

## INTRODUCTION

You are about to embark on the adventure of a lifetime! Just imagine you were living back in the First Century, going about your daily business, when a new Teacher came through town looking for disciples. What are the chances you would drop everything and spend the next three years of your life traipsing around the country with Him? When a couple of guys asked Jesus what He was up to He simply said, “Come and see!” They did. Their lives were changed forever.

I’m inviting you to walk with me through the Story of Jesus for the next forty days (Lent Season.) Each day’s reading should only take 10-15 minutes. By the time we reach the climax of the story (Jesus’ Passion Week) you will have read everything contained in the four Gospels of the New Testament. That’s right, every story, every conversation, every miracle recorded in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John has been woven together into one story –just the way He lived it.

After we finish this part of it we’ll keep going through Books II and III of the “Trilogy” which cover the New Testament books of Acts and Revelation. When we’re done (about 2 ½ months from now) you will have a very different perspective on who Jesus is and, like His first disciples, something about your life will have radically changed.

Enjoy,

J. Dan Small

FEBRUARY 18, WEDNESDAY

## PROLOGUE

Many have already written about the life of Jesus Christ. Relying on eye-witnesses and reputable sources, this record is offered to you as an orderly account of the events as they occurred.

In the beginning God spoke. He expressed who He was using words. We begin our story with The Word. Mysteriously, this “Word” was with God, and in fact, was God. We are told that this “Word” created everything that exists, so we recognize Him as the Source of all LIFE. That LIFE is light-filled. It can diffuse the darkness (ignorance) that permeates our world.

Even more mysterious is the fact that this God-Word became a human child and grew up and lived right here in our neighborhoods. This light-source shone on the world He’d made, but the darkened human race didn’t recognize Him. But whoever did take hold of Him was given the gift of a life-time: a new identity as one of God’s own children, not based on their credentials or efforts but just because that’s what God desired for them.

John, the one who baptized, came on the scene before Jesus went public. He prepared the way by announcing Jesus’ arrival and encouraging everyone to “see the light” of Who He was. John was quick to acknowledge that he himself was not the Light, but that Someone was coming who had existed long before John had been born. (More will be said shortly about John’s miracle birth.) In his introduction, John made it clear that although no human had ever seen God, Jesus had; and, coming from the heart of the Godhead, Jesus would make it possible for mankind to get to know God. John also hinted at the major shift in how humans would relate to God. “This Jesus,” he declared, “was not bringing laws like Moses did. He was bringing something called grace.” Grace and truth would be the hallmarks of Jesus’ message.

In case some might mistake Jesus, the God-man, for an alien or think of Him as other-than-human, we have the genealogies of His mother, Mary, as well as His earthly (not biological, but that will be explained in a few pages, too) father, showing that He can trace His human blood-line through King David, the Patriarchs, and all the way back to Adam.

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During the reign of Herod over Judea, the Jewish temple duties were handled by a rotation of authorized priests. Among the duties was the burning of incense in the Holy Place day after day. Our story begins when this routine was interrupted by a supernatural visitor who startled a priest named Zacharias. Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth were up in years and had prayed in vain for a child, an heir, which was so important in their culture. They had lived as faithful God-followers even though their prayers had gone unanswered.

So on this day when it was Zacharias' turn to do the temple chores, he was working inside the sacred room, putting the daily incense on the altar. Suddenly an angel was standing in front of him beside the altar. Naturally, he was struck with fear, which the angel perceived. "Nothing to be afraid of, Zacharias. I'm here to tell you that your many prayers have been heard and your dear wife, Elizabeth, will become pregnant. You are going to have a son!"

The angel went on to explain that his name would be John; he would have a special assignment, some dietary restrictions, and the tremendous privilege of preparing the entrance of the long-awaited Messiah. He also noted that this miracle baby would experience the infusion of God's Spirit even while in the womb. "He will turn many of Israel's children toward the Lord their God," he went on to say, "and in the spirit and power of Elijah he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and cause rebels to listen to the wisdom of those who are godly."

I'm sure you can appreciate Zacharias' skepticism, knowing that both he and his wife were way beyond child-bearing years. He asked, rather doubtfully, how this could possibly happen.

Now, the angel Gabriel wasn't used to anyone questioning his word, especially when he knew it had been given him by the Sovereign Ruler of the universe. You can almost hear the edge in his voice as he answers, "I am Gabriel who stands in the very presence of God Almighty! He sent me with this exciting news; but since you doubt my words, I'm going to strike your tongue so that from this hour until all this takes place you won't be able to say a word."

Meanwhile, the crowd outside was wondering why Zacharias' routine tasks were taking so long. As he emerged and they saw that he couldn't speak, they realized through his gestures that something out of the ordinary had taken place. Once his term of service was completed, Zacharias returned home to Elizabeth. And she conceived. For the next five months she stayed out of the public eye, astonished that the Lord had "looked on her" in this special way.

## FEBRUARY 19, THURSDAY

Six months later Gabriel was given another assignment. This time to the humble village in northern Israel, Nazareth. There a young girl named Mary, who was probably in her teens, was awaiting her upcoming marriage to a man named Joseph. The angel appeared to her in her house with this announcement: "Good news! The Lord is about to give you the highest honor any woman could have!"

Needless to say, Mary was as unprepared for this as Zacharias had been in the temple. Seeing the stunned look on her face, Gabriel continued, "God is so pleased with you that He's chosen you to become the mother

of the promised Messiah! When He is born, you'll name Him Jesus; and someday He will take the throne of David and rule forever!"

Mary's response wasn't the same as Zacharias' had been. Yes, she had questions about how this would take place since she wasn't married yet, but there was an obvious willingness in her voice when she asked, "How will this happen since I'm not married yet?"

Patently, Gabriel filled in a few more details for her. "God's Spirit will come upon you and the Power of the Highest will overshadow you so that, in fact, your son will be the Son of God. And," he went on, "God said to tell you that your aunt, Elizabeth, down in Judah is six months along in her miracle pregnancy. He wanted you to know that with Him nothing is impossible."

From her heart, Mary spoke these precious words, "I am the humble servant of the Lord. I am willing for this to happen just as you have said." Then the angel departed.

Mary took the news about her elderly aunt as a hint from God that she should go to visit her. She made the long, lonely trip south. Upon arriving at her aunt's home, when Elizabeth heard her voice at the door, she felt the child in her womb jump. God's Spirit filled Elizabeth's heart and voice with this amazing tribute:

"What a blessing! You are truly the most blessed woman in history! And bless that little child in your womb! How is it that the mother of my Lord should grace my humble home? The moment I heard your voice, my baby leaped for joy inside! Bless you, child, for believing what the Lord has told you!"

Mary responded with her own words of thanks:

"My inmost soul is overwhelmed by the Lord. My spirit overflows with joy. He has reached out to a simple village girl like me and has given me the greatest place any woman could hope for. He is so mighty, so holy, and so merciful. This shows that He brings down all those who are proud and raises up the humble who fear Him. Those who have nothing, He has filled with good things; those who are focused on their wealth have been sent away empty. He hasn't forgotten His chosen people but has remembered His promise to Abraham, and He will bring it to pass."

Mary stayed on with Elizabeth for about three months until it was time for Elizabeth's child to be born. At his birth the whole community came to celebrate along with her.

Meanwhile, Zacharias remained unable to speak. It was when the baby was eight days old, the traditional age for the circumcision of male babies, that he was given his official name. Everyone was sure they would name this first-born after his father, Zacharias. But no, Elizabeth was insisting on naming him "John" even though there were no men in their family line with that name. So naturally they turned to Zacharias to settle the issue. He took a writing tablet and spelled out the name, "J-O-H-N." Everyone was shocked.

But they were even more surprised when Zacharias began speaking out loud for the first time in over nine months. He praised God, and the Holy Spirit filled his heart and lips with these prophetic words:

Luke 1:76-78 "Look what God has done! He has visited His people and is raising up Someone to save us from our enemies. For generations prophets have said this day would come, a Day when we could be set free to live for Him every day of our lives!

And you, my own son, will be the forerunner, proclaiming a message of sins taken away. This promised Deliverer will give light to all who've been sitting in darkness and the shadow of death, and He will guide our feet into the way of peace."

As you can imagine, the story about these strange events rippled through the hill country for a long time causing everyone to wonder, "What kind of child is this going to be?"

John grew up in the southern desert area of Israel, and the supernatural hand of God in his life was evident as he became strong in spirit.

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Mary returned home to Nazareth, and being over three months along, there was no hiding that she was pregnant. Joseph, a God-fearing man, realized that it would be wrong for him to marry someone who was immoral. Because he was gracious and wanted to spare Mary public humiliation, he began looking for a way to deal with her sin privately.

Wrestling with this late into the night, he fell asleep and had a dream. An angel was there calling his name. “Joseph, heir of David’s line, do not hesitate to take Mary as your own wife. The child in her was not conceived in sin but by the infusion of God’s Spirit. It’s a boy and you’ll name Him ‘Jesus.’ (In their mother-tongue, this name is ‘Yeshua,’ which means ‘the Lord saves.’) He will, in fact, save His people from their sins.”

Isaiah had prophesied this seven hundred years earlier when he wrote, “A virgin will conceive, give birth to a son, and call His name ‘Immanuel.’” (Immanuel means “God with us.”)

Once Joseph was fully awake, he made arrangements to immediately take her as his wife. However, respecting her unique condition, they did not consummate their relationship until after Jesus was born.

#### FEBRUARY 20, FRIDAY

Meanwhile in Rome, Caesar Augustus decreed that everyone in the Empire should be registered for tax purposes. So throughout the Middle East, everyone had to travel to their home city. That meant Joseph and Mary would have to go to Bethlehem, about 80 miles south of Nazareth. As they approached the village, Mary realized the birth was imminent; so they looked for a suitable room but were unsuccessful. The best they could do was to turn an animal shelter into a make-shift birthing center.

That night some shepherds doing night-watch were shaken out of their slumber by a burst of light. The whole sky was ablaze with light! An angel of the Lord was standing before them and said, “Don’t be afraid! I have exciting news for you and for people everywhere! Just now, over in Bethlehem, a Savior has been born! He is the long-promised Messiah! Look for a newborn child, wrapped up snugly and lying in a manger.”

No sooner had the angel made this announcement than the bright sky was filled with thousands of angels, like a choir, saying, “Glory to God on high! Peace and blessing to mankind on earth!”

And then the scene was over. The angels had gone and the night sky returned to normal. Quite motivated by this, they said, “Let’s go NOW! We’ve got to see what the Lord has just announced!” They ran toward the village and found everything just like they’d been told. With hearts full of worship, they exuberantly shared their story with everyone they met before returning to their flocks. The townsfolk marveled, but Mary cherished these stories in her heart.

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On the eighth day, when the baby was circumcised, they gave Him the name Jesus, as the angel had instructed Mary before He was conceived.

After forty days (the Jewish purification period following the birth of a son), they took Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem. The Old Testament Law prescribed that firstborn sons, who technically “belong to the

Lord,” be redeemed by presenting an animal sacrifice. Poorer folks could substitute a pair of turtle-doves or young pigeons. This is what Jesus’ parents brought with them.

As they approached the Temple, an elderly man named Simeon introduced himself to them, explaining that God had revealed to him that he wouldn’t die before seeing the promised Messiah. That very morning the Holy Spirit had urged him to come to the Temple, and he’d arrived about the same time as Joseph and Mary with their infant Son.

Tenderly, Simeon took the baby from His mother and held Him. As he gazed at the infant face, he prayed, “Lord, now You can take me Home. Just as You promised, my eyes have seen the One You prepared to bring salvation to the whole world!” As he handed the child back to Mary, Simeon prophesied, saying, “Your Child will shake things up as He exposes the hearts of many. He will face strong opposition, and deep suffering will be your lot as His mother.”

As they stood there, Anna, an eighty-four-year-old widow approached them. In recent years she had stayed at the Temple, often fasting and praying night and day, longing for God to deliver Jerusalem from her oppressors. Upon seeing the young Child, she burst out in thanksgiving and began telling others about Him, those who, like her, had been looking for a deliverer.

Joseph and Mary wondered at these unusual events as they completed the prescribed rituals and returned home.

Sometime later, maybe as much as two years, a group of scholar-astronomers from the East, known in the region as “king-makers,” arrived in Jerusalem. It caused quite a stir when they entered the city, announcing that they’d come to pay homage to the newborn “king-of-the-Jews.” Herod, the king, gathered the religious leaders and scribes and asked if the archives had any information about this. Sure enough, they found an obscure passage in the book of Micah predicting that Bethlehem, a small village of Judea, would someday be the birthplace of a Ruler who would shepherd the nation.

So Herod gave the visitors directions. In a private consultation he asked them when they had first seen the star. Feigning a desire to worship this new king, he urged them to report back once they’d found Him. As they were leaving the city, the star they’d seen previously appeared again and led them right to the door of the home where Jesus was living with His parents. They were so thrilled! Seeing the child, they bowed low and worshiped Him. Then they presented Him with rich gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

However, when they left Bethlehem, they did not return through Jerusalem because they had been warned in a dream NOT to go back to Herod. So they took an alternate route to their own country.

At about the same time, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, instructing him to take the family to Egypt because Herod was out to destroy their Child. Though this hadn’t been in their plans, God had foretold it centuries before through the prophet who said, “I have called My Son out of Egypt.”

It was a good thing that they left Bethlehem immediately. The angel was right. Herod was so furious about being slighted by the mysterious “king-makers” that he ordered every male child in the region to be killed. Based on the timing of events described by the visitors, the order was directed at all boys who had been born in the previous two years. Jeremiah the prophet had written about this tragic event some 600 years earlier: “A voice was heard in Ramah: crying, weeping, and loud groaning; Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they are taken from her.”

In time, Herod died; and an angel of the Lord again appeared in a dream to Joseph, telling him that it was safe to return home to Israel. Along the way Joseph learned that Herod's son Archelaus had been named king. In another dream an angel directed Joseph not to return to Bethlehem but to his home in Galilee. They ended up settling in Nazareth, and the ancient prophecy that declared "He will be called a Nazarene" was fulfilled.

## FEBRUARY 21, SATURDAY

Jesus' childhood was marked by extraordinary wisdom, and He became strong in both spirit and body. The only story recorded from His early years took place when He was twelve years old. His parents took Him to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. As was the custom, crowds of people made the pilgrimage for this feast. When the time came for returning to their homes, Jesus' parents naturally assumed He was in the company of all the youth. After a long day's travel, they looked for Jesus and discovered the fact that He was not among the travelers. So they returned to Jerusalem to find Him.

Meanwhile, Jesus had been occupied with the teachers in the temple. He participated in their discussions, listening and asking questions. These religious leaders were quite astonished at how informed and insightful Jesus was.

When Joseph and Mary finally located Jesus, they were amazed at what He had been doing. Mary, who was quite overcome with worry, chided Him for causing them this distress. Jesus' reply (which they didn't understand at the time) was that they ought to have expected Him to be "doing My Father's business." Jesus returned with them to Nazareth, submitting Himself to them. God's blessing was upon Him and He was loved and respected by all who knew Him.

Mary treasured all this in her heart.

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It wasn't until Jesus was about thirty years old that the details of His life were more fully recorded. The historical context was Tiberius Caesar's fifteenth year as Emperor. Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor in Judea; Herod, Philip, and Lysanias were Jewish tetrarchs over different regions of Israel; the Jewish High Priests at the time were Annas and his son-in-law, Caiaphas.

It was at this time that John the Baptizer began his public ministry, calling the nation to repent and be baptized and saying that "the kingdom of heaven had arrived on earth." Dressed in an unusual outfit of a camel's hair tunic and leather belt, and known for a strange diet of locusts and wild honey, he was remarkably effective in attracting large numbers of people from miles around. They came to the Jordan River to confess their sins and to be baptized by him.

It's worth noting that several prophets had predicted John's ministry centuries earlier. They said of him, "Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way for You;" and, "the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord. Make His paths straight. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

John attracted large crowds, but it wasn't because his message made them feel good. He confronted their hypocrisy and nationalistic ego when he said, "You brood of poisonous snakes, who warned you that you were headed for God's wrath? If you're serious about repentance, it has to change the way you live. No hiding behind this empty claim of being 'Abraham's descendants' as if your bloodline is all that matters. Good grief,



if God wanted to, He could start a whole new set of Abraham's children out of these rocks. Every tree that fails to bear good fruit gets chopped down and thrown into the fire. I'm telling you, the axe is about to strike the root of the tree! You'd better make sure that your repentance isn't just words but that it produces the fruit of real changed character!"

The people were shaken by this and asked, "What do we need to do?"

"For example," John said, "if you've got two coats, give one to someone who needs it. The same goes with your food. Look out for others' needs, not just your own."

A few of the tax collectors in the crowd asked what they should do. John replied, "Only collect what you're required to. Stop padding the bill and siphoning off excess for your own pockets."

Then some soldiers wanted to know what "fruits of repentance" meant for them. "Stop intimidating and taking advantage of others. And stop complaining about your wages," was John's response.

John's message and methods caused the people to wonder if perhaps he was the promised Messiah for whom they had been waiting. He silenced that rumor when he declared, "There is One coming who is so much greater than I am that I'm not worthy even to unfasten His sandals. Yes, I've been baptizing you with water, but He will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Not only that, He also comes ready to separate wheat from chaff, gathering the wheat into His barn, but burning the chaff with unquenchable fire."

It wasn't long before Jesus went from His hometown of Nazareth in Galilee down to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. John was incredulous. "You should be baptizing me! Surely You don't need to be baptized."

Jesus simply explained that this was part of God's process of making all things right. In identifying with those being baptized, Jesus was affirming both His humanness as well as the call to a Kingdom way of life. So Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan. As He came up out of the water, the skies opened: God the Spirit came out of the clouds in the form of a dove and landed on Jesus. Then, coming out of heaven in a voice all could hear, were these words: "You are My precious Son; I'm so proud of You. You are the joy of My life."

## **FEBRUARY 22, SUNDAY**

Immediately following his public baptism, Jesus, being filled with the Spirit, was driven by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil, Satan. He was alone except for the wild beasts that inhabited the region. He had fasted for forty days, so he was very hungry.

That was when the devil tempted Him by suggesting that He command the stones to become bread, adding derisively: "If You are the Son of God."

Jesus, not taking His cues from the Tempter, quoted Scripture in replying, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'"

Next, the devil took Him to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem. He, following suit, quoted Scripture to add weight to his temptation, saying, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here; for it is written: 'He shall give His angels charge over You to keep You,' and 'In their hands they shall bear You up lest You dash Your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus responded with another Scripture, saying to him, "It is also written, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'"

For his final attempt to get Jesus to submit to his counsel, Satan took Him to a very high mountain from which they could see all the kingdoms of the world and their glory at once. From there he offered Jesus rule over it all, saying, “All this authority and the honors and privileges that come with it will be Yours. Since it has been handed over to me, I can give it to whomever I choose. All You have to do is fall down and worship me, and it’s Yours!”

Jesus’ terse and unequivocal reply was, “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.’”

Having failed to win Jesus over, Satan left Him until a more opportune time. Then angels came to strengthen Jesus.

Meanwhile, John continued baptizing along the Jordan River. Some of the Jewish religious leaders were sent from Jerusalem to investigate. They asked whether he considered himself to be the Messiah, a reincarnation of Elijah, or perhaps the Prophet predicted in their ancient writings. John flatly denied those roles, saying that the One they were describing was, in fact, among them. He went on to state that the Messiah, although yet to be revealed, had existed long before he had.

It was the very next day that John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is the One of whom I said, ‘He is greater than I am because He existed before I did.’” John also reminded the crowd that just a few weeks before he had seen the Spirit descend upon Him from heaven in the form of a dove. “God had revealed to me,” he went on to say, “that this would be the visible confirmation of the arrival of the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. I saw it and I’m testifying: here He is, the Son of God.”

The next day Jesus passed the place where John and two of his disciples were standing. John again told them, “There is the Lamb of God.”

Immediately the two disciples of John left him and began to follow Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them coming and asked what they were looking for.

“Where are you staying, Teacher?” they asked.

“Come and see” was Jesus’ reply. So they went along and spent the day with Him. One of them, whose name was Andrew, quickly found his brother, Simon Peter, and told him, “We have found the Messiah!” He brought him to Jesus.

When Jesus met Simon, He said, “So you are Simon, son of Jonah. I will change your name to Cephas (which means stone).”

## **FEBRUARY 23, MONDAY**

The next day Jesus decided to return to Galilee. He found Philip and invited him to come along. Philip was from Bethsaida, the same city as Andrew and Peter. He found his friend Nathanael and told him about Jesus, saying, “We’ve met the One whom Moses and the Prophets said would come — the Messiah! His name is Jesus. He’s from Nazareth, son of a carpenter by the name of Joseph.”

Nathanael’s response was, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”



To which Philip said simply, "Come and see."

As Nathanael approached, Jesus said to him, "Now here is an Israelite whose life is above reproach!"

Nathanael was taken aback. "How do You know me?"

Jesus told him that He'd seen him sitting under a fig tree before Philip had come up to him.

Nathanael was convinced. "Teacher, You are the Son of God, rightful king of Israel."

Commending him, Jesus went on to say, "So you believe Who I am just because I said I saw you under the fig tree? You will most certainly see greater proofs in the days to come: the heavens opening and angels going back and forth between heaven and the Son of Man."

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A few days later Jesus and His disciples were invited to a wedding in Cana. Jesus' mother also attended; and when she heard that the hosts had run out of wine for the feast, she approached her Son about the situation. He let her know that it may not be time for doing public miracles.

Nevertheless, in a few minutes He instructed the servants to fill six large stone water pots with water. No sooner had they filled them with water, than Jesus told them to take a cupful to the master of ceremonies.

The servants knew where the wine had come from, but the host had no idea. So he called to the bridegroom saying, "This is remarkable! At most celebrations they serve the good wine first and save the lower quality for later. Instead, you have saved the best for last!"

And so it was that Jesus demonstrated His unique power. This was his first miracle. It increased the disciples' faith in Him.

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From there, Jesus, His family, and His disciples went to Capernaum for a few days and then made His way to Jerusalem for the Passover.

When He arrived at the temple, He saw the courtyard filled with animals and with people conducting business. Jesus found some scraps of rope and wove them into a whip which He then used to drive all the animals out of the sacred space. He also dumped out the money boxes and declared loudly, "Get these things out of here! Do not turn My Father's house into a public market!"

Needless to say, this caused quite a commotion. The disciples recalled the Scripture that says, "Zeal for the sacredness of Your House overwhelmed Me."

Some of the leaders approached Jesus, asking, "Who gave You the right to do this? Give us some sign that You have this kind of authority."

Jesus said cryptically, "Destroy this temple and three days later I'll raise it back up."

The Jews were incredulous, "We've been working on rebuilding this for forty-six years. How can You talk about doing it in just three days?"

Of course, He was referring to His body; but it wasn't until three years later, after His resurrection, that the disciples put this all together and more fully believed what Jesus had told them.

The people were astonished at the reports of His miraculous powers, and many believed what had been claimed about Him; but Jesus didn't put too much stock in their support, knowing how fickle people can be.

## FEBRUARY 24, TUESDAY

One evening a Pharisee named Nicodemus approached Jesus privately. “Teacher, we’ve been talking about You and recognize that You must have come from God because no one could do the signs and wonders You’re doing unless God was empowering him.”

“Listen to Me,” Jesus answered, “no one can possibly know what God is doing unless they have been reborn from Above.”

Nicodemus was confused. “Surely You’re not suggesting that a grown man like me has to get back into my mother’s womb to be born all over again.”

Jesus explained further, saying, “You are thinking strictly from a physical perspective. You have been born physically; but to see the kingdom of God, you must have a life conceived by the Spirit in your spirit. This is something that happens invisibly, like wind. You can’t see the wind, but you can hear and see when it is blowing.”

Nicodemus couldn’t wrap his mind around this concept. “I just don’t understand,” he told Jesus.

Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Aren’t you a prominent teacher in Israel? How is it that you don’t already know this? I can tell that you don’t trust My testimony. This is so basic. If you don’t grasp this, how can you hope to understand the larger Message God is speaking? There is only One who came from heaven and can truly explain the truths of heaven — that is, the Son of Man.

“Nicodemus, do you recall the story of Moses putting the brass serpent on a pole in the desert? That was a foreshadow of how the Son of Man must be lifted up for the healing and deliverance of all who look to Him in faith. Trusting God’s heart is at the center of the Message. It was out of His exceedingly great love for mankind that God gave His Son to deliver them from death and to impart to them His very own eternal life. The Son was not sent as Judge to condemn but as Savior to rescue from condemnation.

“Those who accept the Son for Who He is and receive His message have escaped judgment. Unfortunately, because most prefer living in darkness (where they can get away with doing evil) and hate the light that exposes their misdeeds, they remain condemned.

“Those with nothing to hide, whose actions originate in God, have no problem being transparent, letting their deeds be seen for what they are: truth!”

We have no record of how Nicodemus responded at the time or what else they may have discussed.

From Jerusalem Jesus and His disciples went to a town called Aenon near Salim where John was baptizing. As Jesus taught, His disciples baptized. Some of the people went to John with the report that Jesus was drawing bigger crowds than he was.

John replied with sincerity and humility, “What we have is from God. My message is not something I made up to attract a following. You recall how clearly I stated that I was not the Messiah; I was just sent to prepare the way for Him, like the best man introducing the bridegroom at a wedding. As ‘best man’ I’m not jealous but thrilled for Him. He will be the focus of attention, I must fade into the background.

“This is only right since He has come from heaven and I am from the earth. He is explaining life from heaven’s perspective, but most folks won’t accept it. Those who do believe Him discover God’s truth. He speaks God’s words, and everything He says and does is by the Spirit of God.

“It is evident that the Father loves the Son and has put Him in charge of everything. So everyone who accepts and trusts the Son gets in on everything He is and has . . . forever! Conversely, those who reject Him miss out on His life and can only look forward to God’s holy judgment.”

## FEBRUARY 25, WEDNESDAY

John was imprisoned for publicly exposing Herod’s many misconducts, which included adultery with his sister-in-law, Herodius. When Jesus learned about John’s incarceration and also of the Pharisees’ awareness that His popularity was eclipsing that of John the Baptist, He left Judea to return to Galilee.

Ordinarily, Jews traveling between Judea and Galilee took the long way around, avoiding Samaria because they despised Samaritans. But leading His disciples north, Jesus explained that He needed to go through Samaria. Around noon they approached the city of Sychar, the site of Jacob’s well. This was an area bequeathed to Joseph by the patriarch Jacob.

Jesus was quite tired so He rested by the well while the disciples went into the city for some lunch. When a woman approached the well, Jesus asked her if she would give Him a cup of water. Knowing that Jews normally wouldn’t have any dealings with Samaritans, she asked Him, “How is it that You, a Jew, are willing to ask a Samaritan for a drink — and a woman, no less?”

Jesus said, “Ma’am, if you only knew what God wants to give you and Who it is you’re speaking with, you would be asking Me for a drink of living water!”

The woman didn’t know what to say to that. She couldn’t imagine what He was talking about. “Sir, I see that You don’t have anything to draw water with,” she said. “Where would You get this ‘living water’? Surely You’re not claiming to be greater than our forefather Jacob, who watered his flocks and drank from this well himself, are You?”

Jesus replied, “Everyone who drinks from this well will have to come back again and again, but whoever drinks of the water I give will never thirst again. The water will spring up inside him, bringing God’s kind of life.”

That sounded great to the woman. She told Him, “I’d like some of that water! That way I won’t have to keep coming out here to this well.”

Jesus’ response was rather unusual. He asked her to get her husband, to which she replied, “I don’t have a husband.”

Then Jesus told her, “You are right when you say you don’t have a husband right now. You have had five husbands, and you’re not married to the man with whom you’re currently living.”

No doubt embarrassed by the course of this conversation, she changed the subject. “Sir, you’re obviously a prophet with special insights. Our fathers have worshiped for generations on this mountain while the Jews say Jerusalem is the only proper place God has ordained for worship.” The question inferred was, “Who is right?”

Jesus used her diversion to announce the very essence of His Message. “Ma’am,” He said to her, “although the emphasis has for centuries been about *where* we worship, that’s about to change forever. The Jews do have an advantage because the Message explaining all this does come through their blood-line. However, regardless of heritage, God is looking for those who worship Him genuinely from the core of their being. God is spirit, you know, so what matters is whether we live authentically out of our spirits.”

Eager to end this conversation, as it was getting a little deep, she said, “I’m sure that when the promised Messiah comes, He’ll be able to explain all this.”

Jesus smiled and replied, “Here I am.” Before they could continue the discussion, the disciples returned from the town. It was obvious from the look on their faces that they were shocked to see their Master openly conversing with a Samaritan woman.

She took this interruption as an opportunity to hurry back to the city. She went immediately to some of the men and said, “You’ve got to come see this Man I met, Who, never having seen me before, told me everything I’ve ever done. Do you think He could be the Messiah?”

This piqued their curiosity and a crowd headed for the well. Meanwhile, Jesus’ disciples urged Him to join in their meal. “You go ahead,” He said, “I’m feeling pretty full right now Myself.” The disciples looked at each other, wondering if someone else had brought by some food. Jesus explained, “What satisfies Me most is doing the work the Father has assigned Me. Look around; the harvest is ready! Obviously I’m not talking about the physical fields of grain you can see — they won’t be ready for another four months. No, I’m talking about a spiritual crop that produces eternal life. Some have the task of planting the seeds; others get to reap the fruit. In this work others have been planting seeds for a long time, and you get to be part of their hard work by gathering the harvest.”

The disciples were about to see this come true. The crowd came out to meet Him and were so taken with His Message that they urged Him to stay on in Sychar. Jesus and His disciples stayed for two days. The testimony of the villagers was, “We first believed because of what You were able to tell this woman; but now, having heard for ourselves, we know that You are the Messiah, the One sent to save the world.”

Then Jesus, empowered by the Spirit, returned to Galilee. Many of the people had been to Jerusalem and news of His activities had spread quickly. He was welcomed in the region and He taught regularly in their synagogues.

One of the towns in Galilee was Cana where He had turned water into wine. An influential leader from Cana found Jesus and begged Him to come to his home to heal his son who lay at the point of death. Jesus rebuked him saying, “Why won’t you believe in Me unless I do a miracle?”

But the official persisted, “Sir, come quickly or he will surely die.”

To which Jesus stated simply, “You may return home; your son is healed.” The man took Jesus at His word and headed home.

Along the way, some of his servants ran to meet him and joyfully announced that his son was better. The man asked when the change had occurred, and they told him it had been around 1 p.m. The official realized that this was the very hour he had met with Jesus. Then he and his entire household believed in Jesus. So Jesus had now performed a second miracle in Galilee.

## **FEBRUARY 26, THURSDAY**

From there Jesus made His way to His hometown of Nazareth. On the Sabbath He went to the synagogue as usual. He stood up to read the Scripture of the day; and when He was given the scroll, He turned to the prophet Isaiah and read these words:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the Gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.”

After handing the scroll back to the attendant, He sat down; everyone was watching and waiting to see if He would comment on the passage. He spoke to them and said, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled before your very eyes!”

The congregation was amazed at how simply yet profoundly He spoke. They couldn’t get over the fact that this was “Joseph’s son” who had grown up in their neighborhood.

He rebuked them saying, “I know you’re waiting to see Me perform the miracles you’ve been hearing about; but, as the saying goes, ‘no prophet is honored by those he grew up with.’ No, as history records, back in the days of Elijah there was a great famine. There were plenty of widows in Israel, but he was sent to help a Sidonian widow. And in Elisha’s day, while there were many lepers in Israel, none of them was healed — only Naaman, the Syrian.”

Suddenly the mood in the synagogue changed and everyone became furious. They dragged Him toward a cliff at the edge of town, intending to throw Him off; but mysteriously, He walked right through the crowd and got away.

Jesus moved to Capernaum and established that as His home. Capernaum is at the north end of the Sea of Galilee in the regions originally parceled out to Zebulun and Naphtali (two of the original tribes of Israel). Once again, a prophecy from centuries before was being fulfilled:

“The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles: the people who sat in darkness saw a great light; and upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light has dawned.”

From that time Jesus’ Message was, “Get serious about your life: God’s Kingdom is here.”

One day as He walked near the Sea of Galilee, He noticed Simon Peter and Andrew whom He had met previously. They were fisherman, but Jesus invited them to follow Him, saying, “I will make you fishers of men.” Without hesitation they left their nets and followed Him. Further down the beach they came upon James and John along with their father, Zebedee. They were busy mending nets, but Jesus also invited them to become His followers. They quickly left everything with their father and his hired hands.

Together they went to Capernaum and entered the synagogue on the Sabbath. Jesus taught the people and they were amazed at how He spoke with such authority, unlike their usual teachers.

On one Sabbath a man who had a demon was in attendance. He shouted at Jesus saying, “Leave us alone! What do we have to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who You are: the Holy One from God!”

Jesus rebuked the spirit, telling it to be quiet and to come out of the man. Then the man’s body shook violently. The spirit shrieked and came out of him. After this, Jesus’ teaching and authority were the topic of much conversation throughout Galilee. The people wondered how He could command evil spirits and get them to obey Him with a word.

After the synagogue service Jesus and his followers went to the home of Simon Peter and Andrew, where Simon's mother-in-law was sick with a high fever. They told Jesus about it and asked Him to help. He went to her side, took her hand, and rebuked the fever. Immediately she was healed, got out of bed, and began serving them.

That same evening the whole community showed up at the house where Jesus was staying. They brought all kinds of sick and demon-possessed to Him. He healed them all, laying hands on them and casting out demons with a command. The demons kept shouting, "You are the Messiah, the Son of God!" But Jesus silenced them.

The prophet Isaiah had predicted Jesus' healing work when he wrote, "He Himself took our infirmities and removed our diseases."

Jesus got up very early the next morning and went out to a quiet place away from the city where He could pray. Before long, Simon and the others found Him and told Him that everyone was looking for Him. The crowd didn't want Him to leave, but He explained that He had to preach the Message of God's Kingdom to the other cities.

He went throughout Galilee preaching, healing, and casting out demons. His fame spread and they kept bringing Him all who had various afflictions. People also came from Syria, Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan. Soon the crowds were so large He had to get in a boat and teach them from there.

After a while He told Simon to take the boat out further and put in their nets for a catch. Simon retorted with the complaint that they'd been fishing all night and had caught nothing. "But Master, since You say so we'll try it," he rather begrudgingly assented.

No sooner had they dropped their nets in than they were teeming with so many fish the nets began to break. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. There were so many fish that when they loaded them into the boats they began to sink.

Simon, who had been fishing that lake all his life, had never seen anything like it. He knew Jesus had caused this. He fell down in front of Him and said, "O Lord, I'm not worthy to have You in my boat. I am too much of a sinner to be around You."

Jesus reassured him, saying, "Don't be afraid. From now on you'll be in the business of catching men." So as soon as they reached the shore, they left their fishing boats to follow Him.

## **FEBRUARY 27, FRIDAY**

Jesus took His disciples away from the city and began to explain to them how God's kingdom differed from life as they'd known it.

- "God's blessing is on all who recognize their poverty without Him. Heaven's kingdom is prepared for people like that.
- All who have known deep sorrow will experience great comfort.
- In God's plan the earth belongs not to the power-brokers but to the humble.
- All who long for God's way of life will find full satisfaction in Him.
- Those who show mercy to others will themselves be shown mercy.
- Only those whose hearts are pure will see God.
- Those who are truly God's children will work peace in the world.



“Along the way, as you live like this, you will suffer persecution, slander, and false accusations; but you can rejoice anyway because God is saving up a huge reward for you in His kingdom. Know that you’re in good company with the holy prophets of old who were similarly mistreated.

“On the other hand, what troubles and heartaches await you who revel in your prosperity! What desperate hunger lies in store for all who boast of their affluence! The ones who spend their days in frivolity and pleasure will discover what mourning and grief feel like, and all who are given places of honor by the crowds will find out how worthless that praise is. For generations, people like them cheered on the false teachers and prophets.

“While you are in the world you serve as salt, preserving and enhancing; unless you lose your ‘saltiness,’ in which case you’ve lost your value. While you are in the world you are like lights, doing good things that can be seen by others to help them recognize and honor your Father in heaven. Let your life be a beacon of light in the darkness.

“I am not bringing you a new teaching that does away with the Old Testament. No, I have come to demonstrate how all that it teaches can be lived to the full. Those who minimize the importance of God’s revealed will won’t amount to much in His kingdom, while those who live it and teach it will be great. My message is this: unless and until you are living better than the scribes and Pharisees you won’t even get into the kingdom of heaven. Surely a blind person can’t provide assistance to others who are blind; they’ll both fall into the ditch. Those who truly learn from their teachers eventually become like them.

“Let me explain what I mean. The letter of the Law, to which the scribes and Pharisees proudly adhere, says, ‘You must not murder.’ They are quick to bring murderers to justice. But I’m here to tell you that if you even get angry with your brother, call him a fool, or curse him in your heart, you are in danger of the fiery judgment of hell.

“Once you understand the tremendous value God places on human souls, you’ll make reconciliation and restitution a priority, even to the point of interrupting your worship. If, while you are worshiping, you remember that you have offended someone, drop what you’re doing and go make peace with them. Only then will your offering be pleasing to the Lord.

“Here’s another example: The commandment literally says, ‘You must not commit adultery.’ I’m telling you that if you even look twice at a woman to satisfy your sexual appetite, you have broken this Law. Once you recognize the sacredness of human sexuality, you’ll see why it would be better to pluck out your eyes and go through life blind or handicapped than to be led astray by your senses and end up in hell.

“The scribes and Pharisees have declared: ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce;’ but I say that whoever divorces his wife (unless she has been unfaithful to her husband) is making her an adulteress because whoever marries a divorced woman is committing adultery.

“They have also made up elaborate rules about the right way to make promises or swear oaths. Supposedly, if you swear by Heaven or earth or Jerusalem your word is more binding. My word to you is that everyone should speak forthrightly, honestly, and plainly: ‘yes’ means yes, ‘no’ means no; and if you say you’ll do something, be sure you follow through. After all, what good is it to swear by something over which you have no control? Heaven, after all, is God’s throne, the earth His footstool and Jerusalem belongs to the great King. Why, you can’t even stop your hair from turning gray, so what good is it to ‘swear by your own head?’

“The Law, as understood by the scribes and Pharisees, exacts meticulous retribution — that is, ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth;’ but let me describe God’s heart in this matter: if someone hits you, don’t

hit him back. If he wins a case against you and demands your shirt as payment, give him your jacket as well. And if anyone forces you to go a mile with him (as soldiers often did in those days requiring citizens to carry their packs), offer to go a second mile. In God's Kingdom if someone has a need and asks for help, we don't turn our backs on him.

"Your religious teachers take the command to 'love your neighbor' and add 'hate your enemy.' On the contrary, I encourage you to love your enemies and to pray for those who abuse you; do good things for those who hate you and even bless the ones who curse you. That will demonstrate that you are like your Heavenly Father who equally dispenses sunlight and rain upon those who are honest and good as well as the evildoers. Only loving those who are nice to you is no great accomplishment. Anyone can do that! Treat others the way you want to be treated. If you only greet the folks you like, you're acting just like the pagans. No, your lives must reflect the heart of your Heavenly Father: perfectly loving.

"Earlier I explained that when you do good deeds it gives the world a chance to see what a life connected with God can look like. Having said that, you have to be careful that you don't end up living for the attention and praise of the people around you. If you do that, you'll miss out on getting the reward only God can give.

"Here are a few examples:

1. Don't broadcast when you help the poor. You've seen the type. They hire a trumpeter to march in front of them calling attention to their act of mercy. What a sham! Instead, if you do these acts in secret, your Father who sees everything will reward you in His time.
2. Don't make a show of praying to God. Again, the guys that stand and give long prayers in church may impress the people, but they don't have God's attention. He loves to meet with you in private and hear your heart, not a bunch of fancy words. After all, He knows what you need before you even ask Him.

He listens to simple prayers like this:

Our Heavenly Father, may your Name be honored in my life,  
may You govern our lives and may Your heart's desire be accomplished  
here on earth the way it is in heaven.

We recognize you as our Source and ask only for what we need for this day.

We know we need Your forgiveness and we need You to help us forgive others who wrong us.

Protect us from the Tempter and when we are tempted help us to never choose evil.

The kingdom, the power, and the glory belong to You forever. Amen.

Only if you are willing to forgive those who have wronged you, will your Heavenly Father forgive you. If you refuse to forgive, the Father cannot extend forgiveness to you.

3. Finally, if you decide to fast by denying yourself some food or pleasure in order to draw near to God, don't let others know about it. Again, your Father who looks on the heart will reward you far better than the praise you might get from friends for being 'so spiritual.'