see also [Luke 12:19-20](#)). All this shows how much we absorb ourselves in the present to the detriment of the future, especially the eternal.

Question  
# 5

In what specific ways do people tend to focus on the physical rather than the spiritual in everyday life?

Therefore, we must spur people to think about eternity and the necessary preparations they must make prior. We must help them look beyond the moment see the consequences of their actions upon where they will spend eternity. We

## Instruct

prepare for retirement by opening IRA's and 401K's in addition to the Social Security the government withdraws from our checks. We save our hard-earned money in preparation to buy a house or car. We may also put money aside for our children's college education. We even prepare for medical emergencies or property damage by purchasing the necessary insurance coverage. If we make preparation for all these things and more in life, why would we not prepare for where we spend eternity?

To engage people in a conversation about the gospel, one of our deacons and Legacy Adult Bible Study teachers, Bro. Fulton Cook, has a creative and innovative way to help people start thinking about their preparation for that time. He captures their attention by asking, "Have you ever thought about the most important question in life?" And when they inquisitively respond, "what's that," he poses another question, "What happens when we die?" Naturally, Bro. Fulton doesn't begin with this question, for this would be awkward and disrupt the flow of the conversation. But through a meaningful and purposeful conversation, he brings them to this point so that he can transition to the gospel. He uses this question merely as a bridge to reorient their thinking from what they are doing right then at that moment to the eternal! In some ways, he imitates Jesus' approach here with the **woman** at the well in order to turn a conversation about something physical (drinking **water**) into something spiritual (**living water** or salvation).

Question  
# 6

How can you help people bridge to start thinking about the eternal rather than just the physical in your everyday interaction with them?



**THE RELIGIOUS OBSTACLE:**

After the **woman** confesses her interest in obtaining this **living water**, Jesus leads her to a point of self-reflection in order to further emphasize the spiritual nature of His conversation. At this point, she wants the **water** because it will alleviate her physical thirst and she will no longer need to draw from the well on a daily basis. She hasn't yet realized why she actually needs that **water**, so Jesus must help her understand that He is talking about salvation from her sins. Therefore, He must bring her to a point of acknowledging that she's sinned and only He can give her the (eternal) life she craves so much. Consequently, knowing her situation, Jesus then instructs **her to go and call her husband** (v. 16).

Although the **woman** replies to Jesus rather vaguely by indicating that she has **no husband**, she still answers Him truthfully. Because she responded in truth, it gave Him the opportunity to elaborate on the condition of her heart and the sins which she has committed. He doesn't condemn



her. He doesn't belittle her. Like Seargent Friday on "Dragnet," Jesus presents "just the facts." He simply points out her past which causes the **woman** to pause and think. After commending her for speaking the truth, Jesus confirms that she indeed has **no husband** before revealing that she's actually had **five husbands** and the one with whom she now has a physical relationship is **not her husband** (v. 17). Perhaps, others in the town would have known this fact about her, but a stranger passing through the area would have no inkling about her past and really no reason for knowing such detail. This leads the **woman** to conclude that Jesus is **a prophet** (v. 19). She has begun making the transition from the purely physical to the spiritual, but she's not yet fully discovered Jesus' true identity.

Now thinking in spiritual terms, the **woman** ponders the proper place to conduct **worship** based on the two different traditions espoused by the Samaritans

According to the tradition of her ancestors, the Samaritans **worshiped** on Mount Gerizim (**this mountain**) while the Jews claimed **Jerusalem is the place where one should worship** (v. 20). Even though presented as a declarative statement, it really poses a question: where should we **worship**? Rather than furthering discussion on the gospel, this question in the form of a statement only serves as a distraction. Jesus isn't talking about religious tradition or ritual, but a relationship with the Father through Him ([John 14:6](#)). He must get her back on track. When hearing the gospel, people will often introduce distractions into the conversation. They may have a sincere, heart-felt question, but it nevertheless serves as a distraction to disrupt the discussion. While we must be ready to give a brief answer, we must also take control of the conversation, circumnavigate the distraction, and re-focus them on the single issue that matters most: their relationship with Christ.

### Question # 7

What things can become a distraction in the presentation of the gospel?

The more pertinent question is not *where*, but *how* **one** should **worship**. Therefore, Jesus once again redirects the woman's thinking, declaring that **the hour** has come **when** she will **not worship the Father** exclusively **on this mountain** or even **in Jerusalem** (v. 21). In other words, the place of **worship** doesn't matter! The same goes for any personal preference or physical posture we may have. The style of songs we sing (if theologically correct) doesn't matter. The words in our prayers or even the types of prayer we utter, as long as they reflect proper theology and respect for the Lord, don't matter. Whether we stand, kneel, or lie prostrate doesn't matter. Whether or not we raise our hands in praise doesn't truly matter. What matters is the condition of our hearts! Do we **worship** the Lord sincerely as expressed through our obedient servitude dedicated to Him alone?

For this reason, Jesus explains that the Samaritans (**you plural**) **worship what they don't know** whereas the Jews (**we**) **worship what they know** (v. 22). Because the Samaritans regarded only the Torah as inspired, they don't have the full revelation of God which gives the complete picture of **salvation** through the Messiah. They are missing critical details which reveal the Messiah's identity and what He would specifically come to do! Jesus' contention that **salvation is of the Jews** doesn't mean

that only they have exclusive access to eternal life. On the contrary, it means that the Messiah, as prophesied in Scripture, would come through the Jewish people in order to bring **salvation** to the whole world!

As a result, **the hour** has **now** come when **the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth** (v. 23). God doesn't want phony, pretend worship where people offer Him lip service or where they praise His name in church and participate in all the so-called "spiritual" activities all while their lives bear no righteous fruit at

all. He detests when people who call themselves His followers live like the world and ultimately bring reproach upon Him. **To worship God in spirit and truth** deals with the condition of our heart—not some overtly outward activity that fools others, and by which we can also fool ourselves, into thinking that we are in right standing with the Lord. Thus, God desires people to **worship** Him sincerely through their obedient service. Our outward actions matter because they reflect the true condition and intent of our hearts. Therefore, God seeks genuine relationships with people not a reliance on religious ritual and tradition. He desires that we live out our faith daily by imitating His righteousness ([Lev 19:2](#); [Eph 5:1-2](#)).

**So Samuel said:**

**"Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, As in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, And to heed than the fat of rams,"**

**1 Samuel 15:22**

Question  
# 8

According to Scripture, what does it mean to have an authentic relationship with Christ?

When presenting the gospel, we must remove any obstacle or distraction which hinders it. Religion, just as it does here in John 4, often becomes a major source of distraction! We can't let it. We must attempt to remove any distraction and get to the heart of the issue: their personal relationship with Christ. For example, don't ask people where they go to church. Many people "attend" church, but they don't have a genuine relationship with Christ. In addition, don't ask them if they believe in Jesus or know

## Instruct

Him—for even the demons “believe and tremble” ([Jas 2:19](#))—yet they don’t have a genuine relationship with Him. Consider asking a more pointed question like: If Jesus were to ask why should I let you into heaven, what would you say? This allows them to explain the gospel in their own words to see if they have truly understood it and accepted it. Anyone who has a genuine relationship with Christ can explain what has happened to them even if he or she doesn’t use “religious” or “theological” language. A person, for instance, may simply attest: “I know I’ve made mistakes, so I prayed to Christ and He changed me.” A person who has an authentic relationship with Christ won’t immediately appeal to baptism, works, or church membership as the means for their **salvation**. Rather, they will affirm that Christ forgave them when they repented of their sins.

Above all, we must bring people to a point of self-reflection where they contemplate their life choices and recognize they need a Savior. In other words, they must come to a point where they admit they have sinned and turn to Christ for forgiveness. Here is where our role differs slightly from Jesus in this setting. As God, Jesus knew everything about this **woman**; He could see her heart. He revealed her sins to her which led to conviction. While we must help people understand that they have sinned through Scripture and our personal testimony, we generally need not point out their specific sins—for we cannot see their hearts. For the most part, honest people who have begun thinking in “spiritual” terms will admit their faults even if they try to justify their sin by emphasizing their good deeds. Christ will ultimately bring their specific sins to their attention. He will convict them. We don’t. We simply become the vehicles who Christ uses to bring them to this point.

Question  
# 9

How would you respond to someone who says that they will go to heaven because they are a “good” person?

**THE DIVINE REVELATION:**

As the **woman** ponders the direction of this conversation, she seems to have begun realizing that Jesus may be more than just a **prophet**. According to her understanding, she confesses her belief that **Messiah is coming; when He comes, He will tell us all things** (v. 25). In a sense, she knows that only the **Messiah** can truly satisfy her needs—and really the needs of the world. She waits eagerly and anticipates that day, but she has not yet realized who exactly Jesus is until He reveals His identity to her. The Messiah whom she seeks and upon whom she pins her hopes is none other than **the one speaking to** her (v. 26)! In reference to His identity as **Messiah**, Jesus directly declares, “**I am**” (see [Exod 3:14](#)). talking about religious tradition or ritual, but a relationship with the Father through Him ([John 14:6](#)). He must get her back on track. When hearing the gospel, people will often introduce distractions into the conversation. They may have a sincere, heart-felt question, but it nevertheless serves as a distraction to disrupt the discussion. While we must be ready to give a brief answer, we must also take control of the conversation, circumnavigate the distraction, and re-focus them on the single issue that matters most: their relationship with Christ.

The most important part of a gospel conversation is pointing people to the One who can actually help! We must explicitly introduce people to Jesus who can save them from their sins. Try not to engage people in a conversation about religion or philosophy. These subjects only serve to distract. On their own, they can't save; they can't

transform the sinner. On the contrary, speak to them about the One who created them and loves them more than any other person on earth. He has come to give life through His once-and-for-all sacrifice. He has come so that the void in their life created by sin and dysfunction might forever be filled with Him!

**And God said to Moses,  
“I AM WHO I AM.”  
And He said, “Thus you shall say to  
the children of Israel,  
‘I AM has sent me to you.’”**

**Exodus 3:14**

In life, people constantly search to find satisfaction because we have a void in our lives meant to be filled with a genuine relationship with Christ. Apart from Christ, nothing can fill this void: our relationships, our possessions, our passions, our pursuits, and the like. We will continue metaphorically returning to the same well in hopes of one day finding that satisfaction. But it will never come. Until we understand what it means to worship the Lord “in spirit and truth” with sincere hearts, our search for satisfaction will never end. To worship the Lord, as Jesus shows this Samaritan woman, we must have a relationship with Him whereby we have repented of our sins and have been made in right standing. As His followers, we must also take the initiative to introduce people into a relationship with Him as the One who can save them. After all, God has given us this mandate to make disciples in all the world ([Matt 28:19-20](#)). How will you be part of worshiping the Lord by declaring His salvation to all people?

## *Incorporate*

What divine appointments has God given you to share the gospel? Have you always acted on them? Why or why not?

What obstacles have you faced when sharing the gospel? How did Christ help you overcome them?

As you've studied this lesson and prayed this week, write down the names of individuals whom God has brought to mind that need a relationship with His Son. How will you respond to His call to reach them?

*December 8, 2024*



# *Worship the Son, not the Servant*

*Luke 1:46-56*

Focal Verse:

*"And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior."*

Luke 1:47



## Introduce

YouTube has an autoplay feature in the settings which populates and plays videos automatically based upon your search history and interests. Generally, the autoplay suggests videos by various content creators within the same genre and on the same subject that you've been watching. Usually, I just let these videos play randomly while working around the house—mostly as background noise—but sometimes something will catch my attention. After watching several podcasts by some former news hosts who ditched cable television, autoplay populated a video of a Gen Z woman who looked to be in her early 20s discussing her view on the recent election on her podcast. However, it wasn't her perspective on the election that caught my attention, but her comment that "only two perfect people ever lived on earth: Jesus and Mary."

Obviously, she spoke from a Catholic background according to their tradition. But this tradition doesn't match Scripture! The Bible is clear that only *one* perfect (sinless) Person ever lived: Jesus. We should never elevate the servant over the Savior! Nor should we ever worship the servant alongside the Savior! To elevate and adore Mary the way the Catholic religion has done is misguided. It really becomes idolatry. It distracts from the One who truly deserves our adoration and worship because He died for our sins! God used Mary because she was generally faithful and obedient, but she was not perfect. The Child she carried and to Whom she gave birth would save her from her sins too! For this reason, in her song of praise, she "rejoiced in God [her] Savior" ([Luke 1:48](#)).

We must maintain the right perspective. We must focus our eyes on Christ rather than the servants He chooses to use to proclaim and deliver His message. Several years ago, a former member approached me with an idea for the annual Christmas party centered around a theme with angels.



Not only did she want to decorate extensively with angels, but she also wanted to have people tie their devotions together by talking about angels and their roles. Using this as a teachable moment, I had to explain that the angels played a minor, albeit it

## Introduce

important role in the story as God’s messengers; our focus should remain on the birth of the Savior who came to take away the sin of the world.

Sometimes we can become so distracted by the messenger or the servant used to deliver it that we actually miss the message from God Himself! Even the Apostle John became so distracted by the grandeur of the things he had seen that he fell at the feet of the angel showing him and began to worship ([Rev 22:8](#)). The angel quickly chastises him with these words, “See that you do not do that. For I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren the prophets, and of those who keep the works of this book. Worship God” ([Rev 22:9](#)). If John, called “the beloved disciple” who physically walked with Jesus had become distracted in his worship, how much more might we become distracted in ours if we let our guard down? We must worship God alone. We must worship the Savior born in Bethlehem—not the servant. May we not become distracted this Christmas season in our worship, but take an honest evaluation of our lives asking, “Where is my focus? Whom do I truly worship?”

Key  
Question

What things tend to distract you during this holiday season? How can (do) they impede your worship of Christ?

### Luke 1:46-49

#### **PRAISE OFFERED TO THE SAVIOR:**

At some point in our lives, someone has probably asked us to perform a certain task at their request or represent them in some fashion which afforded us great honor. Although we never felt we truly “deserved” it, they bestowed this honor upon us because we acted with integrity consistently; we certainly weren’t perfect, but we could be trusted to execute the task they gave us faithfully. For example, we may have been selected by our company to represent them at a prestigious networking event. We may have been selected by our peers in school to deliver a class presentation. We may have been chosen by a teacher over all our classmates for a special assignment. As adolescents, our parents may have asked us to do something that demonstrated their confidence in us. Or, perhaps, the church body tasked us with overseeing a particular ministry. In any case, how did you respond? Hopefully, most of us responded with gratitude and performed the job with excellence rather than exhibiting a spirit of hubris and pride.

As the Gospel of Luke opens, a young woman named Mary found favor with the Lord who asked her to do something extraordinary. God had chosen her, not because she was perfectly sinless, but because she was obedient, faithful, and righteous. Through her obedient faithfulness, Mary had made herself available



for God to do the impossible through her ([Luke 1:37](#)). For this reason, God sent the angel Gabriel to tell her that she would conceive and bear “the Son of the Highest” as a virgin ([Luke 1:32](#)). Initially, Mary reacted with amazement and shock because she had never been intimate with any man. Soon, however, her surprise turned to praise for the Lord! In this same announcement, Gabriel also informed Mary that her relative, Elizabeth, had also conceived a child in her advanced age after long being barren ([Luke 1:36](#)). Immediately, Mary traveled to visit Elizabeth so they could share in this good news together and rejoice in the Lord (Luke 1:39). At this point, we pick up our lesson

for this week which features Mary's song of praise dedicated to the Lord for what He has done and will do for His people through Jesus' birth.

With utter joy in her heart, Mary reports that her **soul magnifies the Lord** (v. 46). The Greek word translated **magnifies** literally means "to make great." In our modern vernacular, we could even say she "made a big deal about" Him. Borrowing a literary technique from the Psalms and other Hebrew poetry called synonymous parallelism, Mary repeats the first line of the song using slightly different wording for emphasis. She describes how her spirit has **rejoiced in God her Savior** (v. 47). Since the announcement of Jesus' birth by Gabriel, Mary has continually offered praise to **the Lord**. Based upon the context here, a better translation of the verb **has rejoiced** is "began rejoicing" to denote an action begun in the past and continuing indefinitely into the future. It connotes how she is in a constant state of rejoicing! She praises God not only because of what these events mean for her life personally, but what they mean for God's people and truly the whole world. In Jesus, salvation has now come to everyone who will accept it.

Question  
# 1

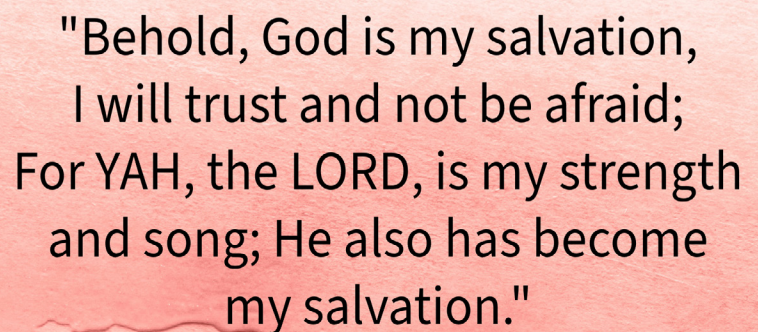
How do you express joy for what the Lord has done in your life?

By identifying the Lord as **my Savior** in a long line of Old Testament tradition, Mary depicts God as a redeemer and deliverer who rescues His people from their predicaments. Both the Psalms and Prophets often use this language to describe God's work either through the exodus or in reference to restoring a remnant of His people after exile. Probably, Isaiah 12:2 shares the closest parallel with Mary's song: "Behold, God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid; for Yah, the Lord, is my strength and song. He also has become my salvation." Last week, we also learned how Jesus likely used this same passage from Isaiah, particularly 12:3, as His basis for offering the Samaritan woman "living water." All this shows how Jesus has an even greater purpose than just rescuing His people from political enslavement in Egypt (or Rome); how He has a greater mission than just freeing exiles to return to their homeland. Jesus has come so that He might free us from the spiritual bondage of sin and give us eternal life through Him—the promise to which the Patriarchs, Prophets, and people all ultimately looked forward.

Like those in the Old Testament, Mary personalizes God's response to her. She

refers to Him as **my Savior**. She too needs the salvation He alone offers just like Abraham, Issac, Jacob, David, or any other Old Testament saint. While Mary and these Old Testament saints exhibited great faith and God accomplished great things through them, they still needed His salvation! They still had to depend upon Him. These individuals in and of themselves were not “great” because of what they did; rather, they were great examples because of what their faith in the Lord allowed Him to do through them ([Heb 11](#))! Even though we should commend the servant for exemplary faith and seek to emulate such in our own lives, God always deserves the focus and glory for what He has done! Therefore, Mary makes sure that the Lord is the object of our praise here in this song and not her.

For this reason, she acknowledges her dependence upon the Lord when she explains how God **has regarded the lowly estate of His maidservant** (v. 48). By describing herself as a woman of low socio-economic position as a slave or servant, Mary indicates that she would have never



"Behold, God is my salvation,  
I will trust and not be afraid;  
For YAH, the LORD, is my strength  
and song; He also has become  
my salvation."

Isaiah 12:2

expected God to use someone in her position to give birth to the Messiah who came to save the world. For emphasis, we could even turn her statement into a question: “Who am I that God should choose to use me?” We often fail to look at (i.e., regard) things in the way that God does. When we look at ourselves or sometimes at other people, we see someone whom God can’t use because we think we don’t have what it takes. We don’t have the money or resources. We don’t have the education, training, or ability. We don’t have the skills., We don’t have the social standing. We don’t have the personality and so forth. Like Mary, we often think, “Why me? How can I be of any value or help to the Lord? What can I do? I’m a nobody.”

However, God frequently chooses to use ordinary people—the ones we’d least likely expect—to do extraordinary things. In fact, God often does not use people the world may see as having great means and abilities. It doesn’t mean that He can’t use such people if they humbly submit to Him, but that He often chooses to use ordinary people who don’t stand out from the crowd because He wants the world to clearly

## Instruct

see Him at work through us! He wants the world to know that what was accomplished came through His power and not our own. Consequently, God primarily looks at the condition of our heart rather than the abilities that we may or may not have. He looks to see if we're living righteously, obediently, and faithfully having surrendered our lives completely to Him in every area. Thus, Mary asserts that **He who is mighty has done great things for me and holy is His name** (v. 49).

From Mary's opening refrain of praise in this song, we can learn two principles which we can apply in our own lives. First, we must realize that we all need the salvation God offers. As Paul writes, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" ([Rom 3:23](#)). No one merits salvation. No one deserves it. However, we sometimes tend to place people on a proverbial pedestal, forgetting that God saved them from their sins in the same way He did us. We should commend and encourage people who live righteously and faithfully to continue doing so; we should even follow their example (see [1 Cor 11:1](#)). But we must always give credit where credit is due: God. We must always seek to glorify Him for what He has done through His servants and never "idolize" the servant. We must maintain the right perspective. Our praise and worship belong only to the Lord. And Mary, for her part, makes sure God receives the honor due Him here in her song of praise.

"Praise Him for His mighty acts;  
Praise Him according to His  
excellent greatness!"

Psalm 150:2

Question  
# 2

In what ways can we as humans sometimes begin to idolize a servant or leader and become distracted in our worship of the Lord?

When we respond in faith by turning to Him from our sins, God can now use us to accomplish extraordinary things if we completely surrender our lives into His control. No matter who we are or what we have done in the past God can still use us according

to His purpose if we live faithfully in the present. This leads us to our second principle. For God to use us, we must make ourselves available. We do that by ensuring we are in right relationship with Him. We have no unconfessed sin in our lives ([1 John 1:9](#)) and we are living faithfully according to His Word under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. It also means that we must cultivate our relationship daily through Bible study and prayer so that we can hear Him when He calls! May we respond to God's call like the prophet Isaiah. After realizing he lived among a people of unclean lips and God cleansed him with a burning coal, Isaiah quickly answered His call saying, "Lord, here am I send me" ([Isa 6:8](#)). Like Abraham, David, or Mary, Isaiah simply made himself available to be used by God. He volunteered and allowed God to use him in any way He saw fit.

Question  
# 3

Have you made yourself available to the Lord? In what ways specifically have you made yourself available?

Too often, unfortunately, many people who call themselves followers of Christ are not ready to answer that call. They have not made themselves available. They've allowed themselves to become stained by the world and caught up with the temporal pleasures in life. They may attend church semi-regularly, but their relationship with the Lord encompasses little more than this. They can't hear the call of Christ in their lives because the noise of their own daily activities drowns Him out! If this characterization describes you, take the necessary steps today to make yourself available: repent and live faithfully. When we become consumed by life, we can miss the blessing of God using us to accomplish His will, for God still wants to do the "impossible" through us by communicating His gospel to the world.

Although we may recognize that we truly have nothing to offer God in our humble positions like Mary did, let us not use this as an excuse to reject what He wants to accomplish through us. Don't place stipulations on your life for God to use you when you've passed certain milestones or met certain goals.

Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying:

"Whom shall I send,  
And who will go for Us?"

Then I said, "Here am I! Send me."

Isaiah 6:8

## Instruct

Don't wait for God to use you by comparing yourself with other people, thinking you must have a certain amount of training, skill, money, or resources before God can use you. On the contrary, simply make yourself available to Him and be willing to do whatever He asks or go wherever He leads. God may not ask you to bear the Messiah like He did Mary which was a one-time event—but even so He will still do extraordinary things through you even greater than you can think or imagine. For Him to work through us in such a notable way, it requires that we be faithful and obedient—ready to surrender to His call.

### Luke 1:50-53

#### **POWER DISPLAYED BY THE SAVIOR:**

As her song continues, Mary praises God for showing **mercy on those who fear Him from generation to generation** (v. 50). Today, our culture would typically define **mercy** as compassion or performing acts of kindness toward others in need. While God certainly does these things according to His will and purpose, such a narrow understanding of **mercy** actually misses the point here. We must remember that Mary would have understood this term from a first-century Hebrew mindset based on their Scripture (i.e., the Old Testament) even though her song was translated into Greek in the Gospel of Luke. The word **mercy** in the Old Testament is often used to translate a Hebrew word referring to God's faithfulness to His covenant. In fact, the Book of Psalms frequently uses this word to praise God for His faithfulness or lovingkindness displayed through His covenant. For example, in our study of Psalm 107:1 last month, the psalmist exclaimed, "Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good! His *mercy* endures forever."

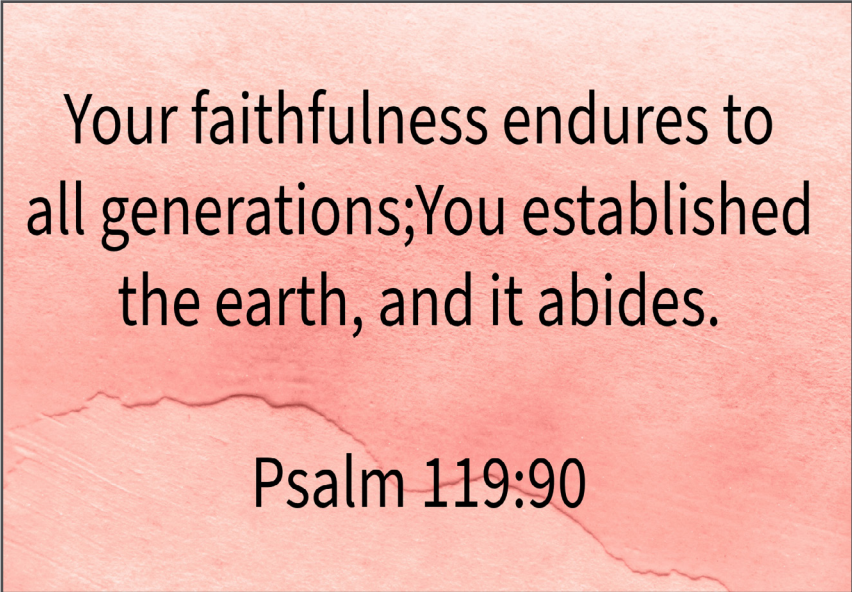
Mary employs that same sense here to describe God's faithfulness to His covenant. Those who have a relationship with Him by faith through grace (i.e., **those who fear Him**) can testify of His faithfulness first-hand. They've seen it with their own eyes. They've experienced it. Scripture is filled with examples of people who experienced God's faithfulness first-hand! For instance, God punished Adam and Eve for their sin; the day they ate of the fruit they died spiritually, but prior to even creating them God had already made a plan to redeem them—and us ([Eph 1:3-14](#)). God saved Noah and his family from the flood and used them to repopulate the earth. He made Abraham the father of many nations and ultimately blessed His descendants with a land to call their own. Through Moses, God rescued the people from slavery in Egypt, parted the Red Sea, and provided for them in the wilderness. Now, Mary had seen God's



faithfulness in an even greater, more life-changing way. The promised Messiah would come into the world through her womb, fulfilling God's promise to redeem mankind from sin once and for all! Since the time of the Prophets, Israel had expectantly waited for the Messiah to come and rescue them. That time has now come for which Mary and the entire nation—and really the world—can rejoice!

Moreover, God's faithfulness isn't just something that occurred in the past, but something we can still experience today! The phrase **from generation to generation** signifies that God remains faithful in every **generation** whether past, present, or future. Like the psalmist says in 107:1, it "endures forever." Every **generation** is a recipient of God's faithfulness because His

character never changes. God isn't fickle like human beings where He may be faithful one day and unfaithful the next. On the contrary, God is always faithful no matter the circumstances. Just like with the Old Testament saints, or Mary in this case, God still remains faithful to us today. We can trust Him implicitly and count His promises as good as done while we await His return. At the same time, we can also see His faithfulness every day in our lives if only we would take time to open our eyes and look. It is evident all around us. As we celebrate and remember God's faithfulness through the birth of His Son to redeem us, may we also praise Him for the many ways we see His faithfulness in our lives still today.



Your faithfulness endures to  
all generations; You established  
the earth, and it abides.

Psalm 119:90

Question  
# 4

How have you personally seen God's faithfulness in your life this week?

For this reason, Mary also notes that God **has shown strength with His arm** (v. 51). In other words, He has displayed His sovereign control and authority over human history. Specifically, He **has scattered the proud in the imaginations of their hearts, put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly** (v. 52). Additionally, God has **filled the hungry with good things** and **sent away the rich** empty handed

(v. 53). Because He has authority over human events, God will one day establish justice and vindicate His people. For those who fear Him, we can rejoice knowing that the victory has already been won. We don't have to wonder about the outcome. We know that God will triumph! Psalm 68:1, for example, exclaims, "Let God arise; let His enemies be scattered; let those who hate Him flee before Him." While God will judge those who proudly reject Him in lieu of their own self-perceived wisdom and power, He will help His servant Israel as we will learn in the next section (v. 54).

In Proverbs 6:16-19, God lists pride among the six things that He hates. Pride manifests itself when we begin thinking that we don't need God. Arrogance will whisper in our ear, "You've got this. You can do this on your own. You don't need God. He's only a crutch for the weak." Today, pride dominates our society because many people view themselves as self-sufficient, self-reliant, and wise. As a whole, our society has rejected God because we live comfortably where we truly have everything we need. Most don't lack anything even though they may complain at times that they don't always get what they want. Such people who reject God for the independence and comfort of this life are in for a rude awakening. For without God, we cannot have life! We have no hope. We may have a false sense of power and prestige here on earth, but apart from Christ we have nothing of eternal value.

The Gospel of Luke has the "great reversal" as one of its major themes based on Jesus' teaching which states, "And indeed there are last who will be first, and there are first who will be last"

([Luke 13:30](#)).

In this stanza of Mary's song, this theme is clearly on display. Through His **strength**, God humbles those the world considers **proud** and powerful

while exalting **the lowly**. In our day, we would identify **the lowly** as blue-collar workers or "average Joes." Although they may not live in destitution, the world tends to overlook them; they don't regard them as overly successful. But God doesn't overlook them; He sent His Son to die for them as much as those whom the world identifies as successful.

For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

1 John 2:16-17

Simply put, therefore, the “great reversal” indicates that God will judge the heart of the worshiper rather than look at external appearance alone. Mankind, however, primarily judges based upon external appearance. Because he cannot see the heart, he draws superficial conclusions based upon one’s perceived social status or achievements.

Therefore, mankind lauds the success of the “wealthy,” the “educated,” and the “powerful.” To him, CEO’s, national leaders (policymakers), inventors, entertainers, authors, entrepreneurs, billionaires, and the like represent success stories—people who have made it in life. To God, on the other hand, success depends upon the heart of the worshiper expressed through complete obedience rather than their external achievements. Their background does not matter as long as they repent of their sins, humbly surrender their lives to Him, and obediently serve Him. In the end, God will honor construction workers, office workers, teachers, personal assistants, first responders, factory workers, hospitality workers, restaurant workers, and the like with eternal life if they trust and serve Him. God will save and use anyone who humbly submits to Him to serve in His kingdom!

Question  
# 5

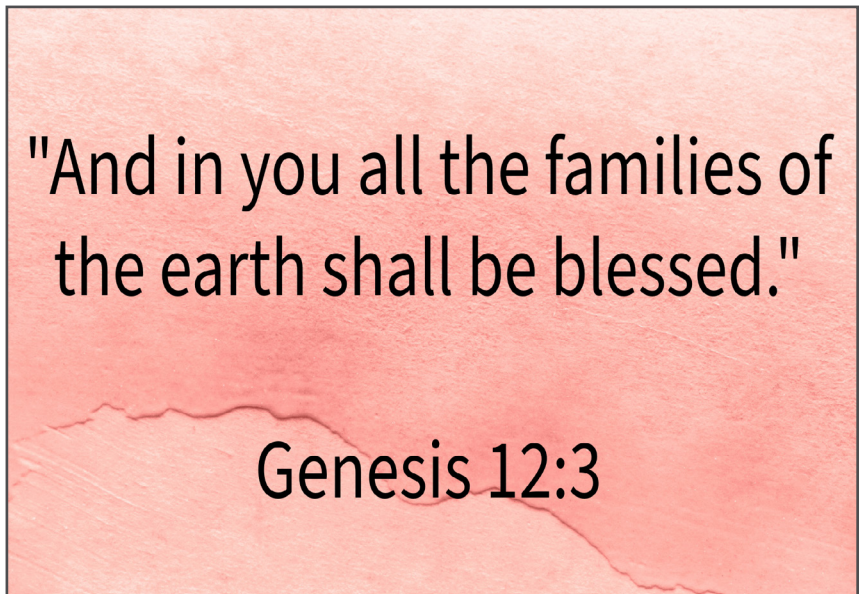
How does status and external appearance even play a role in some churches today? What can we do to combat that?

Mary herself is an example of how God selected someone of good reputation and integrity to bear the Messiah rather than external appearance. In the eyes of the world, she was a nobody; she had no status or privilege. She didn’t come from a prominent family. She didn’t have money. She was betrothed to a blue-collar worker in carpentry. She looked like any other average citizen of the day of humble means (lower class). To the elite, God would have never chosen such a woman to bear the Messiah. She didn’t fit the part. But God didn’t look on the outside. He saw Mary’s heart ([Luke 1:28](#)). He saw a righteous, obedient woman whom He could use. He saw a servant of integrity who would obey and keep herself pure until after the birth of the child. He saw someone faithful through whom He could enact His plan to bring the Messiah into the world to save it! As we worship the Lord, may we ask ourselves: What is the condition of my heart? Is the Lord able to use me because I have faithfully surrendered my life to Him and I am obediently following His Word?

**PROVISION RECEIVED FROM THE SAVIOR:**

As her song draws to a conclusion, Mary describes how God **has helped His servant Israel in remembrance of His mercy** (v. 54). She makes explicit what her song has implied all along. God has helped Israel because of His faithfulness (i.e., **mercy**) to His promises. In other words, His faithfulness serves as the motivation or basis for His actions. God’s promise goes all the way back to His covenant with Abraham ([Gen 12:1-4](#)). Among the many things He promised His servant, God would “make [him] a great nation” as well as that in him “all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” Elsewhere, God also specifies that He will make Abraham’s descendants as numerous as the sand on the seashore and the stars in the heavens” ([Gen 15:5](#); [22:17](#)).

Like the woman at the well whom we studied last week, to understand God’s true intentions with these promises we must look at them spiritually rather than from a purely physical standpoint. The rest of the New Testament helps us in this endeavor. Certainly, God did physically bless Abraham with material possessions and a large family



with the Jewish people still able to trace their heritage back to him today. But God had something greater in mind when He promised that “all families on earth [would] be blessed” in him. After the birth of his son, John the Baptist, Zechariah inspired by the Holy Spirit prophesied these words about his son’s relationship to the coming Christ: “And you, child [John], will be called the prophet of the Highest, for you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways. To give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins” ([Luke 1:76-77](#)). God’s promises don’t just center on the physical deliverance of Israel from their earthly enemies ([Luke 1:71-75](#)), but the spiritual promise of salvation through the Christ who came to take away the sins of the world ([John 1:29](#)).

How does God bless the whole world—“all families”—through Abraham? Mary

points out that God **spoke to Abraham** and **to his seed forever** just as He had their **fathers** (v. 55). To us, this may seem like an awkward phrase that makes little sense until we understand to what the **seed** refers. Mary seems to differentiate somewhat between Abraham's **seed** and her Jewish ancestors (**fathers**). Abraham's **seed**, as we discover, is not based upon physical lineage. It's based upon a relationship with Christ! In Galatians 3:29, Paul writes, "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heir according to the promise" (see also [John 8:37-47](#)). Christ has made eternal life available to the whole world. It doesn't matter whether we are Jew or Gentile or what background we may have. The life Christ offers is available to everyone who will accept it by the "remission of their sins." Jesus came for this reason. He has blessed the entire world by dying in our place and offering us eternal life when we repent of our sins!

### *Inspire*

Mary's song here in Luke reminds us that the object or recipient of our worship should always be God. While we should honor and respect people who live faithfully for the Lord and accomplish great things in service of Him, we must remember that God is the source of their ability. We ought to praise the Lord for what He has done and will do for us and not focus on the servant. God can use anyone provided that we have a relationship with Him through His Son and we have made ourselves available to Him by living righteously and being in good standing with Him. As we celebrate with our families this Christmas, may we remember what God has done for us through His Son, but may we also look to the future to see how God wants to use us to accomplish something extraordinary in 2025. God will use us if we submit to His plan and make ourselves available.

## *Incorporate*

In what ways can the servant steal the focus from the Lord in the church? How can we prevent this?

Why are so many attracted to personality or personalities rather than the Person of Christ?

According to the way the world evaluates success, how would you describe yourself? According to the way God evaluates it, how would you describe yourself? Truly, how “successful” are you in God’s eyes who can see your heart?

*December 15, 2024*



# *Worship by the Shepherds*

*Luke 2:1-20*

Focal Verse:

“Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.”

Luke 2:20

## Introduce

Just after the Halloween decorations came down this year, some houses in my neighborhood began decorating for Christmas. On an otherwise drab, ordinary North Texas street where all the houses look almost identical with cookie-cutter construction, the multi-colored LED light displays fill the night sky with brilliant radiance. These lights adorn the eaves of the roof, line the driveway, and outline the trees and shrubs in the front yard. They shimmer and sparkle in almost every color of the rainbow piercing the darkness. Sometimes the displays even move rhythmically to festive music blaring from an outdoor sound system.

But some homeowners don't stop there with just lights. They fill every square inch of their yard with almost every conceivable type of decoration. They have towering blow-ups of Frosty the Snowman, Santa Claus, or even the Grinch. Some have a sleigh replete with reindeer and gifts ready for the Jolly Old Elf to make his run on Christmas Eve to deliver presents to all the good children of the world. Some, although seemingly far less these days, will have a nativity scene with the Baby, Mary, and Joseph along with animals, angels, shepherds, and wise men. Many people spend hours driving through such neighborhoods looking at the lights as part of their Christmas tradition.

One house in my neighborhood had a new display in their yard this year—a brilliantly lit sign standing about four-feet tall. In large, white letters that stand apart from the deep red background, it reads, "Santa Comes in [number of] Days." The sign has an air of excitement and anticipation about it. For various reasons, people are counting down the days until Christmas arrives! Some may be anticipating the gifts they'll receive. Some may be looking forward to time off from work or school. Others may be looking forward to time spent with family and friends. Despite the frantic pace of the holidays and the stress that often comes from all the preparation, people still have a sense of expectation; they have hope and joy. They can't wait for the day to arrive so they can celebrate!

As believers, we should have an even greater sense of expectation and





## Introduce

anticipation about the Lord our Savior. We get to have a relationship with the God who created us through the Son He sent to save us! This sense of excitement, however, shouldn't come just once or twice a year on Christmas or Easter. It should define our lives every day. Unfortunately, sometimes we become bogged down in routine; we allow the demands and stresses of life to overwhelm us, so we lose that sense of excitement. We can become distracted in our worship. We can look forward more to the end of the workday or to personal recreation time than we do in anticipating spending time with our Lord. May we worship the Lord eagerly and expectantly, anticipating our time with Him and being ready to serve Him in whatever way He calls.








Key  
Question

How would you evaluate your life in terms of your eagerness and anticipation in worshiping and serving the Lord?

**THE ANTICIPATION OF SALVATION:**

In our world today, people attempt to make various kinds of predictions all the time. Sportscasters and commentators try to predict the outcome of important games. Financiers try to speculate on the prices of stocks and commodities. Through the use of polls, political analysts try to predict the outcome of elections. However, even the most “successful” analysts according to the world’s standards have a poor rate of success! By chance, they may sometimes get a detail here and there correct or make the right call, but none of them has a 100% success rate. Perhaps, one of the predictions on which we rely most every day has the worst track record by far—the weather. Although it may have improved with recent developments in technology, meteorologists still miss more than they get right. In Winter, for example, many times they predict snow or ice and we get a cold rain or nothing at all. Other times, however, they predict nothing at all and we get several inches of snow or ice. Moreover, they aren’t exact with their predictions. They only give an approximate range of temperatures or a percentage of coverage in the area for precipitation. They simply make educated guesses!

God, on the other hand, gave exact historical details through His spokesmen—the Prophets—about the Messiah who would come to save the world from its sins. God didn’t give us an approximation so we would have to guess for ourselves, but He gave us concrete details through which we could identify

90% accurate					80% accurate		50% accurate		
Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed
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76°	74°	70°	70°	71°	76°	75°			

the Messiah with absolute certainty! From the Old Testament, we know exactly where the Messiah would be born ([Micah 5:2](#)), we know the manner of His birth ([Isa 7:14](#)), we know His lineage ([Isa 9:6-7](#); [11:1](#)), we know in what manner He would die for our sins ([Isa 52:13-53:12](#)), we know that He would be raised from the dead ([Psalm 16:10](#)), and so many more details than we cannot recount here. Unlike meteorologists, God’s predictions or promises made centuries before the birth of the Messiah proved to be 100% accurate. Through history, we can see all these details fulfilled in one Man—Jesus.

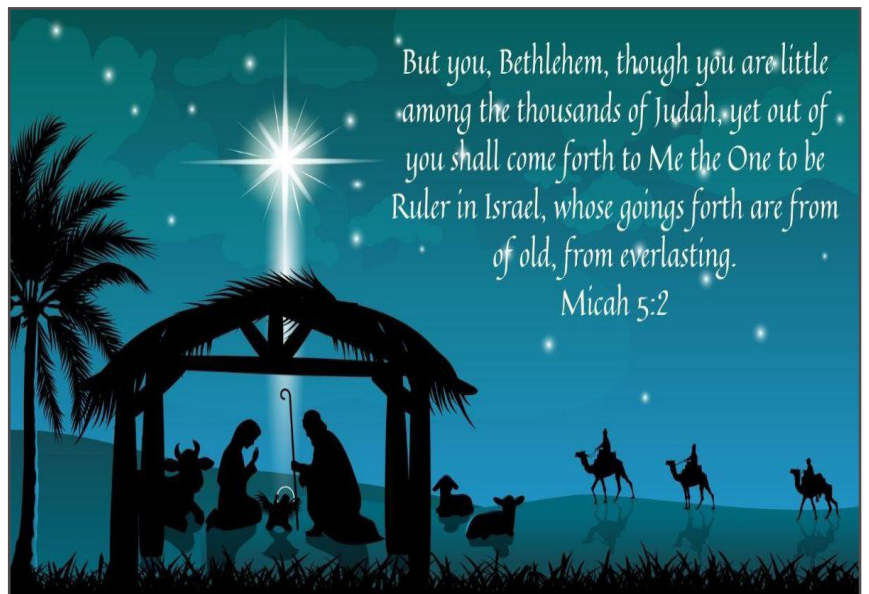
## Instruct

To corroborate the historical identity of His Son through Old Testament prophecy, it's no wonder that God chose a historian to write the third Gospel. While belief in God still requires faith, God has given us enough evidence to draw a reasonable conclusion that Jesus is the Messiah—God who became flesh.

As a historian writing an orderly account of Jesus' birth, Luke begins by relating the background setting in anticipation of the actual event. He mentions two historical figures by name: **Augustus**, that is Octavian, who became the first Roman Emperor after Julius Caesar's brutal assassination, and **Quirinius** (ker-in-knee-us) who served on the Roman counsel and later as the governor of Syria. By calculating the reigns of these two individuals along with King Herod who died in 4 BC, we can arrive at the approximate date of Jesus' birth sometime between 6 and 4 BC—the two-year span is necessitated because Herod became paranoid at the astrologers' (commonly called "wise men") announcement of the birth of a king, so he had all the male children two years and under put to death in order to protect his throne ([Matt 2:16](#)).

Before he became the official governor of Syria prior to Jesus' birth, Quirinius issued a **decree** sanctioned by the Roman Senate which required a **census** as a way to collect taxes. As was custom at that time, people returned to their ancestral homes in the region and city in which they had been born. Although Joseph had settled in **Nazareth**, as a descendant of David he returned to the city of **Bethlehem** along with his espoused **wife**, Mary, who was well advanced in her pregnancy, to participate in the **census**. In that **city of David**, Jesus would be born just as Micah had prophesied seven centuries earlier ([Micah 5:2](#)).

Many of us may gloss over these historical details, but they serve an important purpose in not only establishing concrete historical data concerning Jesus' physical birth, but also in demonstrating the fulfillment of God's plan for the Messiah. As a result, we can observe how God's plan for salvation in the Messiah had been carefully crafted over the centuries rather than haphazardly thrown



together as an afterthought. In Micah 5:2, the prophet revealed the details about the birth of this Messiah: “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting.” Micah lived in the eighth century BC roughly at the same time as the prophet Isaiah; what he had prophesied 700 years earlier was now about to come to fruition—the long-awaited Messiah was about to make His appearance in the world.

Question  
# 1

Why is historical evidence of fulfilled prophecies often not enough to convince people of Jesus’ identity? How should we respond when people question Jesus’ existence as a historical figure?

*Luke 2:6-7*

### **THE ARRIVAL OF THE SON:**

As both our divine Savior as well as our Creator, one would expect a grand celebration befitting the birth of a king into a royal family for the long-awaited Messiah; however, Jesus’ birth stands in stark contrast to this imagery. Instead of a royal arrival, the Savior was born in humble circumstances into a hard-working family of a carpenter. As the couple had journeyed to Bethlehem for the **census**, it came time for Mary to give birth and indeed she **brought forth her firstborn son** after they had found shelter in a stable for the night. After giving birth, she **wrapped** her Son in **swaddling clothes** and laid Him in a **manger**—the feeding trough from which the animals ate.

Jesus wasn’t born in an opulent palace or the most luxurious home, but He was born in the most deluxe accommodations that His parents could find given the circumstances of overcrowding due to the **census**. We often think of Jesus being born into abject poverty, but this isn’t really Luke’s point in recording the place of His birth as a stable and His crib as a **manger**. Rather His humble birth enables Him to



## Instruct

identify with His creation; Jesus primarily connects not with the socially elite, politically powerful, and the educated religious leaders of His day; He connects with common people like **shepherds**; therefore, his birth shows how God desired a relationship with all men, not just the socially privileged, well-educated, or well-connected.

### In-Depth Information



For centuries, babies, whether in wealthy or poor families, had been **wrapped in swaddling clothes** which are strips of cloth which would ensure the baby's legs and arms would remain straight and prevent any potential health problems (see [Ezek 16:4](#)). The **swaddling clothes**, therefore, don't merely represent the family's poverty as the only "rags" they could find or afford, but they indicate a tradition which everyone followed showing that Jesus was born naturally and He was nurtured just as any other baby at that time. Consequently, it demonstrates His humble connection to His creation by being born just as we are, so He could identify with us in every way ([Heb 4:15](#)).

At the end of verse 7, Luke cites the reason why Mary had to deliver in the stable: **there was no room for them at the inn**. We typically watch plays about the Christmas story which have a heartless and inconsiderate innkeeper who turns away the couple with Mary visibly pregnant. Yet, none of the Gospels has them interacting with a disgruntled innkeeper. In fact, the word that Luke uses here describes what we would call a "guest room" in a private home rather than an **inn** according to our modern concept of a motel or hotel with multiple rooms. Remember that Joseph has returned to his hometown where he likely had extended family with whom he should have been able to stay in their guest rooms, but even the rooms in these private homes were occupied because of the **census**. Even Joseph's own family and close friends in the community had nowhere for the couple to lodge.

In some ways, this foreshadows how Jesus would come to His own people, but they would reject Him because He didn't look like the Messiah they expected—they had no room for Him in their beliefs or in their hearts. In John 1:10-11, the Apostle writes, "He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own and His own did not receive Him." Even later during His ministry, Jesus spoke about how "no prophet is accepted in his own country" ([Luke 4:24](#)). Through Jesus' humble birth and His rejection by the ruling class, Luke

emphasizes that, although Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, He did not fit the people's preconceived expectations of what the Messiah should be or do.

Question  
# 2

In what ways do people push Jesus out of their lives today? How would you evaluate Jesus' "welcome" in your own life?

If honest, most of us will admit that we have at least one closet, or perhaps a garage, crammed with junk. We often fill these spaces with a wide assortment of items! We may have things from our childhood, family photo albums, seasonal clothes, exercise equipment, sports gear, supplies for our hobbies, unused furniture, books, games, collectibles, random things we have bought over the years, and so much more.

We fill these spaces from floor to ceiling. Even though we may have them labeled and neatly organized in containers, we have absolutely no room for anything else. We may argue that these things have value and importance to us, but we never use them. We may even think that we need them, but they benefit us in no way stuffed in our closets collecting dust. In some ways, our lives



become like such a closet cluttered with all these things that we think we need. We've crammed our lives so full that we have no room for anything or anyone else. So, we miss the most important aspect of life—maturing in our relationship with Christ—because we push Him away. We have no time or place for Him because we retain all these other things which appear to have value and importance only to find out that they are actually worthless in the end. Nothing can compare or compete with a relationship with Christ!

Although we live in a busy world, being "busy" is truly a choice that we make. We prioritize and choose to put things on our calendars because they are important to us or we enjoy doing them. However, people are often not as "busy" as they truly believe or actually claim. People make time, even at the last minute, for the things which they consider important, valuable, and worthy of their attention. It doesn't matter what it

## Instruct

may be, but people make room on their schedules for the things they value! Therefore, let's not become like the citizens of **Bethlehem** who found no room for Jesus in their homes. May we not fool ourselves and falsely claim "we're too busy," especially when it comes to Christ. When we don't make Christ the priority in our lives and we relegate Him to the "leftover" time, it shows how little we really value Him and appreciate what He has done for us!

Question  
# 3

For what things or activities do you always make time in your life no matter how busy you may be? How does this compare to the time you make for Christ?

## Luke 2:8-15

### THE ANNOUNCEMENT TO THE SHEPHERDS:

Although Jesus' birth may have been lacking the fanfare of an earthly king and humble in its means, the announcement of it certainly proved otherwise. Suddenly, **an angel of the Lord** appeared to a group of **shepherds out in the fields** where they **watched** their **flock at night**, protecting their herd from both predator and poacher. The appearance of this heavenly being naturally startled the men so much that they became **greatly afraid**. So, the **angel** calmed them by telling them to stop being **afraid** because he brought **good tidings of great joy which will be to all people** (v. 10). The word translated **good tidings** is from where we get our word "gospel"—that is "the good news." As we learn in this verse, the gospel he announced that **night is for all people**—not just for the elite and powerful or even just the Jewish people. It is **for all people** from every nation, ethnicity, and socio-economic background. It's for the entire world! The King of glory had come to live among us so that He could save us!

In verse 11, we arrive at the actual proclamation of the birth: "**For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.**" The **angel** explained to the **shepherds** that the Baby who had just been **born** was the **Savior**—the Messiah who had come to liberate the world from its enslavement to sin. With this, **suddenly a multitude** of angelic beings filled the sky and began **praising God** (v. 13). The whole of God's creation awaiting His renewal burst forth into spontaneous praise at the arrival of the **Savior** who promised life and redemption to **all**. From the lips of this angelic choir praise rang out loudly: **Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace,**

## **goodwill toward men** (v. 14)!

The choir rightly directed their praise to **God** in heaven (i.e., **in the highest** place) for what He has done **on earth** below. **On earth**, God has established **peace** with **men** upon whom His favor rests (i.e., His **goodwill toward men**). In other words, God through Jesus Christ has given **peace** to people who will accept the free gift of His salvation. Because of



our twenty-first century understanding, the interpretation of **peace** is often misunderstood in this passage. At face value, people erroneously regard it as a physical **peace**—in other words the absence of physical conflict. In reality, however, at no time **on earth** have the people of God had total physical **peace** in which they were not persecuted in some fashion or did not face some type of adversity simply because they live in a fallen world.

In this context, the word **peace** can almost be interchanged with the word salvation. The peace that God gives comes through the salvation offered by Christ; therefore, it depicts the removal of God's wrath from us because of our sin. **Peace** is not a feeling which we have of "comfort" or "satisfaction"—though salvation does produce that type of **peace** as a by-product in our lives too. Rather, the **peace** that the angels announced here is the restoration of our relationship with the Lord through the Messiah. In Romans 5:1, Paul states, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have *peace* with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (see also [Isa 26:2-4](#); [Acts 10:36](#)). Therefore, the "good news" is that Jesus has taken the enmity of our sin upon Himself and offered us justification (i.e., being made in right standing) and forgiveness in return so that we might have a relationship with God.

After this grand celebration befitting a King, the **angel** then instructed the **shepherds** that they would find the **Babe wrapped in cloths** and **lying in a manger** which would be **a sign** for them to distinguish Him from any other baby that may have been born in **Bethlehem** that **night**. As a result, the **shepherds** determined to go there



## Instruct

to witness the event personally which **the Lord had made known to** them (v. 15). But why would God choose to announce the birth of His Son to **shepherds** rather than the political or religious authorities of the day? Here, the **shepherds** represent common man; they are ordinary people of no special reputation. We could even call them blue-collar workers like most of us! Hence, it demonstrates how Christ came to save them just as much as He did the rich and powerful. Jesus is not *just* the **Savior** of Israel; He is the **Savior for all people**. One can't be any more inclusive than Christ Himself who offers salvation freely to **all** who believe in Him!

### In-Depth Information



In recent days, some modern commentators have depicted the **shepherds** as despised and rejected by society. Sometimes they have even portrayed them as dishonest, thieves, or the dregs whom society has cast out and with whom they have nothing to do; however, this is not really an accurate depiction. In the Old Testament, God used the image of a shepherd to describe both Himself as well as the Messiah ([Psalm 23](#); [Micah 5:4](#)). David was a shepherd as was Moses and God chose them to lead His people! **Shepherds** were never despised or typically viewed as “thieves”; they were merely blue-collar workers. This demonstrates that Christ came for ordinary people; He didn't come just to save the elite few.

#### Question # 4

Why does God often use ordinary people to do His extraordinary work? How is God currently using you to do extraordinary things as His messengers?

## **THE ADORATION OF THE SAVIOR:**

The **shepherds** quickly traveled to **Bethlehem** where they found **Mary and Joseph** and the **Babe lying in a manger** just as they had been told (v. 16). After witnessing this miraculous event, they responded in two distinct ways: first, they immediately told others what they had experienced (v. 17) and second, they glorified and praised God **for the things that they had heard and seen** (v. 20). First, the **shepherds** were excited about what they had witnessed so they **made widely** known what they had experienced. As they left the stable, they told everyone they met! After witnessing such a significant, world-changing event, the **shepherds** didn't remain silent, but rather they told everyone about what they had seen first-hand.

Imagine, however, if the **shepherds** were like the many people who attend service on Sunday mornings and simply went home without ever sharing the gospel. As they gathered outside of the stable, they might have had a discussion like this:

"Where would you guys like to go and eat? I know a little café down the road a bit that has some great lamb chops. Eh, I'm tired of looking at lamb chops all day. Let's go somewhere else. Well, I'm fine eating where everyone else wants to eat." As they walked and talked, they passed people and yet said nothing. Instead, they kept conversing amongst themselves: "You know, I get really tired fending off those corporate wolves every day. I need to start looking for a job with less stress. I can't believe that I gave up my 'Sunday' to come and hear this preaching when I could have been on the Sea of Galilee." If we have been transformed by the power of the gospel through a relationship with Jesus Christ, shouldn't we have excitement and enthusiasm in which we are compelled to share with every one we meet like these **shepherds**?

They didn't return to business as usual. On the contrary, they shared the gospel with everyone. Moreover, the message that the **shepherds** shared also had a great



impact upon the people to whom they **told** it. The text tells us that everyone **who heard** their testimony **marveled** about these things (v. 18). We have a message proclaiming the good news of salvation for **all people**, but how excited are we to share it? Too often, we let fear seize our tongues and political correctness silence our mouths, but the only message that the world desperately needs to hear is about the hope that Jesus Christ offers. Not only have we been commanded to share the gospel, but we should have a passion to share simply because of what Jesus has done for us and through us.

### Question # 5

How do you express your enthusiasm for the things that the Lord has done for you? How often do you share the gospel?

Further, in verse 20, Luke emphasizes that the **shepherds** continued to **glorify and praise God for what they had heard and seen**. When we look at the response of the **shepherds**, we must remember that it also applies to our lives if we have a relationship with Jesus. First, if we have been truly transformed by Jesus, we have a personal testimony which we can tell others about what God has done for us. In fact, no one can argue with such a personal testimony with evidence cited from our changed lives that demonstrates the truthfulness of Scripture. Second, our natural response to the work of God in our lives ought to be to praise Him and worship Him by sharing the gospel with others.

Daily, we talk with others about significant events in the world or personal things that have happened to us. Most of us announce to others all the time great things, such as the birth of a child, graduation from college, a job promotion, and the list could go on; however, we need to have this same enthusiasm and same love for Christ to announce to the world the arrival of our Savior and the source of our salvation. We even talk to others about events with far less significance—events that have no eternal or lasting value, namely sports, celebrities, and movies or television shows. In fact, we spend an inordinate amount of time talking about these things. And we often talk about them with passion and excitement. We freely offer critiques and share our opinions.

But how often do we spend talking about the One who truly matters the most: Christ? When we compare all these other areas which we discuss and ponder daily,

we may unfortunately find a discussion about Christ omitted altogether or only briefly mentioned. We certainly must glorify Him through all our speech even if we don't mention Him specifically, but we need to be more like the **shepherds** who **made** Him **widely known**! They looked for opportunities to share about what God had told them and shown them—and they didn't miss taking those opportunities! We, therefore, need to share Christ



wherever we go and with whomever we meet. Let us not miss the opportunity to adore Him and announce Him to the world as our Savior who will save them too if only they would believe in Him.

Question  
# 6

What are some of the most-important events in your life that you excitedly announced to others? In what ways did you announce these events?

## *Inspire*

Most of us anticipate significant events and milestones in our lives. Like the Christmas yard decoration, we have the days counted down. In fact, we may even have an actual calendar in which we mark an X on the days. We may anticipate anything from a vacation to retirement. We look forward to that day with much hope and excitement. It makes the long, tiring days we endured in life somewhat more bearable it seems. Yet, do we have such an eagerness and anticipation in meeting with our Lord Jesus Christ every day? We should! We get the opportunity to meet with the One who created us and gave His life to save us! May we learn from the shepherds who witnessed Jesus' birth in the stable that night. May we worship with anticipation and expectation, telling everyone what we've experienced through the salvation offered by Christ!

## *Incorporate*

In life, what events have you anticipated with the most eagerness and excitement? In what ways did you anticipate them? How did you celebrate them? How does this compare with your eagerness and anticipation in meeting with Christ daily?

What things interest or excite you to talk about them? In other words, what things are you passionate about sharing with others? How does this compare to your passion for sharing the gospel?

*December 22, 2024*



# *Worship of the Savior*

## *Matthew 2:1-15*

Focal Verse:

*"Saying, 'Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.'"*

Matthew 2:2

## Introduce

In past years, scavenger hunts became a popular way to promote fellowship, encourage camaraderie, and pass the time. Although some scavenger hunts simply gave participants a list of items to find, others made the task a bit more challenging by presenting them with a series of clues which they must then interpret correctly in order to discover a larger prize. Today, a similar concept exists in “escape rooms” where individuals cooperate to find the means of exiting an otherwise sealed room. In either case, the ultimate goal has already been identified for us—correctly interpreting clues in order to find a specific prize or a way out of a locked room. Therefore, as we look for clues, we must use all the evidence we’ve gathered to draw the right conclusions. Failure to pay attention or to analyze the information correctly could lead to the forfeiture of the game. As a result, we can identify three principles that typically guarantee success if we apply them to such a venture.

First, we must look for clues in the right places; we must be methodical and organized in our search or we might miss a critical detail. Randomly running around the room or venue helter-skelter wouldn’t produce the best results. We may “happen” to discover a clue that way, but only by chance. Most likely, we would end up searching the same places repeatedly while



at the same time overlooking others, thereby becoming frustrated and distraught in the process. Second, we must draw the correct conclusion about the clues when we find them. It’s not what the clues mean to us personally or even what we want them to mean, but rather what the author wants us to understand about them. Therefore, we must listen carefully, interpret them correctly, and infer what they actually mean or otherwise we’ll never progress to the next step. When rightly interpreted, these clues will give us further insight and point us in the ultimate direction of our goal.

Third, we must listen to people who have wisdom and experience in the matters at hand. In one sense, we need to heed the advice of an expert who has pertinent knowledge to help us analyze the clues and reach our goal. We shouldn’t attempt to

## Introduce

guess our way to the goal. Neither should we just listen to anyone's advice or opinion indiscriminately without critically evaluating the evidence for ourselves. We need discernment to help us know the right way! When we do these three things collectively, they greatly increase our chances of successfully completing the task and arriving at the goal.

The "wise men" who sought Jesus weren't on some type of scavenger hunt or trying to escape from a locked room. Their search for the Child was most definitely not a "game" but a serious quest which involved the same three principles that we just illustrated here. For example, they already knew their final goal: to find the King of the Jews so they might worship Him. This meant that they had to look for clues in the right place: Bethlehem as guided by the star that they had seen in the East. Even more importantly, they also had to turn to the right source for help narrowing down their search: Scripture. They then had to interpret the information they received correctly. It wasn't what it meant to them, but what message the Lord actually wanted to communicate. Certainly, the experts upon whom Herod called provided the information, but it ultimately came from Scripture rather than their own tradition or insight. This Christmas and throughout the year let us diligently search Scripture so that we might come to know this King of kings better and we might worship Him in the way He deserves.

Key  
Question

How diligently do you search the Scriptures so that you can truly know Christ and worship Him in the manner He deserves?



## Matthew 2:1-6

### **THE SEARCH FOR THE KING:**

The events in this second chapter of Matthew probably didn't happen just a few hours after Jesus' birth, but more than likely significant time had already passed before the "**wise men**" from the East arrived since it would have taken them some time to travel there. Yet, we often confuse this timeframe because every nativity set includes these "**wise men**" assembled along with the shepherds to worship the **King** at the stable. Based upon the fact that Herod the Great slew every male child two years of age and under in Bethlehem, Jesus could have been as old as two ([Matt 2:16](#)). Hence, His family had already moved from the stable where He had been born to reside in a house ([Matt 2:11](#)). Nevertheless, Matthew gives us no real timeframe for how long it took these events to unfold. He simply states that **after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea the wise men came to Jerusalem** (v. 1).

Naturally, the **wise men** began conducting their search for the **King** in the royal city or capital of the region—**Jerusalem**— for one would have expected the birth of a king there. The translation **wise men** in this text, however, can be somewhat misleading. It doesn't refer to philosophers or even cast them as particularly highly-educated sages



of their society even though they would have had some substantial intelligence. Rather, it refers to astrologers—those who study the stars, planets, and cosmic events looking for signs about things that will happen in the world. This would be something akin to individuals who make and read horoscopes today. Consequently, much misinformation exists about this group of individuals based upon details added to the story over the years by tradition. For instance, we do not know how many there actually were. The plural only indicates it had to be two or more. Scripture also never calls them "kings" as the popular Christmas carol begins nor does it ever give them names or identify their countries of origin. It simply refers to them as **men from the East**. Based upon this cardinal direction, however, we can deduce that they were Gentiles and not Jews.

Interestingly, apart from the shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth, the Gentiles, not the Jews, were among the first groups to worship Jesus as **King** (v. 2)!

Question  
# 1

Why must we be cautious to separate tradition when it differs and hear Scripture speak for itself? What is the danger in merely relying on tradition?

After they arrived in town from their long journey, these Gentile astrologers then begin inquiring more details from the locals to find the Child's exact location. They ask, "**Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?**" We may not pay too much attention to this statement and read it quickly, focusing simply on the word **King**, but then we've missed a crucial point. The phrase **has been born King** indicates Jesus' present royal status. He is **King** right now. He does not need to wait to become **King**; He is already **King** even from before His physical birth. And this greatly threatens Herod. Although Jesus did leave His position in heaven to come to earth, He never gave up His status as **King**! He certainly lived as an obedient Servant, but He was also still **King**! Again, the Christmas carol, "Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne," can be somewhat misleading if we don't exercise caution to recall the scriptural context: "Thou didst leave Thy throne and Thy kingly crown, when Thou camest to earth for me."

Scripture never indicates that Jesus ceased being **King**! He did come in the form of man and assume the role of a servant ([John 1:14](#); [Phil 2:6-8](#)), but He has always been and will always continue to be **King**! Therefore, these men genuinely sought to pay homage to and worship Jesus who was born a **King**. Although the text doesn't indicate who they



asked once they arrived in **Jerusalem**, we know the answer itself comes directly from Scripture as prophesied some seven centuries earlier through Micah as indicated by the response that **the chief priests and scribes** give Herod when summoned ([Matt 2:4-6](#)). God gives us enough evidence in creation and general knowledge to point us to Him

and know He exists ([Rom 1:20](#)). But this general knowledge always points to Scripture which reveals His exact plan in Christ. God gave these astrologers enough information to know the **King** had been born which led them to **Jerusalem**. But they needed further information to complete their task which only Scripture could reveal and confirm. Still, they believed and came in obedience to **worship the King**.

At this point, all attention turns to King Herod when he learns of their search for this newborn **King**. As a paranoid and power-hungry individual, this news **troubled** Herod and by extension **all Jerusalem with him** (v. 3). He felt threatened because he was not a king by birth, but rather was appointed by the Romans. Herod, therefore, had two strikes against him which challenged his legitimacy to the throne. First, he was not Jewish by birth because his father was Idumean (Edomite) and his mother Arabian. Second, he was not a king by royal descent but by appointment. In Jesus, however, we find a legitimate **King** by birth through the lineage of David which means He had the right and authority to assume the throne! As a result, Herod flew into a rage and sought to eliminate his competition; he had already killed some of his own sons whom he perceived as a threat to his reign. So, **Jerusalem** was naturally uneasy and **troubled** by his response because they had seen his murderous rage first-hand.

Having summoned these **men from the East**, Herod now actually helps them achieve their goal of locating this newborn **King**. He calls **together all the chief priests and scribes** to inquire **where the Christ was to be born** (v. 4). These religious “experts” and “scholars” of their day knew the Scripture and immediately pointed to **the prophet** Micah who had foretold of Jesus’ birth in the city of David, specifically **Bethlehem in Judea** (v. 5)—not to be confused with another Bethlehem in Galilee (Josh 19:15). Although **Bethlehem** was a small, seemingly insignificant hamlet six miles south of Jerusalem, Micah reminds us not to overlook it, for someone superior to any other leader on earth who would do something far more extraordinary than we could ever fathom would come from this place! In Micah 5:2, consequently, **the prophet** announces that this city would **not** be **the least among the rulers of Judah**, but **out of** it would **come** the greatest **Ruler who** would **shepherd** God’s **people—Israel**.

Question  
# 2

What is the danger of overlooking the “small” things in our lives according to a human perspective? What is God’s purpose in working through these “small” things at times?

Although Herod and the religious leaders he had assembled knew where to get the right information (Scripture), they still didn't handle it correctly ([2 Tim 2:13](#)). While they understood it factually, they failed to apply it correctly! Through their actions, therefore, we can observe the danger of thinking that we know the truth when we are actually distorting, misapplying, and reshaping it to fit our own personal beliefs and opinions. When we base our interpretation of Scripture solely upon our personal views, we haven't truly understood the truth because we haven't heard God Himself speak; we've simply projected upon Him what we ourselves think and want to hear. If we don't interpret the information correctly and apply it properly, recognizing where to go to find the truth and even cognitively knowing it provide no benefit.

For example, both Herod and the "experts" knew where to go to find the truth about this miraculous and long-foretold birth: Scripture. And to some extent, Herod "cognitively" believed the truthfulness of the information and didn't dismiss it. However, he responded with murder rather than **worship** because he

didn't truly understand the nature of the Messiah's mission! Like many, Herod didn't seek to ascertain the whole truth, but jumped to conclusions making his own assumptions about what this baby had come to do. So, he acted upon his own impulses and desires without ever truly understanding the implications. Similarly, the "experts" also had the right knowledge about the Messiah, but they rejected the truth as the rest of Scripture bears out because Jesus did not meet their expectations or fit their definition of what the Messiah should be and what He should do politically.

To put this into perspective, let's look at a practical example. If we suffer from some type of illness or physical ailment, we all *know* where we should go to acquire the knowledge of how to overcome it: a medical professional with the proper training to diagnose the cause of the condition. Leaving aside the occasional misdiagnosis or the possibility of error with any human being, a doctor is the best source of information to diagnose the problem over against our own self-diagnosis—a trend which seems to be growing today amongst people who don't have the actual expertise! After assessing the

"If we are faithless,  
He remains faithful;  
He cannot deny Himself,"

2 Timothy 2:13

problem, the doctor will tell us the truth and prescribe a treatment or plan of action for overcoming what ails us. We now have the knowledge; we know the truth. But we must act upon it in order to make it effective!

We can respond to the truth we have received in one of three ways: 1) we can accept it and follow the plan to overcome the illness as prescribed by the medical authority, 2) we can decide the information doesn't really apply to us and we can formulate our own "better" plan with the knowledge we have to overcome it, or 3) we can take the information and do nothing with it. Most people in life will do one of the latter two options. For instance, we can know what ails us (sin) and even what to do to get well (Christ), but we decide that plan just isn't for us; it doesn't meet our expectations. We can even go as far as filling the prescriptions at the pharmacy (religious ritual), but then we simply leave them on the shelf and never take them. In this way, correct knowledge doesn't do us any good because we don't actually apply it. Knowledge must be obtained from the right source, but it also must be correctly interpreted and applied! This is especially true of Scripture which gives God's perfect plan for overcoming our illness which leads to death—our sin!

Question  
# 3

What is the danger of having knowledge and failing to use it properly? How would you assess your knowledge of Scripture in terms of applying it?

### *Matthew 2:7-8*

#### **THE SECRET INQUIRY ABOUT THE KING:**

Herod secretly met with the wise men because he had an ulterior motive for finding out more specific information to determine the approximate age of the **Child** (v. 7). So, he began asking them at **what time the star had appeared**, presumably because he realized that it would have taken some time to observe it, determine what it meant astrologically, and then travel to **Jerusalem**. He then directed these men to **search carefully for this young Child** and report back to him (v. 8). By his choice of words, Herod wanted them to leave no stone unturned and not give up their **search** until they definitively found the **Child**. Then, he outrightly deceived them as he falsely declared his intentions. He wanted them to bring back word so that he too might **come** and **worship Him!**

Notice the difference between the response of those who lived in **Jerusalem** and

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the visitors who had journeyed there **from the East**. When Herod learned of the news of this royal birth, **all Jerusalem was troubled with him**. They knew what kind of man Herod was from first-hand experience. They had seen his character, observed his personality, and witnessed his actions. In contrast at this point in the account, the **wise men** seemed indifferent to Herod's request. Scripture doesn't record any other response than that they merely went on their way to find the **Child** and apparently fulfill Herod's request since God must warn them in a dream not to return to him (v. 12). Being on the outside of politics and culture in the region, they probably didn't know much about Herod's reputation or have any real reason to doubt his sincerity in wanting to **come and worship the Child**.

Still, we can learn a valuable principle from this brief encounter about pretentious, hypocritical worship.

What we think, do, and say in private will always be revealed no matter how careful we may believe that we have been to conceal our motives or cover our tracks. Much of Herod's exploits, however, were indeed public. People knew about them. He had done very little to conceal them other than use his authority and power to coerce and frighten people. But here was a group of **men** whom he could attempt to deceive and manipulate because they hadn't witnessed all these things publicly. Numbers 32:23 therefore cautions us, "Be sure your sin will find you out."



As believers, we must act honorably at all times and be above reproach by avoiding even the appearance of evil as our sincerest form of praise and **worship** to our King ([1 Thess 5:22](#)). At the same time, we also need to know the character of the people with whom we associate or even with whom we must deal as casual acquaintances lest we become deceived, manipulated, misguided, and drawn away from the Lord. As we will see, God steps in to prevent this from happening with the **wise men** who had come with sincere desire to **worship** Jesus. May we also have such a pure, earnest desire to **worship** Jesus through the way we conduct our lives. May we never simply go through the motions, allowing our worship to become meaningless ritual. Or, even

worse, may we never live hypocritically following the pattern of the world while pretending to **worship** our Savior in an attempt to fool others and even to fool ourselves that we're in right standing. On the contrary, let our **worship** and praise be genuine and sincere as we seek daily to cultivate our relationship with Him.

## **Matthew 2:9-11**

### **THE SERVICE TO THE KING:**

After meeting with Herod, the men departed for **Bethlehem**. And, just as the Lord had done from the very beginning of their journey, He continued guiding them by **the star they had seen in the East** (v. 9). As they arrived in the village, **the star stood still over the house where Jesus was**. Upon seeing this miraculous sight and realizing they had found the **King**, the group began to rejoice greatly (v. 10). Having entered **the house**, they found Jesus along with **His mother Mary** and immediately **fell down and worshiped Him** (v. 11). The text is clear who rightly receive their **worship**: Jesus. Undoubtedly the men respected Mary, but they did not worship her at all. To worship Mary, as some denominations incorrectly teach, is nothing less than idolatry.

As they **worshiped** the Christ, they present Him with three different types of **gifts** which they had brought: **gold**, **frankincense**, and **myrrh**. Collectively, these **gifts** had enormous value and were worthy of presenting to a **King**. But the focus should not primarily be upon the nature of the gift, its value, or even its “theological” significance as “discovered” by later commentators. It should be on the act of **worship** and the devotion of these **wise men** to Jesus. Like today, **gold** was a highly sought-after precious metal with great value. Both **frankincense** and **myrrh** had a variety of uses as aromatic perfumes from Arabia from where these men had come. **Frankincense**, for example, was used as medicine and widely used in religious ritual. **Myrrh**, likewise, shared many of these same uses, but was also used as a perfume in burial ([John 19:39](#)). Some ancient commentators, along with some modern ones, have attempted to connect these gifts with special significance to Jesus’ royalty, divinity, and death. Matthew, however, makes



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no such connection here in the text.

Too often, we can become distracted by non-essential things in our worship which cause us to focus on inconsequential matters. We saw this in the very first lesson this month when we studied Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well. Both the Jews and Samaritans alike had become distracted by tradition and religious rituals—so much that many of them missed the Messiah! When the woman asks Jesus about the proper location for **worship**, recall His response. Jesus redirects her thinking, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father . . . But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him" ([John 4:21-23](#)). We certainly must pay attention to the theology and content of our songs, sermons, and supplications (prayers). How we **worship** is important. But who we direct our **worship** to is even more paramount! We must worship our God and Father and His Son Jesus alone! Let's make sure that we have the proper perspective when we worship and focus on giving our lives wholly to Him as that sacrificial act of **worship** which He desires ([Rom 12:1-2](#)).

Question  
# 4

When does tradition and ritual become a distraction? Why should we not just throw away tradition and ritual as something completely bad, however?

### Matthew 2:12-15

#### **THE SAFEGUARDING OF THE KING:**

Nothing catches God by surprise. Nothing is hidden from His eyes. He has thought of everything. He works in such a way to safeguard and bring the plan which He devised before the foundation of the world to fruition. We see evidence right here when God moves to protect His Son. The **wise men** had no inkling of Herod's motives or his unscrupulous and wicked plan, but God did. First, God divinely warned the men in a dream not **to return to Herod** (v. 12). They obediently heeded God and **departed for their country** by a different route. Second, God sent **an angel** to speak to **Joseph in a dream** (v. 13). He instructed him to get out of bed (**arise**) and **flee to Egypt** with **the young Child** and **His mother**. They would stay there until God gave them explicit instruction to return. For the first time in the text, God now revealed Herod's plan to



**destroy the Child.** Just like the **wise men**, Joseph responded immediately and left **for Egypt by night** to escape this imminent threat.

The family resided there in the safety of **Egypt until** Herod died (v. 15). Matthew thus details how this fulfilled Hosea 11:1 in which the **Lord declared, "Out of Egypt I called My Son."** Through this, we see how Jesus figuratively fulfills the exodus in an even greater way than Moses and Israel ever could. Initially, God referred to Israel as His son as a way of



describing the relationship He had with them when requesting Pharaoh to free the people ([Exod 4:22](#)). Through Moses and eventually Joshua, God led the nation of Israel from literal enslavement at the hands of the Egyptians to freedom in the land which He had promised their forefathers. Now, in an even greater way, Jesus fulfills that ultimate journey from enslavement to freedom. He doesn't free us merely from physical enslavement and give us an earthly Promised Land, however. He frees us from the bondage of sin and gives us eternal life. He accomplishes something no human could ever do!

Through Jesus, we see the ultimate fulfillment of God's plan which He orchestrated in the beginning. God called and used an obedient people to bring the Messiah to save the world from sin and death. Only God could do this Himself. He had to come into the world to dwell among sinful man to pay the price for our sin. Eventually, Christ would die at the hands of Herod the Great's son, Herod Antipas around thirty years later. At that time, Jesus would willingly lay down His life and die on the cross spurred on by the Jews and under the supervision of Rome. However, God's plan did not end with the death of His Son. He brought permanent victory when He triumphantly rose from the grave, conquering sin and death forever for anyone who would turn to Him in sincere faith through repentance. Therefore, let us celebrate, honor, praise, and **worship** the King of kings and Lord of lords who willingly came to earth, faced adversity, and gave His life on our behalf so that we could be forgiven and

## *Instruct*

not have to die!

Question  
# 5

How does sovereign control over events in the universe give you assurance and comfort in your life?

## *Inspire*

In the introduction, we used scavenger hunts and escape rooms to discuss three key principles that apply in our relationship with Christ as well. Yet, there is one significant difference between searching for Christ and a scavenger hunt. God hasn't hidden clues that we must decipher or used some biblical code that only a few people can comprehend. He has spoken plainly to us and provided clear evidence in Scripture to reveal His exact plan. We don't have to guess. We don't have to hope we can figure things out and find the right way. We can know these things confidently if we listen to the Lord and hear Him speak through His Word.

This Christmas season let us make sure that the tradition we celebrate and the things that we believe align perfectly with Scripture. God has given us all the knowledge we need; He has told us the truth. But we must understand what He has actually said and then apply it in our lives. Let us worship the King and celebrate His coming to earth to provide the only way that we can have life. May we not merely "cognitively" know the truth in our minds as if it were some game of Trivial Pursuit, but may we internalize those biblical principles and apply them in our lives so that we can have a relationship with Christ which leads to abundant life in Him. Let us worship Him for the God, Savior, and King that He has been from the beginning and will continue to be throughout eternity.

## *Incorporate*

In contrast to Herod the Great and Israel at times in the Old Testament, what should genuine, authentic worship look like?

How would you evaluate your worship in terms of 1) your cognitive knowledge of Scripture (i.e., the content) and 2) the application of that knowledge?

*December 29, 2024*



# *Worship through Service*

*Romans 12:1-8*

Focal Verse:

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service."

Romans 12:1

## Introduce

As Americans, and particularly Baptists, we like to eat. Almost every “fellowship” involves some type of food or dessert. After all, we have a biblical precedent to follow set by the early church since their regular gatherings typically included “the breaking of bread” in addition to Bible study, prayer, and ministry ([Acts 2:42](#)). Food, however, also often became the source of controversy in the church whether because of unequal distribution among widows ([Acts 6:1-7](#)) or because some members gluttonously gorged themselves during the celebration of the Lord’s Supper and left nothing for late-comers to eat ([1 Cor 11:17-34](#)).

The food industry in our consumer-minded culture revolves around tailoring the dining experience and cuisine to our personal tastes. It provides us with a heavy dose of service where we enjoy the fruit of other people’s intense labor. Although fast-food restaurants focus primarily on convenience and require that we do some things ourselves, such as fill our soda cups, they still do most of the work for us. They take our order, prepare the food, cook it, and hand it to us in the drive-thru or at the counter should we choose to exert the effort of going inside. Likewise, sit-down restaurants employ a wait staff to meet our every need. They take our orders, deliver the food from the kitchen, refill our glasses, bring any condiments or sides, and clean up our messes. They do everything short of feeding us the food!

But this doesn’t apply to just restaurants. We live in a service-oriented society where we have everything at our fingertips. Online retailers deliver packages to our doorsteps. If we choose to go to the store, most have personal shoppers who will bring our order to our car. As a result, we have grown accustomed to being served! Unfortunately, this attitude



has found its way into the church. Few people want to participate and serve. Most want to be served and attend with little or no commitment at all.

While teaching seminary, I had a student tell me that she did not want to serve in any capacity in the church because she had “served” others all her life. She explained

## Introduce

that she wanted to focus on herself and “attend” church to build relationships and fellowship with her peers. To sound spiritual, even though she lacked godly wisdom, she said she wanted to find a church where she could “worship” and “be fed.” Her statement led me to ask rhetorically, “Why do you believe God led you to enroll in seminary if He has not called you to serve?” I then explained that God’s purpose through the church is to equip every member—whether full-time minister or layperson—for the work of ministry and service. We shouldn’t serve in areas in which God has clearly not called us, but we cannot make a blanket refusal to serve in any area because we want to focus on ourselves. We can mature and grow in the Lord at the same time we serve in the ministry to which He has called us.

Although we must have a balance between our personal growth in our relationship with Christ and our service, we cannot truly worship if we refuse to serve. After all, God has called us “to present [our] bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, what is [our] reasonable service” ([Rom 12:1](#)). Yet, we live in a culture that expects to be served rather than to serve. However, the church is not some restaurant where we only come to “get fed” for our personal benefit. While the church should teach the sound doctrine and application of God’s Word, it’s not a place where people should cater to make us “happy.” The church is a group of like-minded people who have a relationship with Christ seeking opportunities to advance the gospel and mature together spiritually through our devoted acts of service to Him. Therefore, may we always worship through our service!

Key  
Question

Would you describe your role in the church more of serving or being served? Why?

#### **WORSHIP THROUGH SACRIFICE:**

Most of Paul's letters follow a similar pattern in which he discusses theology first as the basis for our actions before delving into the application. In other words, Paul gives the reason why we should live a certain way in Christ before telling us how we should live. In fact, he adopts this very pattern in his letter to the Romans. After outlining what it means to have a relationship with Christ, Paul then gives us specific principles regarding how we should live righteously. Typically, he marks the beginning of his application sections with a command—**I beseech you** (v. 1). In more modern terms, **beseech** means to urge, implore, or encourage. Thus, the Apostle urges us to **present our bodies as a living sacrifice**.

The conjunction **therefore** beckons us to recall all Paul has said in the first eleven chapters where he addresses the theology of salvation. A review of his theology will help us put into perspective his command to **present** ourselves to the Lord as **a sacrifice**: Sin and willful disobedience have separated us from the Lord, ending with death as its penalty ([Rom 1-3](#)). Only one sacrifice can satisfy that debt and provide life ([Rom 5](#)). Having been saved by grace through faith in Christ Jesus ([Rom 4](#)), we no longer live enslaved to sin in the flesh ([Rom 6](#)); we now live in righteousness as led by the Spirit ([Rom 8](#)). Regardless of our origin or background, we can only have life through Christ; there is not one way of salvation for one group of people and a different way for others ([Rom 9-11](#)). Christ alone saves all who will receive Him!

Our change in status from death because of our sin to eternal life in Christ calls us to **service**. Paul, therefore, urges us to **present our bodies as a living sacrifice by the mercies of God** (v. 1). The phrase **by the mercies of God** points to the work of Christ on the cross through which He has given us life. It should remind us of

"For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved."

Romans 10:12-13

everything God has done for us and the tremendous price He paid to redeem us from our sin—a price that we could never afford because of our own imperfections and one we could never repay because of our weakness to resist temptation and sin. For this reason, we should never forget the grace and mercy God extended to us through Christ! Although we could never repay this act of mercy, it should nevertheless motivate us to serve Him faithfully with our whole being—not out of a sense of duty or obligation, but because we are grateful and love Him.

As humans, we often tend to forget and sometimes take for granted the things given to us—those things for which we ourselves did not have to work. We may show appreciation and gratitude at first, but we can soon lose focus if we don't take steps to remind ourselves of the cost behind the gift and the sacrifice the giver made to purchase it for us. Several years ago, when we had an international service here at the church in the afternoon, a member gifted a refugee an old, yet reliable car. The man responded graciously with gratitude for the gift and joyously received it. Within just a few weeks, however, he had essentially run the car into the ground because he abused it and didn't take care of it. Although the motor still somewhat ran, he ultimately abandoned the car in a grocery store parking lot. Even though he didn't pay for it and received it debt-free, he saw little value in it. It really meant nothing to him—not even for scrap—so he callously got rid of it!

Question  
# 1

Have you ever given a gift which you later found out that the person did not use or truly value? How did they respond to the gift initially? How did they treat it subsequently?

Generally, however, many people live in a self-serving and self-pleasing way in our society; they elevate their own personal desires above acts of compassion and service. Such a lackadaisical and clueless attitude can become easy in the world in which we live because we have a high standard of living and people generally have more than just the basic needs of life. They truly have everything they could ever need or even want. In such a culture, people can easily feel entitled and become self-centered so that they lose sight of a gift's value. Thus, complaints and criticism abound when they don't get what they expect or they treat generous gifts with contempt like this gentleman did.



As appalling as this may sound, people sometimes treat Jesus' sacrifice in this same way. They forget its value based on the cost He paid. Not only did He leave heaven to come and live among His creation becoming a servant, but He also gave His life so that we could be reconciled to God and have eternal life through Him ([Phil 2:6-8](#)). He paid the price for us in full! Although it cost Jesus everything to die for *our* sins, He gave us this gift willingly and freely! Sometimes, however, people lose sight of the value of their salvation and the transformed life of service which Jesus has called us to live in Him as a result. Thus, they have become conditioned to receive rather than give and to be served rather than serve.

But we must remember that someone had to pay for that gift for us to have it in the first place! When we realize the full value of Christ's sacrifice, it should inspire us to serve. **Service** won't simply become something that we do when we have time, when we think about it, or when the church has a special project or mission trip. We will naturally find ways to serve the Lord daily. Therefore, **service** will become a priority and manifest itself through the way we live. It will become a way of life! We will serve the Lord in every area: what we do, what we say, what we believe, what we listen to, where we go, the attitudes we have, and so forth.



*Not the Actual Car Referenced in the Lesson*

Question  
# 2

How would you describe the value of Jesus' sacrifice to you? How is the value reflected in your transformed life of service?

As we have established, Christ paid the price for us to have eternal life in full. In return, we too ought to surrender everything in our lives to Him. For this reason, Paul commands us to **present** (i.e., give) our **bodies**—that is our entire life or being to Him ([see 2 Cor 8:5](#)). If Christ gave everything for us, we shouldn't only give part of ourselves to Him! We must grant Him access and control in every area. Imagine going to the store

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to purchase a piece of furniture that requires assembly—a dining room table. At home, we open the box to discover only three legs and no fasteners or screws. We would complain about the missing pieces. We wouldn't accept it! We would return the item because it was incomplete. Although we could attempt to put it together and keep it, it wouldn't be functional. We couldn't use it in the way it was intended!

If we as humans wouldn't accept an incomplete piece of furniture, why do we think giving only part of ourselves to the Lord would be satisfactory and **acceptable**? If we don't surrender ourselves fully to the Lord and grant Him control of every area of our lives, God can't use us in the way that He intends—just like a piece of furniture with missing pieces. Thankfully, however, God doesn't "return" us! But He will correct us and shape us into the men and women whom He has called us to be ([Heb 12:5-11](#)). God has not called us to sit idly doing nothing as we await His Son's return. On the contrary, He has called us to live righteously, serve faithfully, and share the gospel with the world so that all people might have this same transformed life in Him that we do.

I'm reminded of that venerable hymn *It is Well with My Soul* in which the third stanza resounds: "My sin, oh the bliss of this glorious thought; my sin, not in part, but the whole; is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more; praise the Lord, praise the Lord, oh my soul." Christ paid the penalty for all our sin—not just in part. Christ paid it all! If He



hadn't, we would still be hopelessly lost in our sins and headed on a path of destruction. Since Christ paid the utmost for us and gave everything He had so that we might have life in Him, we should give the same in return out of respect, honor, and gratitude. Let's make our entire life available for Him to use as He sees fit according to His divine plan.

Question  
# 3

Have you truly given control of every aspect of your life to Christ?

When we think about the term **sacrifice**, we tend to focus on death. But here Paul emphasizes that we are to be **a living sacrifice**. Certainly, giving ourselves to the Lord as **a sacrifice** requires death. Scripture tells us that we must die to our old way of life ([Rom 6:6](#)) and put to death our members of sin ([Col 3:5](#)). Elsewhere, Paul even notes of himself, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" ([Gal 2:20](#)). Just as Jesus' **sacrifice** did not ultimately end in His death but looked forward to His bodily resurrection, so also our sacrifice ends not in our death but looks forward to our resurrection in which we participate right now in the new life that He has given us.

So, if we must die to our old way of life, what does Paul mean by **a living sacrifice**? Christ doesn't *just* save us from sin and leave us where we are. He transforms us. He calls and equips us to live **holy** and righteous lives as His representatives. In using baptism as a metaphor for this new life in Christ, Paul writes, "Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" ([Rom 6:4](#)). **A living sacrifice**, therefore, focuses on the transformed life that we now live before others as a testimony to the work that Christ has done within us. We must live in righteousness and holiness with integrity at all times.

When we surrender our lives fully to the Lord and conduct ourselves in purity and holiness, God finds this **sacrifice acceptable** as our **reasonable service**. The phrase **reasonable service** is difficult to translate because of its rarity in the New Testament. Besides **reasonable service** (KJV, NKJV, and NET), other translations say true and proper worship (NIV), spiritual worship, (ESV, ASV, and RSV), spiritual service of worship (NASB), and true worship (CSB). The CSB perhaps best captures the sense that Paul intends here: true worship. Worship is not the performance of a series or rituals or religious acts; rather, it

"Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life."

Romans 6:4

## Instruct

centers around our obedience. Therefore, true worship is not so much what we do as much as it is about who we have become in Christ. As a result, who we have become in Christ now influences what we do. In this way, true worship reflects a lifestyle that we now live day in and day out. It's who we are in Christ! We worship Christ in the way we live in obedience to His holy standards, how we love one another, how we share the gospel, and how we meet the needs of others as God gives us ability.

Question  
# 4

How would you evaluate your “reasonable service” or “true worship” to the Lord?

## Romans 12:2-3

### WORSHIP THROUGH SURRENDER:

In verse two, Paul explains exactly how we function as this **living sacrifice**. We are to have a different perspective. No longer do we follow the pattern of the **world**; we follow the pattern of Christ, particularly in how we think (v. 2) and how we view ourselves (v. 3). First, Paul demonstrates this changed perspective through our thinking in general. He commands us **not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our mind**. Control over our actions begins with the renewal of our minds. We don't generally do things without thinking at all. If we do, that would be utterly absurd and foolish. Even in the spur of the moment, we still contemplate our actions for at least a split second. All our actions originate in our minds. We think, no matter how long or how little, on a subject and then act. For example, we don't merely find ourselves in sin and caught up in the pattern of **this world**. We think about it. We entertain tempting thoughts which we do not purge from our minds and fail to combat those thoughts with principles from Scripture. Then, we willfully choose to participate in that sin. We don't “fall” into sin by accident; we've thought about it and then deliberately engage in it!

We are **not to be conformed to this world** which stands in opposition to the Lord. Instead, we are to **be conformed** to Christ and His righteousness. We cannot be conformed to Christ if we constantly ponder the things of **this world**. Paul has warned the Romans from the beginning of the letter about this. He interjects, “And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting” ([Rom 1:28](#)). Further, Paul contrasts these two

different mindsets: "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit" ([Rom 8:5](#)). The difference between these two patterns couldn't be greater: "The carnal mind is enmity against God" while the Spirit-filled mind "is life and peace" ([Rom 8:6](#)).

Let's evaluate the things which we consume on a daily basis and see how they can truly affect us in terms of the standard for living communicated in Scripture. In and of themselves, the things upon which we think may not be inherently sinful at times, but they can still produce actions that are when we don't

have the right perspective. If social media use, for example, becomes a platform to participate in gossip, spew lies, attack or slander others, tolerate and support practices that clearly violate Scripture, and even celebrate sin, we shouldn't participate! If watching the news or listening to podcasts, which is emotionally-driven like everything these days to increase ratings, causes us to become angry, hate those who disagree with us, cause contention in holding ungodly views, and consumes all our focus and conversation, we must cease watching.

We must rid our lives of the things that distract us in the pursuit of godliness. If we retain these areas that misdirect our thoughts from the Lord, we will never be successful in renewing our minds and conforming to Him. I have specifically mentioned these two areas in the previous paragraph because they consume much of our time and thinking. Honestly compare the amount of time you spend engaged in social media and watching the news or listening to podcasts as compared to how much time you spend in God's Word each day and each week. Couple this with the amount of time we spend watching television, listening to music, surfing the Internet, and having conversations with other people and we will most likely see how much influence these things have on our thought-life and how little Scripture does. If we're honest, we probably have a great imbalance in our thought life. If we're not careful, we can become disgruntled with God's pattern for our lives, desensitized to sin, and consumed with the

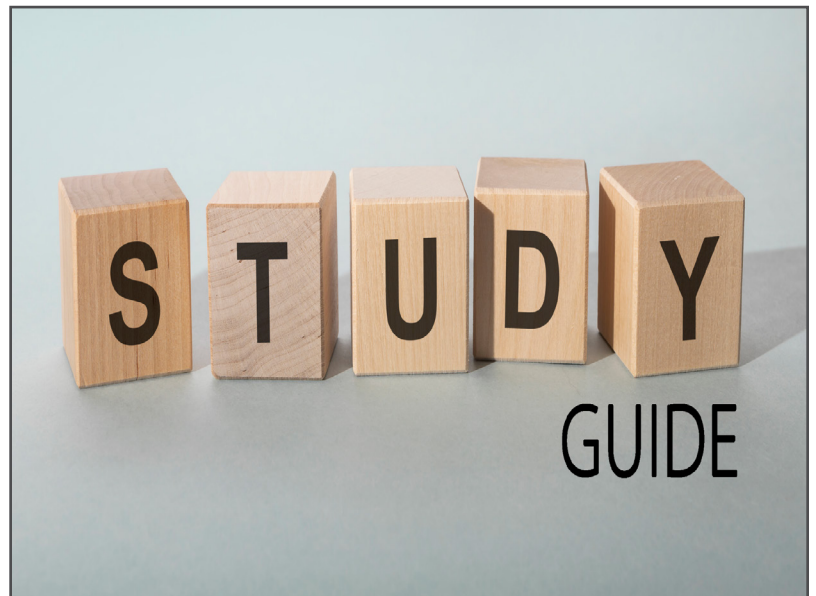
"For to be carnally minded is death,  
but to be spiritually minded is  
life and peace."

Romans 8:6

way of the world.

When we focus on the things of Christ, we can discern or **prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God**. The word translated **prove** actually means to approve or agree with. In other words, we are to “agree with” God by applying what He has instructed; we are to live by the standards in His Word which reveal right from wrong. In English, the word **prove** carries with it the idea of testing or distinguishing. We are to test everything according to God’s **perfect will**. In my tenure as a college professor, my students would always request a study guide so that they could know how to prepare for a test. God’s given us a study guide so to speak. He’s given us everything we need to know for a successful life! Scripture reveals His expectations and His **will** which prepares us for life’s challenges.

Too often, however, we miss the obvious. We view God’s **will** as an abstract concept which is difficult, if not impossible, to figure out. We always need to seek God in the specific direction that He will have us go in life. But we can know His **perfect will** with absolute certainty. God’s **will** is not something difficult or magical that we must fret over determining. He’s given it to us plainly in Scripture! God’s **will** is simple. When we have a relationship with the Father through Christ, God expects us to obey His commands, practice righteousness, cultivate our relationship with Him, serve Him faithfully, and love others as He has loved us. Anything that departs from these tenets found in Scripture is not God’s **will** and we should not think nor practice them!



Question  
# 5

What tests should we apply in order to know God’s will for our lives?

Second, our relationship with Christ transforms the way we think about ourselves. On account of the **grace** God has shown us, we should **not think of ourselves more**

**highly than we ought** (v. 3). Rather, we should **think soberly** as God **has dealt each a measure of faith**. To **think soberly** requires that we have the mind of Christ which enables us to have the right perspective because we can see ourselves and the world through His eyes. It means that we must **not think** of ourselves too **highly** which results in pride, arrogance, and boastfulness or too lowly whereby we see ourselves as worthless, helpless, mediocre, and unequipped.

Christ has transformed us through His **grace** into a magnificent work ([Eph 2:10](#)) that He can use to bring glory to Himself. He cannot do that if we distract others by drawing attention to ourselves rather than pointing to Him or if we are unwilling to serve because we view ourselves as incompetent and unable. Christ has given us **a measure of faith**, not in the sense of belief in this context, but in the sense of exercising the giftedness which He has given to us in the Spirit (see verse 6)—a subject to which He will turn in verse 4.

Question  
# 6

Why do we sometimes make discerning God's will much harder than it actually needs to be?

## *Romans 12:4-8*

### **WORSHIP BY SERVING:**

When we **present** ourselves wholly unto the Lord, we acquire a new position in Him. We each have a place of service in the church! God has placed us **in one body as many members** even though we each have a different **function** in serving Him (v. 4). Paul stresses that even though we may be diverse in our backgrounds and giftedness we are to work together in unity (i.e., **members of one another**) in order to fulfill God's purpose for His people (v. 5). Therefore, we are to use the **grace** that God has given us to serve in the church rather than being complacent and idle (v. 6). We are to participate not just in receiving discipleship for ourselves and growing in our own faith, but also by making disciples through sharing the gospel ([Matt 28:19-20](#)). Because of the limited scope of our discussion, however, we will focus on the **mind** we should exhibit in serving rather than the individual **gifts**. Hopefully, we will discuss these gifts more in-depth in 2025 with our quarterly theme study of 1 Corinthians being "United" in Christ.

A renewed **mind** compels us to actively serve—to find our niche in **the body** so that we can grow together in Christ, communicate the gospel, and disciple or mentor

others in Scripture. Unfortunately, many in the church display a **mind conformed** to the pattern of the world. The world expects to be served and entertained. They view worship as a passive activity that people do occasionally rather than the way they live all the time. In fact, the pattern of the world says, "The church is here to serve me. I don't have to contribute anything. I'm here to get what I can."

The **world**, however, may be more deceptive in their language and try to sound spiritual in how they communicate this idea. They may even say, "The church is not feeding me. It isn't doing anything for me." The question I would ask them is this: "What are you doing about it? How are you contributing?"

Growth is not the sole responsibility of the church! The church provides the setting, helps with accountability, and equips by pointing others to Christ through His Word. But you yourself must contribute! Such a statement about not being fed may sound spiritual, but it often lacks validity because it becomes self-centered when people do not take responsibility for themselves to contribute!

It's one thing if a church does not preach and teach the undiluted truth of God's Word. Someone should not be a member or attender of that congregation. It's another thing if the church provides no opportunity for growth and service. Here at FBCFW we have no excuse because we can confidently say that we are standing upon God's Word and have numerous opportunities to serve and grow collectively and individually as God's people. The only reason we can't find a place of service or grow in our faith is because we have allowed the pattern of the world to be our guide. Let's, therefore, exhibit a renewed **mind** that conforms to Christ's expectation. It's His **perfect will** that we use our spiritual gifts for His glory in the church with the right perspective which points others to Him through the holy and righteous life we now live in the Spirit.

"And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ,"

Ephesians 4:11-12



In our culture, we have become accustomed to being served. The service-related industry is one of the largest sectors of the United States economy. In fact, a quick search indicates that nearly 80% of jobs are service-oriented! Although we may hold one of these service-related jobs, we still expect others to wait on us in our time off. Overall, our culture values convenience and speed. We want things at our fingertips and we don't want to work very hard to get them. Unfortunately, such a mindset has carried over into the church. People want the church to serve them rather than view the church as a community through which we can collectively serve the Lord. God has not called us to be served, but to serve. Serving Him is a privilege not some form of drudgery or inconvenience. After all, through His Son, God has given us life that we could never have on our own! He paid the price so that we would not have to. Therefore, our service ought to be a concerted act of worship whereby we devote our lives completely to Him, living righteously and utilizing our spiritual gifts to help grow His kingdom. May we worship the Lord daily as living sacrifices by conforming our lives to His and having a renewed mind through which we serve Him with the right perspective and attitude.

## *Incorporate*

In what ways have you presented yourselves as a living sacrifice to the Lord? Compare your life before Christ to your life in Christ now. To what have you died? What has changed? What may need to change?

What characteristics does a renewed mind display? How would you evaluate your mind according to these characteristics?

## ***Journal: Document God's Work***

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