



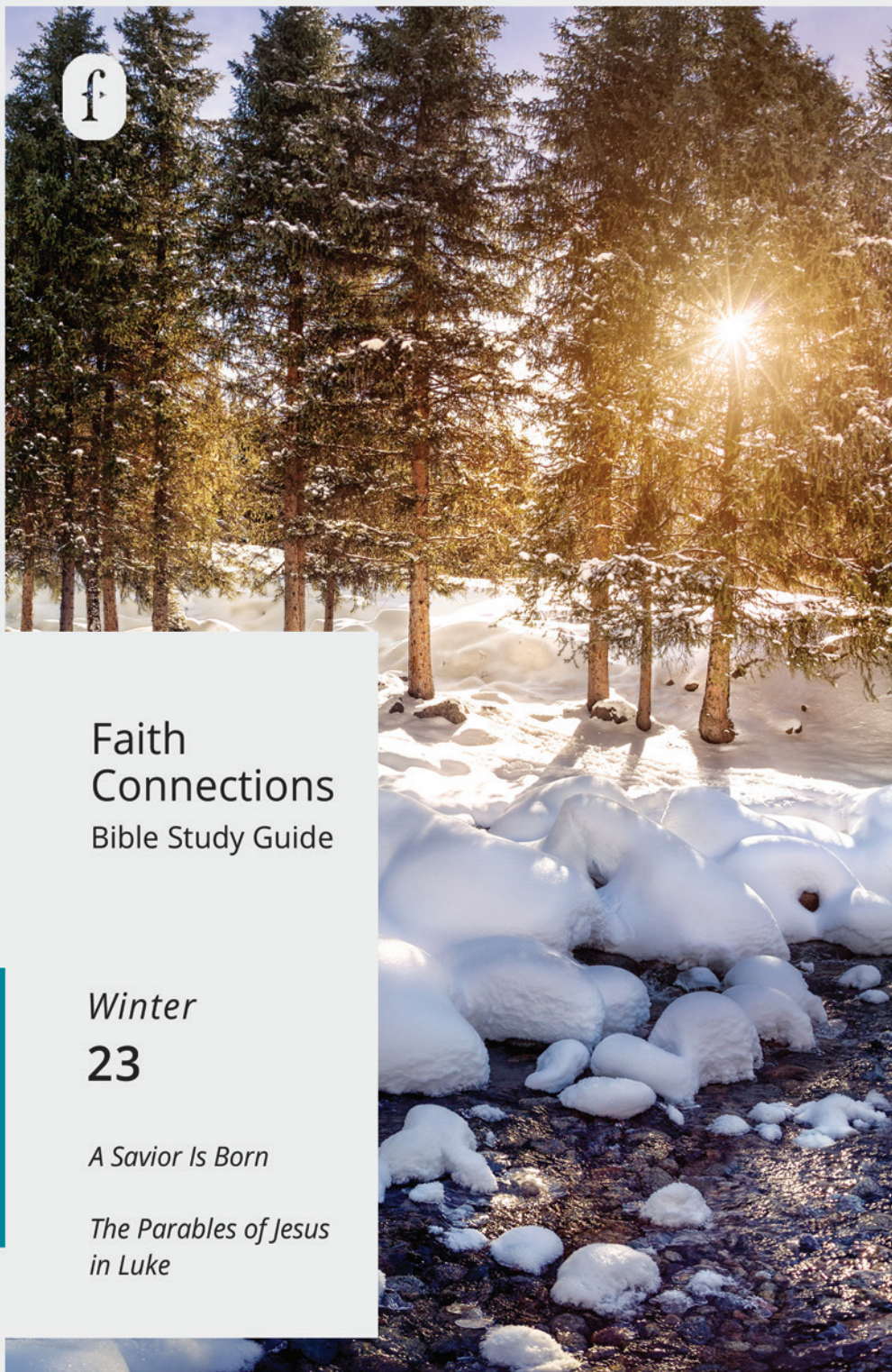
# Faith Connections

Bible Study Guide

*Winter*  
**23**

*A Savior Is Born*

*The Parables of Jesus  
in Luke*



# Bible Study Guide

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Winter 2023-24  
Volume 47, Number 2

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Mike L. Wonch  
Editor

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# Perspectives

## Routines

Most of us are creatures of habit in many ways. Often, without giving much thought to it, we go about our daily lives doing the same things in the same way.

Much of life is about routines. We get up at a certain time, go to the same job, watch the same weekly television shows, go to bed around the same time, and repeat. If we are not careful, much of life can pass us by without our even knowing all that is going on around us.

Our spiritual lives can become, at times, a matter of routine. If we are not careful, we can attend church, serve on committees, lead small groups, and so on without giving it much thought. Although we are sincere in our service to God and others, we should always be mindful of knowing why we do what we do. Otherwise, we run the risk of doing things more out of habit or guilt, rather than mindful service.

Proverbs 4:23-27 says, “Keep vigilant watch over your heart; that’s where life starts. Don’t talk out of both sides of your mouth; avoid careless banter, white lies, and gossip. Keep your eyes straight ahead; ignore all sideshow distractions. Watch your step, and the road will stretch out smooth before you. Look neither right nor left; leave evil in the dust” (TM).

This passage points to the importance of keeping our spiritual lives in the place where we are intentionally growing in our faith. As we travel our faith journey, we must keep our hearts and minds in tune with God, seeking more of Him and less of those things that detract from our spiritual health. God calls us to fix our eyes on Him and avoid any road that leads us away from God and the things of God.

As we approach a new year, it is an opportune time to think about our spiritual path. Are you stuck, spiritually speaking, in a routine? Be open to the Holy Spirit’s leading and teaching, being mindful of the reason and purpose for the way you live in your daily walk with God. Today, let us avoid the routine and live with hopeful expectancy for what God is doing in and through us.

May God bless you as you study His Word this quarter!

MIKE WONCH

Editor

December

3

# SPEECHLESS!

*God speaks to us in our silence.*

## THE WORD

LUKE 1:5-25

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. <sup>6</sup>Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. <sup>7</sup>But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

<sup>8</sup>Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, <sup>9</sup>he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. <sup>10</sup>And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.

<sup>11</sup>Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup>When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. <sup>13</sup>**But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John."** <sup>14</sup>He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, <sup>15</sup>for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. <sup>16</sup>He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup>And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

<sup>18</sup>Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

## KEY VERSE

<sup>19</sup>The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. <sup>20</sup>And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.”

<sup>21</sup>Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. <sup>22</sup>When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

<sup>23</sup>When his time of service was completed, he returned home. <sup>24</sup>After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. <sup>25</sup>“The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”

## ENGAGE THE WORD

### THE RIGHTEOUS WAIT

#### Luke 1:5-10

**T**he story of John the Baptist’s birth begins in the “time of King Herod” (v. 5), a paranoid and ruthless king under the powerful and oppressive rule of Rome. Against this backdrop we are introduced to Zechariah and Elizabeth. Two significant points are highlighted in regard to this couple: they were both “righteous in the sight of God” (v. 6), and they were old and childless (v. 7). The path of faithfulness does not guarantee life will go as planned, or that it will be free of disappointments and challenges. However, just as Zechariah and Elizabeth discovered, times in the seemingly barren wilderness do not indicate an absence of God’s presence or favor.

The picture of a childless couple is reminiscent of several stories in the Old Testament (Rebekah, Genesis 25:21; Rachel, Genesis 29:31; Hannah, I Samuel 1:5). Perhaps most of all, our minds turn to Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 18:9-14). In their story, God worked through a miraculous birth to establish the nation of Israel, making Abraham’s descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky (Genesis 15:4-5).



### Did You Know?

Zechariah means “God remembers” and Elizabeth means “God is my oath.” As we consider their place in God’s redemption story, we recognize the significance of their names. God remembered His people and kept His promise.

### GOD SPEAKS

Here, once again, God works miraculously in the lives of a faithful but childless couple to prepare the way for the coming Messiah, the fulfillment of Israel.

As one of thousands of priests, Zechariah would provide a week’s service at the temple twice a year. Lots would be used to determine the specific duties for the day; however, due to the number of priests, a priest could only go into the holy place to assist in the daily offering once. When Zechariah was chosen to enter the holy place and burn incense, representing the prayers of intercession rising to God (Psalm 141:2; Revelation 5:8; 8:3-4), it was a once in a lifetime experience.

### Luke 1:11-17

Zechariah’s solemn, once in a lifetime experience became even more life-changing when he encountered an angel standing by the altar of incense (v. 11). Zechariah initially reacted in fear (v. 12), but the angel—as so often seen in such encounters—told him not to be afraid (Genesis 21:17; Daniel 10:12; Luke 2:10; Matthew 28:5; Acts 27:24), for the message was one of God’s gracious intervention. Gabriel declared that Zechariah’s prayer had been heard and Elizabeth would bear him a son (v. 13). In context, the prayer referred to is most likely his prayer offered on behalf of God’s people; but God’s response also answered the personal prayers of Zechariah and Elizabeth, ones perhaps forgotten in their old age. God’s redemptive work meets us at the level of personal need, but is always far greater in scope.

The child was to be named John, which means “God is merciful” or “God is gracious.” After years of silence, the prophetic voice would be rekindled. John’s birth would be a source of joy for many (v. 14), he would be great in the sight of the Lord, live an ascetic life, and be filled with the Spirit (v. 15). Central to the prophetic role was calling God’s people back to a place of faithfulness, even at great personal cost (v. 16;

**Think About It**

Luke 1:56-79, known as Zechariah's Song, reveals the rich insights and depth of praise he discovered in the days of waiting and silence. In silence, our eyes and ears are opened to God's work within.

**SILENCE**

see Luke 3:1-20). The words of Malachi the prophet were fulfilled, for John came in the spirit of Elijah and prepared the way for the Lord (v. 17; see Malachi 3:1 and 4:5-6).

**Luke 1:18-25**

Zechariah was faithful and devout, but also human. He knew the story of Abraham and Sarah well, but the news of John's miraculous birth still seemed impossible. The testimony of others can easily be forgotten when the same circumstances become personal. In response, Gabriel informed Zechariah that he would be silent until John's birth (v. 20). While the imposed silence was an expression of discipline for not believing, it undoubtedly served as a daily sign and reminder as well. In his silence, Zechariah was continually assured that God's promise would be fulfilled at the "appointed time" (v. 20).

When Zechariah was unable to pronounce the benediction for those waiting, which most likely consisted of the Aaronic blessing in Numbers 6:24-26, it became evident that he had seen a vision (v. 22). He and Elizabeth returned home, and when she became pregnant she withdrew into seclusion for five months (v. 24). The text does not explicitly tell us why she withdrew from public life, but perhaps her acknowledgement of God's favor (v. 25) suggests she withdrew for a time of solitude, reflection, and worship in response to God's gracious act. In solitude and silence, both Zechariah and Elizabeth are able to listen and meditate on what God was doing in and through their lives.

**REFLECT**

**T**ake time this week to get silent before God. Think about what God is saying to you through this week's passage.

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December

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# THE NEVER-ENDING KINGDOM

*God accomplishes His purposes by choosing to work through open and obedient people.*

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## THE WORD

LUKE  
1:26-38

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup>to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup>The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

### KEY VERSES

<sup>29</sup>Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup>But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup>**You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.** <sup>32</sup>**He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David,** <sup>33</sup>and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

<sup>34</sup>"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

<sup>35</sup>The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. <sup>36</sup>Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup>For no word from God will ever fail."

<sup>38</sup>"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.



## ENGAGE THE WORD

### A “TROUBLING” GREETING

#### Luke 1:26-29

**G**abriel was sent to Nazareth (v. 26), a small village in Galilee some 75 miles or so northeast of Jerusalem. Those in Judea, the southern province that included Jerusalem, considered the northern province of Galilee to be remote and uncultured, and even more so the agricultural village of Nazareth, which was hidden in a valley and removed from the main trade routes. The popular opinion of Nazareth is evident in Nathanael’s question, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” (John 1:46). Indeed, very few would think it possible the Messiah would emerge from such a backward place.

The young woman who received the angel’s message was just as ordinary and unimportant according to the value judgments of her world. Mary is a young virgin, pledged to be married to a man named Joseph (v. 27). The fact that Joseph was a descendant of David is significant, and its importance is revealed in Luke 1:32-33. The first phase of the marriage process was that of betrothal, which consisted of a formal, witnessed contract and the paying of the bridal price. In the finalization of the marriage process, generally a year or so later, the husband brought his wife into his home to begin married life together. The time of betrothal was legally binding and carried with it the promise of mutual fidelity. A violation was viewed as adultery (Deuteronomy 22:23-24).

The angel’s greeting to Mary is one that assures her of God’s presence and favor (v. 28). Mary’s humility and faithfulness quickly become evident in this encounter. She is initially “troubled” or perplexed, wondering what this greeting might mean (v. 29). Mary knew the stories of Old Testament heroes. For them, the promise of God’s presence and favor often came with a mission and call to obedience. What was the call and mission awaiting her? But the fact that Mary was troubled by this greeting also speaks to her

### Did You Know?

The Bible does not tell us Mary's age, but we know Jewish girls in this period could be betrothed as young as 12. Many speculate that Mary was in her mid-teens when Jesus was born.

### AN AMAZING ANNOUNCEMENT

character. It is clear this was not a greeting she expected or assumed that she deserved. Being unsettled by the angel's words, and the potential calling behind them, points to Mary's humility. It is the humble and dependent who make themselves available for God's work in the world.

#### **Luke 1:30-33**

Gabriel informed Mary that she would give birth to a son, and his name would be Jesus, the Greek form of the name Joshua (v. 30). In Hebrew, the name means "the Lord is salvation," for this child would save His people from their sins (see Matthew 1:21). Verses 32-33 speak to both the character of the child and the nature of His future reign. As in the announcement of John's birth, this child would also be great (Luke 1:15). However, the nature and character of greatness was markedly different for Jesus. Whereas John would be "great in the sight of the Lord," Jesus would be great and would be called the "Son of the Most High" (v. 32). His greatness exceeds all others, for He is the unique embodiment of divine sonship, the Word made flesh (John 1:14), the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15), the radiance of God's glory, and the exact representation of His being (Hebrews 1:3).

As the Son of the Most High, Jesus would be given the throne of His father David (v. 32) and His reign will never end (v. 33). He is the fulfillment of the promised Messiah-king in the line of David, a promise given to David in 2 Samuel 7:8-16 and affirmed in multiple Old Testament passages (see Psalm 89:3-4; 132; Isaiah 9:6-7; 11:1-5; Jeremiah 23:5-6). The reign of Jesus, however, is not to be a passing one, restricted by time or earthly boundaries. His reign is eternal and His kingdom unending (v. 33), and His salvation is not limited by our divisions of race, ethnicity, or nationality. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19), tearing down the dividing walls of hostility (Ephesians 2:13-14), and bringing all things

**Think About It**

Mary reminds us that we do not need to be great or gifted in the eyes of others to be used by God. We simply need to be surrendered to God in faithful obedience.

**A FAITHFUL  
RESPONSE**

into submission (1 Corinthians 15:24-28). God kept His promise to Israel, and in so doing, went far beyond the narrow hopes and expectations of the nation to bring about redemption for all people and an eternal kingdom.

**Luke 1:34-38**

Mary does not convey doubt in regard to Gabriel's message, but understandably asks how the birth will come about given that she was a virgin (v. 34). The answer is God's creative power will "overshadow" her, and the uniqueness of Jesus' birth will point to the uniqueness of Jesus himself as the holy and sinless Son of God (v. 35). This does not suggest that Jesus somehow becomes the Son of God through this supernatural conception, but rather that His supernatural birth will testify that He is the Son of God.

For Mary, carrying through with this call brought with it the possibility of dire consequences. The loss of reputation, social standing, her relationship with Joseph, and the potential disgrace to both their families all loomed on the horizon should she walk this path. Once again, Mary's faithfulness, humility, and trust are displayed as she responds with obedient surrender to God's plan. She is the Lord's servant (v. 38), and as such, she is willing to accept whatever God has for her. In her response, Mary embodies what Jesus will later teach: that to find true life we must be willing to lose our life (Matthew 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24). As a result, a seemingly ordinary young woman, in a small and despised village, came to play a key role in God's story of redemption.

**REFLECT**

In what ways can you live with an "I am the Lord's servant" attitude today?

DOUG VANNEST

December

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# REJOICE!

*Mary rejoiced because God chose her through which He sent the Savior to accomplish His mission of transforming the world.*

## THE WORD

**LUKE 1:39-56** **A**t that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, <sup>40</sup>where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup>When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>42</sup>In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! <sup>43</sup>But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup>As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup>Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

### KEY VERSES

<sup>46</sup>**And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord**

<sup>47</sup>**and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,**

<sup>48</sup>**for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.**

**From now on all generations will call me blessed,**

<sup>49</sup>**for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.**

<sup>50</sup>**His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.**

<sup>51</sup>**He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.**

<sup>52</sup>**He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.**

<sup>53</sup>**He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.**

<sup>54</sup>**He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful**

<sup>55</sup>**to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors."**

<sup>56</sup>Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

## ENGAGE THE WORD

### A SHARED JOY

#### Luke 1:39-45

**H**aving been told by Gabriel that her relative Elizabeth is miraculously with child (Luke 1:36), Mary immediately makes her way to Judea for a visit. Most certainly, no one else could relate to Mary's circumstances like Elizabeth.

At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's baby leaps. John's reaction in the womb is a preview of his future ministry, one that will testify to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29-30). Elizabeth hears the testimony of her yet to be born child, and instantly recognizes Mary as "the mother of my Lord" (v. 43). She proclaims that Mary is blessed (vv. 42, 45), takes a posture of humility in Mary's presence (v. 43), and commends Mary for her faithfulness (v. 45). We should note there is no hint of envy or resentment of being overshadowed. Elizabeth celebrates what God has done in Mary's life and what it means for the people of God. Mary's miracle does not diminish her own, and there is no reason for a competitive spirit.

### WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR MARY

#### Luke 1:46-49

Mary's song of praise (vv. 46-55) opens with a personal expression of gratitude and praise. In response to what God has done for her (v. 48), Mary's "soul glorifies the Lord" (v. 46) and her "spirit rejoices in God" (v. 47). In her glorification of the Lord as the "Mighty One," the song echoes those of the Old Testament that exalt the God who both reigns and delivers (see Psalm 34; 44; 89; 111). For Mary, to be entrusted with this role in God's plan produces a sense of awe and wonder in the light of God's redemptive love and power. The grace of God at work in our lives should always produce such a response.

### Did You Know?

The Song of Mary in Luke 1:46-55 is also known as *The Magnificat*, which comes from the first word of the song in the Latin translation. Magnificat means to magnify, glorify, or exalt.

Far from exalting herself, Mary stood amazed that God had “been mindful of the humble state of his servant” (v. 48). Our response to grace is not only one of joy and wonder, but one of humility as well. The fact that God works in and through ordinary and frail vessels like us does not lead to pride, but to the humble amazement we see in Mary. She recognizes that all generations will now call her blessed (v. 48), but this cannot be understood as a self-declaration of her own worthiness. This recognition is wholly dependent on verse 49: “For the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.” It is by God’s grace that she is blessed and through God’s work that she will be remembered.

### WHAT GOD WILL DO FOR ALL

#### Luke 1:50-53

The extravagant grace and mercy of God celebrated here is offered to all, extending “to those who fear him, from generation to generation” (v. 50). Again, our joy in the experience of God’s grace will lead us to celebrate that grace in the lives of others. Mary’s song celebrates the *hesed* of God, meaning His loyal, steadfast love, and she recognizes that this love reaches well beyond her own personal experience. This love is gracious, kind, compassionate, patient, and everlasting (see Psalm 103).

This coming kingdom also brings a great reversal of the world’s values and systems. God will scatter the proud, bring down rulers, and lift up the humble (vv. 51-52). We hear in this echoes of Hannah’s prayer in 1 Samuel 2:1-10. God upends the accepted order of the world to reveal a far more beautiful kingdom built on love, justice, and righteousness. Nowhere is this great reversal more evident than in the teachings of Jesus himself. The Beatitudes invert the world’s perspective of being blessed (Matthew 5:3-10): those who seek to save their life will lose it (Matthew 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24), the first will be last (Matthew 19:30, 20:16; Mark 10:31; Luke 13:30), and the “unclean” outsiders



**Think About It**

That any of us can become an instrument for God's purpose reveals the immensity of God's love and grace. Like Elizabeth and Mary, seeing God work through anyone's life should lead us to joyful worship.

are welcomed (Matthew 9:9-13, 15:21-28; 21:31; Luke 7:36-50, 19:9-10; John 4:1-26). Systems of power and oppression are undone in the kingdom of this Messiah, and His followers pray for the grace to embody that kingdom here and now (Matthew 6:10; Micah 6:8). This reversal speaks to the matters of wealth and poverty as well, for God will fill the "hungry with good things," but will send the "rich away empty" (v. 53). This is a common theme in the Gospel of Luke. Much attention is given to the plight of the marginalized, along with stern warnings about neglecting those in need while accumulating wealth (Luke 6:20-26; 7:22-23; 12:13-21; 14:12-14; 16:14-29).

We should not forget that when Jesus began His ministry (Luke 4:14-20), He affirmed Mary's declaration by claiming Isaiah 61:1-2 as His mission statement: to bring good news to the poor, proclaim freedom for the prisoner, give sight to the blind, set the oppressed free, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

## WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR ISRAEL

**Luke 1:54-56**

The final segment of Mary's song celebrates God's faithfulness to Israel. God, in steadfast love and mercy, kept the promise He made to Abraham (v. 55; see Genesis 12:1-3). Israel is referred to as God's "servant" (v. 54), a description used often by the prophet Isaiah (see Isaiah 41:8-9; 45:4). Jesus, as the fulfillment of Israel's promise, also comes as a servant (Isaiah 42:1-4; Matthew 20:26-28; Philippians 2:6-8). There can be no mistaking the nature of God's kingdom and those who align with it, for the picture is consistently one of a servant who lives in surrendered, self-giving, sacrificial love.

---

**REFLECT** Today, rejoice in all that God has done and is doing in your life.

December

24

# THE SAVIOR IS BORN!

*Jesus' birth is good news for all the world.*

## THE WORD

**LUKE 2:1-20** In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. <sup>2</sup>(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) <sup>3</sup>And everyone went to their own town to register.

<sup>4</sup>So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. <sup>5</sup>He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup>While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, <sup>7</sup>and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

<sup>8</sup>And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup>An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup>But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. <sup>11</sup>**Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.** <sup>12</sup>This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

## KEY VERSE

<sup>13</sup>Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup>"Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

<sup>15</sup>When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

<sup>16</sup>So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup>When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, <sup>18</sup>and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. <sup>19</sup>But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup>he shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

## ENGAGE THE WORD

### A HUMBLE ENTRANCE

#### Luke 2:1-7

Jesus' birth in the city of Bethlehem is precipitated by a decree from the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus. The commanded census (v. 1), which publicly registered one's name, occupation, property, and family, was likely for the purpose of levying taxes. The practice of returning to one's ancestral home was in line with Jewish practice, but the census was a stark reminder to the Jewish people of their oppressed state. Highlighted here is the reality of a subservient people, longing for deliverance.

The census took Joseph, a descendent of David, to Bethlehem, the town of David (1 Samuel 16). Women were not required to appear in person for such a census, but Mary accompanies Joseph (v. 5), perhaps due to the approaching birth of her child. All of these circumstances, including the decree of a pagan emperor, led to the fulfillment of the prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:4-6). Given the great number of travelers, Bethlehem was crowded and all of the guest rooms filled. As a result, Jesus is placed in a manger (v. 7), most likely a feeding trough, indicating His birth took place where animals were housed. Amazingly, the "Word made flesh" (John 1:14) did not come to us in the trappings of power and glory. Jesus truly emptied himself, taking the form of a servant (Philippians 2:7), and entered the world in humility and vulnerability.

### A REVELATION TO THE HUMBLE

#### Luke 2:8-12

The birth of Jesus is announced by an angel, but not

### Did You Know?

The route most likely taken to Bethlehem by Mary and Joseph measured more than 90 miles, much of it through difficult terrain. Given Mary's condition, the journey was surely slow and challenging.

where we might expect, for this revelation was not delivered in the temple courts or in the halls of power. Those settings would seem most fitting for announcing the Son of God's birth, but Jesus' entrance into the world was consistently marked by humility. The angel delivers the divine message to a group of shepherds out in the fields, faithfully tending their flocks (vv. 8-12). The first to receive this astounding and joy-filled news are ordinary people performing common labor.

The message comes to those who are humble and lowly, affirming that the God of Israel upholds the cause of the humble and brings down the proud (Psalm 147:6; Proverbs 3:33-35; Isaiah 26:4-6). As the song of Mary proclaimed, there is a great reversal that occurs in God's redemptive work (Luke 1:51-53). It is also meaningful that shepherds were the first to hear about the arrival of the Good Shepherd (Psalm 23; John 10:1-18; Revelation 7:17), and those who watched over flocks were the first to receive news of the birth of the Lamb of God (John 1:36; Revelation 5:5-6).

This announcement was good news for "all people" (v. 10). The deliverance brought by the Messiah would transcend our boundaries and divisions (Acts 10:34-35). In one sentence we are told who Jesus is: Savior, Messiah, and Lord (v. 11). As Savior, He will deliver people from the power of sin and death. As Messiah, or the Christ, He is the "Anointed One" who fulfills the promises of God, serving as prophet, priest, and king. As Lord, He is the One who reigns over all, deserving our absolute allegiance.

## THE JOY OF HEAVEN **Luke 2:13-15**

The birth was celebrated by a heavenly chorus, a "great company" that appeared praising God (v. 13). Glory was given to God (v. 14), for it was the glory of God being revealed in the child who was born. In Christ, the fullness of God's self-revelation is given, and in Him we see the Father (John 14:8-9). Just as the heavenly beings offered glory to God, the very idea

**Think About It**

We would not expect to find a child whose birth is announced by angels in the humble place of a manger. Perhaps we should be alert and look for Jesus in surprising places.

that God would reveal himself to us should lead to a response of praise and wonder.

In contrast to the reign of Caesar, God's kingdom revealed in Christ is one of true peace (v. 14). The peace of the emperor was an outward one enforced through power and threat. While it maintained order, it had no ability to bring true peace or reconciliation to the hearts and lives of its citizens. The peace that Jesus offers is a gift, grounded in right relationship with God, others, and ourselves, and is not subject to the shifting circumstances of life (John 14:27; 16:33; Philippians 4:7). All those who recognize and submit to the reign and rule of Christ will know this favor and peace.

**THE JOY DEEPENS  
AND SPREADS****Luke 2:16-20**

The joy that resulted from the Messiah's birth produced both outward and inward responses. The shepherds, having found the child just as the angel described (v. 16), spread the word to others about all they had seen and heard (v. 17). The humble and ordinary shepherds became the first witnesses to recount the story of Jesus' birth to others. The amazement and joy they experienced in their encounter with the Messiah could not be contained, but was shared with others who were in turn "amazed" (v. 18). At the same time, Mary treasured and pondered all of this in her heart (v. 19). God's revelation of grace led her to reflection and wonder, with joy and amazement taking root deep in her own spirit. The immense joy and peace we discover in our encounter with the Messiah will lead to inner reflection and holy gratitude; but, it will also overflow into testimony, sharing with others the grand story so they might be amazed as well.

**REFLECT**

In what ways can we respond to Jesus' birth with praise and wonder?

DOUG VANNEST

December

31

# BUILDING A STRONG FOUNDATION

*Obedience to God is what enables  
one to stand the storms of life.*

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## THE WORD

**LUKE 6:46-49** **W**hy do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say? <sup>47</sup>As for everyone who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice, I will show you what they are like. <sup>48</sup>They are like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built. <sup>49</sup>But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete.”

**PSALM  
127:1-2**

**KEY VERSE**

**<sup>1</sup>Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labor in vain.  
Unless the LORD watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain.**

<sup>2</sup>In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat—for he grants sleep to those he loves.

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## ENGAGE THE WORD

**THE WISE BUILDER**

**Luke 6:46-48**

**S**ometimes Jesus told a parable without explanation, and later He explained the meaning to His disciples. Jesus began the parable in today’s text with the spiritual lesson He intended to convey. Then, he presented the object lesson. Jesus’ spiritual truth reminded His listeners of the importance of connecting what they say with what they do. It might be easy for someone to call Jesus “Lord”; it might not be as easy to



truly make Him Lord over all of life. Hypocrites talk big, but fail to back their words up with actions. Proclaiming Jesus is Lord then living out that testimony in daily life lays a solid foundation for spiritual strength, stability, and endurance when the storms of life attack.

Jesus gave visualization of a solid foundation from daily life. His listeners scuffed their sandals through the sandy soil of Israel's desert floor every day. They knew a sturdy foundation for a new home could not be built on desert sand. Wise builders had to dig deep into the sand to find a bedrock shelf on which to lay foundation stones. Jesus' listeners had, no doubt, seen the Western Wall in the temple area in Jerusalem. The Western Wall consisted of 46 layers of stones; 29 layers were above ground and 17 layers were underground. The stones were large, measuring 44 feet in length, 11 feet tall, and 6.5 to 14 feet deep. Hence, they were heavy, weighing several hundred tons each. Now, that is a solid foundation! None of Jesus' listeners would be surprised to learn that the home built on such a solid foundation could withstand all manner of harsh weather beating against it.

Jesus clearly pointed out the spiritual truth. Disciples of Christ must do more than make a verbal confession of faith. They must read God's Word carefully, listen for the Spirit of God to illuminate their minds, then put truth to action in daily life. Hearing God's Word should always lead to applying it practically. Life's storms have a way of testing our faith. A life built on God's Word will withstand whatever life throws at us.

## THE FOOLISH BUILDER

### Luke 6:49

Jesus packed a great deal of spiritual truth into one verse. A quick read might tempt us to think this object lesson is too simple to be worthy of consideration. But, consider some of the less obvious implications. On the surface the poorly built house looks just as beautiful as the well-built one. Shrewd builders can often skimp on building materials without getting

### Did You Know?

We cannot truly say “Jesus is Lord” without the help of the Holy Spirit. “Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, ‘Jesus be cursed,’ and no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3). We must always remember that even our Christian witness is not from us alone, but is a gift from God.

### THE DIVINE ASSISTANT

caught. They probably believe they got away with shortcuts. And, they just might . . . until a violent storm blows up unexpectedly, no one is the wiser. However, during the storm, their poor building methods reveal themselves for everyone to see.

We witnessed Jesus’ object lesson on every television news cast in our city a few years ago. A local builder constructed two large and expensive homes in a new housing development. A family purchased one as soon as it was finished and moved in. They soon began to hear strange sounds in the quiet of the night. They called a housing inspector to identify any problems. He insisted that they evacuate the house immediately. Television cameras from local stations recorded the next few hours for us to watch in real time. Disbelief shocked us as we watched both new homes collapse into their basements and begin sliding down the back yards. You see, the home builder brought loose dirt to the building sites to level the ground and did not compact it properly. Rain weakened the soil, the foundation gave way, and the house was destroyed. This is exactly what Jesus was pointing out in this parable.

Jesus wanted His listeners to know that we can claim to be disciples without truly being one. We can fool others, and even ourselves, for a season. But, the storms and trials of life have a way of exposing our faulty spiritual foundation. Everyone eventually realizes that a testimony without genuine commitment to Christ is worthless.

### Psalm 127:1-2

The psalmist adds an important reminder to Jesus’ parable. We do not build a solid foundation for our spiritual lives by ourselves. We do not pursue efforts in self-improvement to accomplish the life to which Jesus calls us. We lack the understanding and the ability to be self-made disciples. Only God can transform us into Christlike disciples through the power of His Holy Spirit. The psalmist could be referring to

## Think About It

Most people spend a lifetime giving their time, attention, energy, and money to possessions and experiences of this earthly life. We must remember that we are much more than citizens of this world. We are souls bound for eternity. Therefore, we should lay solid foundations as we prepare for eternity.

home construction; or, he might be calling attention to establishing a household or family, as when a man and woman begin life together as husband and wife. Both require cooperating with God in the endeavor. To live with Jesus is a mutual collaboration. Together, along with fellow believers in a faith community, we learn, pursue, examine, and celebrate the joy-filled life of being a Jesus-follower.

Likewise the psalmist continued, we can make our best efforts at providing security for a city or a home. We can purchase state-of-the-art equipment and attend to every detail. But, only God can provide the protection we truly seek. Workers may put in long hours from early in the morning until late at night trying to achieve the fulfillment they seek; many of them fall into the trap of becoming workaholics. They literally live to work; it becomes an addictive behavior for them. However, fulfillment in life and work eludes them, and they miss the good sleep that only God can provide.

When athletes from around the world come together for Olympic games, commentators often highlight a common problem with some athletes. It's called Olympic gold depression. Athletes have focused long hours from an early age to prepare for the games. They win a gold medal then drop into deep emotional depression because their achievement did not satisfy the longing for achievement they expected it would. Fortune, fame, power, property, education, even countless social media followers cannot satisfy the deepest longing of our hearts. God made us for himself; only God brings true satisfaction in a life that is built on a relationship with Him.

## REFLECT

Invite God to do a foundation inspection in your life today.

FRANK MOORE is retired General Editor for the Church of the Nazarene.

January

7

# A TRULY GOOD NEIGHBOR

*Love of neighbor knows no limits.*

## THE WORD

LUKE  
10:25-37

**O**n one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. <sup>26</sup>“Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>26</sup>“What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” <sup>27</sup>He answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” <sup>28</sup>“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

<sup>29</sup>But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

<sup>30</sup>In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. <sup>31</sup>A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup>So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup>But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. <sup>34</sup>He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. <sup>35</sup>The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

## KEY VERSES

<sup>36</sup>**“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”**

<sup>37</sup>**The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”**

## ENGAGE THE WORD

### SETTING THE TRAP

#### Luke 10:25-29

The passage of Scripture begins with a lawyer who specialized in Jewish religious law asking Jesus a question. Immediately we realize something is off. As a lawyer, he knew Jewish religion law backward and forward. So, why ask Jesus the question? Because he was setting a trap (v. 25). Jesus avoided the trap by answering the lawyer's question with two questions, "What is written in the Law?" and "How do you read it?" (v. 26).

Jesus encountered opposition throughout His ministry from Jewish religious leaders and experts in the law. Usually they misunderstood Jesus' message and created conflict. Not this lawyer. He gave the correct answer, and Jesus gave him credit for it. His answer contained teaching from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18—love God; love your neighbor. The commands sound simple enough, but the lawyer needed the technical definition of the word "neighbor." Jews only considered other Jews worthy to be considered a neighbor. So, perhaps he set another trap for Jesus in hopes Jesus' answer would defy Jewish law.

This encounter deals with how to "inherit eternal life" (v. 25). The lawyer asked Jesus what he must do, calling attention to his religious works. The truth is, inheritance of eternal life comes to us as a gift of God. We do not do anything to earn or deserve it (Ephesians 2:8-9). In light of this, Jesus' parable went far beyond anything the lawyer expected to hear about his neighbor or eternal life.

### THE VIRTUOUS MAN Luke 10:30-35

This short story introduces us to a lone traveler on one of the most dangerous roads in Israel. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was about 14 miles long, but it contained numerous hiding places for robbers to attack unsuspecting travelers. The traveler in the story found himself beaten, robbed, and left for dead along the side of the road. The priest and Levite who

### Did You Know?

The 14 mile road from Jerusalem to Jericho exposed travelers to great danger for several reasons. The road dropped 3,600 feet in that short distance. The path often had rock walls with crevices and caves, perfect hiding places for robbers. It switched back and forth in the descent making it difficult to see very far ahead to any approaching danger.

passed him both represented the Jewish religious establishment. Both men crossed to the other side of the road to stay on schedule and avoid ceremonial uncleanness as they made their way to temple worship. Thus, they valued personal ceremonial purity more than showing mercy to a man in great need.

Jesus' listeners probably anticipated the response exhibited by the two religious leaders in the story. However, they did not expect the next character Jesus introduced. No self-respecting Jewish teacher would ever place a Samaritan in such positive light. The words "good" and "Samaritan" did not belong together according to their religious traditions. Jews hated Samaritans because of their culture, ancestry, and religion. So, no Jew would ever acknowledge that a Samaritan could perform a virtuous deed. The pity, compassion, and mercy of this good man stood in stark contrast to all pre-conceived notions Jews had about these despised people. Not only did the Samaritan attend to the wounds of the traveler, he transported him to town, and paid for all of his expenses for the next week to 10 days.

Notice that Jesus did not use the word "neighbor" in this story (vv. 30-35) that intended to answer the central question, "Who is my neighbor?" Yet, all of His listeners, including the lawyer, knew exactly who demonstrated the correct answer to the question with his merciful actions.

### THE CORRECT ANSWER

#### Luke 10:36-37

The religious lawyer again answered Jesus' question correctly. He understood kingdom ethics and knew that the hero in the story, a despised Samaritan, demonstrated selfless love in action. He patterned his life after Leviticus 19:18, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (v 27). Furthermore, Jesus implied that not just Samaritans, but everyone in the world can be defined as our neighbor.

The lawyer approached the question of defining



### Think About It

Imagine how difficult it would have been in Jesus' day for Jewish leaders to accept the high moral and spiritual standing He gave the virtuous Samaritan. He is one of the most heroic figures in the Synoptic gospels. Yet, Jews considered Samaritans marginalized sinners worthy of nothing better than death.

the word neighbor in a technical, objective way. Jesus shifted the analysis to an internal/subjective response; that is, the one who actually demonstrated mercy, compassion, and love. We can also describe Jesus as “the one who had mercy” by His actions throughout His life. He showed us mercy so we might show mercy to others in need— “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy” (Matthew 5:7).

Perhaps the most shocking realization the lawyer and listeners had at this point in the story was that Jesus used the actions of the righteous Samaritan to also answer the first question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (v 25). Jesus implied here that God’s salvation must be offered not only to Jews, but also to Gentiles. Since God includes everyone as our neighbor, God wants everyone to be saved, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). The “whoever” included everyone in the world.

Jesus ignored the ceremonial religious standing of the lawyer as He highlighted the actions of the Samaritan in such a positive way. He then instructed this Jewish leader to “Go and do likewise” (v 37); that is, imitate the Samaritan. This call to action continues to answer the first question about eternal life. While it is true that our salvation is a gift from God received by faith, the actions, reactions, attitudes, motives, and intentions of a recipient of God’s free gift of salvation will witness to it in daily life. In other words, the righteous acts like that of the Samaritan do not earn us favor with God; rather, our loving actions flow from our hands as the fruit of our relationship with God.

### REFLECT

In what ways might you need to broaden your definition of “neighbor”?

FRANK MOORE

January

14

# SHINE FORTH!

*We are to be a lamp that shines God's light  
in the darkness.*

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## THE WORD

LUKE  
11:29-36

As the crowds increased, Jesus said, “This is a wicked generation. It asks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. <sup>30</sup>For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation. <sup>31</sup>The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the people of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom; and now something greater than Solomon is here. <sup>32</sup>The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and now something greater than Jonah is here.

<sup>33</sup>“No one lights a lamp and puts it in a place where it will be hidden, or under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, so that those who come in may see the light. <sup>34</sup>Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eyes are healthy, your whole body also is full of light. But when they are unhealthy, your body also is full of darkness. <sup>35</sup>See to it, then, that the light within you is not darkness. <sup>36</sup>**Therefore, if your whole body is full of light, and no part of it dark, it will be just as full of light as when a lamp shines its light on you.**”

KEY VERSE

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## ENGAGE THE WORD

ONE GREATER THAN  
JONAH AND  
SOLOMON

Luke 11:29-32

Opponents of Jesus countered His message about God’s kingdom with demands of proof (11:16, 29). The light of Jesus’ perfect light should have been enough of a sign. So, Jesus refused to submit to their demands. Other supposed prophets from God had

demonstrated signs and wonders in the past; Jesus, rather, called His Jewish listeners' attention to two examples of Gentile responses to God's message.

Isn't it ironic that God's evangelist Jonah should have been excited to offer God's salvation to the Ninevites, a Gentile nation, but he wasn't? Isn't it also ironic that God had already extended the prevenient grace of spiritual conviction to the Ninevites, and they were ready to hear Jonah's call to repentance? They responded wholeheartedly to God's invitation and repented with sackcloth and ashes.

The queen of Sheba served as Jesus' second example (1 Kings 10:1-10). Like the Ninevites, the people of Sheba were Gentiles. Word reached the queen of the relationship Solomon had with the Lord (v. 1). Yet, when she saw God's spiritual and material blessing on King Solomon, she recognized the hand of God—"Praise be to the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the LORD's eternal love for Israel, he has made you king to maintain justice and righteousness" (v. 9).

Nineveh and Sheba lay 1,300 miles apart, far to the north and south of Israel. Yet, this great distance even in ancient days did not hinder the message of God's love, blessing, and salvation from reaching these distant nations. The God who created the whole world and every person in it found ways to reach out to everyone because He loves them so much. Jesus wanted His generation to know of God's love and salvation for the whole world.

I often heard a phrase as a child that applies to this passage of Scripture: "Don't it always seem to go that you don't know what you've got until it's gone?" Jesus' listeners saw and heard the light of the world and had no idea of their privilege until He returned to His Father. If Gentiles from distant lands recognized God's salvation offer, how much more should the crowds who heard Jesus have responded to His message? The same applies to us and everyone living in our generation.

### Did You Know?

Citizens of ancient Israel and the surrounding nations heard stories about light and darkness from early childhood. They understood that living in light meant making wise and good daily choices. They also understood that if they made self-centered choices leading to lying, theft, gossip, dishonesty, impurity, lawlessness, and the like, then any light within them would be extinguished. They would find themselves lost in darkness.

## LAMP OF THE BODY

### Luke 11:33-34

Sue, my wife, has a gift for decorating a room well. She uses lamps and overhead lights effectively in her decorating plan. People in Jesus' day lighted their homes, businesses, and places of worship with candles and oil lamps. These light sources emitted a soft glow that lighted small areas. No one would think of hiding them where no light is needed or putting a bowl over them. People placed them strategically around rooms to provide maximum illumination of the area.

Jesus spoke in this passage about the proper placement of lamps for maximum effectiveness. However, He was not offering decorating tips to His listeners. Luke used the imagery of light also in 8:16-17. Matthew emphasized light in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:15; 6:22-23). John used spiritual light 16 times in his gospel and five times in 1 John. So, light is an important image for the gospel writers.

Jesus then explained the reason He did not need to give His listeners additional signs that He presented God's message. When our eyes are healthy, they accurately visualize light and fill the entire body with the warmth and beauty that the light provides. However, diseased eyes cannot perceive light, leaving the entire body devoid of the warmth and beauty surrounding them. Jesus, the light of the world, stood before His listeners offering a clear display of divine light. Those with healthy eyes recognized Him and needed no further signs. Those with diseased eyes could not see the light of His presence and remained in darkness. Additional signs could not help them. Jesus offered a clear warning to those in the crowd that day, and to us, regarding the health of our spiritual eyes to accurately perceive the things of God.

## SPIRITUAL LIGHT AND DARKNESS

### Luke 11:35-36

The Bible compares our eyesight to spiritual under-

### Think About It

Jewish religious leaders considered the Ninevites and citizens of Sheba to be outcasts unworthy of God's salvation. Yet, Jesus praised them for their spiritual sensitivity. The sinners in the gospel of Luke, also considered unworthy of God's salvation, repented and received Christ's forgiveness. The Old and New Testament outcasts responded to God's light, while the Jewish religious leaders chose to remain in spiritual darkness.

standing in both the Old and New Testaments (Psalm 119:18; Ephesians 1:17-18). Along with the privilege of receiving spiritual understanding through the prevenient grace of God, we have the responsibility of responding to it. Refusal to repent and accept God's invitation to a relationship with Him leads to spiritual darkness. A life pattern of refusal ultimately leads to spiritual imprisonment in darkness which hardens self-will against all spiritual insight. This grave warning about our responsibility to respond to the light God shines on our pathway reminds us that this is a serious matter. Daily choices either support the health of our spiritual eyes or expose them to disease. The frightening reality of this warning is that the blinding of our spiritual eyes can happen so slowly over time that we fail to realize what we are doing to ourselves not only for this life, but for the life to come as well.

The message Jesus shared with His listeners in this passage of Scripture about our responsibility to maintain healthy eyesight and respond to divine light applies even more so to us. Jesus' listeners did not have a complete understanding of God's plan of salvation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We do. His listeners did not have the entire Bible explaining God's self-revelation from Genesis to Revelation. We do. Jesus' crowd did not have the cloud of witness spanning 2,000 years of church history. We do. With great privilege comes great responsibility. May we be found faithful in living and testifying to the transforming power of God through salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ!

### REFLECT

Consider the ways you can let God's light shine through your life today.

FRANK MOORE

January

21

# RESOURCES OF THE KINGDOM

*God provides everything we need for life and security.*

## THE WORD

**LUKE**  
**12:13-34**

Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”

<sup>14</sup>Jesus replied, “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?” <sup>15</sup>Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”

<sup>16</sup>And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. <sup>17</sup>He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’”

<sup>18</sup>“Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. <sup>19</sup>And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’”

<sup>20</sup>“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’

<sup>21</sup>“This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”

<sup>22</sup>Then Jesus said to his disciples: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear.

<sup>23</sup>For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. <sup>24</sup>Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! <sup>25</sup>Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? <sup>26</sup>Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?

<sup>27</sup>“Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labor or spin.



Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. <sup>28</sup>If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! <sup>29</sup>And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. <sup>30</sup>For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. <sup>31</sup>But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

<sup>32</sup>“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. <sup>33</sup>Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. <sup>34</sup>**For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**

## KEY VERSE

## ENGAGE THE WORD

Jesus echoed the words of Deuteronomy 15:11 when He said, “The poor you will always have with you” (Matthew 26:11). He did not say this because God planned for His world to be filled with poor people, but because poverty is an unfortunate reality in our fallen world. Today’s text challenges us to examine blessing and abundance through the lens of stewardship and responsibility. Today’s lesson can be seen in terms of trust in God to provide for us. Jesus offered important spiritual perspectives of these matters.

## REJECT GREED

### Luke 12:13-15

A man sitting among Jesus’ listeners asked him to judge a family matter for him. People in Jesus’ day often appealed to religious leaders to settle such disputes. So, the man’s request would have seemed reasonable to the crowd. Deuteronomy 21:17 points out the custom that at the time of a landowner’s death, the property was divided equally between the man’s sons, with the firstborn receiving a double portion. It appears that the man in the text is asking Jesus to instruct the older brother to share some of his double portion with him. The older was under no obligation to comply.

Jesus interpreted the request as an example of greed, for He responded, “Be on your guard against

### Did You Know?

The Palestine economy of Jesus' day depended upon agriculture. Israel has 1.7 million acres of fertile land. "Over 70 percent of the population engaged in agriculture; 90 percent lived in rural areas" (David Neale, *Luke 9-24: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* [Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2013], 99).

### THE RICH FOOL

all kinds of greed" (v 15). By this Jesus did not mean that personal property is evil in and of itself or that it is wrong to own material possessions. Rather, Jesus' warning to "Watch out!" (v. 14) calls attention to the way possessions and property have a way of taking control of a person's life. An important question often asked in Christian discussions today might be asked in all three sections of today's Scripture reading: "Do you own your possessions, or do your possessions own you?"

#### Luke 12:16-21

Luke is the only gospel writer to give us Jesus' parable of the rich fool. It offers a powerful warning against hording and an attitude of self-sufficiency. What a contrast between the lifestyle of Jesus and His disciples as they lived on the daily provisions provided by benevolent friends and the lifestyle of the prosperous farmer in this parable.

An agricultural practice common in Jesus' day continues today. That is, farmers grew much more grain, fruits, and vegetables than they needed so they could sell to or share with the citizens of their land. How, then, is it possible that this farmer used his abundant blessing from God not as an opportunity to bless others but as a temptation to feed his own selfishness? How could he have been so blind to his misguided perspective? The parable does not judge the farmer for his abundant harvest, but for his greed in hording God's blessing for his own personal security.

Jesus quickly called attention to an important spiritual principle that should guide our desires and actions every day. The abundant farmer assumed that he controlled the length of his life. He gave himself many years to enjoy the benefit of his hording. Little did he know when he had this conversation with himself that he was living his last day on earth. He had no promise of tomorrow and neither do we. We must live every day of our lives from a kingdom perspective with kingdom priorities.

Jesus closed the parable of the rich fool with a

## Think About It

The parable of the rich fool reminds us of the futility of attempting to secure prosperity as a priority in life. “Foolishness consists in thinking that responsibilities end with securing one’s own economic future” (Snodgrass in David Neale, *Luke 9-24: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* [Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2013], 98).

## DON'T WORRY

solemn warning against *not* being “rich toward God” (v. 21). It can be easy for us to get caught up in the world’s value system. We must listen carefully to Jesus and assess our daily priorities and choices to always seek to be rich toward God. We must examine our blessings with an eye toward wise stewardship and Christian responsibility.

### Luke 12:22-34

Many in our world live at or below the poverty level. So, they worry about food, clothing, shelter, clean water, and health for themselves and their family members. Most citizens of first-world nations live with daily assurance of the basic necessities of life. You might think they do not have reason to worry. Not so. Jesus admonished His followers, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear” (v. 22). But, disciples in Jesus’ day, and today, still fall into the trap of worry.

Jesus reminded us in the previous passage of Scripture that we do not have control of the number of days we will be granted on this earth. We may think we are self-made and self-sufficient, but we are neither. So, that being the case, we should consecrate all of life into God’s care and resist the temptation to worry. God provides abundantly for the birds of the air and the flowers of the fields. “How much more” (v. 28) will God care for us when we depend on Him for the provisions of life? We must not worry about what we do not have control over in life.

Today’s entire Bible study reaches its climax in Jesus’ reminder in verse 34, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Where is your treasure? Where is your heart?

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**REFLECT** Think about the ways you can turn your worries over to God.

January  
**28**

# REPENT OR PERISH

*Although God waits patiently for our repentance,  
there is an urgency to get right with Him.*

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## THE WORD

**LUKE 13:1-9** **N**ow there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup>Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? <sup>3</sup>I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. <sup>4</sup>Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup>I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

<sup>6</sup>Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. <sup>7</sup>So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’

### KEY VERSES

<sup>8</sup>“‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. <sup>9</sup>If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”

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## ENGAGE THE WORD

### JUDGMENT IS INEVITABLE

**W**e can understand Luke 13:1-9 only in light of its literary context. In 12:4-7, Jesus told the crowds we need not live in terror of God. God *is* the Judge of the universe. However, we are not to be afraid of God, but trust His providential care. Yet, let’s not imagine we’ll be spared disaster simply because we’re Christians.

Jesus said He came to bring “fire” (12:49). This imagery reminds us that His mission was not only to save,

but to judge. And judgment is ultimately about division (12:51)—the painful separation of good from evil. Everyone will be judged—righteous and unrighteous alike.

### **Luke 13:1-5**

## **WHEN YOUR LIFE IS ON THE LINE**

Within months of this incident, Jesus became a victim of Pilate's cruelty. Jesus knew His journey to Jerusalem would put Him in peril (Luke 9:22 and 44).

His reminder about the inevitability of suffering and judgment in Luke 12 was interrupted by news, probably from recent pilgrims. Galileans in Judea were routinely "profiled" as revolutionaries. Perhaps these particular victims were guilty by association only, not because of anti-Roman opinions. Regardless, Pilate probably justified his lethal orders as essential in the Roman "war against terrorism."

The news from Jerusalem was obviously intended to solicit some controversial comment from Jesus. Instead, He preemptively challenged the widely-held assumption that sin was the cause of suffering (Job 4:7; 8:4, 20; Psalm 1:4; 37:20; John 9:1-3).

Did these Galileans "have it coming" because of their politics or because they were "worse sinners"? Jesus denied that calamities befell only the notoriously sinful. He shifted the focus from judging others to putting our own houses in order.

Some suffering results from human sinfulness. But suffering is not always God's active punishment of disobedience. Some suffering is the "natural" consequence of choosing to live against the grain of the universe—like spitting into the wind. Some suffering is a result of living in a fallen world.

Are we competent to calculate the causal connections between calamity and conduct? Perhaps the Galileans provoked their own tragedy. But what about the 18 killed when the tower of Siloam collapsed? Some thought they too were as "guilty" as the "terrorists." Among Pilate's construction projects, Josephus reported the renovation of aqueducts near the Pool

### Did You Know?

The brutality of Pilate's rule as Prefect of Judea (AD 26-36) is documented in the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews and Jewish Wars*. That this bloody slaughter of Galileans at the temple goes unmentioned is no evidence against its historicity. Compared to Pilate's other atrocities, this one was not particularly noteworthy.

of Siloam, financed by pilfered funds from the temple treasury (*Jewish Wars* 2.9.4). Perhaps Jesus' audience believed the workmen should have returned their ill-gotten pay, refusing to profit from the schemes of crooked politicians. Perhaps those who reported the grizzly Jerusalem incident did so in protest. Are the poor left no other choice but to work for crooked politicians? Did they bring up slaughtered worshipers to remind Jesus of the blasphemous injustices of Roman oppression? Jesus' reply was shocking. His audience expected Him to denounce Pilate's cruelty. Jesus points out that *we* are *all* sinners who must repent or perish (face spiritual death and its eternal consequences). We cannot say, "No thanks," to judgment. The reality is that we live in perishable bodies. Every day we live, we are dying. We cannot choose whether or not we will suffer or die or be judged. That's bad news!

The good news is that there is hope. We can repent. We have hope because the crucified Jesus is alive. He died an agonizing death, but God raised Him from death. If God did not spare His own Son from suffering (Romans 8:32), we should not be surprised when we suffer (1 Thessalonians 3:2-4; see Romans 8:17). Jesus never answered the perennial problem of why a good and all powerful God allows evil and unjust suffering (see **Think About It**). He apparently found such human efforts to justify God misguided. The question, "Why did this or that tragedy happen?," is left unanswered in Scripture. Perhaps no answer is entirely satisfying.

Regardless of the cause of the catastrophe or its victims, Jesus' response is the same in verses 3 and 5: everyone must repent or perish. When your life is on the line is not the time to ask, "Why?"

### GOD'S PATIENCE

#### Luke 13:6-9

After waiting patiently for at least three years for a fruitless tree in his orchard to produce a crop, its own-

## Think About It

*Theodicy* is the philosophical and theological attempt to vindicate the goodness and power of God in the face of evil and unjust suffering in the world.

er decided to cut it down. But his gardener persuaded him to give the tree one more year.

Jesus urged His audience to repent in the face of inevitable judgment. God's patience with sinners is remarkable, but not infinite. We cannot delay forever.

Of course, humans are not trees, mindless vegetation. But life experiences—like the probing of our roots or having fertilizer dumped on us—may not seem gracious. We may mistake such things as judgment. Still, we are called to bear fruit (John 15:4-6). We cannot become fruitful on our own; but, our fruitfulness is not merely the work of God. We must willingly allow God to work in our lives.

We can and must repent. Repentance is not just about abandoning sinful, rebellious, or counterproductive ways. Jesus also invited followers to end (repent of/turn away from) their futile efforts to find explanations as to why people suffer (Matthew 5:45). It is fruitless. Instead rejoice in the unexpected, unsought, undeserved experience of joy, of good, of blessing, of grace that God bestows.

We all have expiration dates. Who knows whether yours or mine will be sooner? If you are reading this, you survived over two years of unprecedented, global pandemic—more than six million died. We can't agree whether lock-downs, masking, vaccines, social-distancing, and so on made matters better or worse. We may never know. Regardless, we are alive. There is one thing all the living must do while there is still time: repent or perish.

## REFLECT

Is there anything in your life where repentance is needed?

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February

4

# THE COST OF BEING A DISCIPLE

*We must count the cost of discipleship  
when we commit ourselves to following Jesus.*

---

## THE WORD

LUKE  
14:25-35

### KEY VERSE

**L**arge crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: <sup>26</sup>"If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. <sup>27</sup>**And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.**

<sup>28</sup>"Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? <sup>29</sup>For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, <sup>30</sup>saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.'

<sup>31</sup>"Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Won't he first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? <sup>32</sup>If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. <sup>33</sup>In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.

<sup>34</sup>"Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? <sup>35</sup>It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out.

"Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

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## ENGAGE THE WORD

**MAKE JESUS YOUR  
FIRST PRIORITY**

**Luke 14:25-27**

**J**esus pointed out that discipleship demanded entirely changed life-priorities: Serious disciples must



hate “father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters” (14:26; see 9:59-62).

You object: Wait a minute, Jesus! Doesn't this contradict your command that even adults should honor their parents (18:20; see 1 Timothy 5:8). Doesn't your claim that disciples must hate even their own lives (see Luke 9:24) seem to undermine your command: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (10:27).

We must keep in mind that, in the Middle East, “hate” is hyperbolic for “love comparatively less”<sup>†</sup> (Genesis 29:30-33; Deuteronomy 21:15-17). Love and hate are not emotions, but concern life-orienting decisions and priorities.

## STOP AND THINK FIRST

Luke 14:28-30 and 31-33 are not story parables like the others we study in this unit. They are metaphorical analogies. The NIV paraphrases Jesus' rhetorical questions in both verses 28 and 31 to begin with “Suppose.” Literally, in 14:28 He asked, “Who among you, wanting to build a tower, does not first sit down and consider the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?”<sup>†</sup> The answer He presumed was, “Nobody.” Similarly, in 14:31, Jesus asked, “What king goes to war with another without first sitting down and deciding whether he is able with 10,000 soldiers to oppose the approaching army with 20,000?”<sup>†</sup> His presumed answer is, “No king would do that.”

## FINISH WHAT YOU BEGIN

### Luke 14:28-30

The “tower” in Jesus' analogy referred to a watchtower built by farmers prosperous enough to secure their property against foraging animals and marauding thieves. This expensive venture could not be undertaken lightly. The foundation of an unfinished tower would stand as a lasting monument to the folly of an impulsive decision. It would serve only “to advertise weakness and . . . an invitation to attack.”<sup>\*†</sup>

Like a marriage, the decision to follow Jesus should

## Did You Know?

Sadly, there are still cultural and religious settings in which deciding to follow Jesus completely alienates believers from their biological families. Regardless, discipleship always demands uncompromising allegiance to Jesus as our first priority. This entails a willingness to die a shameful death (Luke 9:23) for Jesus rather than compromise our faith (Revelation 2:13; 12:11).

**GIVE UP  
EVERYTHING  
FOR JESUS**

**DON'T FORFEIT  
YOUR TRUE  
IDENTITY**

not be made “lightly or unadvisedly.” To avoid ridicule and embarrassment, Jesus considered it better not to begin the journey of discipleship than to start and not finish it.

All were welcome to become His disciples (14:21-23), but Jesus wanted lifetime commitments, not inflated statistics. So, He urged shallow followers to decide thoughtfully: Are you prepared to accept the potentially painful consequences of actually becoming a wholly-committed disciple?

### **Luke 14:31-33**

Jesus’ second analogy resembled the first. A farmer could delay ambitious building plans until he got his finances in order. But the king in the second illustration must decide immediately. Perhaps he had the help of advisors, but his stakes were higher. His decision would effect him and his entire kingdom.

Delay for the beleaguered king was impossible, because the enemy’s army was already on the march. His question was, “With half the troops, should we resist or surrender?” Which would be worse, devastating defeat in battle or the humiliation of submission without a fight? If fighting against overwhelming odds would bring greater disaster, wouldn’t he be wise to send ambassadors to negotiate terms of peace and avoid war? For the king, many issues besides safety and survival had to be taken into consideration.

If serious discipleship is comparable to enlisting in a spiritual army battling God’s enemies (11:17-23), then this is no ordinary army. Volunteers must renounce all human resources—their power, parents, position, and possessions (12:21, 33-34; 18:22, 29). Jesus calls all would-be disciples to count the cost and consider what it means to follow Him.

### **Luke 14:34-35**

Pure sodium chloride cannot lose its saltiness. But the “salt” used in Jesus homeland came from evapo-

### Think About It

Unlike the roar of a fire, the thunder of a waterfall, or the smashing impact of lightning, salt does its work quietly and unseen. Christians are like that. True disciples of Jesus change their world by the subtle influence of their Christlike example.

rating water from the Dead Sea. The salty crystalline remains were a mixture of NaCl, other minerals, and clay particles. So, when moisture leached out the real salt, only a tasteless residue resembling salt remained—totally worthless, even for fertilizer. May the same be said of would-be disciples? If they only appear to be disciples, but lack the essential commitment of true disciples, are they useless?

Before you despair of ever measuring up to Jesus' expectations of true disciples, remember the closing chapters of every gospel. The 12 disciples closest to Jesus, who followed Him to Jerusalem, abandoned Him. Judas betrayed Him. Peter denied knowing Him. And the rest deserted Him. The painful reality of the cross dissolved their alleged commitment.

However, the story does not end there. For example, Jesus knew Peter could not sustain his foolhardy promise, "Lord, . . . I will lay down my life for you" (John 13:37). He addressed Peter by his old name: "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:31-32).

Recall the scene beside the Sea of Galilee reported in John 21:15-23. The risen Jesus restored Simon to his original assignment as a leader. Take heart! The call to discipleship is daunting—impossible in our own strength. But Jesus empowers us to follow Him, despite our weakness and failure.

\*David E. Garland, *Luke, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 602.

### REFLECT

In light of today's passage, take time to think about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

GEORGE LYONS

February

11

# THE PRODIGAL FATHER

*God loves us whether we have wandered away from Him or failed to understand His heart for others.*

## THE WORD

LUKE  
15:11-32

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup>The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

<sup>13</sup>"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. <sup>14</sup>After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup>So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup>He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

<sup>17</sup>"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! <sup>18</sup>I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup>I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' <sup>20</sup>So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

<sup>21</sup>"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

<sup>22</sup>"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.

<sup>23</sup>Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate.

<sup>24</sup>For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup>"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup>So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. <sup>27</sup>"Your brother has come," he replied, "and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound."

<sup>28</sup>"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. <sup>29</sup>But he answered his father, "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup>But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"

<sup>31</sup>"My son," the father said, "you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup>**But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.**"

## KEY VERSE

## ENGAGE THE WORD

The "Pharisees and the teachers of the law" complained that Jesus "welcomes sinners and eats with them." Jesus justified His scandalous behavior by telling parables that, directly or indirectly, urged detractors to rejoice with God over the repentance of sinners (15:6-7, 9-10, 32).

## THE FATHER

### Luke 15:11-12

Jesus introduced first the father of two sons. Despite the younger son's deplorably insulting request, the father put convention aside and "divided his property between them."

## THE YOUNGER SON

### Luke 15:13-24

The younger son soon converted his property into cash and left home. Jesus did not say precisely where he went or what he did. He stressed only that he spent everything with his "extravagant lifestyle"<sup>†</sup> (literally: "living unsavingly").

After squandering his inheritance, this Jewish boy became so hungry that he stooped to working on

## Think About It

Middle-Eastern custom dictated that firstborn sons should inherit twice as much as their younger brothers. For the younger son to demand his one-third “share of the estate” before the father’s demise, in this cultural context, was comparable to wishing him dead.

a Gentile’s pig farm (see Leviticus 11:7; Isaiah 65:4; 66:17). Even the carob pods he fed the swine began to look like good enough to eat.

“When he came to his senses,” he realized his father’s hired servants fared better than he. He prepared an apology, acknowledging his sin against God and offense against his father. Deeply ashamed, he would not ask to be restored as a son, but to be treated as only a day-laborer. Their daily existence was more precarious than that of slaves.

When the waiting father saw his wayward son in the distance, he “was filled with compassion.” That is, the father had a deeply felt, visceral, emotional response upon seeing the son he feared was dead. The Greek root for “compassion” often characterizes Jesus’ gut-response to human need (Matthew 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34; Mark 6:34; 8:2).

Then, the father did what no self-respecting, older, Middle-Eastern man would do: “He ran to his son.” But his extraordinary outpouring of undignified affection had only begun.

The father “threw his arms around him and kissed him.” He interrupted the son’s speech before he had fully repented. He ordered servants to dress him in fine clothing, apparently before he had bathed. Putting sandals on his feet signified that he would not be treated as a servant. The gift of the signet ring was comparable to restoring his name to the family checking account.

Before the advent of refrigeration, meat was seldom on the menu. Killing “the fattened calf” signaled that a lavish party with many guests was coming: “Let’s have a feast and celebrate.”

## THE OLDER SON

### Luke 15:25-32

The younger son returned home while his older brother was in the field. When the older son arrived, the party had already begun. Confused by the sounds of celebration, he asked “what was going on.”

### Did You Know?

In its setting in Luke's gospel, this parable concluded Jesus' trilogy of parables about God's joy over repentant sinners. Its open-ended conclusion invited any who imagined they had no need of repentance or grace to receive it.

The answer (v. 27) so infuriated him that he refused to join the celebration inside. "So his father went out and pleaded with him" to come in. His response exposed his festering resentment and jealousy. He refused even to recognize him as his brother, calling him instead "this son of yours."

The parable ends with the wayward son inside the house and the reluctantly-obedient son outside. Jesus deliberately left the tension in the story unresolved. Would the father persuade him to rejoice that "this brother of yours" had unexpectedly returned home "safe and sound" (v. 28)? Would he remain outside or join the celebration?

### CONCLUSION

The traditional title of this parable—"The Prodigal Son"—might be appropriate, if the story ended with verse 24. But its focus is on "the man who had two sons" (v. 11). Furthermore, the word "prodigal" means recklessly or wastefully extravagant. Doesn't that better describe the father? Aware that his younger son had already lost everything, including himself, the father welcomed him home with open arms—and an open checkbook (v. 22).

Jesus told this story to illustrate how God the Father (and His only Son, telling the story) related to sinners. It was about the kingdom of God and God's over-the-top, inexhaustible supply of grace to the undeserving—not only tax collectors, but also Pharisees and teachers of the law.

### REFLECT

**A**lthough this parable might be very familiar to you, invite the Holy Spirit to help you read this story with new eyes.

GEORGE LYONS

February

18

# THE SHREWD MANAGER

*We are held accountable for the way we manage  
the resources God has given us.*

## THE WORD

**LUKE 16:1-13** Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. <sup>2</sup>So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.'

<sup>3</sup>"The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg—I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.'

<sup>5</sup>"So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'

<sup>6</sup>"'Nine hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied.

"The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty.'

<sup>7</sup>"Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?'

"'A thousand bushels of wheat,' he replied.

"He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.'

## KEY VERSE

**<sup>8</sup>"The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. <sup>9</sup>I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.**

<sup>10</sup>"Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. <sup>11</sup>So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? <sup>12</sup>And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?



<sup>13</sup>"No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."

## ENGAGE THE WORD

### "WHAT SHALL I DO NOW?"

#### Luke 16:1-4

**T**he words, "What shall I do now?" were spoken by the most unlikely character in all the parables of Jesus. The "shrewd manager" had just learned he was fired, and was considering his limited options.

His former employer, a rich man, is probably not the story's hero. Ancient stereotypes about the rich make today's seem kind by comparison. They came by their wealth dishonestly or by an undeserved inheritance, and preserved it selfishly.

Rumor had it that the manager was wasting his master's possessions. Were the rumors true? Perhaps the manager was the victim of a smear campaign, sabotaged because of his employer. The manager's untenable middle position made him a target from both sides—his master's greed and the debtors' backstabbing.

Whether or not the gossip was true, the employer distrusted his manager enough to act promptly: "Get your books in order. You're fired." If the manager said anything in his own defense, we are not told.

Although the manager said nothing to his master, Jesus lets us enter the desperate man's thoughts and empathize with his plight. Cut loose from his only viable livelihood, the sacked steward realized his options were few and bleak. His white-collar job had not prepared him to compete with brawny day-laborers. And his associations with the elite left him unskilled to beg. Charged with incompetence or corruption, the manager admitted only that he was weak and proud.

In total despair, he asked himself, "What shall I do now?" Once a course of action dawned on him, all we know of the manager's scheme is its motivation—future security.

## Did You Know?

The Mosaic Law prohibited creditors from charging interest to fellow Israelites (Leviticus 25:35-37; Deuteronomy 23:20), but permitted it to non-Israelites (Deuteronomy 23:20). Yet, laws against interest were commonly violated (1 Samuel 22:2; Psalm 15:5; Proverbs 28:8; Ezekiel 18:8), as was the law's mandate to cancel all debts in the Sabbatical Year (Deuteronomy 15:1-11). Masters in Jesus' parables encouraged their servants to seek interest payments (Matthew 25:27; Luke 19:23).

## THE MASTER'S COMMENDATION

## THE MANAGER'S SCHEME

### Luke 16:5-7

If incompetence got him into trouble, would conniving get him out? We get two glimpses of what he did next. The manager's "discounts" amounted to more than three-years' wages for each debtor. And how many more were there? This scheme did not benefit the manager directly. He simply wrote-off from 20 to 50 percent of the debts—at his master's expense. By accepting renegotiated contracts, the debtors put themselves in the manager's—and his master's—debt. There were culturally-expected strings attached.

Some believe that the manager was eliminating hidden costs (see **Did You Know?**) and his commission from the debt. If that is the case, what did the manager hope to gain? He might have imagined that his generous discounts would allow him to become a permanent houseguest of the debtors his "creative" accounting scheme benefited. But how long would they extend hospitality after he lost his job and ability to benefit them further?

By reducing their debts he may have been attempting to get on their good side, possibly hoping they would repay his kindness in the future. Or, is it possible that the manager was finally dealing honestly for the first time? Had desperation driven him to his senses—to obey God and use this last opportunity to help the downtrodden? We can only guess.

### Luke 16:8

We can't say whether the manager's plans were successful. What we are told is by far the most puzzling feature of this strange parable: "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly."

The master *commends* the manager? This seems strange. However, Jesus wants us to focus on the message He is pointing to in this parable: the manager's diligence in his dealing with others. The manager

## Think About It

To instruct Christians as to how money may achieve noble ends, John Wesley formulated three simple rules. By carefully observing all of these, we may prove ourselves to be faithful managers of our assets: First, gain all you can. Second, save all you can. Third, give all you can.

## CONTEMPORARY APPLICATION

looked at the situation, developed a plan, and made a connected relationship with the debtor, acquiring their esteem.

Is it possible that the shrewd manager somehow represents Jesus, whose forgiveness and healing of notorious sinners outraged and scandalized the religious authorities of His day?

We need not decide. Our urgent concern is: What does this strange parable teach of relevance to us? “What shall I do now?”

### Luke 16:9-13

Immediately following the parable, Jesus remarked that worldly people are often shrewder in dealing with their own kind than are God’s people. He urged hearers to use their resources to gain heavenly friends and secure a blessed eternity.

If bad people make plans to cushion their fall, shouldn’t good people make friends to further God’s kingdom? Far too often “the people of the light” receive prodigals grudgingly, more like the older brother than like his prodigal father (Luke 15:24, 28). Do we alienate the people we should befriend with kindness and generosity?

If worldly people are shrewd enough to use their masters’ money to its best advantage, shouldn’t God’s servants use the resources He entrusts us to further His cause, and our own eternal good?

People, in essence, will serve someone or something. Many in the world serve money/wealth as its master. Jesus’ words in verse 13 remind us that we must serve God and Him only.

## REFLECT

**T**ake time to consider the place money/wealth holds in your life.

GEORGE LYONS

February

25

# A LIFE OF PERSISTENCE AND HUMILITY

*We must seek God with a persistent and humble heart.*

## THE WORD

LUKE  
18:1-14

**T**hen Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. <sup>2</sup>He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. <sup>3</sup>And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'

<sup>4</sup>"For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, <sup>5</sup>yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!'"

<sup>6</sup>And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. <sup>7</sup>And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? <sup>8</sup>I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

<sup>9</sup>To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: <sup>10</sup>"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

<sup>13</sup>"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

## KEY VERSE

**<sup>14</sup>"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."**

## ENGAGE THE WORD

### THE ANNOYING WIDOW AND THE UNJUST JUDGE

#### Luke 18:1-8

Unlike most parables in Luke, this parable seems to give away its application before the story begins—disciples should never give up praying. But persistence in prayer is not the only point. Verses 6-8 stress that God is more anxious to bring justice than we are to pray for it.

Jesus introduced first the nemesis of the heroine. Her town had the worst imaginable judge. Appointed to dispense justice, he cared nothing for justice, because he had no respect for God or other human beings.

The powerless heroine is a widow, victimized by an unidentified “adversary.” In ancient patriarchal societies, widows, orphans, and aliens were especially vulnerable. The Old Testament frequently urges God’s people to join Him in defending such defenseless people (Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 10:18).

Jesus said nothing about the widow’s behind-the-scenes opponent or his crimes. Aware of her helpless situation, she came again and again to the corrupt judge, pleading, “Grant me justice against my adversary.” But to no avail.

The widow’s unrelenting persistence served only to constantly annoy the judge. Finally, he could take it no longer. Still unconcerned for justice, he eventually granted what she sought. But only selfishly—to end her pestering visits to his “courtroom,” and to avoid what he feared she might do in her desperation.

The point of the parable was not to urge disciples to bombard heaven with relentless prayers until God reluctantly caved in and granted their requests. The parable’s logic is clear: If a notoriously unjust judge eventually grants justice to an inconsequential widow, how much more will a just and loving God grant “justice, and quickly,” to His “chosen” people?

Jesus predicted that His followers would suffer and be rejected, as He had. There would be difficult days between His first and second coming (17:22). This

## Did You Know?

### The Twice-Daily Temple Atonement Sacrifice for Israel's Sins

"Each service began outside the sanctuary at the great high altar with the sacrifice for the sins of Israel of a lamb whose blood was sprinkled on the altar, following a precise ritual. In the middle of the prayers there would be the sound of silver trumpets, the clanging of cymbals, and the reading of a psalm. The officiating priest would then enter the outer part of the sanctuary where he would offer incense and trim the lamps. At that point, when the officiating priest disappeared into the building, those worshipers in attendance could offer their private prayers to God."<sup>2</sup>

broken world would cause them to "cry out to him day and night" (18:7).

There was no question about God's willingness to "bring about justice." The question was, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Will Jesus' disciples persist in praying, "Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10; see Luke 11:2)? Persistence matters.

## THE SELF-RIGHTEOUS AND THE HOPELESS SINNER

### Luke 18:9-14

In Jesus' audience were "some who were confident of their own righteousness" and "everyone else," whom the self-righteous "looked down on."

Contemporary Christians stereotypically presume all Pharisees were arrogant hypocrites. Some were; others were humble. Rabbis urged pious Jewish men to thank God daily that He had not made them Gentiles, slaves, women, or ignorant of the Law (Babylonian Talmud, *Menachot* 43b). Some, undoubtedly, perverted what were meant to be prayers of sincere gratitude into monologues of self-congratulations.

Jesus' original audience expected the "Pharisee," not the "tax collector," to be the hero of His story. But His parody of Pharisaic piety at its worst overturned their comfortable assumptions. We must not assume this caricature intended to represent typical Pharisees, lest we become guilty of a similar lack of humility: "Thank God I'm not a self-righteous Pharisee!"

Contemporary Jerusalem Jews gathered daily for prayers—public and private—in the temple area, when the atonement offerings were made at dawn and at 3:00 p.m. (see Luke 1:8-10; Acts 3:1). Many who could not be present scheduled their devotions to participate remotely (see Acts 10:3).

"The Pharisee stood by himself" to avoid being defiled by the masses of ordinary worshipers. He did not keep his prayer to himself, but he did pray aloud, following Jewish custom.

## Think About It

Jesus taught: “For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 14:11). The tax collector’s honest prayer demonstrated the humble demeanor God has always expected of His people (see 2 Chronicles 7:14; Psalm 18:27; Proverbs 3:34; Isaiah 66:2; Matthew 18:4; 23:12; Luke 1:48, 52; James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:6).

His “prayer,” however, more closely resembled a testimony, boasting before God and anyone nearby of his accomplishments. He confessed no sins or shortcomings, failed to thank God for His gracious gifts, and offered no requests for himself or others.

Pharisees fasted far more often and tithed far more meticulously than the Law required. By this conceited Pharisee’s standards, he was superior to all “other people”—especially the tax collector. It is tempting to grade ourselves on a curve of our own creation. By selecting those to compare, we can always make ourselves look better (see Galatians 6:1-5).

“The tax collector stood at a distance,” acutely aware of his unworthiness to participate in the worship service. Jews considered those who gathered taxes for the occupying pagan empire, traitors and notorious sinners.

The tax collector’s extraordinary gesture of repeatedly striking his chest reflected his deep emotional distress, more common among Middle Eastern women than men (see Luke 23:48). His petition, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner,” employed an unexpected verb for “mercy” (see Luke 18:38-39). He prayed literally: “God, make atonement for me.”<sup>†</sup>

Because of the tax collector’s profound realization of his personal unworthiness, Jesus insisted: “This man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.”

The tax collector longed for the gift of divine justification—to be made right with God, which the Pharisee imagined he had already earned.<sup>1</sup>

1. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove.: IVP Academic, 2008), 350.

2. Bailey, 346.

## REFLECT

Consider what you can learn from the actions of both the Pharisee and the tax collector.

# Key Verse Memory

Committing God's Word to memory is an important goal for Christians of every age. To assist you in this worthy objective, we have suggested three key verses for memorization. Select one verse to memorize each month or memorize one verse of your choosing for the quarter.

Key verses for Winter 2023-24:

**Luke 1:31-32**

**Luke 11:36**

**Luke 12:34**

## COMING NEXT QUARTER

**SPRING 2024**

### **Unit 1: 1 Corinthians**

In this study, we will see how Paul addresses the problems between the Corinthian believers through the light of the gospel message.

### **Unit 2: 2 Corinthians**

In this study, Paul addresses such issues as suffering, forgiveness, reflecting God's glory, and being generous.



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