

# Whatever You Want

## Today In Your Reading...

It was encouraging to read this verse today, "Here begins the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God" (*Mark 1:1*). How refreshing it was to begin the New Testament! "The One who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was going to come into the world"; and, "all who believed Him and accepted Him, He gave the right to become children of God" (*John 1:9, 12*). That is good news indeed!

We were introduced to two important women — Elizabeth and Mary — and two miraculous births. Though she was very old and without child, Elizabeth was given the news that she would bear a son, the forerunner of the Messiah. "He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah... He will precede the coming of the Lord, preparing the way for His arrival" (*Luke 1:15-17*). She was to name him John. "God sent John the Baptist to tell everyone about the light so that they might believe because of his testimony" (*John 1:6*).

Mary, though she was a virgin, was told that she would also bear a son; she was to call Him Jesus. "He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord will give Him the throne of His ancestor David; and He will reign over Israel forever. His kingdom will never end! The baby born to you will be holy, and He will be called the Son of God" (*Luke 1:26-33*).

As confirmation of the angel's promise to Mary, she was told about Elizabeth's pregnancy. She would soon travel to Judea to see if it were true. Two pregnancies, two miracles. How can this be, one might ask? How can a virgin have a child? No problem. Can the One who created everything there is not also create life in a mother's womb? God is sovereign, all-powerful, and able to do all that He chooses. **"Nothing is impossible" with Him**, the angel told Mary, and she

believed it (*Luke 1:37*).

## Daily Reflection

Do you believe that God is sovereign, that He is all-powerful? That is easy to say but more difficult to live out in reality. For example, do you believe that nothing is impossible with Him, that He can work miracles in your circumstances?

How would your words and actions prove that you either do or do not believe this truth?

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I love how Mary responded to the angel after hearing the news of her pregnancy. **"I am the Lord's servant,"** she said. **"I am willing to accept whatever He wants"** (*Luke 1:38*). I have no problem saying to God, "I am your servant." I want to serve Him in whatever capacity that is. However, I have difficulty saying to Him, "I am willing to accept whatever You want." But, these two things cannot be separated. Why not?

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Both of these ladies were surprised by God with complete life changes, an unforeseen direction. Are you as faithful as Elizabeth, to say "How kind the Lord is"? Are you as courageous as Mary to say, "I am willing to accept whatever You want" for me, even if it's inconvenient? **Can you declare your service to the Lord without accepting His assignments?** Are you ready to let the Lord upend your comfortable life to do His work?

# Who Is Jesus?

## Today In Your Reading...

Both John and Jesus were born! Two miracles occurred at John's birth; he was given to Elizabeth in her old age and Zechariah was able to speak again (remember the angel took his voice because he did not believe his wife would have a son). The first words recorded from Zechariah, after John's birth, were a prophecy of his son's future. "You, my little son will be called the prophet of the Most High, because you will prepare the way for the Lord. You will tell His people how to find salvation through forgiveness of their sins..." (*Luke 1:76, 77*).

As we read of Jesus' birth, several people affirmed His identity as the promised Messiah. First, it was Elizabeth who said, when she first saw Mary, "You are blessed by God above all women, and your child is blessed! What an honor this is, that the mother of my Lord should visit me" (*1:42, 43*). Second, Zechariah prophesied of Jesus, "Praise the Lord because He has visited His people and redeemed them. **He has sent us a mighty Savior...** just as He promised through His holy prophets long ago (*1:68, 69*).

Third, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Matthew reminded us of Isaiah's prophecy, "Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and He will be called Immanuel, meaning '**God with us**'" (*Isaiah 7:14*). Fourth, the angels told the shepherds in their fields, "Don't be afraid! We bring you good news of great joy for everyone! The Savior, yes, **the Messiah**, the Lord has been born tonight in Bethlehem" (*Luke 2:10, 11*).

Fifth, God affirmed Jesus' identity in the Temple, when Jesus was dedicated. A devout man named Simeon said, "Lord, now I can die in peace for I have seen the Savior You have given to all people. **He is a light to reveal God to the nations**, and He is the glory of Your people

Israel" (*2:29-31*). A prophet named Anna was there too. "She talked about Jesus to everyone who had been waiting for **the promised King** to come" (*2:38*).

## Daily Reflection

Unfortunately, though Jesus had just arrived, there was a great deal of misunderstanding about His purpose on earth. Zechariah said, "Now we will be saved from our enemies, from all those who hate us" (*1:71*). Simeon "eagerly expected the Messiah to come and rescue Israel" (*25*); and Anna told everyone Jesus had come to "deliver Jerusalem" (*2:38*). Though Jesus will one day save His people from their enemies (at His second coming), **His original mission was to save them from their sins.**

It is this misunderstanding that will lead the Jews to misidentify Jesus as an ordinary prophet and deliver Him up to be crucified. It was this misunderstanding that would be like "a sword that pierces the soul" of Mary, as she would later watch her son die on the cross (*2:35*).

Today, there is still a great deal of misunderstanding surrounding Jesus. To many, like you and I, it is clear that He was and is the Messiah, the Savior of the world. However, to many other people, they are not so sure. Why do you think there is so much controversy surrounding Jesus' true identity?

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How has God confirmed in your heart and mind that Jesus is His Son and the only one able to save men from their sins?

# The Kingdom of Heaven

## Today In Your Reading...

We looked into three events that affirmed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. First, the visit of the wise men. Evidently, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were still in Bethlehem two years after Jesus' birth and a star led the wise men to them. They were there to worship Him, the "newborn King of the Jews" (*Matthew 2:2*). When they saw Jesus, "they fell down before Him and worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts..." (*2:11*).

We do not have many details about Jesus' boyhood, so to recall this particular story must have been important. His arrival was a big deal, so big that foreigners knew about it and traveled hundreds of miles to see Him. This visit was also an indication that **Jesus was the Savior of both the Jews and the Gentiles**; and, of course, as Herod tried to kill Jesus, we get a glimpse of the political threat that He represented to those in power.

The second event that affirmed Jesus' identity was when He was twelve and His family visited Jerusalem. When Mary and Joseph couldn't find Him among their caravan, they had to return to the city, where they found Him sitting among and talking with the religious scholars at the Temple. While they were amazed at His understanding of the Scriptures, they asked why He stayed behind in Jerusalem. Jesus' response perplexed them, "You should have known that I would be in My Father's house" (*Luke 2:41-50*). Here is evidence that Jesus was aware of His divinity, the fact that He was the Son of God.

The Gospel writers silently skip eighteen years of Jesus' life and we don't see Him next until He met John the Baptist at the Jordan River. Here Jesus was baptized by John, and when He came up from the water, the Holy Spirit descended upon Him like a dove and His Father was heard

saying, "This is My beloved Son, and I am fully pleased with you" (*Mark 1:11*). John indicated part of Jesus' mission by announcing that He would "separate the chaff from the grain" and, then, "burn the chaff with never-ending fire." John was referencing Jesus' future separation of true believers and unbelievers at the time of the final judgment (*Matthew 3:12*).

## Daily Reflection

Before Jesus appeared at the river to be baptized, John was preaching to everyone, "Turn from your sins, for **the kingdom of heaven** is near" (*Matthew 3:2*). Matthew used that phrase, "the kingdom of heaven," thirty-two times to describe the ministry of Christ. Other New Testament writers used the "kingdom of God."

While the kingdom of heaven may refer to the entire realm of God's authority in the universe, it takes on a much more personal meaning when Jesus comes to earth. The kingdom of heaven involves much more than His rule over the world; *now it involves His rule in our hearts*. Thus, when Jesus comes, the kingdom of heaven refers to more than His sovereignty but also our salvation in Him. The first step, we are told, is to repent, to turn from our sins. Why must repentance be a step in the salvation process?

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When Jesus was on earth, it was said that the kingdom of heaven was coming or it was near. Now, with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we can say that **the kingdom of heaven is in us**. Though we will one day experience the tangible kingdom of God in heaven, we can experience the kingdom of heaven in our hearts today.

# Target of Temptation

## Today In Your Reading...

Jesus began His public ministry. However, before it started, "He was led out into the wilderness by the Spirit to be tempted by the Devil" (*Matthew 4:1*). This intense time of temptation was necessary **to prove His sinlessness**. As the "Second Adam," Jesus was able to resist that which the first Adam could not and, therefore, Jesus would be able to undo all that had been ruined with sin (*1 Corinthians 15:27*).

As Jesus' ministry began, the Gospel writers affirmed His divinity in several ways. First, John the Baptist testified that He was the Messiah because of what he had witnessed at Jesus' baptism — the Holy Spirit descending upon Him (*John 1:32-34*). The next time John saw Jesus, He announced to everyone, "Look! There is the **Lamb of God** who takes away the sin of the world," a foreshadowing of His sacrificial death on the cross (*1:29, 36*).

The second affirmation of Jesus' divinity came from his first disciples — Andrew, Peter, Phillip, and Nathanael. "**We have found the Messiah**," they said. "We have found the very person Moses and the prophets wrote about! His name is Jesus" (*John 1:41, 45*).

The third affirmation of Jesus' divinity came in a series of events. He revealed to the disciples His supernatural power by telling Nathanael where he was before anyone found him (*1:48*), by linking Himself to Jacob's ladder (*1:51*), by turning water into wine at a wedding (*2:1-12*), by demonstrating great zeal for God's house, the Temple (*2:13-17*), and by **foreshadowing His resurrection** (*2:18-22*).

## Daily Reflection

Let's return and focus on the temptation of Jesus. This event was so important that three of the Gospel writers chose to include it in their

accounts of His life. We can learn several things from Jesus' experience here.

First, while God does not tempt us with sin, **He does allow the enemy to tempt us**. While that sounds strange, we must trust that *God uses temptation for our good, not for our ruin*. How can temptation be used for our good?

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It is in times of temptation that we demonstrate our commitment to God, whether or not we believe Him and trust Him. It is in our resistance of temptation that we get to flex our faith muscles and build up immunity to Satan's ploys.

A second truth here is that **temptation itself is not a sin**. Jesus was tempted but did not sin. Therefore, we too can be tempted without sin. It is in our surrender to temptation that gives birth to sin and its consequences.

Third, Satan's purpose in temptation is **to get you to act independently of God**, which is what he did in the beginning. It is to replace God with yourself and give yourself what you "need" or want without needing Him to do it.

Fourth, in temptation Satan desires to **exploit a weakness** (Jesus was hungry), **undermine your priorities** (get glory by jumping off of the Temple), or **appeal to your entitlement mentality** (rule the kingdoms of the world). Which one of these does he use most against you?

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# Making Much of Him

September 28 — *John 3:1-4:45; Luke 3:19, 20*

## Today In Your Reading...

We were witnesses to three conversations. One conversation was between Jesus and a Pharisee named Nicodemus, another was between Jesus and a Samaritan woman, and the third one was between John the Baptist and his disciples. While these are three separate occasions, there is a connection between them.

First, let's look into the discussion John had with his disciples (*John 3:23-36*). They were concerned, perhaps even a little jealous, that their followers were abandoning John to follow Jesus; but, John quickly dispelled their fears. "God in heaven appoints each person's work. You yourselves know how plainly I told you that I am not the Messiah. I am here to prepare a way for him, that is all. The bride will go where the groom is. A groom's friend rejoices with him. I am the groom's friend, and I am filled with joy at his success. **He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less.** He has come from above and is greater than anyone else. I am of the earth and my understanding is limited to the things of the earth..."

John could have been jealous of Jesus, scorned Him for taking his followers and overshadowing his ministry. Instead, **John demonstrated true humility and contentment.** He recognized who he was in light of who Jesus was; and, he recognized his God-given role to play, which was to introduce Jesus as the Messiah. That role was coming to an end. He did his part and now that Jesus was here, John faded into the background. It's interesting that our passage today ended with John's arrest and imprisonment. His ministry, as the forerunner of the Messiah, was over.

Why did John shine the light on Jesus instead of on himself? "He is sent by God, He speaks God's words, and the Spirit of God is upon Him without measure" (*3:34*), which leads us to the other

conversations. When talking with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, Jesus described the phenomenon of salvation. He told Nicodemus salvation was like being "born again" (*3:3*). "Humans can reproduce human life," He said, "but the Holy Spirit gives new life from heaven" (*3:6*). He told the Samaritan woman salvation was like "living water, which takes away thirst. It becomes a perpetual spring within you, giving you eternal life" (*4:14*).

## Daily Reflection

Jesus is able to give you and others salvation, new life on the inside. As the people of Sychar said, "He is, indeed, the Savior of the world" (*4:42*). **Your role**, then, as one of His followers, is like John's ministry, **to point others to Him**, to "bring in the harvest, which is people brought to eternal life" (*4:35-38*).

Have you come to the realization that God has placed you where you are to tell others about Him, that they too may be "born again"? Are you looking for those people, those opportunities, or are you too busy with your own life? List the people to whom you are actively witnessing.

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The problem is, so many times we get in the way. **We make too much of ourselves and not enough about Him.** What is the solution? What advice would John the Baptist give you?

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# The Good News Has Come!

## Today In Your Reading...

Jesus began His ministry in earnest. "At last the time has come! The Kingdom of God is near! Turn from your sins and believe this Good News!" (Mark 1:15). The word for "good news" here is "gospel." Since the beginning, when sin ruined everything, bad news has been the predominant story of men. **Jesus came to reverse the effects of sin, which is good news!**

Luke recorded for us a signal event, in which Jesus read from the scroll of *Isaiah* in the synagogue in Nazareth. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me," He read, "for He has appointed Me to preach Good News to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the downtrodden will be freed from their oppressors, and that the time of the Lord's favor has come" (Luke 4:16-21; *Isaiah* 61:1, 2; 42:6, 7; 53:8). After Jesus finished reading, He said, "This Scripture has come true today before your very eyes!" In other words, He was saying to them, "This passage is about the promised Messiah, and I am He!"

Notice here that Jesus covered the multiple facets of life — **physical** (the blind will see), **emotional** and **social** (the downtrodden will be freed from their oppressors), and **spiritual** (captives will be released). Human beings are more than just a body; we have an immaterial side to us as well. Unfortunately, sin has infiltrated and corrupted every part of man, marring our reflection of God's image; that is the bad news. However, **Jesus is the solution to all of our suffering; He is the answer to our sin problem.** That is the good news!

Making such a bold statement triggered anger from the crowds. Claiming to be the Son of God made Him a target for destruction. We get a glimpse of His future suffering when the people of Nazareth tried to kill Him (Luke 4:28-30).

However, we also get a glimpse of His escape from death, when Jesus "slipped away through the crowd and left them."

These were not just empty words. Jesus' claims were not a publicity stunt. He proved them over and over by His authoritative teaching, by His various miracles, by healing the sick, and by casting out demons. *The world would be different from now on because of the Good News!*

## Daily Reflection

What physical, emotional, social, or spiritual issues are you facing right now?

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No matter what you are facing, Christ is the answer. **He is the solution to the effects of sin in your life.** Are you turning to Him for help or are you relying on other sources for resolution?

The Good News involves more than just saving you from your past and securing your future. **Christ wants to impact your present.** The Gospel is not a one-time event but rather it is an ongoing relationship. Are you allowing the Good News of Jesus Christ to impact and shape your every day life? How so?

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# Gone Fishin'

September 30 — *Matthew 9:1-17; Mark 1:40-2:22; Luke 5:1-39*

Day 273 — 92 Days to Go

## Today In Your Reading...

We followed Jesus around as He traveled and taught and healed the people in the area of Galilee (in the north). The response of the people was about the same wherever He went. Most of them were amazed at His teaching and impressed with His miracles; however, there were always some in the crowd — usually religious leaders like Pharisees and Sadducees — who questioned His authority and actions. Thus, they constantly looked for ways to trick Jesus and condemn His ministry.

This two-fold response from the crowds stood out to me as the theme of today's section. When Jesus called Andrew and Peter, both fishermen, to follow Him, He said to them, "Come and be My disciples, and **I will show you how to fish for people!**" (*Mark 1:16-18; Luke 5:10*). What does it mean to "fish for people"? **Jesus would equip them, empower them, and encourage them to share the Gospel with others.** That is the reason that He came to earth and that's the focus that He wanted His disciples to have also (*Luke 4:42-44; Matthew 28:19, 20*).

Therefore, like fishermen, Jesus and His disciples would "cast their nets" by sharing the Good News with as many people as they could; we would call this **evangelism**. Like fish, some people responded favorably by swimming into the net; however, others played "hard to get." In today's terms, we might say that Jesus and His disciples were "casting their lines" to see which fish would "bite down" or "take the bait."

When we are fishing for people, not everyone will respond favorably; some will not "bite down on our bait" or swim into our net. In fact, some *people will bite back*, like the Pharisees did to Jesus, questioning His identity or authority. Thus, there are times when we must do what Jesus did and defend the Gospel, which simply

means to give an answer or explanation for our message, for why the Gospel is true. Defending the faith is called **apologetics**. Just as evangelism is important, so is apologetics, knowing how to navigate around the obstacles that people will use to block the Gospel's advance.

## Daily Reflection

Evangelism and apologetics, two activities that should be a regular part of your life. How would you evaluate your efforts in fishing for people?

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Does anything about evangelism or apologetics intimidate you? Why or why not?

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Keep in mind, sharing the Gospel is as simple as **telling people what God has done in your life**, like the leper who told everyone what Jesus did for him (*Mark 1:45*). It can be as simple as using the opportunities you have in everyday life to expose people to the message of Christ, like Matthew did by inviting friends over for dinner (*Matthew 9:9-13*).

While you are called to "go fishing," you don't have to quit your day job. **Simply fish as you go!** Cast your line and let God do the rest. Some people will respond well; others may not respond at all. That is okay. Like Peter, *sometimes you will fish all night and catch nothing, and sometimes God will overflow your net.*