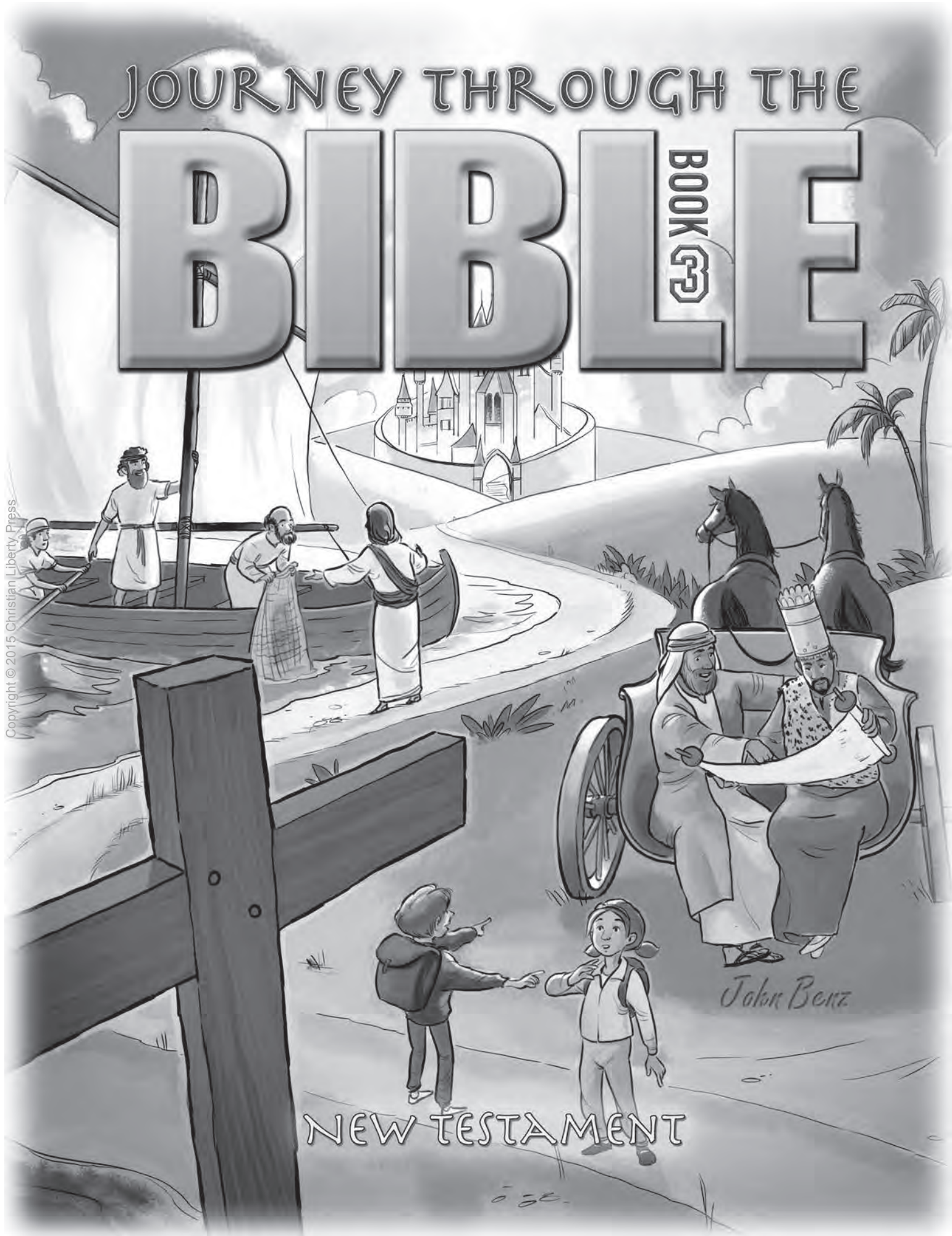


JOURNEY THROUGH THE

BIBLE

BOOK 3

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John Benz

NEW TESTAMENT

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Contents

Introduction	vii
Note to Parents	ix

UNIT 1 Introduction, Matthew, and Mark..... 1

LESSON 1	Old Testament Overview.....	1
LESSON 2	Intertestamental History	2
LESSON 3	Key Groups in the New Testament	3
LESSON 4	Setting of the New Testament	4
LESSON 5	Introduction to the Gospels	5
LESSON 6	Introduction to Matthew.....	6
LESSON 7	The Birth and Childhood of Jesus: Matthew 1–2.....	8
LESSON 8	John the Baptist and Jesus’ Ministries: Matthew 3–4.....	8
LESSON 9	The Sermon on the Mount, Part 1: Matthew 5.....	10
LESSON 10	The Sermon on the Mount, Part 2: Matthew 6–7	11
LESSON 11	Miracles: Matthew 8–9.....	12
LESSON 12	The Calling and Commission of the Twelve: Matthew 10.....	13
LESSON 13	Doubt and Opposition: Matthew 11–12	14
LESSON 14	Kingdom Parables: Matthew 13	15
LESSON 15	Lost Friends, Miracles, and Opposition: Matthew 14–15	16
LESSON 16	Peter’s Confession and the Transfiguration: Matthew 16:1–17:13	17
LESSON 17	Faith, Humility, and Reconciliation: Matthew 17:14–18:35.....	19
LESSON 18	The Last Will Be First: Matthew 19–20.....	20
LESSON 19	The Triumphal Entry: Matthew 21:1–27.....	22
LESSON 20	A Battle of Wits: Matthew 21:28–23:39	24
LESSON 21	The Olivet Discourse: Matthew 24.....	26
LESSON 22	Parables for Preparation: Matthew 25.....	28
LESSON 23	Preparation for the True Passover: Matthew 26.....	28
LESSON 24	The Passion of the Christ: Matthew 27	30
LESSON 25	The Resurrection and Great Commission: Matthew 28.....	31
LESSON 26	Introduction to Mark	32
LESSON 27	The Beginning of Jesus’ Ministry: Mark 1.....	33
LESSON 28	Miracles, Opposition, and Disciples: Mark 2–3	34
LESSON 29	Jesus’ Parables: Mark 4:1–34	35
LESSON 30	The Incredible Power and Authority of Jesus: Mark 4:35–5:43.....	36
LESSON 31	Mission and Tragedy: Mark 6.....	37
LESSON 32	True Defilement and True Faith: Mark 7:1–8:9.....	38
LESSON 33	Peter’s Confession and the Transfiguration: Mark 8:10–9:13.....	40
LESSON 34	Preparations for the Cross: Mark 9:14–50.....	41
LESSON 35	Back to Judea: Mark 10.....	41
LESSON 36	Into Jerusalem: Mark 11:1–26.....	43
LESSON 37	Jesus, the Expert Debater: Mark 11:27–12:44	44
LESSON 38	The Sermon on the Mount of Olives: Mark 13.....	46

LESSON 39	<i>The Last Night with the Disciples: Mark 14:1–52</i>	48
LESSON 40	<i>The Trial, Crucifixion, and Resurrection: Mark 14:53–16:20</i>	49
UNIT 2	Luke and John	53
LESSON 41	<i>Introduction to Luke</i>	53
LESSON 42	<i>The Birth Narrative: Luke 1–2</i>	53
LESSON 43	<i>Jesus’ Baptism, Genealogy, and Temptation: Luke 3:1–4:13</i>	54
LESSON 44	<i>Jesus’ First Ministry in Galilee: Luke 4:14–44</i>	55
LESSON 45	<i>Ministry Foundations and Opposition: Luke 5:1–6:16</i>	56
LESSON 46	<i>The Sermon on the Plain: Luke 6:17–49</i>	57
LESSON 47	<i>Jesus the Prophet: Luke 7</i>	58
LESSON 48	<i>More Teachings and Healings: Luke 8</i>	59
LESSON 49	<i>Jesus the Messiah: Luke 9:1–50</i>	59
LESSON 50	<i>Preparations for Jesus’ Departure: Luke 9:51–10:24</i>	60
LESSON 51	<i>The Final Teaching Circuit, Part 1: Luke 10:25–11:54</i>	61
LESSON 52	<i>The Final Teaching Circuit, Part 2: Luke 12–13</i>	62
LESSON 53	<i>The Final Teaching Circuit, Dinner and Discipleship: Luke 14</i>	63
LESSON 54	<i>The Final Teaching Circuit, Lessons for Pharisees: Luke 15–16</i>	64
LESSON 55	<i>The Final Teaching Circuit, The Kingdom of God: Luke 17:1–18:14</i>	65
LESSON 56	<i>The Final Teaching Circuit, The End of the Journey: Luke 18:15–19:46</i>	66
LESSON 57	<i>The Battle with the Religious Leaders: Luke 19:47–21:4</i>	67
LESSON 58	<i>The Olivet Discourse: Luke 21:5–38</i>	68
LESSON 59	<i>The Lord’s Supper and the Arrest and Trial: Luke 22</i>	69
LESSON 60	<i>The Trial Under Pilate and the Crucifixion: Luke 23</i>	70
LESSON 61	<i>He Is Risen!: Luke 24</i>	72
LESSON 62	<i>Introduction to John</i>	73
LESSON 63	<i>John’s Prologue: John 1:1–18</i>	74
LESSON 64	<i>The Baptist, the First Sign, and the Temple Cleansing: John 1:19–2:25</i>	76
LESSON 65	<i>Nicodemus: John 3</i>	77
LESSON 66	<i>The Samaritan Woman: John 4</i>	79
LESSON 67	<i>Healing and Opposition: John 5</i>	80
LESSON 68	<i>The Bread of Life: John 6</i>	81
LESSON 69	<i>The Feast of Tabernacles: John 7</i>	83
LESSON 70	<i>False Belief: John 8</i>	84
LESSON 71	<i>The Healing of the Blind Man: John 9</i>	86
LESSON 72	<i>The Good Shepherd and Lazarus: John 10–11</i>	87
LESSON 73	<i>The Anointing and Triumphal Entry: John 12</i>	89
LESSON 74	<i>The Last Supper: John 13–14</i>	90
LESSON 75	<i>The Vine and the Branches: John 15</i>	91
LESSON 76	<i>Final Warnings: John 16</i>	93
LESSON 77	<i>Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer: John 17</i>	94
LESSON 78	<i>The Trial and Crucifixion of Jesus: John 18–19</i>	95
LESSON 79	<i>The Resurrection: John 20</i>	96
LESSON 80	<i>Peter’s Redemption: John 21</i>	97

UNIT 3	Acts, Romans, and 1 & 2 Corinthians	101
LESSON 81	<i>Introduction to Acts</i>	101
LESSON 82	<i>The Ascension and the Replacement of Judas: Acts 1</i>	102
LESSON 83	<i>Pentecost: Acts 2</i>	103
LESSON 84	<i>The Gospel Spreads: Acts 3–4</i>	104
LESSON 85	<i>Discipline and Deacons: Acts 5–6</i>	106
LESSON 86	<i>Stephen’s Sermon: Acts 7</i>	107
LESSON 87	<i>To Judea and Samaria: Acts 8</i>	108
LESSON 88	<i>The Conversion of Saul: Acts 9</i>	109
LESSON 89	<i>Cornelius and the Gentile Church: Acts 10–11</i>	111
LESSON 90	<i>The First Missionary Journey: Acts 12–14</i>	112
LESSON 91	<i>The Jerusalem Council: Acts 15:1–35</i>	114
LESSON 92	<i>The Second Missionary Journey: Acts 15:36–18:22</i>	115
LESSON 93	<i>The Third Missionary Journey: Acts 18:23–21:14</i>	117
LESSON 94	<i>Paul in Jerusalem: Acts 21:15–23:22</i>	119
LESSON 95	<i>Before Gentiles and Kings: Acts 23:23–26:32</i>	120
LESSON 96	<i>To Rome: Acts 27–28</i>	121
LESSON 97	<i>Introduction to the Epistles</i>	122
LESSON 98	<i>Introduction to Paul’s Epistles</i>	124
LESSON 99	<i>Introduction to Romans: Romans 1</i>	125
LESSON 100	<i>Do Not Judge: Romans 2</i>	126
LESSON 101	<i>The Gospel: Romans 3</i>	127
LESSON 102	<i>Abraham and Adam: Romans 4–5</i>	129
LESSON 103	<i>The Battle Against Sin: Romans 6–7</i>	130
LESSON 104	<i>Slaves or Children?: Romans 8</i>	132
LESSON 105	<i>What about Israel?: Romans 9–11</i>	133
LESSON 106	<i>How Then Shall We Live?: Romans 12</i>	135
LESSON 107	<i>Government and Conscience: Romans 13–14</i>	136
LESSON 108	<i>Concluding Words: Romans 15–16</i>	138
LESSON 109	<i>Introduction to 1 Corinthians: 1 Corinthians 1–2</i>	139
LESSON 110	<i>Spiritual Architects and Being a Good Father: 1 Corinthians 3–4</i>	140
LESSON 111	<i>Sexual Immorality and Marriage: 1 Corinthians 5–7</i>	141
LESSON 112	<i>Idolatry, Hair, and the Lord’s Supper: 1 Corinthians 8–11</i>	143
LESSON 113	<i>Spiritual Gifts and Love: 1 Corinthians 12–14</i>	144
LESSON 114	<i>The Resurrection and Final Greetings: 1 Corinthians 15–16</i>	147
LESSON 115	<i>Introduction to 2 Corinthians: 2 Corinthians 1–2</i>	148
LESSON 116	<i>The New Covenant and Paul’s Ministry: 2 Corinthians 3–4</i>	149
LESSON 117	<i>Paul’s Ministry Résumé: 2 Corinthians 5–6</i>	150
LESSON 118	<i>Godly Sorrow and Generous Giving: 2 Corinthians 7–8</i>	151
LESSON 119	<i>Cheerful Giving and Paul’s Further Defense: 2 Corinthians 9–10</i>	152
LESSON 120	<i>Strength in Weakness: 2 Corinthians 11–13</i>	154

UNIT 4	The Epistles and Revelation	157
LESSON 121	<i>Introduction to Galatians: Galatians 1–2</i>	157
LESSON 122	<i>Faith vs. Works: Galatians 3–4.....</i>	158
LESSON 123	<i>Freedom in the Spirit: Galatians 5–6.....</i>	159
LESSON 124	<i>Introduction to Ephesians: Ephesians 1–2.....</i>	161
LESSON 125	<i>The Mystery of the Gospel and the Body of Christ: Ephesians 3–4</i>	162
LESSON 126	<i>Christian Living and Spiritual Warfare: Ephesians 5–6</i>	163
LESSON 127	<i>Introduction to Philippians: Philippians 1–2.....</i>	165
LESSON 128	<i>Joy, Peace, and Contentment in Christ: Philippians 3–4.....</i>	166
LESSON 129	<i>Introduction to Colossians, Supremacy of Christ: Colossians 1–2.....</i>	168
LESSON 130	<i>The New Life and Freedom: Colossians 3–4 & Philemon</i>	170
LESSON 131	<i>Holy Living and Christ’s Return: 1 Thessalonians 1–5</i>	171
LESSON 132	<i>Clarification about Jesus’ Return: 2 Thessalonians 1–3</i>	173
LESSON 133	<i>Right Doctrine and Right Leaders: 1 Timothy 1–3</i>	174
LESSON 134	<i>Godliness with Contentment: 1 Timothy 4–6</i>	176
LESSON 135	<i>Preserve the Gospel: 2 Timothy 1–2</i>	177
LESSON 136	<i>Final Words: 2 Timothy 3–4.....</i>	179
LESSON 137	<i>Order and Good Works: Titus 1–3</i>	180
LESSON 138	<i>Jesus Is Better Than the Prophets: Hebrews 1–2.....</i>	182
LESSON 139	<i>Heavenly Rest: Hebrews 3–4.....</i>	183
LESSON 140	<i>Jesus, the Great High Priest: Hebrews 5–6</i>	185
LESSON 141	<i>A New Priest, a New Covenant, and a New Law: Hebrews 7–9</i>	186
LESSON 142	<i>Endurance and Faith: Hebrews 10–11</i>	187
LESSON 143	<i>Finish the Race: Hebrews 12–13.....</i>	189
LESSON 144	<i>The Proverbs of the New Testament: James 1–2.....</i>	191
LESSON 145	<i>The Tongue, Heavenly Wisdom, and Prayer: James 3–5</i>	193
LESSON 146	<i>Graceful Suffering: 1 Peter 1–2.....</i>	195
LESSON 147	<i>Marriage, Witness, and Warfare: 1 Peter 3–5.....</i>	196
LESSON 148	<i>False Teachers in the Last Days: 2 Peter 1–3, Jude</i>	198
LESSON 149	<i>A Beautiful Symphony: 1 John 1–3</i>	201
LESSON 150	<i>Marks of a True Christian: 1 John 4–5.....</i>	203
LESSON 151	<i>Wise Hospitality: 2 John & 3 John.....</i>	204
LESSON 152	<i>Introduction to Revelation</i>	205
LESSON 153	<i>The Glorious Son of Man and the Seven Churches: Revelation 1–3.....</i>	209
LESSON 154	<i>Heavenly Worship: Revelation 4–5.....</i>	212
LESSON 155	<i>The Seals Are Opened: Revelation 6–7.....</i>	214
LESSON 156	<i>The Trumpet Judgments: Revelation 8–11.....</i>	216
LESSON 157	<i>The Unholy Trinity: Revelation 12–14.....</i>	219
LESSON 158	<i>The Bowl Judgments: Revelation 15–16.....</i>	221
LESSON 159	<i>The Fall of Babylon and the Great Feasts: Revelation 17–19.....</i>	223
LESSON 160	<i>The End of the Story: Revelation 20–22</i>	225
	<i>Index.....</i>	229

Introduction

The *Journey Through the Bible* curricula is designed to encourage students to encounter the biblical text firsthand. Many students grow up hearing Bible stories in Sunday school or from their parents or even from similar home-schooling curricula. The work that these people and programs do for students is very valuable for their growth and maturity. The goal of this curricula, however, is to go beyond the stories of the Bible and to have students read the Bible itself. In fact, this ninth grade curriculum, along with the seventh and eighth grade curricula in the *Journey Through the Bible* series, will take students through the entire Bible. Within these three years, students will have read the entire Bible.

For this year, we will look at the New Testament. The translation that we are going to use for this curriculum is the New King James Version (NKJV). Since the King James Version of the Bible is the most widely used translation out there, we chose the NKJV version because it is a little easier for students to read. While it is possible to complete this curriculum using other translations of the Bible, the questions in the workbook use the language and phrases of the NKJV. As a result, it may be difficult at times to find the answers to these questions without using an NKJV.

There are three components to this curriculum. The *first component* is the **workbook**. The workbook is divided into four units of forty days of reading per unit. On the top right-hand corner of each workbook page is the Bible reading that the student should do for that day. As he or she reads, there are ten questions from the Bible reading that the student is to answer in the workbook. The vast majority of the questions in the workbook can be answered just using the biblical text itself, but there are a few questions that require using outside sources such as a dictionary. Many of these questions are designed to bring out some of the important points in the text. On average, the student will read about two chapters of the Bible per day. Also included on each workbook page is a set of three questions that come from the lesson book.

The *second component* to this curriculum is the **lesson book**. The lessons in this book are designed to help students understand what they are reading. This is not designed to be a theology book that teaches a particular view of theology; rather, it is a survey of the New Testament, which is designed to bring clarity to the reading that the students are doing. On theological issues for which there is debate, the approach of this book is to examine the various options and allow students to decide for themselves which view is most plausible. As students read their daily lesson, they will need to answer three questions from the lesson book; these questions appear at the bottom of the corresponding page in the workbook. These questions are designed to hold students accountable to read through the lesson book. It is recommended that students read through the daily lesson before doing the Bible reading and answering the questions in the workbook.

There are two features within the lesson book that are worth noting. *First*, periodically there will be some **vocabulary words** that are typed in bold print. These are words that may be significant or may just be words that are not commonly used in everyday speech. Often these words will appear in the questions from the lesson in the workbook. *Second*, it is worth noting the **thought questions** at the end of many of the lessons. These questions are designed to help the student think about the reading in a more critical manner. Some of these questions are designed to bring out the theology of the passage, some are designed to prompt the student to think more deeply about what is actually happening in the passage, and some are designed to help the student think about applying the passage to his or her life.

The *third component* to this curriculum are the **tests**. Each quarter the student will take tests based on the questions in the workbook. There will be one test for every twenty days in the student's workbook, though the tests can be divided in half to cover only ten days at a time.

John Benz

Note to Parents:

In Deuteronomy 6:5–7, it says: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.”

Scripture makes it clear that the primary responsibility for teaching children lies with the parents, particularly the fathers. This curriculum will be most effective if parents discuss the reading and lesson with the students after they do the work. The thought questions at the end of most lessons provide an excellent opportunity for discussion between parents and their students. In addition, parents are encouraged to use the daily readings for family devotionals. Although these questions are not included with the curriculum, here are some questions that can be asked after every lesson:

1. What is something that this passage teaches you about God?
2. What is something you can pray for as a result of this passage?
3. What is one question you have from this passage?

When you discuss the passage with your students, they will be far more likely to think about the passage and how to apply it to their lives.

then travels from there and meets Matthew, a tax collector, and tells him to follow Him. Matthew leaves everything and follows Jesus. When the Pharisees see Jesus eating with tax collectors, they sneer; but Jesus informs them that He came for the sick, not the healthy. Chapter 9 finishes with more miracles. Jesus heals a bleeding woman, raises a girl from the dead, gives sight to the blind, and casts out demons. However, the Pharisees resist Him; this will be a bigger problem in days to come.

Thought Question:

Why do you think that Jesus allows the demons to go into the herd of pigs?

The Calling and Commission of the Twelve: Matthew 10

Lesson 12

During the course of Jesus’ ministry, He accomplishes many things. He heals the sick, casts out demons, and

teaches about the kingdom of God. Of course, the most significant thing that Jesus accomplishes is giving His life so that we could be forgiven. Yet another incredibly significant aspect of Jesus’ mission is the development of His disciples. Jesus knows that His time on earth is short and that He will return to the Father. When He leaves, He will need to entrust His work and message of the kingdom to others who will spread the word. This is why Jesus spends so much time focusing on the twelve.

In Matthew 10, Jesus chooses the twelve disciples from the midst of all His followers. It is clear from the other gospels, particularly John, that the twelve are not the only disciples who follow Jesus. So Jesus separates the twelve from the rest of the disciples and chooses them to be His close disciples. Jesus will spend the better part of three years with these twelve disciples, living with them and teaching them many things.

We know more about some of the twelve than we do about the others. Peter is the most famous of the twelve and the one who seems to be the leader of the

The Twelve Apostles*

Matthew 10:2–4	Mark 3:16–19	Luke 6:14–16	John (various verses)	Acts 1:13
1. Simon, who is called Peter	1. Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter)	1. Simon, whom he named Peter	Simon Peter (1:40–42)	1. Peter
2. Andrew his [Simon Peter’s] brother	4. Andrew	2. Andrew his [Simon Peter’s] brother	Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother (1:40)	4. Andrew
3. James the son of Zebedee	2. James the son of Zebedee	3. James	unnamed son of Zebedee (21:2)	3. James
4. John his [James’s] brother	3. John the brother of James	4. John	unnamed son of Zebedee (21:2)	2. John
5. Philip	5. Philip	5. Philip	Philip of Bethsaida (1:43–44)	5. Philip
6. Bartholomew	6. Bartholomew	6. Bartholomew	Nathanael of Cana (1:45–49; 21:2)**	7. Bartholomew
7. Thomas	8. Thomas	8. Thomas	Thomas called the Twin (11:16)	6. Thomas
8. Matthew the tax collector	7. Matthew (Levi, son of Alphaeus, a tax collector, 2:14)	7. Matthew (Levi, tax collector, 5:27)		8. Matthew
9. James the son of Alphaeus	9. James the son of Alphaeus	9. James the son of Alphaeus		9. James the son of Alphaeus
10. Thaddaeus	10. Thaddaeus	11. Judas the son of James	Judas (not Iscariot) (14:22)	11. Judas the son of James
11. Simon the Zealot	11. Simon the Zealot	10. Simon who was called the Zealot		10. Simon the Zealot
12. Judas Iscariot	12. Judas Iscariot	12. Judas Iscariot	Judas the son of Simon Iscariot (6:71)	12. Matthias replaces Judas [who had died] (Acts 1:26)

*Others in the NT are regarded as apostles besides the Twelve, notably James the brother of Jesus (Acts 15:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:7; Gal. 1:19), Paul (Acts 14:4, 14; 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8–9), and Barnabas (Acts 14:4, 14).

**Nathanael is probably Bartholomew, since he is closely associated with Philip. He is certainly not Levi/Matthew, who already has two names and who was from Capernaum. It is possible but unlikely that he is Thaddeus/Judas or Simon the Zealot.

group. He consistently is prone to act first and think later. He will be the one who confesses that Jesus is the Christ first, and he will be foundational for the building of the Church after Jesus ascends to heaven. Peter and his brother Andrew, another member of the twelve, work as fishermen before following Jesus. Their fishing partners, James and John, are the next two most famous disciples of the twelve. During the life of Christ, James and John ask on multiple occasions for Jesus to give them special power and authority in His kingdom. Later, John, the author of the fourth gospel, identifies himself merely as “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” Peter, James, and John are given special privileges within the twelve; they are the ones whom Jesus requests to be with Him in the garden of Gethsemane before He is betrayed. We do not know much about Philip other than that he is from the same city as Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Thomas will be famous for doubting that Jesus is resurrected, but he also has one of the best confessions of faith in the gospels. Church tradition states that Thomas may have been the first person to bring the gospel to India. We know that Matthew is a tax collector before Jesus calls him to follow Him, and Matthew is the author of this gospel. Also, Judas Iscariot is infamous as the one who betrays Jesus. Simon the Canaanite is also called Simon the Zealot in the other gospels. As we learned from the introductory lessons, Zealots were revolutionaries who opposed Rome and fought for Israel’s independence. There must have been interesting conversations between Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax collector. We know almost nothing about Bartholomew, James, and Lebbaeus (or Judas Thaddaeus).

Jesus does not simply call these disciples so that they can learn. These disciples are immediately put to work. Jesus sends them out as an extension of His own ministry. Just as Jesus heals the sick, casts out demons, and proclaims the kingdom of heaven, so also do His disciples. Jesus spends the rest of chapter 10 preparing the twelve for the mission that they are about to do. This is not going to be an easy mission. They are to bring practically nothing with them on this journey, but they are to depend on the generosity of others. They should expect to be persecuted and hated just as Jesus is persecuted and hated. However, God will be with them, and the Holy Spirit will give them the words to say. Following Jesus is very costly, and Jesus warns them that they will be rejected even by their own families. They will be rewarded, but suffering will come first. Jesus sends them out only among the cities of Israel. It is not yet time for the message to go to the Samaritans or Gentiles; that will come later.

Thought Question:

Why do you think that Jesus tells His disciples to bring practically nothing with them as they preach in the cities of Israel?

Doubt and Opposition: Matthew 11–12

Lesson 13

Chapter 11 begins with a question from the disciples of John the Baptist. As mentioned in the lesson on chapter 3, John the Baptist had certain expectations of the Messiah. He pictures the Messiah as a man with an ax in His hand, ready to cut down the tree of all who refuse to repent. He also pictures the Messiah with a winnowing fork, ready to separate the righteous from the unrighteous. After a year of Jesus ministering, this separation and judgment has not yet occurred. It would appear by the question of John’s disciples that he is confused about Jesus and may be starting to doubt if Jesus is the Messiah that he expected. Yet Jesus responds to the inquiry of John’s disciples by drawing attention to His miracles and making a reference to a passage in Isaiah that speaks of the Messiah performing miracles.

Following this question, Jesus begins to speak about John the Baptist. Jesus confirms that John the Baptist is indeed the fulfillment of the passage from Malachi that speaks of the return of Elijah the prophet to prepare the way for the Lord. This implies that Jesus is the Messiah Himself, considering that John directed people to Jesus. Though John’s mission is to call the people to repentance, we see Jesus condemning a number of cities because they refuse to repent when He performed miracles there. While many are prepared to receive the Messiah, it appears that most are not ready to receive Jesus. Thus, as John the Baptist had expected, Jesus does call down judgment upon those who refuse to repent; but contrary to John’s expectations, this judgment does not occur right away. In light of this call of judgment by Jesus upon the cities that refuse to repent, there is also an offering of salvation. Jesus calls upon all who hear Him to come to Him, and He offers to give them rest. Once again, Jesus offers salvation to those who are sick, not to those who are well.

The opposition by the religious leaders takes center stage in chapter 12. It is clear that the Pharisees are searching for things of which to accuse Jesus. As He and His disciples pass through the fields on the Sabbath, His disciples grab some grain and eat it. According to the tradition of the elders, this is work; so the Pharisees

accuse Jesus and His disciples of desecrating the Sabbath. However, these rules are in addition to the Law of Moses, and Jesus does not need to submit to them. Besides, Jesus Himself has authority over the Sabbath. Jesus then heals a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, and the Pharisees once again seek to accuse Him of breaking the Sabbath. Yet Jesus argues that it is right to do good and heal on the Sabbath. Because Jesus directly challenges the Pharisees in the synagogue, presumably in front of the people, the Pharisees begin to plot how they can destroy Jesus.

A little later, Jesus casts out a demon from a man who is blind and mute, and the man is healed. However, when the crowds start to believe that Jesus might be the Messiah, the Pharisees accuse Him of being demon-possessed. They believe that He is able to cast out demons because He is possessed by Beelzebub (Satan). Yet Jesus argues that their logic is ridiculous. In fact, He goes further to argue that their persistent refusal to believe in Him, even to the point of believing that Satan is fighting against himself, will lead to their damnation. The “unforgivable sin” of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is a persistent refusal to accept the works of the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ. Because of their careless words, they will be judged; for words reflect the nature of our hearts. The words of the Pharisees reveal their stubborn refusal to accept and believe in Jesus. The Pharisees respond by asking Jesus to give them a sign to prove His authority. The only sign that Jesus offers is the sign of Jonah, who was in the earth for three days but was “resurrected” at the end. Jesus’ death and resurrection is the only sign needed for faith. Once again, Jesus speaks judgment upon that generation for their refusal to believe.

Thought Question:

Based on the lesson and this passage, explain in your own words what the unforgivable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is.

Kingdom Parables: Matthew 13

Lesson 14

God sent Jesus to earth in order to establish His kingdom. As mentioned earlier, the Jews of Jesus’ day have a number of expectations concerning the kingdom of God. *First*, they expect that kingdom to come suddenly when the Messiah appears. *Second*, they expect there to be a separation on that day between the righteous and the wicked, with the wicked being destroyed. *Third*, they expect the kingdom to be an earthly kingdom

established in Israel with all of the other nations submitting to Israel, including Rome. However, the kingdom that Jesus establishes is going to look very different from the one that the Jews expect. Jesus’ teachings from the parables in Matthew 13 are going to challenge the Jewish expectations of the kingdom.

The first parable that Matthew records is the parable of the sower. This parable is actually going to be the key for understanding all of Jesus’ parables. In this parable, a sower sows seeds in various places on his farm. Some of the seeds fall along the path, others fall among the rocks, others grow among the thorns, but still others grow in the good soil. Jesus gives this parable to the crowds but does not explain what it means, so His disciples ask Him in private to explain further. They first ask Jesus why He chooses to teach in parables rather than speaking plainly. Jesus quotes Isaiah’s commission in Isaiah 6 to explain why He speaks in parables. Rather than telling these stories simply to illustrate a point, He actually tells these stories in order to hide the point from those who are not willing to listen. Jesus knows that people come to Him with different motives. He speaks in parables in order to further harden the hearts of those who are not sincere. In fact, this is actually what the message of the parable of the sower is all about. God is the Sower, and the seed is the Word of God. The pathway represents those who do not receive His word at all because Satan snatches it before it can bear fruit. The rocky soil represents those who accept the word but do not let it sink in; when tough times come, they fall away because they have no roots. The thorny soil represents those who do accept the word, but they do not bear fruit because they are distracted by the things of this world. Finally, the good soil represents those who come with ears ready to hear, and these people yield incredible fruit from God’s word.

In the parable of the weeds, Jesus speaks about another farmer who plants good seed in his field, but an enemy comes and plants useless weeds in that same field. When the servants see the weeds growing along with the wheat, they ask if they should pluck up the weeds. The master, however, tells them to let them grow together lest some of the wheat be harmed by plucking up the weeds. The message of this parable is that both the wicked and the righteous will coexist for a time in the kingdom of God. Rather than the immediate separation that the Jews expect, they will grow together.

In the next two parables, Jesus speaks about the slow-growing nature of the kingdom. Remember that the Jews expected the Messiah to bring the kingdom all at once. Yet Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to

a mustard seed that starts extremely small but grows to become a big tree. In addition, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to yeast that slowly works its way through the bread until the whole loaf rises. In both of these parables, we see that the kingdom is going to start small, but eventually grow to become huge. Historically, this is exactly what happens: the kingdom starts with Jesus, then the twelve disciples, then thousands on the day of Pentecost, and eventually is spread throughout the whole world.

After explaining the parable of the weeds to the disciples, Jesus offers two more parables that relate to one another. The kingdom is compared to both a treasure found in a field and a pearl of great price. In both of these parables, a person finds something so valuable that he gladly sells all that he has in order to get that valuable thing. This tells us that the kingdom of God is a treasure, and we need to be willing to pay whatever we can to get that kingdom.

Jesus finishes this section of teaching with two final parables. In the parable of the net, Jesus speaks once again about the coming separation of the righteous from the wicked. We have already learned that both will coexist in the kingdom for some time, but here we see once again that there will eventually be that separation at the end of the age. To conclude this section about the kingdom, Jesus says that the person who understands the kingdom is like the master of a house who brings out both new and old. Here Jesus is talking about the old treasures as teachings from the Old Testament, and the new treasures are the new insights that Jesus offers. These new insights do not contradict the old, but rather draw out the meanings of the old even more.

Sadly, this chapter ends on a regrettable note. Jesus returns home and begins to preach in the synagogue there. However, rather than the people being overjoyed that one of their own people is the Messiah, they refuse to believe in Him. They cannot see past that person who had grown up in that city, and very few people there believe in Jesus. In fact, it is so deplorable there that Jesus is unable to perform many miracles because of their unbelief.

Thought Questions:

1. How might Jesus' teachings about the coexistence of the wicked and the righteous in the kingdom help explain some of the scandals in churches in America?
2. Why do you think Jesus tries to further harden the hearts of those who are not ready to listen?

3. Why do you think it is so difficult for people in Jesus' hometown to believe in Him?

Lost Friends, Miracles, and Opposition: Matthew 14–15

Lesson 15

John the Baptist is one of the greatest prophets in the Bible. He is given the incredible privilege of being the one who would prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah. John also does an incredible job with the responsibilities that God gives him. For a while, John the Baptist and Jesus both minister to the people at the same time. Yet from the moment John baptizes Jesus in the Jordan, he knows that he must fall more into the background so that Jesus could be front and center. Sadly, in Matthew 14, we learn that the ministry of John the Baptist comes to an end when he is unjustly put to death.

Because John had spoken out against Herod's relationship with his brother's wife, Herod has John put in prison. However, because of John's popularity with the people and because Herod enjoys listening to John, he keeps him in prison rather than killing him. Yet, one day, Herod throws a party for his birthday, and the daughter of the woman whom John condemns Herod for marrying dances for Herod. She pleases Herod so much by her dance that he offers to give her whatever she wants. When she asks her mother, she tells her to ask for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Because this takes place publicly, Herod reluctantly agrees, and John the Baptist is put to death.

When Jesus finds out about this, He goes off to a solitary place, presumably to think and pray. John had been an important ally of Jesus, and likely the two were friends; so Jesus wants to mourn and think about what will come next. However, the crowds see Jesus go off by Himself and follow Him. When Jesus sees them, rather than sending them away, He has compassion on them and teaches them and heals them. Yet, when it gets late, Jesus sees that they need food. So Jesus tells His disciples to give food to the crowd. However, the cost of food for such a crowd would be huge, so His disciples question Him. Jesus then performs a miracle and feeds the entire crowd with only a few fish and a few loaves of bread. Like Moses, Jesus provides a form of manna to the people. Everyone is amazed by this miracle, as over 5,000 men are there, and likely as many women and children are there, as well.

Having ministered to the crowds, Jesus finally gets the alone time that He wanted before, so He sends away

His disciples on the nearby lake. However, after Jesus is done praying, He comes to join the disciples; the problem is that He is on land and they are in a boat, so Jesus walks on water to come to them. As one could imagine, the disciples are terrified when they see Jesus walking on water. Yet Jesus comforts them by letting them know that it is He and that they do not have to be afraid. Peter, being the kind of person who acts first and thinks later, asks Jesus to let him walk on water, as well, and Jesus agrees. Peter walks on water for a short distance but then gets scared by the wind and begins to sink; but Jesus saves him. Of course, the disciples are amazed and worship Jesus. Then, when they arrive at the other side of the lake, Jesus performs more miracles and heals many there.

Contrasted with the faith of the crowds is the stubborn rejection of Jesus by the religious leaders. Once again, the religious leaders confront Jesus because He and His disciples do not follow their traditions. In this case, they condemn Jesus because His disciples do not wash their hands before they eat. Rather than trying to justify Himself, Jesus points out the hypocrisy of their traditions. According to their traditions, it is perfectly acceptable to take money that children can use to provide for their parents and give it to the synagogue or temple instead. Jesus points out by this that their traditions go against the commandment to honor your parents. Jesus then quotes Isaiah, who had earlier rebuked the people because their religion was only a matter of outward actions rather than coming from the heart.

Privately, Jesus talks to His disciples about the religious leaders. Apparently, these religious leaders are offended by Jesus' words. When the disciples tell Jesus about this, He dismisses it and compares the religious leaders to blind people who are trying to lead other blind people. However, Jesus goes on to address the original issue with which the religious leaders have a problem. Jesus says that these people are so concerned with outward washings that they are ignoring their dirty hearts. It is far more important to work on the heart than to just focus on the outward actions.

Following this confrontation with the faithless religious leaders, Jesus goes into the thoroughly Gentile area of Tyre and Sidon. There He is met by a Canaanite woman who begs Jesus to cast out a demon from her daughter, but Jesus ignores her. She is so persistent that Jesus finally replies to her that it is wrong to give the children's food to the dogs. This would be very insulting. So why does Jesus say this? Jesus is teaching everyone a lesson: He had come to first save the lost people of Israel. God had made a covenant with Israel, and He is

keeping His promise by offering salvation to Israel first. Yet this woman has incredible faith; and in the midst of an insult, she replies to Jesus reminding Him that even the dogs get some scraps from the table. Jesus is so impressed by her faith that He heals her daughter.

Jesus travels from there back to the Sea of Galilee and again heals and teaches the crowds. When it grows late, Jesus tells His disciples to feed the crowds. Sadly, the disciples do not seem to have a great memory because they once again question this command. However, Jesus again takes a few fish and some loaves of bread and feeds this crowd, as well. This crowd has 4,000 men, as well as women and children.

Thought Questions:

1. Even though Jesus needs to mourn the loss of John the Baptist, He still ministers to the crowds. What lessons can we learn from this?
2. Why is it not a sin for Jesus to compare the Canaanite woman to a dog?

Peter's Confession and the Transfiguration: Matthew 16:1–17:13

Lesson 16

As we have already seen, Jesus' greatest source of opposition during the days of His ministry comes from the very people who should be the most eager to accept Him, the religious leaders. In chapter 16, the religious leaders decide to confront Jesus again, this time asking Him to give them a sign from heaven to prove that He is from God. This request reveals the stubborn and rebellious nature of their hearts. Jesus has given an incredible number of signs to the people that had been well known to everyone. These religious leaders do not ask this because they want to believe; they ask this so that they could test Jesus.

Jesus, however, knows the hearts of these men and refuses to give them a sign. Rather, Jesus tells them that the only sign that they will receive is the sign of Jonah. Yet, what is the sign of Jonah? Elsewhere, Jesus clarifies that the sign of Jonah is the coming crucifixion and resurrection of the Messiah. Just as Jonah had spent three days and nights in the midst of the earth when he was swallowed by the fish, so also will Jesus be in the earth but raised on the third day.

In light of this interaction with the religious leaders, Jesus seizes on the opportunity and warns His disciples privately to be careful about the leaven of the religious leaders. As often is the case with people, when Jesus speaks in metaphor, the disciples take Him literally. They assume that Jesus is talking about actual leaven and bread and think that Jesus is rebuking them for forgetting their bread. It appears that the disciples are not that much brighter than the religious leaders, for if Jesus were concerned about physical bread, after the two miracles of feeding the crowds that Jesus had recently performed, the disciples should surely know it would be no problem for Jesus to make bread. Jesus clarifies that the leaven that He is warning them about is metaphorical for the teachings of the religious leaders. Jesus warns the disciples to be careful about the teaching of the religious leaders, lest it corrupt them just as leaven works its way throughout a whole loaf of bread.

Following this warning about the religious leaders, a major turning point occurs in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus decides to test the disciples to see what they believe about Him. First, Jesus asks them about His reputation, what the people are saying about Him. They reply that some people think He is John the Baptist, while others think He is Elijah or Jeremiah or one of the other prophets. Then Jesus makes it personal and asks the disciples who they think He is. Peter, who never seems to be afraid to speak his mind, speaks for the disciples and declares that Jesus is the Christ, or Messiah. This is probably the smartest thing that Peter has ever said up until this point. Jesus blesses Peter for this confession and commends him for listening to the Father who had revealed that to him.

Jesus' blessing of Peter has led to much debate over the years within Christianity. Jesus tells Peter that He will build the Church upon the rock that is Peter. The name *Peter* literally means "rock" or "stone." Jesus says that He is going to give Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven and that God will support the decisions that Peter makes. If Peter looses something on earth (forgives it), God will loose it in heaven; and if Peter binds something on earth (condemns), God will also bind it in heaven. In other words, Jesus is giving Peter the authority to oversee church discipline. However, the question remains as to who precisely is given this authority. The Roman Catholic Church believes that this blessing is given first to Peter and then passed down every generation to the next bishop of Rome, known as the *pope* (which means "papa"). They believe this because Peter ultimately died as a leader of the church in Rome. Other Christians argue that this authority is only given to Peter for the critical role that he will play in the

development of the early church. This authority, therefore, is never intended to be passed down from generation to generation.

Sadly for Peter, his moment of glory quickly comes to an end. After blessing Peter, Jesus begins to plainly tell the disciples that He has to go to Jerusalem, and there He will be put to death but will be raised on the third day. In fact, from the moment of this confession, Jesus draws all of His focus towards Jerusalem for the upcoming crucifixion. Yet the idea of a Suffering Servant Messiah rather than a Conquering King Messiah does not sit well with Peter, so Peter rebukes Jesus. Jesus does not allow this kind of talk to continue, however; He immediately rebukes Peter, calling him Satan because he is not thinking about the things of God. Jesus' greatest temptation during His life is the temptation to avoid the suffering of the cross. When Peter suggests that the cross should not happen, he is being used by Satan to tempt Jesus. The disciples still do not fully understand what it means to be disciples of the Messiah, so Jesus tells them what awaits them. As His disciples, they also must be willing to deny themselves and take up their crosses to die with Him. Following Jesus will not bring free glory; rather, it will cost them their lives. Yet, when they are willing to give up their lives for the gospel, they will gain far more in return.

Jesus finishes this teaching by telling the disciples that some of them will still be alive and will see Jesus as the Son of Man coming in His kingdom. The reference to the kingdom of the Son of Man comes from Daniel 7 and refers to when the Father gives the kingdom to the Son. Although there is certainly room for interpretation of this prophecy, the very next story is likely the fulfillment of this prophecy. Six days after Peter's confession, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John with Him up on a mountain and reveals His glory to them. This event is called the Transfiguration; in it Jesus is transformed, and His face shines brightly and His clothes become a bright light. Moses and Elijah also appear and talk to Jesus about His coming death and resurrection (see Luke 9:31). There is a lot of speculation as to why precisely it is Moses and Elijah. Moses represents the Law, and Elijah represents the Prophets. So when Peter sees these two men meeting with Jesus, he offers to make them some tents, not understanding fully what is happening. However, before Peter can start to pitch tents, the Father speaks to the disciples, confirming that Jesus is His beloved Son and telling them to listen to Him. This whole incident is very similar to Jesus' baptism, and God's words are basically the same in both places. In both of these situations, God confirms His love for Jesus just before He enters into a great temptation.

After Jesus returns to normal, He and the disciples return down the mountain. Jesus commands them to keep this incident a secret until He is raised from the dead. This provides an opportunity for the disciples to get some clarification on something concerning Jesus. The disciples know the prophecy from Malachi that says that Elijah must come before the Messiah will come. Since Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the disciples wonder who Elijah was. Jesus confirms to them that John the Baptist was in fact the Elijah who was to come.

Thought Questions:

1. Why do you think that the Pharisees and Sadducees ask Jesus for a sign?
2. Why do you think that Jesus is transfigured before the disciples?

Faith, Humility, and Reconciliation: Matthew 17:14–18:35

Lesson 17

Now that Jesus' disciples know that He is in fact the Christ, Jesus has some final lessons to teach His disciples before He faces the cross. It has been clear from the moment that Peter confessed that Jesus is the Christ that the disciples still have much to learn about the nature of the kingdom that Jesus has come to bring. Peter himself followed his great confession with a sinful rebuke of Jesus when Jesus had begun to speak about His coming suffering. Therefore, in the days leading up to Jesus' death, He draws His attention towards His disciples.

After Jesus, Peter, James, and John return from the mountain where Jesus had been transfigured, they are immediately met by a man who begs Jesus to heal his son. His son has been afflicted by a demon, and this demon has caused the child much harm. This man had previously brought his son to the rest of the disciples, but they were unable to cast the demon out of the boy. Yet, when they bring the boy to Jesus, He rebukes the demon, and the demon leaves the boy. When the disciples ask Jesus why they were unable to cast out this demon, Jesus reveals that this kind of demon could only be cast out by faith, through prayer and fasting. This reveals something to us about the nature of demons. Not all demons are the same, and some demons are more difficult to deal with than others. Nevertheless, Jesus uses this as an opportunity to teach His disciples about faith. Even though this kind

of demon cannot be cast out without faith, it does not take much faith to do this. Faith is the decision that we make to actively trust in the character and promises of God. Jesus also tells us that with even a little faith we will be able to move mountains.

It is important to Jesus that the disciples understand that He must die, so once again as they come to Galilee He tells them plainly that He will be betrayed and killed and will be raised up on the third day. This still is very difficult for the disciples, so they are filled with sorrow. When Jesus and His disciples arrive in Capernaum, Peter is confronted by the people who receive the temple tax. It was required of every person to pay the temple tax, yet Jesus had not yet paid the tax. When Peter comes to Jesus about this, Jesus sees this as another teachable moment for His disciples. In one sense, it is absurd for Jesus to pay the temple tax since the money from that tax is supposed to go to God; and since Jesus is God, He would be paying Himself. He mentions this to Peter in order to teach him that Jesus is in fact the Son of God. To prove this, Jesus tells Peter to go fishing and the first fish that he catches will have the perfect amount of money in its mouth to pay the temple tax. Peter does this, and the fish does in fact have the money in its mouth.

At the time when the disciples should be preparing for Jesus' death, instead the disciples are worried about who is going to be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. The disciples are still concerned about personal glory rather than God's divine plan of salvation. So Jesus once again takes this opportunity to teach His disciples some valuable lessons. The disciples are worried about who is the greatest in the kingdom, yet they need to be focused first on simply how to get into the kingdom. So Jesus calls a child to Himself and tells the disciples that they need to become like a little child if they want to be in the kingdom of heaven. In fact, to answer their question, Jesus tells them that the person who humbles himself like a little child will be greatest in the kingdom. Little children are not concerned about greatness or comparing themselves to others; they want to enjoy life, and they are content knowing that they are safe and loved by their parents. Like little children, the disciples need to abandon their ambition for self-glory and simply find joy and comfort that they are loved by God.

Jesus takes this object lesson from the little child further. Jesus tells the disciples that for anyone who causes a little child to sin, it would be better for that person to be put to death. In fact, whatever causes anyone to sin should be severed, whether it be their hand, their foot, or even their own eyes. The focus and intentions of the

disciples are in the wrong place. They are concerned with glory and greatness when they should be worried about their own sins and their need for righteousness. Jesus returns to His original illustration and says that they should not despise the little children, for their angels are in the presence of God Himself. This statement about these angels has led many to believe that there are guardian angels for children. This is certainly possible. Nevertheless, through the illustration of this child, Jesus is telling the disciples that greatness in the kingdom comes through humility, not ambition. Again, Jesus illustrates the importance of humility with the parable of the lost sheep. Just as a shepherd rejoices over a lost sheep that returns more than he rejoices over ninety-nine that are not lost, so also God rejoices more over a sinner who repents than those who do not need to repent. The disciples should be overjoyed that they simply get to be in the kingdom; they should not worry about being the greatest in that kingdom.

Next, Jesus takes this opportunity to teach His disciples about forgiveness and reconciliation. Jesus details a four-step process for dealing with sins and offenses. The *first step* in dealing with an offense is to confront the person one-to-one. Far too often people skip this step, and it has disastrous effects. When we complain to others first, we do not solve the problem at all, and we sin against that person by slandering his or her name. When we bring others with us at first, it puts the other person on the defense because he or she will feel outnumbered. If the person does not repent when we confront him or her directly, we move on to the next step. The *second step* in dealing with an offense is to bring two or three other witnesses to confront the person. By bringing it up this next level, hopefully the other person will see how serious the sin is and repent. If he or she does not repent with the second step, we are to move on to the third step. In the *third step*, we are to bring the matter before the church and have the church confront the person. If the person is still stubborn and does not repent, Jesus says to treat that person like a heathen and a tax collector; this is the *fourth step*. There is much debate as to what precisely Jesus means by this last statement. Some suggest that this means the person is to be kicked out of the community of believers, just as a heathen was not allowed into the temple. Yet others point to how Jesus interacts with heathens and tax collectors, and they suggest that Jesus is telling us to treat the person like a nonbeliever by sharing the gospel with that person. Whichever is the more appropriate application, Jesus goes on to tell the disciples that God is going to support the decisions that the church makes when it disciplines one of its members.

Peter recognizes that the goal of this whole process is forgiveness. However, it is possible for a person to take advantage of this process, so he asks Jesus how many times we are supposed to keep forgiving a person when he or she sins against us. When Peter suggests seven times, Jesus raises it exponentially by telling him seventy times seven. To illustrate this point, Jesus tells the parable of the unmerciful servant. In this parable, a servant owes his master a massive debt. Yet, mercifully, the master completely forgives that debt. However, when that man sees a fellow servant who owes him a little money, he forces the man to pay him back. Jesus points out that the master who had originally forgiven that servant will require every penny to be restored when he finds out about this servant's unforgiving attitude. The lesson here is simple: because we have been forgiven so much by God, we have no excuse not to forgive another person.

Thought Questions:

1. Do you think that the story of the temple tax reveals Jesus' supernatural knowledge (knowing that the fish has the money), or reveals Jesus' power over nature (Jesus makes it so that the fish has the money)? Why?
2. What are some practical lessons you can learn about the nature of faith from little children?
3. If we are commanded to forgive people over and over again, does this mean we should let people hurt us over and over again? Is there a way to forgive someone but still protect ourselves?

The Last Will Be First: Matthew 19–20

Lesson 18

From the moment of Peter's confession, Jesus and His disciples begin their journey towards Jerusalem. In chapter 19, they arrive in the region of Judea near to the city of Jerusalem. As the end of Jesus' life draws closer and closer, He continues to teach His disciples more and more about the nature of the kingdom and how they should live their lives.

In His famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us that divorce is not acceptable, except for the case of adultery or sexual immorality. In light of this teaching, the Pharisees in Judea try to trap Jesus. They bait Jesus into this trap by asking Him if it is okay to divorce a wife for any reason. They know that Jesus will say that it is not acceptable except in the case of sexual immorality.