

# **2013 Devotionals**

*by*

*Diane Woerner*

Written for Brentwood Baptist Church  
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Arranged in Scriptural order

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## **Treasure**

### **Matthew 6:19-24**

*Key Verse – Matthew 6:21: For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

When you hear the word “treasure,” what first comes to mind? A pirate’s chest filled with doubloons and rare jewels, buried for years under a gnarled and forgotten tree? Old Ebenezer Scrooge in his gloomy chamber, wearily counting and recounting his piles of gold coins?

In today’s reading Jesus identifies a number of different treasures. He speaks first of things that moths eat, rust destroys and thieves steal—essentially everything people owned in those days. Clothes were made of sheep’s or goat’s wool, a perfect feast for moths. Rust could put at risk farm tools, cooking utensils, weapons and other vital possessions. And of course anything else of value would be something a thief might steal.

Another treasure is something He calls “mammon.” While in one sense mammon is represented by money, in the broader sense it means everything money can buy—everything the world says is important. Jesus implies that we are all slaves to mammon, unless by His grace we have now become slaves to God.

A third group of treasures are those things that meet our daily personal needs. Without food and drink and clothing to keep us warm, we could not live. Finally, a fourth thing we treasure (verse 34) is our sense of control over our lives. All of us spend a certain amount of mental energy—sometimes a lot of mental energy—contemplating our future and how we might prepare for it.

It’s interesting to notice that Jesus does not say, “Where your heart is, there your treasure will be also.” We tend to think we rule our own hearts, that we can choose to love and be loyal to someone just because we know we’re supposed to. We say we love our spouse, our children, our friends—and especially our God—because we really want to believe we do.

But our treasures give us away. Those things we give value to speak candidly of the actual object of our affections—and all too often it’s ourselves. We surround ourselves with the things that will keep us safe, give us comfort, entertain us, make us feel important, guard our future. Only after our needs and wants are met do we consider the needs of others—or the requirements of God.

What Jesus was teaching the crowd gathered on that Galilean hillside was that God desires a radically different kind of life. We are to seek first those things that please and benefit God: His Kingdom and His righteousness. This takes place in the tangible, everyday decisions we make—what we do with the hours in our day, what we choose to think about, what we spend our money on.

Luke records it this way: “Be rich toward God” (Luke 12:21). When His priorities become what we treasure most of all, then our hearts will inevitably follow, our love and loyalty and enthusiasm will be directed toward Him, and He will gain the great joy of giving His far better treasures to us in return.

## Questions

1. Our culture teaches us that we can be independent, masters of our own destiny. But in verse 24 Jesus says we are slaves, not masters. We either love and are committed to God OR we love and are committed to that which the world says is important. If you are totally honest, what pulls on your heart most strongly? In what areas of your life do you need to change masters?

2. List some specific things that:

- a. Keep you safe
- b. Give you comfort
- c. Entertain you
- d. Make you feel important
- e. Guard your future

In what ways can you more fully release these needs into God's hands, freeing you to devote your time and attention and resources to seeking His Kingdom and His righteousness?

3. In verses 22-23 Jesus says, "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness." This is another unexpected reversal. We would think that if the body is full of light, then the eye would be good. But once again it's a matter of our personal priorities and choices. We have a lot to say about what enters our minds through our eyes and our ears. What things do you look at or listen to that bring God's light into your body, and what things bring darkness?

## The Triumph of Christ

Matthew 21:1-11

*Key Verse - Matthew 21:5: See, your King is coming to you.*

We call it the “Triumphal Entry” of Christ, but in many ways it was anything but triumphant. Here was a King who didn’t even own a horse, who instead road into town on a borrowed donkey. There were no nobles to ride before Him, no trumpets to announce His arrival. There wasn’t even a crown on His head.

More telling than these things, however, was the truth that the crowds of people who were throwing down their robes and spreading palm branches in His path didn’t really know who He was. They knew He was the Son of David. They reminded each other that He was “the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.” Most of all, they were excited to welcome Him as the “King of Israel who comes in the name of the Lord.”

But none of them understood that He wasn’t just coming in the name of the Lord—He *was* the Lord. Nor did any of them realize that He was a King unlike any king Israel had had in the past. Those kings (if they were any good at all at being kings) understood that their number one assignment was to keep Israel’s enemies from destroying her.

It had been many years since that sort of king had ruled in Israel, but the people knew the stories well. No wonder they were excited—this was probably the first real king-candidate they had found in many generations. Maybe at last the arrogant Romans would have met their match in this Man who could even bring people back from the dead. Thus their cries were profound and heartfelt: “Hosanna! Save us!”

It must have been rather confusing then when the first action their new King took had nothing to do with unseating—or even unsettling—the Roman rulers. Instead, according to Matthew, He marched into the temple and began attacking His own people, the Jews!

So was the whole celebration nothing but a sham? Not at all. It was actually an important part of God’s pre-scripted plan for human history. We know this first because the details were clearly foretold in the prophetic record. “Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout in triumph, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your King is coming to you; He is righteous and victorious, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Zechariah 1:9).

We are also given in this story a glimpse of the unmatched supremacy of Christ over all natural circumstances. When Jesus sent the two disciples to get the donkey, He not only perfectly described what they would find, but also the conversation they would have with the bystanders who saw them untie the donkey. Moreover, even though this was a young animal that had never had anyone on its back, it was content to carry Jesus through crowds of screaming people without the least evidence of stubbornness or fear.

Finally, we see in this story the great tension between the fallen present and the triumphant future. The people in Jerusalem, like people everywhere throughout history, had a desperate longing for a conquering King to bring peace to their land. It was this very heart-cry, I believe, that caused Jesus

to weep over the city as He approached it. He knew it was soon to enter an even more painful season in which the last safe place, the temple itself, would be utterly destroyed.

But He also knew that all of creation, along with all of heaven, is poised and waiting for another celebration event, this time a truly Triumphant Entry of their King into Jerusalem. In that day He will be riding on a horse, the great white horse of a victor. In that day there will be trumpets, and vast numbers of nobles—and children and rocks and even the stars—who will be shouting together the praises of their King. In that day there will be not one but many crowns on His head (Revelation 19:12). And from that day on His Kingdom will be universal and eternal, never to be challenged again.

### **Questions**

1. In John's vision of heaven, one of the elders refers to Christ as the "Lion of Judah." What John sees on the throne, however, is a slaughtered Lamb (Revelation 5:5-7). How can Christ be both exalted and lowly at the same time? What does this tell us about God's love?
2. Even though the people did not understand Who they were praising, nevertheless their praises were received by Jesus as right and good. Later, when the children in the temple area continued to cheer Him, He also affirmed their praise (Matthew 21:16). From this we might see that authentic praise is less of an intellectual response and more the outflow of our hearts. What is lost if our worship does not come from our hearts? How can we restore it?
3. Modern America has very little concept of what a king really is. Our idea of government is a democracy based on human rights and majority choices. Yet something within us still rises up and desires an earthly king—someone who is powerful, whom we can trust to lead us, who will protect and provide for us. Why is this actually dangerous, especially in our post-Christian times?

## All Authority

Mark 15:6-15

**Key Verses – Mark 15:12-15:** *Pilate asked them again, “Then what do you want me to do with the One you call the King of the Jews?” Again they shouted, “Crucify Him!” Then Pilate said to them, “Why? What has He done wrong?” But they shouted, “Crucify Him!” all the more. Then, willing to gratify the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. And after having Jesus flogged, he handed Him over to be crucified.*

All of Jerusalem was in an uproar. The Pharisees were willing to do anything to rid their community of this blasphemer—who also happened to be a threat to their power. The people were terrified that Jesus would somehow bring down upon them another display of the wrath of Caesar. Pilate was desperately trying to find some middle ground, some way to avoid being responsible for the death of a Man he knew was innocent.

But what seemed to be the height of chaos was very clear and orderly to Satan. He understood that the best way to secure his rule on earth—and also the most effective way to retaliate against the God who had rejected him—was the removal forever of the human Jesus from the planet. That this process involved such humiliation and torture was simply icing on a diabolical cake.

What he could not see—what Jesus’ own disciples could not see—was that these events were only a small but very significant scene in a much larger drama, written from the beginning of time by God Himself.

It was only a matter of months later, however, when it all became clear to the followers of Christ.

When they heard this, they raised their voices to God unanimously and said, “Master, You are the One who made the heaven, the earth, and the sea, and everything in them. You said through the Holy Spirit, by the mouth of our father David Your servant: ‘Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot futile things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers assembled together against the Lord and against His Messiah.’

“For, in fact, in this city both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, assembled together against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, to do whatever Your hand and Your plan had predestined to take place.”  
(Acts 4:24-28)

Ah, yes. It was God’s perfect plan all along. Jesus was at complete peace in the hour of His trial, knowing fully (as He told Pilate), “You would have no authority over Me at all. . .if it hadn’t been given you from above” (John 19:11).

Can we find that peace as well in the upcoming hours of our own testing? Can we realize that the “kings of the earth” only do what God has predestined them to do? Can we see through the dusts of our dying culture a glimpse of God’s glorious triumph?

Or will we, like the people in Jesus' day, only know and fear the cruel hand of Caesar? When the crunch comes—and I honestly believe many of us will live to see chaos much like that which overtook Jerusalem—will we be so eager to preserve our tranquility, security, and comfort that we too will trade the Son of God for the Barabbases of our own priorities and desires?

It's an eternally significant question, one which each of us may well have to answer.

## Questions

1. Where do you see specific patterns in our society which reflect (or indeed, are directly prompted by) Satan's utter contempt for the authority of God? Why is it so important for the church to have a clear understanding of both the necessity for and the holiness of properly administered authority?
2. In the days and hours leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus, many people were directly responsible for what ultimately took place, including Judas, the Jews, Caiaphas, Pilate, and of course the crowds. But in Luke 23:34 Jesus asked the Father to forgive them because they didn't really know what they were doing. We however understand that Jesus was the Son of God who was being punished for our sin. Do we therefore deserve a stronger judgment if we still choose to reject Him?
3. The concept of submission is often held in low regard by many people today, who see it as an indication of weakness or inadequate self-esteem. How does Christ's modeling of pure submission to the will of His Father actually demonstrate both strength and healthy self-esteem? What can we learn from His example?

## Two Right Choices

Luke 2:51-52

**Key Verses – Luke 2:51-62:** *Then He went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them. His mother kept all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and with people.*

As I sat down to write my thoughts on this passage, my two-year-old granddaughter came up and tugged at my arm. Could we read a book please? Both of these options were valuable and important, but I had to choose between them.

In this solitary glimpse we have into Jesus' childhood, we see that He too faced a choice between two right actions. After the Passover festival He could have returned home with His family as He had always done. Or He could stay in His Father's house, bringing the wisdom God had given Him to a council of Jewish scholars.

How often do we wrestle with two right choices? It's a very different sort of wrestling than the kind we sometimes experience when we know one choice is right and one is wrong. Here we are told Jesus fully believed He *had to be* in His Father's house. He even expected Mary and Joseph somehow to know that. Yet as soon as they found Him, He "went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them."

It seems that even as a very young man, Jesus already possessed the wisdom to discern the right priorities. He stayed in His Father's house for five days. But for Him to stay longer when His parents expected Him go with them would be to break the Law itself: "Honor your father and your mother."

Years later Jesus would tell another group of Jewish leaders, "The Son is not able to do anything on His own, but only what He sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, the Son also does these things in the same way" (John 5:19). This was His advantage. Because He was one with His Father, Jesus could perfectly choose between two right paths.

Even though we aren't able see what the Father is doing as clearly as Jesus did, we can learn at least couple things about making choices from this brief event in His early life.

First, Jesus put the priority of His Father above the priority of His parents. This story ends with the note that Jesus "grew in favor with God and with people." Sometimes both are possible. But if one kind of favor has to be sacrificed—and later in Jesus' life it definitely did—then we should forego the favor of people when God's favor requires it.

Second, we need to realize there are times when our obedience to God will be misunderstood and may even be painful to those whom we love—because God is accomplishing something in their lives as well. Those few days of worried anguish may well have been part of God's preparation for the far greater suffering Mary would later endure because of her son.

The only way we will be able to make the *right* right choices is to have the power Jesus had: the power of God's grace (Luke 2:40). You see, "right" is defined as what God considers to be right.

God will give us His grace, and we will grow in His favor, as we seek to make the choices which are most pleasing to Him.

### **Questions**

1. Think of a time when you had to choose between two right paths. What considerations influenced your eventual decision? Do you now believe they were the best determining factors?
2. If God has a specific plan for our lives, why does He sometimes allow us to be challenged by two or more right choices?
3. Jesus knew His calling was to teach people God's ways. Yet after this one incident He waited another eighteen years before stepping into His calling. Think of other men in the Bible who were called by God but did not wait for His timing. What happened to them?
4. Why should we be cautious when others ask us for advice on choices they are facing?

## **All-Conquering Calm** **Luke 4:16-31**

*Key Verses – Luke 4:16, 30: He came to Nazareth. . .and went on His way.*

Nobody meant to stare, but all of them did. As the tall young man walked quietly to His accustomed seat in the Sabbath-day assembly, every eye was on Him. Even though He had been absent for several months, every man in the room had heard the stories. Jesus, the town carpenter's son, had been going from synagogue to synagogue throughout Galilee, and everywhere people were saying wonderful things about His wisdom and teachings. There were even accounts of miracles and healings.

In spite of their pressing curiosity, however, habit prevailed, and the morning service began as it always did. But when it came time for the Scripture to be read by a lay reader, a silent thrill went through the room. Jesus had risen to His feet, signaling His willingness to be that man. He was quickly handed the scroll with the writings of Isaiah.

As had happened in all the other towns, the first reaction to His words was a marveling at their graciousness. Although everyone present knew the passage from memory, somehow the prophecy of Isaiah had a new freshness and power when Jesus spoke it. They even felt for a moment the compelling rightness of His claim, "Today as you listen, this Scripture has been fulfilled."

But then other thoughts entered their minds, overshadowing that initial tug on their hearts. "What's the matter with us? This is Jesus. We know Him. We know His family. We taught Him these words. If there's anything special about Him now, certainly we deserve a demonstration of His power more than anyone."

Yet instead of drawing them back to their first response, Jesus' next words only made things worse. "I'm not surprised," He essentially told them. "A prophet is never honored at home. And don't forget, God deliberately chose outsiders to receive His miracles in the olden days. Why should you expect to get preferential treatment now?"

As His words sank in, their smoldering indignation blazed into a fiery rage. Lunging toward Him, they drove him out of the synagogue and on to a high cliff. They fully intended to hurl this blasphemer to His death. But it wasn't yet His time to die. Supernaturally He passed through the crowd and continued on His way.

What impressed me about this incident in the early ministry of Christ was His composure in the face of both the worship and the wrath of the people who knew Him best. Our normal human propensity is either to deliberately pursue the affirmation of our family and friends, or else to minimize the chance of painful rejection by avoiding those who can hurt us the most. But neither of these seemed to concern Jesus.

Instead, from the time He walked into Nazareth until the time He left, Jesus exhibited what William Kinsley has described as "undaunted courage, restful content, child-like trust, and holy, all-

conquering calm.” Setting His will to follow the path His Father had laid out for Him, it mattered not where that path took Him—nor what He encountered on its way.

Can we learn to walk this way? We can—but only by knowing what Jesus knew, which is that our acceptance by the Father makes all human praise or rejection insignificant by comparison. As we mentally back away from our immediate circumstances and choose to see the events of our life as only small pieces of a far grander picture, we too can experience a divine contentment which comes from the assurance that God is sovereign and that He does all things well.

## **Questions**

1. Why do you think the men in the synagogue transitioned so quickly from appreciation to anger? Have you ever experienced something your heart is drawn to, but your mind can talk you out of? How much should we trust our reasoning?
2. In the week preceding His crucifixion, Jesus again faced people who went from worshiping Him to condemning Him to death (see Matthew 21:9 and 27:22). Are there challenges you’ve encountered earlier in your life that give you strength to walk through the circumstances you’re dealing with now?
3. Life brings highs and lows, and to some extent we are always affected by them. Oswald Chambers wrote, “If God has made your cup sweet, drink it with grace; if He has made it bitter, drink it in communion with Him.” How is your relationship with God making a difference in some of the specific highs or lows of your life right now?

## The Mystery of Grace

John 7:53-8:11

**Key Verse – John 8:11:** *“Neither do I condemn you,” said Jesus. “Go, and from now on do not sin anymore.”*

Many of us see this familiar account of the woman caught in adultery as simply one more instance where Jesus brilliantly turns the tables on His would-be trappers—the scribes and the Pharisees—trapping them instead. There are many such scenes in the Gospels, and we feel a rather pleasurable satisfaction in watching our Hero outwit His opponents again and again and again.

In some ways, however, this story turns the tables on us as well, because it is filled not so much with things we know as it is with things we don't.

We don't know this woman's story, what brokenness in her life drove her to break the Law as well as the bonds of her marriage. We don't know anything about the man involved, nor do we know why he too wasn't brought before Jesus. After all, Moses' command was clear: “If a man commits adultery with a married woman. . .both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death” (Leviticus 20:10).

We don't know exactly what the scribes and Pharisees had in mind when they sought for “evidence to accuse” Jesus. If He had consented to their plan to stone the woman, would that have been considered a crime in a Roman court?

And then there's that piece of the story we've got on our list of things to ask about when we get to heaven: whatever was Jesus writing on the ground?? Why didn't John sneak over after the confrontation ended and check it out for us—this one and only time we ever hear about Jesus writing down anything?

But there is yet a deeper mystery, one this Scripture beckons us to delve into, and that is the mystery of grace itself.

The Law was clear: adultery is such a serious offense against God's holy standard for marriage that death is its right and just reward. What's more, in many cases a sinner's death was to be initiated at the hands of those who actually witnessed the sin, with “all the people” then joining in the stoning process (see Deuteronomy 17:7). Such was the intent of the Law—to impress upon the entire community not only the horrific offensiveness of sin, but also the consequences that accompany a violation of God's created order.

It seems the scribes and Pharisees had forgotten that purpose. On the contrary, they sought to use this woman's offense for the exact opposite reason—they wanted to bring into question the very morality of God Himself. Would Jesus condone the severe punishment and presumably risk the censure of the government—and perhaps of the community itself, to whom He had spoken words of forgiveness and freedom—or would He dilute the requirements of the Law and allow her to live?

Remarkably, Jesus not only sidesteps their trap, He uses it to bring into focus a higher law: the eternal power that was generated through His own redemptive obedience.

Consider the pattern of Old Testament justice. A person such as this woman is determined to have broken the Law. Her punishment must be carried out, quite possibly by her husband and maybe even by her own children if they were among the initial witnesses to her sin. They could stone her in anger, they could stone her with great remorse, but stone her they must, or they themselves would be breaking the Law.

Our modern sensibilities recoil at all this. We would hire a professional executioner, someone who has no personal connection with the offender, for whom it's just a job. But in so doing we lose touch with the great, dark horror of sin—and how deeply it is rooted in all of us. This was the heart of the insight Jesus forced on His would-be challengers. “The one without sin among you should be the first to throw a stone at her.”

The older men figured it out first, but eventually His point got through to the younger ones as well. They were now the ones who were trapped. If they cast a stone, they would be lying. If they didn't, they would be rejecting the Law. Their condemnation of the adulteress was instead turned back upon themselves.

But then we read Jesus' astonishing words to the trembling woman: “Neither do I condemn you.” Why could He say that? Why, as we read in Matthew 9:6, does “the Son of Man have authority on earth to forgive sins”?

I believe the answer lies in the fact that Jesus had already laid His life down for us through His eternal obedience to the Father. Revelation 13:8 describes Him as the “Lamb slain from the foundation of the earth.” At the time of this story He had not yet walked out that reality out in history, but the assurance of His pending sacrifice nevertheless echoed into eternity past and future.

And thus He could say to this broken woman—as He did to the paralyzed man in Matthew 9, and as He now says to us—“Your sins are forgiven because of My shed blood. Go, and sin no more.”

## Questions

1. When the woman was in the middle of her adulterous affair, she probably had no thought as to its potential consequences for her family—that they might soon be forced to be her executioners. Even though our present culture does not inflict this kind of punishment—or sometimes any punishment at all—our sins still deeply impact many people beyond ourselves. What are some examples of this kind of cost today?
2. In this story and the story in Luke 20:20-26—where Jesus is challenged about whether He should pay taxes to Caesar—we find Him caught between the requirements of two different authorities. In both cases He raises the issue to the higher level of God's authority. What situations in your life might be similar, and how does Jesus' example help you to navigate them?
3. Matthew Henry notes, “It is common for those that are indulgent to their own sin to be severe against the sins of others.” Have you ever encountered this? Have you been guilty of this? Why do you think this happens?

## The Burgeoning Church

Acts 5:12-16

**Key Verses – Acts 5:12-16:** *Many signs and wonders were being done among the people through the hands of the apostles. By common consent they would all meet in Solomon’s Colonnade. None of the rest dared to join them, but the people praised them highly. Believers were added to the Lord in increasing numbers—crowds of both men and women. As a result, they would carry the sick out into the streets and lay them on beds and pallets so that when Peter came by, at least his shadow might fall on some of them. In addition, a multitude came together from the towns surrounding Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed.*

Burgeoning. It’s an old-fashioned word that means growing or developing quickly, flourishing. In what was probably a matter of days, or at the most weeks, the church of Jesus Christ had increased from a small group of believers huddled together in an upper room (Acts 1:15 mentions a count of 120), to now thousands of enthusiastic converts. With great joy they demonstrated their commitment to God and to each other by dramatic changes in both their priorities and their lifestyles.

But soon they also encountered the strong turbulence of their sin-darkened world. Peter and John were arrested by the Jewish leaders for their bold public testimony to the Lordship of Christ. Even more sobering, the new believers watched two of their own number draw their last breath at the feet of Peter—God’s judgment on an ill-advised attempt to deceive the community of faith.

In today’s snapshot of the action in Jerusalem we only see a hint of fear—“none of the rest dared to join them,” that is, none of them were willing to openly stand with Peter and John and the other leaders in their fearless proclamation of the gospel message. But we are told that in spite of the looming opposition of the Sanhedrin, these men were being highly praised by the people. It was an exhilarating time to be alive.

And no wonder. There’s nothing like a mighty wave of miracles to ignite massive public enthusiasm. This passage is full of superlatives: *crowds* of new believers, *multitudes* coming from the surrounding towns—and perhaps most amazing, *all* the sick and tormented were healed. Even more, there is the implication that some of these sweeping demonstrations of divine power were accomplished without even the laying on of hands, but simply through the impact of a passing shadow.

But at some point the high priest and his colleagues could no longer contain their jealousy and again arrested the Christian leaders. After an angel let them out of prison, they promptly returned to the temple and continued their ministry. When the guards brought them back before the Jewish council, this time the men were flogged before being released.

It was only a foreshadowing of the suffering to come. Soon the first martyr’s blood would be spilled (Acts 7:54-60). We are then told, “On that day a severe persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the land of Judea and Samaria.” Would the believers still be as faithful in this season as they were when the miracles of deliverance flowed so freely?

Yes! In Acts 8:4 Luke gladly reports, “Those who were scattered went on their way proclaiming the message of good news.” Even though their lives had been painfully disrupted, these ordinary men and women carried with them the extraordinary faith and love and endurance that not only caused the church to continue its growth in new parts of the world, but ultimately reached across time to touch you and me with their astonishing testimony of God’s power and grace.

## Questions

1. Modern-day conversions only occasionally result from someone witnessing a dramatic display of the supernatural power of God. More often they occur in relatively ordinary contexts. To what extent did their confidence in God’s ability to do miracles prepare the early Christians for their upcoming persecution? Do you think 21st century believers have that same confidence? Do you think we may soon need it?
2. It is possible for people to *believe in* Jesus but not to *follow* Him. John 12:42-43 describes one such situation. “Nevertheless, many did believe in Him even among the rulers, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, so they would not be banned from the synagogue. For they loved praise from men more than praise from God.” In the parable of the sower, some seeds spring up with joy and “believe for a while,” but do not last in hard times (see Luke 8:13). What more is there to being an authentic follower of Christ than simply believing?
3. There are some stories in Scripture that seem to be put there just to challenge our assumptions. We might agree that a person can be healed by a touch, but it’s harder to accept the power of God carried through nothing but a shadow, or a piece of cloth (see Acts 19:11-12). Why is it important for us to admit that God can do—and does do—completely unexpected things?

## Majorly Disturbing

Acts 19:23-41

*Key Verse – Acts 19:23: During that time there was a major disturbance about the Way.*

Once again, it began with twelve men. This time the scene was not the shores of Galilee, but rather an influential city in the province of Asia called Ephesus, where Paul found twelve believers and led them into the baptism of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Two years later, we are told, everyone in Asia had heard of Jesus Christ. During those years Paul and his fellow workers not only sidestepped the resistance of the Jewish authorities in that region, they demonstrated to the people the superiority of Jesus over demonic powers as well. Thus “the Lord’s message flourished and prevailed.”

But as we learned in today’s reading, it was only a matter of time before that message ignited the wrath of those who could not hear it. Focusing on both the economic threat and the religious threat the Way brought to their city, Demetrius the silversmith rallied first his fellow craftsmen, then the entire city populace, into a confused yet deeply emotional opposition to the same men whom many had only hours earlier held in high esteem.

Perhaps you have seen on television, or even experienced yourself, the strange momentum of crowd hysteria. On this day in Ephesus, we are told, “most of them did not know why they had come together.” All they knew was the roaring, pulsating chant, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” A stranger approaching the scene might have wondered if they thought Artemis herself, the daughter of Zeus, was about to pay a visit to her worshippers.

In this instance, while there were definite moments of potential peril to Paul and other followers of Christ, the mob was eventually calmed and dispersed. We should note however that Paul had already experienced at least five other encounters with crowd opposition prior to this (see Acts 13:50, 14:5, 14:19, 16:22 and 17:5). In most of these situations Paul had been imprisoned or at least forced to leave town, and in one case he had even been stoned and left for dead.

So why does Luke, the author of Acts, call this “a major disturbance about the Way”? Although we can’t know the answer with certainty, one unique feature of the Ephesian mob scene was that it was not initiated by the Jewish leaders, but by men who had no attachment to Judaism at all. While we might justifiably speculate that their motive had more to do with their gold than their goddess, still this appears to be the first time the teachings of the Way threatened a non-Jewish community to the extent that the people could be stirred to this volatile level of response.

One question for us that rises out of this story is this: does the Christianity we believe and live and teach threaten our culture today? In Luke’s version of the Beatitudes he records these words of Jesus: “Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you, insult you, and slander your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.... Woe to you when all people speak well of you, because this is the way their ancestors used to treat the false prophets” (Luke 6:22,26).

While we are never exhorted to be offensive just for the sake of being offensive, it is clear that the radical call of the Way is supposed to be majorly disturbing to an unsaved world. If our faith is easy and comfortable and palatable to the masses, then we may have missed the heart of Christ’s message, who “did not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34). As Demetrius the

silversmith accurately understood, the message of Christ upends the tables of moneychangers and overturns temple gods, ultimately displacing everything that is worshipped other than His Father.

### **Questions:**

1. While in Bible days most public discussion occurred in the synagogues or marketplaces, much of our conversation now takes place on the internet. How might we compare the crowd hysteria to something “going viral” on the web? Do you think there could be a parallel between their joining a chanting mob with relatively little understanding of what was going on and our impulsively “liking” posts on Facebook or forwarding something to all our contacts? Consider such things as the importance of context, your personal knowledge of the person making a claim, the value of agreed-upon definitions of terms, and so forth.

2. The riot at Ephesus ends rather unexpectedly through the intervention of a “city clerk.” Whoever this man was, he appealed to the crowd’s rational understanding, to their respect for proper legal processes and to their fear of “being charged with rioting,” presumably by Rome. If such a riot were to break out today against us who are followers of the Way, do you think these arguments would have the same result? Why or why not?

3. We tend to make an unconscious disconnect between our culture and that of Bible days because we don’t worship the same sort of deities that drove them to such fierce loyalty. Nevertheless, human nature doesn’t change. What are our equivalent deities, why do we identify so strongly with their honor or dishonor, and how can these impulses diminish our loyalty to the one true God?

## Praying for Peace

### 1 Timothy 2:1-7

**Key Verses – 1 Timothy 2:1-4:** *First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all those who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good, and it pleases God our Savior, who wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*

There are two very different but equally appropriate ways to understand Paul's words to Timothy in this passage.

First, we can see it as an exhortation mirroring part of our Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." From this view, we are urged to pray for *everyone*—and especially all earthly authorities—so that His will might be established in every aspect of human relationship and activity.

What is God's will? It is that all be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. It is precisely for this reason that Jesus "gave Himself—a ransom for all" (verse 6). The provision for perfection, both for individuals and for the human race, has been sufficiently and completely offered. When we pray with this vision firmly grasped in our minds and spirits, we will be praying in unity with the heart of God Himself.

But of course many of us who read this passage cannot help but be disturbed by the reality that if we offer prayers—and *thanksgivings*—for all who are presently in authority in the various corners of our world, it is hard to see the connection between their prospering and our own. Too often modern authorities, like the Roman authorities in Paul's day, do not serve to enhance the tranquility and quiet living of authentic followers of Christ.

Does Paul's call to prayer only apply to a theoretical world that many of us will never enjoy? Here is where I think a second meaning is to be found, one that is available to all of us no matter what political powers prevail.

In Paul's letter to the Romans he reminds them, "Everyone must submit to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist are instituted by God" (Romans 13:1). Years earlier, Solomon understood the same thing. "The king's heart is a water channel in the Lord's hand: He directs it wherever He chooses" (Proverbs 21:1). Jesus Himself told Pilate, "You would have no authority over Me at all...if it hadn't been given you from above."

How do these realities affect our prayers? Quite simply, if we truly understood and believed in the absolute sovereignty of God over every aspect of our earthly existence, including those authorities who often impact so many components of our daily lives, our prayers would become an exercise of ever-increasing trust.

As the voice of our spirit (which is the true source of authentic prayer) draws our minds into a realization that God's hand is upon *every* circumstance of history, and furthermore that He can be

trusted to direct those circumstances for our good (Romans 8:28), the result is that we WILL live lives that are peaceful and tranquil with all godliness and dignity.

You see, peace and tranquility in this sense have nothing to do with our external environment. We tend to think that peace results when stresses are removed. But in John 14:27 Jesus tells the disciples that His peace is very different from the peace the world offers. It's a peace untouched by circumstances or stresses, a peace that comes from a childlike assurance that our Father has all matters of our life held firmly in His hands.

And the result of praying with this assurance is not only inner tranquility, but outward "godliness and dignity." The word "dignity" is *semnotes*, which might be better translated as honesty, gravity, soberness or integrity. It is the tangible manifestation of our confidence that God is wise, good and powerful, and that our lives should properly be lived only in response to who He is, not in response to the chaos that surrounds us.

When we live life in this manner, Paul says, *we please God*. That's huge! That should be our greatest joy above all other joys. But there is more implied. When we live lives that radiate peace and godliness, then God's kingdom will be advanced, as others see His work in us and are themselves brought to salvation and to the knowledge of the truth.

## Questions

1. Paul opens his letter to Timothy with a warning against false teachings, and encourages Timothy to see himself as being engaged in a battle (1 Timothy 1:18). Why do you think he makes prayer the "first of all" step to take? Reading further in this letter, what other forms of obedience also help to oppose false teachings and promote "faith and a good conscience" (1 Timothy 1:19)?

2. A.B. Simpson once described prayer this way: "As I listened, it became to me the voice of prayer, the voice of wisdom, the voice of duty, and I did not need to think so hard, or pray so hard, or trust so hard; but that 'still small voice' of the Holy Spirit in my heart was God's prayer in my secret soul, was God's answer to all my questions, was God's life and strength for soul and body, and became the substance of all knowledge, and all prayer and all blessing: for it was the living GOD Himself as my life, my all."

What is gained when we realize that effectual prayer is not so much words spoken from ourselves to God, but rather words spoken *from God through* us back to Himself?

3. Verse 4 speaks of coming to "the knowledge of *the* truth." In 2 Thessalonians 2:10 Paul warns that people in the end times will perish "because they did not accept the love of *the* truth in order to be saved." Paul is speaking of a very specific truth that is received as a gift from God both in our heads (knowledge) and our hearts (love). Read 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 to see why people might refuse this gift, and also what God will do to those who reject it.

## **The Majesty on High** **Hebrews 1:1-4**

***Key Verses – Hebrews 1:1-4:** Long ago God spoke to the fathers by the prophets at different times and in different ways. In these last days, He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things and through whom He made the universe. He is the radiance of His glory, the exact expression of His nature, and He sustains all things by His powerful word. After making purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. So He became higher in rank than the angels, just as the name He inherited is superior to theirs.*

We have a tendency to view Christianity from the perspective of how it impacts us. Although we don't usually realize it, we can easily become the central actor in our play. The story line is very familiar. We were created perfect, we sinned and fell from grace, we desperately needed salvation, through the sacrifice of Jesus we now have the opportunity to become reconnected with our Creator, and one day Jesus will return and we will reign with Him.

But Christianity can only be accurately understood when we begin to realize that we are little more than the supporting cast, the "extras" if you will, in a vastly larger drama: the manifestation of God's glory not only in all of time and space, but also throughout the unfathomable span and expanse of eternity.

These opening verses in Hebrews allow us to consider reality not from our point of view, but from the view of heaven.

The universe (*aion*, the ages, or eternity) was made through Jesus  
Everything that is, is sustained by the power of His word  
He is the exact expression of the Father's nature  
He radiates the Father's glory  
He has eternally provided the purification for sin  
He has been appointed the heir of all things.

Does this perspective lessen the significance of the gospel message? As Paul would say, "Absolutely not!" You see, when we find our proper place in the larger drama of the heavenlies, this earthly stage is transformed into something eternally wondrous.

Beginning with "long ago" and culminating in "these last days," God purposefully ordained our planet and our race to bear the imprint of His glory, which is made all the more radiant against the backdrop of our fallenness and depravity. His love has blasted its way into our unworthiness, His wisdom has thundered down on our foolishness, His forbearance and mercy have swept away our petty arrogance and whimperings.

And as we, like Job of long ago, look up with trembling repentance from the ash-heaps of our lives and "see with our eyes" the infinite majesty of the Sovereign of the universe, we will understand that His exaltation is ours as well, for He has amazingly chosen to show His love and glory in the context of your life, and mine.

## Questions

1. Many if not most of our problems become overwhelming in large part because we see them only in the context of what we know, what we can fix, what we can endure—and so often WE come up short. From God’s view, our struggles are only “for a little while, if necessary” (1 Peter 1:6), and He uses them to teach us more about Himself. Consider one or two of your most pressing concerns in the larger context of what God can accomplish through them. How does this adjusted view change things?

2. Similarly, many of us see our callings as being those services we do for God. But Jesus demonstrated what our ultimate calling is when He lived a life that was the “exact expression” of the nature of the Father. Just as He could say, “The one who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9), so our purpose is to become so conformed to the image of the Son (Romans 8:29) that when people see us they see Him.

The only way we can become accurate reflections of God’s nature is by deliberately fixing our minds and hearts on Him until His personality shapes ours (see 2 Corinthians 3:18). As you serve others in whatever capacity God has granted you to serve, are they becoming more aware of who God is, what He requires and what He can do?

3. Finally, authentic worship takes place when the Spirit of Christ rules in our spirits, for He sees with proper perspective the full majesty of the Son and of the Father (John 15:26). How does this classic description by William Temple give us better insight into what God intends worship to be?

“Worship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by His holiness; the nourishment of mind with His truth; the purifying of imagination by His beauty; the opening of the heart to His love; the surrender of will to His purpose—and all of this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable and therefore the chief remedy for that self-centeredness which is our original sin and the source of all actual sin.”