

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY
PRESENTS

RVL

DISCIPLESHIP™

THE STUDY



SEASON 3

A GROUP STUDY GUIDE

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PARTICIPANT GUIDE

RVL Discipleship: The Study, Season 3

Participant Guide

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INTRODUCTION

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

John 15:5



Welcome to season 3 of *RVL Discipleship: The Study!* So far, our exploration of biblical discipleship has led us to build a deep foundation of understanding as we considered its roots. We began by learning helpful tools to study the Scripture in context, identifying how the original audience probably experienced it and looking at the central thread that ties it all together. Then we explored the roots of discipleship in the Old Testament, considering Israel's journey as God called, trained, and established them to be His redeemed partner—His "first disciple." We concluded the previous season by recognizing how Jesus came to show Israel—and eventually, the world—what it looks like to actually carry that out, fully joining the mission as God's partner.

But what comes next?

As he began his own education in the Jewish world, Ray Vander Laan (RVL) recalls one particular defining revelation:

"I walked into the Jewish world, and it dawned on me that one of two things is true. Either Jesus as rabbi and me as disciple was totally different than His culture, or I had not even begun to be a disciple."

RVL, season 3, episode 9



We cannot understand what it looked like to be one of Jesus' original followers without understanding more about His culture—and that starts by considering Jesus Himself. Why did Jesus choose to become a human being? What was it like in the time and place in which He taught? And finally, what did it mean to be a rabbi in first-century Jewish culture? With this as our lens, let's consider Jesus' life as our human example, discovering how insight into His context can better equip us to follow Him today.

There are no living branches without a vine, and there is no such thing as a disciple without a rabbi.

In this series, we are exploring this idea of discipleship through the lens of its original definition in Scripture. What did it mean to be a disciple of Jesus back then, and what does that mean for us today? This study is organized into four seasons, each building on the last as we explore how to walk the path God has set before us.

The seasons are organized like this:

SEASON 1 | Jesus' original disciples really *knew* their Bible. As modern-day followers of Jesus, it is vitally important that we value Scripture in the same way. Season 1 of *The Study* outlines how we are meant to interact with the Text: 1) approaching it from the context in which it was written; 2) exploring how Jesus used the Scriptures in His teaching; 3) understanding how His followers were meant to be changed by what they learned; and 4) identifying the major paradigm that ties the whole Bible together.

SEASON 2 | Discipleship was formalized with the rise of rabbis in Jewish culture, but the concept really started much earlier than that. This idea of knowing God's path and faithfully walking in it began when He called Israel out of Egypt, setting them apart as a kingdom of priests to show the rest of the world what He was like. Building on the tools and central themes from the first season, season 2 of *The Study* explores the roots of discipleship, examining how God trained and established the nation of Israel in preparation for Jesus' ministry to come.

SEASON 3 | What was daily life like for the Jews of Jesus' day? How did they practice their faith under Roman occupation? And most importantly, what did it mean to be a rabbi? Season 3 of *The Study* focuses on Jesus as a man, our God made flesh, who chose to reveal Himself as a first-century rabbi to a first-century Jewish audience.

SEASON 4 | What did it mean to be the disciple of a rabbi in Jesus' day? How did someone become a disciple, and what were disciples meant to do? The fourth and final season of *The Study* focuses on the practical role of a rabbi's followers in the first century, unpacking cultural and scriptural implications and applying them to our lives as modern-day followers of Jesus.

Let's jump into season 3 as we consider Jesus, the man—God made flesh who conducted His original ministry as a Jewish rabbi.

Should I start *The Study* in Season 3?

Each individual season presents valuable material about discipleship, so if you're just joining the series here in season 3, there is plenty to benefit from. However, each of the four seasons is designed to build upon the previous material. You will find that you get the most out of *The Study* by working through the episodes in order from the beginning.

That said, if you're part of a group that is ready to begin season 3, don't quit! You can certainly start here. Consider watching through the earlier season videos on your own, just to make sure you don't miss out.



HOW TO USE THIS PARTICIPANT GUIDE

This Participant Guide for season 3 of *The Study* is organized into ten **episode guides**, each of which corresponds to a video. Each episode guide is broken up into the following movements:

The Shema | (*optional*) Groups may choose to begin each meeting by reciting the *Shema* together, as a reminder of what we are committing to. Read “The Words of the *Shema*” section in the next few pages to refresh your memory on what we learned about the *Shema* in season 1.

Introduction | Groups are encouraged to read this aloud together, either choosing one reader or taking it in turns.

Talk about It | To prepare for the video lesson, groups will discuss one simple conversation starter in response to the introduction.

Watch | The video episode will be viewed as a group, using the provided outline to take individual notes.

Video Discussion | After the video episode, groups will use discussion questions to dig deeper into the content.

To Wrap It Up | Just like the introduction, this conclusion should be read aloud together.

End in Prayer | End each meeting by praying for one another, making use of the prayer prompts if your group finds them helpful.

P.S. | (*optional*) Each episode guide includes a P.S. section, which is full of additional material to read and respond to on your own between meetings.

Can I go through season 3 on my own?

Of course! This study is designed to be accessible not only for small groups, but also for individual users. If you're going through this season without a group, simply follow the order of each episode guide on your own. You may wish to record your answers to the discussion questions in a journal.

THE WORDS OF THE SHEMA

What is it?

The words of this ancient Jewish prayer first show up in Deuteronomy 6, as Moses encourages the Israelites to keep God's commands when they enter the Promised Land:

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is **one**.
Love the Lord your God with all your **heart** and
with all your **soul** and with all your **strength**.
Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (emphasis added)*



We see throughout the Hebrew text (the Old Testament) that sometimes Israel did a great job with this—and sometimes they did the exact opposite. By the time of Jesus, religious Jews were determined to get it right, to be as faithful as humanly possible to every word that came from the Lord's mouth. With the pressure to worship the gods of Greece and Rome ever increasing, the *Shema* became a sort of pledge of allegiance, an expression of Israel's mission. It was recited first thing in the morning, last thing at night, and many times in between as a reminder to be "all in."

This practice continues among religious Jews to this day—and they don't like saying it alone. Recognizing the power of accountability, the *Shema* is often recited in groups as a reminder that people need each other.

What does this have to do with discipleship?

When Jesus was asked which was the most important of all of God's commandments, He had an answer instantly—and it's a direct quote from the *Shema*:

*"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."
Mark 12:29-31 (emphasis added)*



In season 1, we learned that the Hebrew word *shema* means “to hear and obey accordingly.” For this study, we use the *Shema* prayer in the same way as the Jews of Jesus’ day: a loyalty oath that reminds us to be “all in” to the mission of God as His disciples. Groups have the option to recite it together at the beginning of each meeting, reminding themselves that we aren’t meant to do this alone. We recite it in Hebrew to remember it was relevant for God’s people thousands of years ago. Then, we recite it in English to acknowledge it is just as relevant for us today.

The full text of the *Shema* includes two passages from Deuteronomy and one from Numbers. For this study, we will focus on the first part only, along with the part that Jesus adds in the Gospels:

HEBREW

Shema Israel,
Adonai elohenu-Adonai echad
Ve’ahavta et Adonai eloeikah,
b’khol levavkah,
uve’khol naphshekah,
uve’khol me’odekah.
Ve’ahavta l’re’acha comocha. Amen.

ENGLISH

Hear O Israel!
The Lord is our God—the Lord alone.
Love the Lord your God
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your might,
and love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.





EPISODE 1

THE DESCENDANT

*This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah,
the son of David, the son of Abraham . . .*

Matthew 1:1



THE SHEMA

ON YOUR OWN

Take a moment to reflect before beginning the group meeting. Consider the emotions, experiences, and thoughts that are most on your mind right now. Lay them before the Lord and prepare your heart for the prayer you are about to speak, the commitment you make with the words of the *Shema*.

TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English, together as a group.

HEBREW

Shema Israel,
Adonai elohenu-Adonai echad
Ve'ahavta et Adonai eloeikah,
b'khol levavkah,
uve'khol naphshekah,
uve'khol me'odekah.
Ve'ahavta l're'acha comocha. Amen.

ENGLISH

Hear O Israel!
The Lord is our God—the Lord alone.
Love the Lord your God
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your might,
and love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to season 3! We are halfway through our study on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus—only two seasons to go! (If you haven't gone through seasons 1 or 2 yet, here's your gentle reminder to do so. We will learn so much from this season together, but you will get the most from your experience if you allow each new season to build on the previous ones!)

Seasons 1 and 2 built an excellent foundation to help us understand the mission that a disciple commits to. We concluded last time by noting that, like all of humanity, Israel often failed in their role as God's partner. When the time was right, Jesus came to show them—and us today—how to truly live out the mission. In season 3 we will focus on this idea of Jesus as our example, considering the setting in which He taught and how He conducted His ministry as an honored teacher—a first-century Jewish rabbi with twelve main disciples.

With all that in mind, let's begin to examine some key aspects of Jesus' life, starting at the very beginning. Yes, friends—we will start this season with everyone's favorite part of Scripture: the genealogies.

Keep in mind that the Bible was written by Eastern/Hebrew thinkers, who preferred to communicate truth through story and metaphor. A Westerner writing a genealogy would be concerned with historical precision, taking painstaking care to have each name in order and spelled correctly. The Western mind prefers propositions—direct statements of fact that are often removed from context.

But this is not how Easterners used genealogies. In the Hebrew mindset, a genealogy was certainly a historical account, but it was used to accomplish something different than the Western equivalent of *proving* heritage. Certainly the idea was to correctly trace the family line of real people. But more than providing a historical list, a genealogy was often used as a literary device to communicate a story—to show that someone was deeply connected to (or, in fact, a product of) their ancestors. A family tree would be presented to set the stage for the audience to understand who the descendant would turn out to be, foreshadowing the situations and themes that each individual would confront.

In today's episode, let's take a look at the literary techniques that Matthew, in particular, uses to foreshadow Jesus' identity to his audience. Remember, the writer is reporting accurate information, but his goal is to prepare the audience to understand the greater story—and to recognize their own part in it.

With all this in mind, let's begin!

TALK ABOUT IT

Your group may have gone through seasons 1 and 2 together, but there may also be new faces among you. Begin this first meeting by (re)introducing yourselves. For those who have already gone through seasons 1 and 2, what aspects have been most exciting and/or challenging? For everyone, what are you hoping to take away from this season?

WATCH THE VIDEO

As you watch the video for this episode, you may use the following outline to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

THE VERY WORDS OF GOD

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham:

Abraham was the father of Isaac,

Isaac the father of Jacob,

Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,

Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar,

...

Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab,

Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth,

Obed the father of Jesse,

and Jesse the father of King David.

David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife,

...

and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah. Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.

Matthew 1:1-3, 5-6, 16-17 (emphasis added)



Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry. He was the son, so it was thought, of

Joseph,

...

the son of David, the son of Jesse,

...

*the son of Hezron, the son of Perez,
the son of Judah, the son of Jacob,
the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham,*

...

the son of Adam, the son of God.

Luke 3:23, 31-32, 33-34, 38 (emphasis added)



Gematria means:

What did the groups of seven likely communicate, in literary terms?

Why did the writer likely want names in groups of fourteen?

Other notes:



VIDEO DISCUSSION

QUESTION 1

Let's recap. What are the common differences between Western and Eastern genealogies? What is more often the purpose of a genealogy in the Eastern mind?

QUESTION 2

What is Matthew setting up his audience to understand with the structure of his genealogy, laid out in groups of seven and fourteen? What story is Jesus born into, and what should the reader expect Him to do or become?

QUESTION 3

RVL concludes today's lesson with the idea that we, who were born after Jesus, are part of the "seventh seven." In other words, we belong to the last chapter of God's story on earth—the last quarter of the game. How does this idea affect the way you see the significance of your life?

TO WRAP IT UP

In true Eastern fashion, Matthew uses Jesus' genealogy to tell a story—using literary techniques to highlight the very real connections to King David and to the grand narrative that God unfolded for centuries with Israel's ancestors. What a Western reader often sees as a boring list was actually an Eastern way to make a theological statement. Jesus' genealogy firmly connects Him to God's great story—one that we get to be a part of! In recognizing these techniques, many from Matthew's original audience would have understood the author's claim that Jesus was the Messiah, the son of David whose throne would endure forever.

Recall from this episode that seven was the number of completeness. In placing Jesus at the very beginning of the last group of seven, the writer implies that the story Jesus was born into is not yet complete—the mission is not fully accomplished! And since the account ends with Jesus returning to reign in heaven as His disciples carry out the mission, it's clear that the role of all who come after is to help finish the chapter, to play in “the last quarter” when everything is on the line.

We will devote much of our time this season to emphasizing Jesus' human life as our ultimate example. As we continue, let's keep this idea of the “seventh seven” in mind. Consider how you see yourself in God's story—knowing that every second of your life really matters.

END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

Close your time together in prayer, praying for each other's needs and encouraging one another to *Shema* until you meet again.

If you'd like some ideas, here are some points you might pray about:

- Spend time praying for one another, that this study would be a bonding experience for your group and that the Holy Spirit would help you grow and teach you in new ways.
- Ask the Lord to show you real, practical ways to walk as He walked, both individually and in community.

END GROUP MEETING

To dig deeper into the content from this episode, check out the P.S.'s section on your own before the next meeting.

A FEW P.S.'S

Fully God, yet Fully Human

At different times in history, the church has wavered between emphasizing Jesus' deity and His humanity. There have been times when people tried to explain the distinction by saying that Jesus was fully God, but He only looked like a human being. Others veered the opposite direction, saying that Jesus was merely a human being who was powerfully filled with the Holy Spirit. But Scripture makes it clear that Jesus was both fully God and fully man at the same time.

If we acknowledge that Jesus was both God and a man, why are we focusing so much on His humanity? Why not spend more time considering His divine nature?

In this study we will spend most of our time considering Jesus' humanity because this is where we meet Him as disciples. The Messiah could have been revealed only in His divine nature, bringing *shalom* through the power of His little finger just like He did in Egypt. But if Jesus did everything in His identity as God, we would never be able to relate to Him. He chose to become fully human so that we could follow His example. For this reason, while we strongly affirm His deity, our time together will focus mostly on His humanity.

Matthew's Fourteens and Sevens

In today's episode, RVL outlined some of the fascinating literary tools that Matthew employs in his version of Jesus' genealogy. We noted that the groups of fourteen connect to King David's name by using the Jewish practice of *gematria*. When you assign a number value to each letter in the Hebrew alphabet, David's name adds up to the number fourteen. In fact, this point was so important to the writer that he skips five different kings in order to make this literary device stand out.

As an aside, this omission was not frowned upon or thought of as sloppy. Leaving out names or generations to create symbolic numbers in someone's genealogy was a common literary tool in that culture (check out Genesis 5 and 46 for a deep dive if you want more examples). Remember that in the Hebrew mind, genealogies were meant to set the stage for a story or theological claim, preparing the audience for what they should expect from the main character. Just as readers of Charles Dickens can recognize the Western literary tools in his works, Matthew's Eastern audience would have been primed to understand what he was doing and why. With those groups of fourteen, Matthew is not so subtly driving home Jesus' royal lineage and identity as Messiah: David, David, David!

We also noted that the names are simultaneously arranged in groups of seven, with Jesus beginning the seventh and final group. Seven appears to be an important number to the writer because it's the number of completeness. Matthew is determined to remind his audience that God's story is always complete. His plans

never fail. He knows exactly what He is doing. He arranged for Jesus to be born at exactly the right moment in history, and since we are grafted into that seventh group of the family, God surely did the same for you.

You were born at exactly the moment God planned in this “seventh seven,” the last chapter of the story when God will bring about the climax and resolution. Your life is no more an accident than any other name in that list, and apparently Matthew wants you to know it. Because of what Jesus came to do as the Messiah, you’re not only an integrated, adopted part of His story—you were always intended to *belong* here.

Luke’s Genealogy—in Brief

As RVL touched on in this episode, many scholars believe that Matthew’s genealogy follows Joseph’s family line, while Luke’s version traces Mary’s. In identifying Jesus as “the son, so it was thought, of Joseph,” Luke seems to be saying that this is not Joseph’s family line, since Jesus was not his biological son (Luke 3:23). Rather, the implication is that this is Mary’s lineage.

Sure, but why not just come out and say that? Simply put, following a woman’s family line just wasn’t done at that time. Scholarship suggests that this choice probably wasn’t because Luke thought lowly of women; more likely it had to do with the fact that this was a patriarchal culture. Families were traced only through the patriarch, so it was highly unusual to mention anyone other than him—including younger sons and other family members. Many scholars suggest that Luke begins his genealogy with Mary and traces her line back through the patriarchs of her family. Interestingly, if scholarship is correct on this point, both of Jesus’ parents appear to come from David’s kingly line.

Whereas Matthew focuses on Jesus’ royal connection to David, highlighting His identity as the Messiah, Luke takes a slightly different approach. Luke begins with Jesus and works his way back in time, connecting Jesus to David and then to Abraham, just as Matthew did. Jesus’ identity as the Messiah, the son of David, and a Jewish man from the line of Abraham is clearly spelled out. But unlike Matthew, Luke extends beyond Abraham to trace Jesus’ line all the way back to Adam, whom he calls “the son of God” (Luke 3:38).

This is fascinating for a number of reasons. Luke, a travelling companion of Paul over many of his journeys through Greece and elsewhere, wrote his Gospel to a mixed audience of both Jews and Gentiles. He also addresses his two accounts—the connected books of Luke and Acts—to “most excellent Theophilus,” who some scholars suggest (because of the “most excellent” title) could have been a Roman official. His focus, therefore, is on including Gentile hearers in the Good News he is about to present. By tracing Jesus all the way back to Adam and then directly to God, the Creator of all things, Luke opens up Jesus’ lineage to connect to more than just a Jewish audience. Not only is He the anointed King of Israel, who will bring God’s blessing—He is here for all humanity, for all the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve.

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN

In the time before your next meeting, take time to consider this idea of living in “the last quarter.” Do you think of your life as significant to God’s Kingdom, or is this difficult to imagine? Spend time talking this over with the Lord. You may find it helpful to record your thoughts in a journal.





EPISODE 2

THE GOSPEL

For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.

Hebrews 2:17



THE SHEMA

ON YOUR OWN

Take a moment to reflect before beginning the group meeting. Consider the emotions, experiences, and thoughts that are most on your mind right now. Lay them before the Lord and prepare your heart for the prayer you are about to speak, the commitment you make with the words of the *Shema*.

TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English, together as a group.

HEBREW

Shema Israel,
Adonai elohenu-Adonai echad
Ve'ahavta et Adonai eloeikah,
b'khol levavkah,
uve'khol naphshekah,
uve'khol me'odekah.
Ve'ahavta l're'acha comocha. Amen.

ENGLISH

Hear O Israel!
The Lord is our God—the Lord alone.
Love the Lord your God
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your might,
and love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

As Matthew strongly communicates with his use of the number seven in his genealogy, God's story is always complete. He knows exactly what He's doing, and He picked a very specific time and place for Jesus to be born and live as a human being.

That time and place meant that Jesus would live His life under the boot of the Roman Empire. Israel was not an independent nation, and they hadn't been free for quite some time. After the Exile, the Persian ruler Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to their land, but Israel never really regained their previous sovereignty. They quickly became oppressed all over again, first by the Greeks and then the Romans. By the first century, Judea was governed by the puppet king Herod and his sons—Gentiles who worshipped pagan gods and answered only to Caesar.

Caesar was not only considered the absolute authority for the vast stretch of the empire's reach—he was thought to be a god himself. His citizens and conquered peoples were required to prove their undying loyalty, and there was increasing pressure to worship the emperor as a god on earth.

It's fascinating that this is the context in which God chose to send His Son. At a time when one of the mightiest earthly rulers was considered both human and deity, Jesus, who was *actually* fully God and fully human, would establish His Kingdom as the complete opposite of Caesar's.

As we continue to consider Jesus' humanity, today we will compare Jesus' arrival to the reign of Caesar. We will explore more of the context of His world, understanding why it matters for us that Jesus came as not only the anointed King, but also as King in His humanness.

Let's discuss as we prepare for today's episode.

TALK ABOUT IT

Why do you think God chose this specific time and place for Jesus to be born? Discuss as a group.

WATCH THE VIDEO

As you watch the video for this episode, you may use the following outline to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

THE VERY WORDS OF GOD

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God . . .

Mark 1:1



*How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of those who bring good news,
who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings,
who proclaim salvation,
who say to Zion,
"Your God reigns!"*

Isaiah 52:7




For this reason [Jesus] had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.

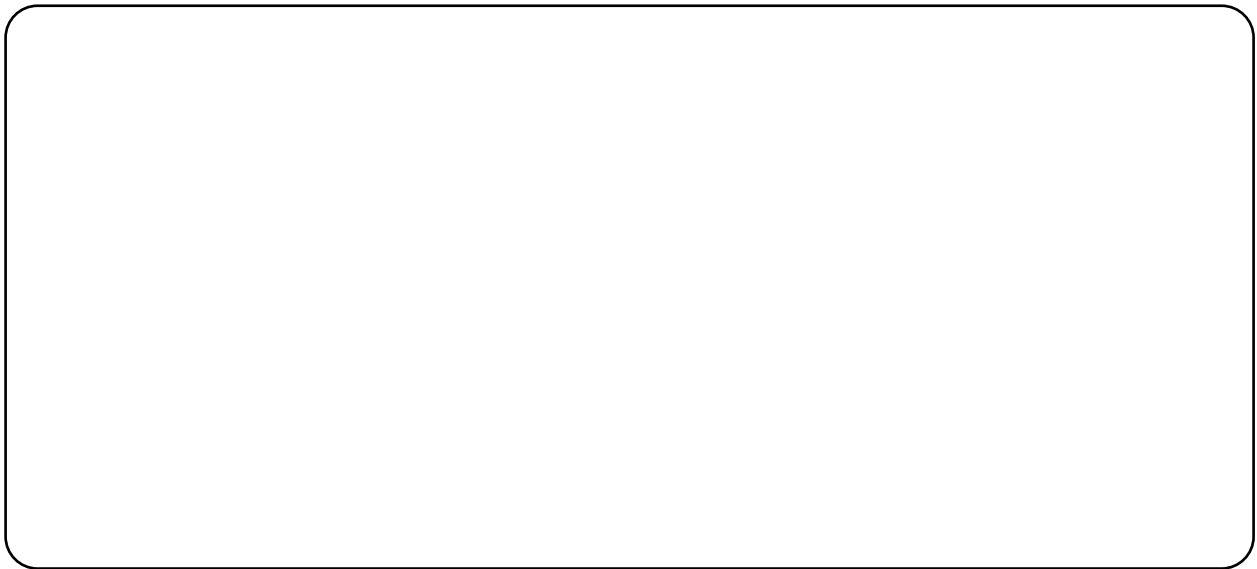
Hebrews 2:17



In the Roman context, *gospel* means:



Other notes:



VIDEO DISCUSSION

QUESTION 1

Let's recap. Why might it have been surprising for Mark and the other three Gospel writers to use *gospel*/ Good News language about Jesus, in their original context? What is Jesus' Good News, and how is it different from Caesar's?

QUESTION 2

As the Messiah, the anointed king, Jesus could have come to earth with His identity as God on full display—but He chose to be fully human. What does this fact have to do with discipleship? Why does it matter for us that Jesus lived a human life?

QUESTION 3

At this point in our study, how would you articulate what a disciple of Jesus does? What are some practical ways we can follow Jesus' example today, in our context?

TO WRAP IT UP

It's interesting to consider the gravity of the introductions in the Gospels. We often gloss over these sections in several books of the New Testament, categorizing phrases like “the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” and “grace and peace to you” as sort of formal, religious language that of course someone like Paul would use. But these were actually intense, politically charged statements! Proclaiming “good news” or promising “peace” by any means other than Rome directly challenged Caesar’s claims to deification—and would eventually become grounds for execution.

Even more fascinating is the fact that while Jesus came as the anointed king whose reign would challenge the might of Rome, He didn't insist on carrying this out through His identity as God. Instead He became fully human, emptying Himself of those God powers in some way and choosing to live a relatable human life. He came to establish the Kingdom; He came to seek the lost and to bring *shalom*; and He came to die in order to redeem humanity back into God's *beth ab*. But He chose to do it all as a human being like you and me.

So, why did Jesus live a full life, instead of just getting His death over with? *To show us how.*

The real Good News is that our Messiah came in human flesh, not only to redeem us back into God's family, but as the ultimate example of what it looks like to join God's story. Our role is to take Jesus' example and put it into action. Are you ready to start practicing what He preached?

Let's move into a time of prayer as we consider all that we've discussed today.

END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

Close your time together in prayer, praying for each other's needs and encouraging one another to *shema* until you meet again.

Here are some things you might pray about:

- Take stock of how each member of your group is doing this week. Is anyone facing difficulties or struggles that they could use prayer for? Consider spending time praying for each other one-on-one.
- Ask the Lord to show you real, practical ways to walk as He walked, both individually and in community.

END GROUP MEETING

To dig deeper into the content from this episode, check out the P.S.'s section on your own before the next meeting.

A FEW P.S.'S

This section is meant for participants who want to dig deeper on their own between group meetings. If your group wants to go through some or all of this section together, choose a method to read the following aloud and then discuss. You may choose one member to read an entire example or take turns, each person reading one paragraph.

PAX ROMANA

Jesus was born in a time period known as *pax Romana*, which simply means “Roman peace” in Latin. This refers to the state of relative tranquility—at least compared to the civil wars fought by Julius Caesar—enjoyed by the Roman world between (roughly) the reigns of Augustus and Marcus Aurelius. The term is connected to the idea of Caesar’s gospel—that the reign of the emperor is what brought about this peace. The idea was, *Before we had an emperor, life was chaotic and unpredictable. Now that Caesar is here, he is going to provide everything we could ever dream of—at least for the wealthier and more loyal among us.*

Yet it’s easy to wonder: if Caesar and underlings like Herod were so despicable, then why would anyone take Rome’s “good news” about his reign seriously? One reason for this, at least for loyal Roman citizens, is that Caesar did often deliver on his promises.

Rome took a leaf out of Alexander the Great’s book by spreading *Hellenism*, or what had become Greco-Roman culture, wherever they went. They didn’t just conquer peoples and set up puppet rulers. The Greeks and later the Romans dazzled people with their way of life, usually illustrated by their impressive infrastructure. *Pax Romana* often meant having brand-new aqueducts in your town. It meant paved streets, beautiful new city centers, theaters, arenas, and armies that kept you safe from roving bandits. Roman peace meant culture and art and wealth your city could never have imagined before the emperor came along.

And the stuff Rome built was *good*. Many Roman constructions like roads, reservoirs, irrigation systems, and even buildings still stand and function today, 2,000-plus years later! Caesar was often a crook and there was plenty of suffering in his empire, but his benefits were serious. Sure, they came at the price of having to worship him, but honestly, what’s one more god when you’re already juggling a full pantheon?

This is part of why the Jews were so baffling to their Roman oppressors. Everywhere else Rome went, people loved their culture and infrastructure. They generally had few qualms about adding Caesar to their list of deities in order to enjoy Roman peace. But most religious Jews simply refused to be dazzled. They’d had their fill of having the desires of their eyes dictate their actions; after all, that was what got them exiled the last time. By the time Jesus was born, much of Israel was determined to be people of the *ears* once more, *pax Romana* or not.

A GOSPEL FOR ROME

For a number of reasons, most scholars agree that the Gospel of Mark was very likely written first for Romans. One of these details has to do with two names: Alexander and Rufus.

In Mark 15, Jesus has been flogged and is heading to the place where He would be crucified. The soldiers pull a man out of the crowd and force him to carry the cross, presumably to speed things up. Mark tells us this was a man from Cyrene—“Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus.”

Ah yes, Alexander and Rufus. Of course. Thanks, Mark, for this significant detail. These two were never mentioned before in Mark’s account and are never mentioned again. So why include this information in the first place?

At the end of Paul’s letter to the Romans (presumably sent to many of the same people Mark was writing to), he asks the believers there to greet several specific people in Rome. Among them are Priscilla and Aquilla (names you will likely recognize from the book of Acts), but Paul also mentions Rufus!

Many scholars believe that this is why Mark name-drops these men when explaining that Simon carried Jesus’ cross. *Oh yeah, you know Alexander and Rufus from your house church over there? Their dad was the one the Roman soldiers forced to carry Jesus’ cross. You can ask them about it.*

A KING’S TRIUMPH

The “good news” of Caesar’s reign was advertised in myriad ways. His marketing strategies included minting coins, levying tributes, commissioning statues, posting proclamations, and erecting temples where the emperor could be worshipped. Caesar’s power was gained through complete dominance over others.

Perhaps the most extravagant way Caesar’s reign was displayed to his subjects was through an event known as a *triumph*, a practice that—like most of Roman culture—originated with the Greeks. At first Rome used the triumph as a military procession for victorious generals, displaying plunder and captives as a sign of their domination over the enemy. From 20 BC on, however, the practice of triumph was officially limited to emperors. Over time, the Roman triumph became a way to display not only Caesar’s sovereignty, but also his deity.

The procession itself went like this:

It began in the *Praetorium*, where an elite unit of Roman soldiers turned out to escort Caesar through the city streets. Caesar was given a purple robe, often taken off one of the statues of the gods. A wreathed crown was placed on his head, an indication of his deity. The soldiers then acclaimed their divine leader: “Hail, Caesar! *Imperator!* Dominator!”

The procession started at the *Praetorium* and followed the *Via Sacra*—the “sacred way.” It made its way through city streets lined with people burning incense, all the way up to Capitoline Hill, where the Temple of Jupiter

stood. Greek historian Dionysus of Halicarnassus records that when Rome was being built, an intact human head was discovered on that hill. Thus, they named it *capit*, or “Head Hill.”

A sacrificial bull was dragged along with the procession, with someone carrying sacred knives for the slaughter. When the procession arrived at the temple, the emperor was offered a bowl of wine, which many accounts record he would refuse and pour out. Perhaps he meant this to indicate, *I will pour out my power for my country*. Perhaps he poured it out in honor of his own deity.

After Caesar refused the wine, the sacrifice was made. Then the emperor would ascend the massive stairway of the temple, taking his place before the adoring crowd as lord and god. To show off his authority, Caesar was flanked by prominent men, often his sons or heirs—one on his right and one on his left. And the roaring crowd cheered, hailing him as lord and god.

During the triumph, everyone kept a sharp eye for portents—signs from the gods that could foretell aspects of the emperor’s reign. During Julius Caesar’s memorial games, a comet appeared for several days, which they took to mean he had ascended to the gods. And with this ceremony, Caesar was declared “lord and god”—the “savior of the world” as they knew it.

Now, imagine being one of those Roman citizens, receiving a letter from someone named Mark who claimed a different “Good News” about a different “Son of God” and “Savior.” *Who was this King? When was His triumph, and why haven’t we heard about it?*

Let’s go over this description of Caesar’s triumphal procession—the way he ascended to power—one more time, closely comparing it to Mark’s account:

First, soldiers gathered in the *Praetorium* before the procession.

*The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers.
Mark 15:16 (emphasis added)*



Caesar was given the purple robe and the wreathed crown, signs of his sovereignty and, eventually, his deity. Then the soldiers, after receiving gifts from Caesar, acclaimed him: “Hail Caesar! Lord and god!”

They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. And they began to call out to him, "Hail, king of the Jews!"

Mark 15:17-18 (emphasis added)



Then came the procession, with a sacrifice led alongside and someone next to it carrying the instrument of death. They made their way through the streets to the place called *capit* ("Head Hill").

Then they led him out to crucify him. A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross. They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means "the place of the skull").

Mark 15:20b-22 (emphasis added)



They offered Caesar a bowl of wine, which he refused by pouring it out. Then the sacrifice was made.

Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.

And they crucified him.

Mark 15:23-24 (emphasis added)



Caesar ascended the stairs of the Temple of Jupiter on Capitoline Hill, someone on his right and someone on his left. And then the crowd, the most important among them jostling for the closest position, would cheer: "Hail Caesar! Hail Caesar!"

They crucified two rebels with him, one on his right and one on his left.

...

In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him

among themselves. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

Mark 15:27, 31-32 (emphasis added)



The people and the priests watched closely for signs from the gods.

At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.

...

The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

Mark 15:33, 38 (emphasis added)



Mark's account was a ruler's triumph indeed! This was how the King of kings chose to ascend to power! Jesus could have beaten humanity into submission with power and fear, but instead He turned the whole system upside down. The Cross was how Jesus chose to be "exalted to the highest place," to be given "the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11). Caesar clawed after power by dominating over others, but Mark wanted his readers to plainly see that this is not how the Kingdom of Heaven comes.

And who appears to be the first to recognize it? A Roman soldier!

And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

Mark 15:39 (emphasis added)



Imagine being one of those first-century Romans receiving Mark's letter. Many of them had probably lived through a Roman triumph in person, since Nero had not been in power for very long by this point. What an incredible illustration of the "Good News" of a new King—a demonstration of how the true Savior took back His broken world!

Today Rome is a Christian center. And what of Caesar? He's just ruins and restorations. His grasps for power didn't last.

More than once, the apostle Paul used this same imagery as a metaphor when writing to a Gentile audience. To the believers in Corinth, he wrote:

But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere.
2 Corinthians 2:14 (emphasis added)



Notice that in Jesus' triumphal procession, we are not positioned as onlookers. Nor are we the army carting plunder or driving along captives—we *are* the captives. But in this procession, we follow the Son of God who calls us to be like He was, to offer ourselves as living sacrifices. We may follow Him even to death, carrying out our mission so that the world may *yadah* the real Savior of the world. But if we're following Jesus, death is never a defeat.

Will we join His procession?

*For further study on this subject, visit ThatTheWorldMayKnow.com to watch Volume 14: "The Mission of Jesus" in RVL's video series, *That the World May Know*.*

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN

Every human faces the temptation to trust in infrastructure—both physical and relational. It's a survival instinct to prioritize physical comfort and safety over everything else. The promise of *pax Romana* didn't die out with Rome—it's a mindset that is alive and well in our own culture today. In the time before your next meeting, take time to consider and talk with God about whose peace you are trusting in. You may find it helpful to record your thoughts in a journal.





EPISODE 3

THE SERVANT

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage . . .

Philippians 2:6



THE SHEMA

ON YOUR OWN

Take a moment to reflect before beginning the group meeting. Consider the emotions, experiences, and thoughts that are most on your mind right now. Lay them before the Lord and prepare your heart for the prayer you are about to speak, the commitment you make with the words of the *Shema*.

TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English, together as a group.

HEBREW

Shema Israel,
Adonai elohenu-Adonai echad
Ve'ahavta et Adonai eloeikah,
b'khol levavkah,
uve'khol naphshekah,
uve'khol me'odekah.
Ve'ahavta l're'acha comocha. Amen.

ENGLISH

Hear O Israel!
The Lord is our God—the Lord alone.
Love the Lord your God
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your might,
and love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

In our last episode, we learned about the power of the word *gospel* in Jesus' world. Caesar considered himself a deified human being—a god on earth whose reign was considered the only “good news” there could possibly be. Rulers like Caesar brought about their reigns through power, violence, and ruthless tyranny, promising peace to those who submitted and dealing out misery and death to everyone else. They clawed their way up the ladder with no regard for those they stepped on along the way.

And yet, in this time of Caesars and kings, Jesus came as another sort of ruler altogether. His Kingdom would last forever, but it would come about in a very different way—and its King would behave very differently from the tyrants the people were used to.

If so many Jews in Jesus' day struggled to recognize Him as the Messiah who would bring peace, can you imagine how much more confusing or surprising this “Good News” would have been in the Greco-Roman world? Who was this guy, and why was He so very different from the kings and emperors they were familiar with?

In today's episode we will continue our exploration of Jesus as our example by examining how the apostle Paul introduced His attitude to the Gentile world—to cultures that are much more like our own today. Let's pay special attention to how Paul instructs followers of Jesus to behave, both in the first century and as His disciples today.

Let's begin!

TALK ABOUT IT

As a group, read Philippians 2:1-18 together. What do you like? What do you find challenging or confusing?

WATCH THE VIDEO

As you watch the video for this episode, you may use the following outline to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

THE VERY WORDS OF GOD

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

*Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!*

*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*


Philippians 2:5-11 (emphasis added)



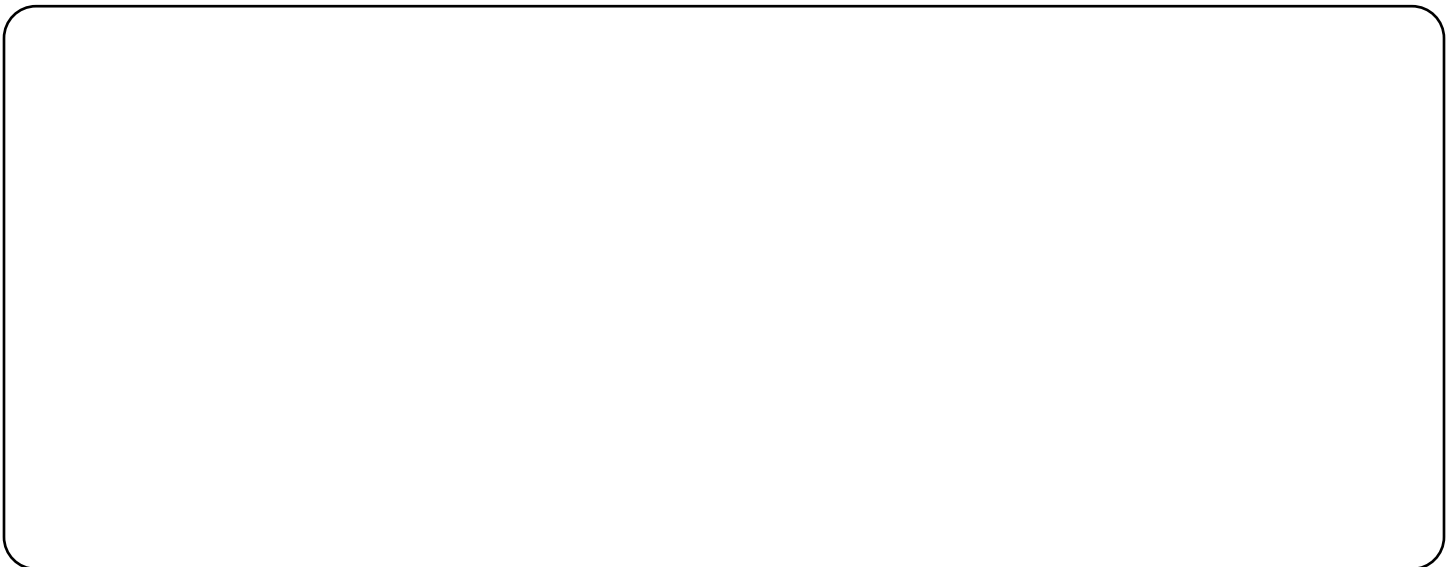
A heroon is:



Kenosis means:



Other notes:



VIDEO DISCUSSION

QUESTION 1

Let's recap. What does *kenosis* mean? What was a *heroon*? What do these terms have to do with how Jesus lived out the mission?

QUESTION 2

Our culture doesn't directly "deify" human beings, but we certainly elevate people for their achievements. How do you see this idea playing out in our culture today?

QUESTION 3

What might it look like to practice *kenosis*—to "empty ourselves" and "take the form of a servant" in our relationships with one another like Jesus did?

TO WRAP IT UP

As RVL put it, Jesus was the complete opposite of what the Greco-Roman world called a “hero.” Instead of ushering in His kingdom with great displays of power and military might, He established it through sacrificial love. Rather than spending His time working toward deification, He was already God in flesh. And instead of using His identity to dominate, He emptied Himself, embracing the reality of human life with humility so that He could show the rest of us how to follow.

Is this the kind of attitude that we adopt in our relationships with one another? We probably don’t spend our time trying to become deified political tyrants, but are we willing to live like Jesus, even if it means we never get credit for it from others? Are we willing to humble ourselves as servants? Are we more concerned with living for our happiness than we are with walking as Jesus walked?

As we continue our study of Jesus as our example, let’s consider what *kenosis* might look like in our lives today. How can we channel our passion for God’s mission into the kind of humility that makes us a redeeming community? How can we be so passionate about bringing *shalom* to chaos that we let go of our need to get credit for it?

Let’s move into a time of prayer, asking the Lord to form this kind of character in each one of us.

END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

Close your time together in prayer, praying for each other's needs and encouraging one another to *shema* until you meet again.

Here are some things you might pray about:

- Ask God to help you demonstrate the character of Christ, praying the passage from Philippians 2 over one another.
- Ask the Lord to show you real, practical ways to walk as He walked, both individually and in community.

END GROUP MEETING

To dig deeper into the content from this episode, check out the P.S. section on your own before the next meeting.

A P.S.

PHILIPPI, THE ROMAN COLONY

A City of Heroes

The city of Philippi in Greece has an interesting history with deep connections to the theme of *gospel*. As RVL mentioned in this episode, the city was founded by Philip II, the father of Alexander the Great and a powerful king in his own right.

The Greeks, and later the Romans, had a habit of deifying their heroes—assigning a god-like status to people they felt had accomplished superhuman things during their lifetime. These heroes weren't thought of as eternal gods like Zeus/Jupiter, but they were as close as one could get in human form, at least in the Greco-Roman understanding. For example, if you offered a little incense at his *heroon*, a deceased, deified hero could be relied upon to “put in a good word” for you with the mythological gods and goddesses.

Philip II was one of the earliest kings in recorded history who sought to be deified, or worshipped as a god on earth, while he was still alive. While preparing an army fit to conquer the world, he held a banquet during which statues of the twelve primary Olympian gods and goddesses were paraded in. This act of worship was followed by the presentation of a thirteenth statue—depicting none other than himself as a god. The idea was to force the audience to recognize his deified status, honoring him along with the rest of the pantheon.

The guests were so horrified that his bodyguard killed him on the spot—and then they promptly deified him. His *heroon* in Philippi became one of the most famous in their world, and people would travel for thousands of miles to offer prayers there.

Philip's throne and growing army passed to his son, Alexander the Great, who proceeded to build a vast empire. After Alexander's death, control of that territory eventually passed to the Romans, who adopted much of Greek culture and gave it a Latin rebrand. And the great city of Philippi, the home of Philip's *heroon*, would eventually become the setting of one of the most decisive battles in history.

A City of Caesars

Another of the earliest recorded cases of pursuing living deification was Julius Caesar. One of the most famous figures in history, Julius schemed and fought against other Roman generals for control of territory—until the day he marched his army into Rome itself and declared himself emperor. At the time Rome was a republic, governed by a Senate system not all that dissimilar to the American system today. Julius believed that Rome should be an empire instead, and he took it by force, claiming divine status as its first Caesar.

Like Philip, Julius' life as a deified one didn't last long. You probably know the story—the mighty Caesar was stabbed and killed by his former friends and allies, notably Cassius and Brutus. (“*Et tu, Brute?*”)

The assassins fled Rome and gathered their armies. Eager for revenge, Julius' adopted heir, a young man named Octavian, joined forces with another famous Roman general, Mark Antony (yes, *that* Mark Antony). Together they marched to pursue Cassius and Brutus, and the four armies clashed at Philippi. How ironic that the same struggle for imperial power and living deification would play itself out under the shadow of Philip's *heroon*! This battle would decide whether Rome would remain a republic or whether an emperor claiming to be both fully divine and fully human would sit on the throne at the time of Jesus' birth.

Cassius and Brutus were outclassed and outflanked, and they committed suicide to protect their own honor. Julius' avengers were victorious. But Octavian and Mark Antony had a problem: what to do with the armies they had conquered? Cassius' and Brutus' men were Roman citizens, representing thousands of families back home who would not be terribly supportive of generals who slaughtered their fathers and husbands and sons. But they couldn't just let the prisoners go, lest the forces simply regroup under another leader. Or they might turn to raiding, pillaging and stealing whatever they could get their hands on. None of these options was a good look for aspiring politicians who wanted to overthrow the republic and live to tell the tale.

Octavian decided to turn the city of Philippi—a city marked by quests for deification—into a Roman colony. This meant that not only would the city enjoy funding and support from Rome, but within the city bounds Roman law would protect and provide for its inhabitants, just as if it were the capital itself. Octavian gifted the new colony to the conquered soldiers, allowing them to occupy the surrounding land and build a new life in the beautiful countryside of Greece. This decisive move proved to be a political home run.

Octavian would go on to defeat Mark Antony in his own pursuit of power, finally establishing the throne Julius had coveted. Octavian then took the name Augustus Caesar, the first true reigning Roman emperor. He called himself a god on earth—the deified son of the deified Julius Caesar—and this time it worked. The people back in Philippi would begin to not only worship their dead heroes, but their living emperors as well.

Years later, the apostle Paul and his companions traveled the same road on which Octavian and Mark Antony led their armies, this time bringing the spiritual Good News of a new King to the Roman colony of Philippi. Yet this King was nothing like Philip or Julius or Octavian/Augustus. This King took the concept of *heroon* and turned it on its head, and in so doing, turned the known world upside down, too.

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN

In the time before your next meeting, talk with the Lord about how you tend to relate to others, especially other believers. Do you feel pressure to prove your righteousness, or to gain authority over others? Where do you find yourself struggling to take the form of a servant—to humble yourself as Jesus did? You may find it helpful to record your prayers in a journal.





EPISODE 4

THE QUESTION

When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Matthew 11:2-3



THE SHEMA

ON YOUR OWN

Take a moment to reflect before beginning the group meeting. Consider the emotions, experiences, and thoughts that are most on your mind right now. Lay them before the Lord and prepare your heart for the prayer you are about to speak, the commitment you make with the words of the *Shema*.

TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English, together as a group.

HEBREW

Shema Israel,
Adonai elohenu-Adonai echad
Ve'ahavta et Adonai eloeikah,
b'khol levavkah,
uve'khol naphshekah,
uve'khol me'odekah.
Ve'ahavta l're'acha comocha. Amen.

ENGLISH

Hear O Israel!
The Lord is our God—the Lord alone.
Love the Lord your God
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your might,
and love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

In episode 1 we focused on the fact that Jesus was fully human—which means He was born into a specific family unit. A key figure in Jesus’ life as a human being was His cousin, the man known as John the Baptist. Isaiah prophesied about John long before either cousin was born. John would be the one calling out: “In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Isaiah 40:3).

John was imprisoned for criticizing King Herod. The tetrarch ruler had married his brother’s wife, which explicitly violated *Torah* law (Leviticus 18:16, 20:21). John preached that any king who refused to follow *Torah* was unfit to rule, as is stated in the Hebrew Bible. Herod, a Gentile put into power by Caesar, cared nothing for the attack on his morals, but he was furious at the political criticism that threatened his throne. He threw John in prison, later executing him at the request of his stepdaughter.

But between the time of his arrest and the execution, John sent messengers to Jesus. John asked his cousin, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Matthew 11:3).

What an odd question coming from John the Baptist! After all, John’s parents had prepared him from birth to proclaim the coming of the Messiah, a man who was his own cousin. John was there in the water with Jesus when the Spirit descended like a dove and the voice from heaven spoke. And John had dedicated his entire life to preparing the Israelites for Jesus’ ministry.

Nearing the end of his life, did John lose faith? Or was there more going on in his question? As we continue our study of Jesus’ life as a human, let’s examine the interaction between John and Jesus, exploring the ideas about God’s Kingdom that Jesus came to teach.

TALK ABOUT IT

Sometimes God answers our prayers in ways we didn’t necessarily ask for. How do you think John expected Jesus to answer him? What would you have expected Jesus to say?

WATCH THE VIDEO

As you watch the video for this episode, you may use the following outline to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

THE VERY WORDS OF GOD

After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee.

When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

*Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: **The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.**"*

Matthew 11:1-6 (emphasis added)



Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!

Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!

*See, your **king comes to you,***

righteous and victorious,

lowly and riding on a donkey,

on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

I will take away the chariots from Ephraim

and the warhorses from Jerusalem,

and the battle bow will be broken.

He will proclaim peace to the nations.

His rule will extend from sea to sea

and from the River to the ends of the earth.

As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you,

***I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit.
Return to your fortress, you prisoners of hope;
even now I announce that I will restore twice as much to you.
Zechariah 9:9-12 (emphasis added)***



***Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.
Isaiah 35:5-6 (emphasis added)***



***But your dead will live, Lord;
their bodies will rise—
let those who dwell in the dust
wake up and shout for joy—
your dew is like the dew of the morning;
the earth will give birth to her dead.
Isaiah 26:19 (emphasis added)***



***“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners . . .”
Isaiah 61:1 (emphasis added)***



***“ . . . to open eyes that are blind,
to free captives from prison
and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.”
Isaiah 42:7 (emphasis added)***



Other notes:

VIDEO DISCUSSION

QUESTION 1

Let's recap. What Old Testament allusion is likely included in John's question? What allusions seem to be in Jesus' answer? What is John really asking Jesus, and how does Jesus respond?

QUESTION 2

Sometimes God's answer to our prayers is a loving no. Why might that be? And when that happens, how do we tend to feel toward Him? As disciples, what would be an appropriate response?

QUESTION 3

How do you feel about the idea that there is always suffering in the body of Christ? How can we have compassion for our brothers and sisters around the world who are suffering because of their faith in Jesus?

TO WRAP IT UP

When John the Baptist sent messengers to Jesus, he very cleverly asked his cousin, “Are you the one who is to come?”—a.k.a. the one who will free the prisoners? Jesus, apparently recognizing the allusion to Zechariah, responds with a few of His own. And He ends with the loving statement, “Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me” (Matthew 11:6).

Jesus does not promise safety to His followers. In fact, He predicts the opposite. He told us that the world would hate His disciples, persecuting them just as they persecuted Jesus Himself (John 15).

Will we be offended by this reality? Are we willing to live like John—completely and totally committed to the mission, no matter the cost? Let’s keep this in mind as we continue our study of Jesus’ life as our human example.

END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

Close your time together in prayer, praying for each other's needs and encouraging one another to *shema* until you meet again.

Here are some things you might pray about:

- Ask God for the courage to face whatever situations He's called you to.
- Ask the Lord to show you real, practical ways to walk as He walked, both individually and in community.

END GROUP MEETING

To dig deeper into the content from this episode, check out the P.S.'s section on your own before the next meeting.

A FEW P.S.'S

Geographical Context: Herod's Backyard

*When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee.
Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the
area of Zebulun and Naphtali . . .
Matthew 4:12-13 (emphasis added)*



It sounds a bit like Jesus is afraid in this chapter. I mean, who wouldn't be? His cousin was just imprisoned by Herod Antipas, the son of the man who murdered babies in an attempt to kill Jesus Himself. We know from the historian Josephus that John was being held at Machaerus, a palace fortress along the Dead Sea. The prison's name means "the sword," and Machaerus was infamous for its brutal treatment of prisoners. All things considered, at least from a human point of view, it would make complete sense for Jesus to keep His distance from Herod.

But this is yet another instance where knowing the context of Scripture can give us more insight into Jesus' life. History records that not long before John was arrested, Herod Antipas moved to a new palace on the Sea of Galilee. What else do we know to be located on the Sea of Galilee?

Capernaum.

We might read this passage and think that Jesus was running away from Herod. But a closer look at geography and history tells us that Jesus was doing the exact opposite. When He heard that John had been imprisoned, Jesus went to Capernaum and set up camp in Herod's backyard. On a clear day, Herod needed only to glance out the window to see the village where the true King of Israel was proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven.

Yes, Jesus had many additional reasons to make Capernaum His home base, which we will explore later in season 3. But make no mistake—Jesus knew exactly what He was doing in this passage, and it had nothing to do with fear.

"End Times" Charts

There is no doubt that John the Baptist was a key player in the story of Jesus' life on earth. It was prophesied in the Old Testament that John would prepare the way for the Messiah, and he lived that mission with a faithfulness we should all aspire to. John understood, probably from a very young age, exactly who Jesus was. And as we discussed today, it appears that John remained faithful to the end, even when in prison.

In those days there were a few different ways religious Jews tended to look for the coming of their Messiah—sort of like “end times” charts, if you will. Many interpreted Scripture to say that the Messiah would come to judge their oppressors immediately. He would destroy the wicked and usher in a messianic age where everything would slowly return to *shalom* as the Kingdom of Heaven came to earth.

From what we read in Scripture, it’s possible that this was the outcome John expected. His rebuke to some of the Pharisees whom he considered hypocritical is particularly suggestive:

“The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Matthew 3:10-12 (emphasis added)



While John was perfectly confident in Jesus’ identity and 110 percent faithful to his own mission, it’s possible that he, too, was expecting the sudden, dramatic appearance of a Messiah who was ready to judge. At least it’s reasonable to consider that interpretation.

But others expected the Messiah to approach things a bit differently. This viewpoint interpreted Scripture to say that the Messiah would certainly establish His kingdom in victory over the oppressive powers of this world—but before ushering in any judgment, He would deal with the evilness of the age by allowing His followers to live alongside the lost for a while. When the time was right, these people believed, it would be evident who His followers were. And *then* would come the judgment.

What parable does this remind you of?

Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

“The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’

“An enemy did this,’ he replied.

“The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’

“No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’”

Matthew 13:24-30 (emphasis added)



Now there’s no way to know for sure how John the Baptist expected Jesus to bring about His Kingdom. (Not even Jesus’ twelve disciples got that right every time.) But it does suggest that aspects of Jesus’ approach might have taken His cousin by surprise.

There are several things we can take away from this. First, we are never going to get things right 100 percent of the time. We’re only human, so it’s simply not going to happen. But let’s be inspired by the passion and commitment of John to give it our all. Let’s respond with humility when the Lord corrects us and never take our eyes off the mission—even if it doesn’t work out the way we expect.

Second, let’s take very seriously the fact that Jesus wanted the wheat to spend time growing alongside the weeds. Could it be that calling in the harvest too soon might uproot the wheat along with the weeds . . . because the *weeds themselves can always be transformed* into wheat through the power of God’s love? Our mission is to bring *shalom* to the chaos around us. The way we live our lives really matters, not only for ourselves, but for the sake of the lost around us.

NOW IT’S YOUR TURN

In the time before your next meeting, reread today’s verses from Matthew 11 several times. Each time you read, journal a new response, noting what challenges you, what the passage communicates about humanity, what it communicates about God, and how you might want it to change you.





EPISODE 5

THE FLOCK

"From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it."

Matthew 11:12



THE SHEMA

ON YOUR OWN

Take a moment to reflect before beginning the group meeting. Consider the emotions, experiences, and thoughts that are most on your mind right now. Lay them before the Lord and prepare your heart for the prayer you are about to speak, the commitment you make with the words of the *Shema*.

TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English, together as a group.

HEBREW

Shema Israel,
Adonai elohenu-Adonai echad
Ve'ahavta et Adonai eloeikah,
b'khol levavkah,
uve'khol naphshekah,
uve'khol me'odekah.
Ve'ahavta l're'acha comocha. Amen.

ENGLISH

Hear O Israel!
The Lord is our God—the Lord alone.
Love the Lord your God
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your might,
and love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

In the first century many Jews thought the Messiah would rescue them from the clutches of Rome through awesome displays of power, just as God had done in Exodus. Some expected to be delivered through military might, as in the days of Joshua.

But it is now clear from His teachings that Jesus had no intention of ushering in the Kingdom of Heaven through violence. He called His followers to bring *shalom* to chaos by turning the other cheek, walking the extra mile, and forgiving even the worst people imaginable.

So what's up with that next section of Matthew 11? After Jesus responds to John's question from prison, He says this to the crowd around Him:

*"From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to **violence**, and **violent people** have been raiding it."*

Matthew 11:12 (emphasis added)



We explored the first part of Matthew 11 in our last episode, looking at Jesus' response to His cousin. Today we will continue our discussion of His teaching in this chapter. Why would Jesus, who never condones building God's Kingdom through violence anywhere else, now use that language here?

For centuries this passage has created a struggle for scholars and translators alike, but let's recall one of the tools we have learned for studying the Bible in its context: When something seems odd or prompts us to ask, "Why do I need to know that?" the answer is often to ask, "Is the writer or speaker getting this from somewhere else in Scripture?"

Jewish scholarship recognizes in this Matthew 11 passage a possible allusion to an Old Testament prophecy about the Messiah—and about how His Kingdom will come. Let's get into today's episode and consider a new take on this passage.

TALK ABOUT IT

At first glance, what does Matthew 11:12 seem to say about how the Kingdom of Heaven comes? How does this appear to conflict with what we know of Jesus' teaching?

WATCH THE VIDEO

As you watch the video for this episode, you may use the following outline to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

THE VERY WORDS OF GOD

"Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it."

Matthew 11:11-12



*"I will surely gather all of you, Jacob;
I will surely bring together the remnant of Israel.
I will bring them together like sheep in a pen,
like a flock in its pasture;
the place will throng with people.
The One who **breaks open** the way will go up before them;
they will **break through** the gate and go out.
Their King will pass through before them,
the Lord at their head."*

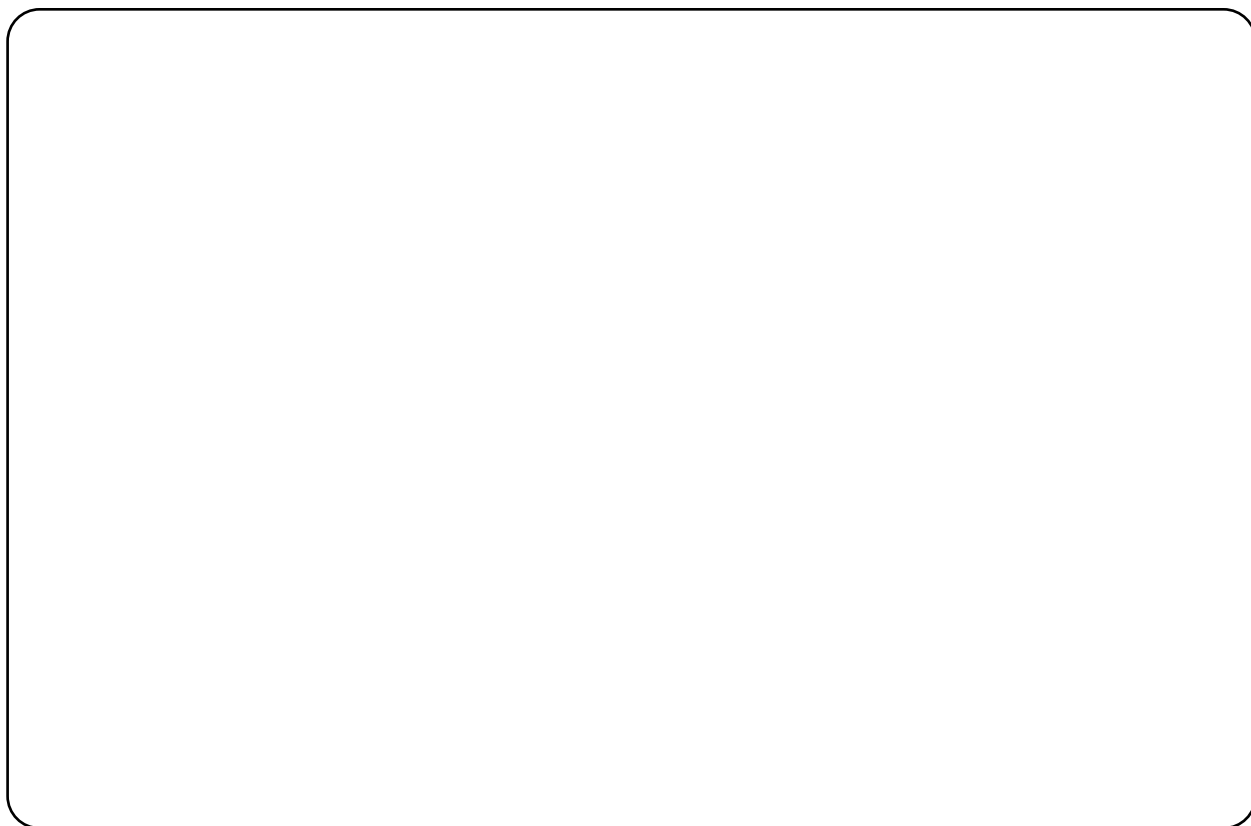
Micah 2:12-13 (emphasis added)



Possible meanings of *biadzo* and *pratz*:



Other notes:



VIDEO DISCUSSION

QUESTION 1

Let's recap. What does the word *pratz*—or its Greek equivalent, *biadzo*—mean? Which meaning does RVL suggest Jesus is employing? Why does RVL suggest that Jesus is alluding to Micah 2 with this word?

QUESTION 2

Recall from previous episodes the idea of kingdom work in the biblical sense. How does a kingdom expand in this point of view? How does doing the will of God relate to this idea of having *pratz*?

QUESTION 3

What did it look like for John the Baptist to have *pratz*? Since Jesus is our King, the one with 110 percent passion who runs ahead of us, how can we follow Him with *pratz* in our context today?

TO WRAP IT UP

By using the word *pratz*, Jesus utilized word imagery that Jewish scholarship recognizes as a possible allusion to Micah 2. This same chapter includes an Old Testament prophecy that informed Israel how God would redeem them from exile and introduce the Messiah. Not only is it likely that a biblically literate audience would have made this connection, but Jesus' words would have also sparked a very familiar image in the minds of His hearers.

The original audience likely pictured God's Kingdom arriving with intense passion and explosive excitement—just like the sheep who can't wait to get out of the pen and get on with their "mission." Israel was penned up during the Exile to teach them a lesson, but now God was ready to open the gate. The Messiah would lead His people, showing them how to live out their mission as God's image-bearers on earth. And they were supposed to imitate this anointed king's passion—to be just as excited and intense about bringing the kingdom as He was (and still is!).

So where is our passion, our *pratz*? Do we approach "throwing our stones," joining God's story, and bringing *shalom* to chaos with the same passion that Jesus saw in John the Baptist? Are we following closely behind our King to do God's will on earth? Or do we more often find ourselves timidly exiting the pen, wandering around with no sense of purpose? Are we willing to leave the relative safety of the sheepfold in the first place?

In season 3 we are focusing on Jesus as a human being because He is our example, the One we must imitate if we want to be His disciples. Let's keep these ideas in mind as we continue on this journey, asking Him to give us the *pratz* we need to follow Him faithfully.

END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

Close your time together in prayer, praying for each other's needs and encouraging one another to *shema* until you meet again.

If you'd like some ideas, here are some points you might pray about:

- Ask God for more *pratz* in your daily life as you follow Jesus.
- Ask the Lord to show you real, practical ways to walk as He walked, both individually and in community.

END GROUP MEETING

To dig deeper into the content from this episode, check out the P.S.'s section on your own before the next meeting.

A FEW P.S.'S

Sheep Pens and Three Feet of Manure

We learned that, geographically speaking, the lower part of Israel is divided almost right down the center. One half is made up of fertile farmland, where families depend on their crops for survival. The other half is desert wilderness, which is where shepherds are sometimes found. These seminomadic families depend on their flocks for subsistence. Today's episode mentioned a symbiotic relationship between the two groups that usually comes into play only once a year, right after the harvest.

In Israel, crops are usually planted in late November or December. They sprout over the next several months, and around June the harvest begins. Once the harvest is complete, the farmers and shepherds strike their deals, exchanging grazing rights and some fresh supplies for animal goods and the chance to get the fields cleared and fertilized. The arrangement benefits both parties for a short time only, and they generally take advantage of it. Farmers will allow sheep into their fields, and shepherds will set up camp until the grazing is done. But come late November, those fields will need to be planted again, and the flocks must return to the desert.

Shepherds usually live a nomadic lifestyle in the desert, leading their flocks along sparsely populated and well-known travel routes. But during their time in the fields, they need to keep their sheep in one specific area. When the animals aren't grazing during the day, where can they go?

In the hills along the farmland, the shepherds devised a series of sheep pens that they use to keep their animals safe at night during the post-harvest grazing. Some of these pens are natural caves, covered in sheep dung and the soot from thousands of campfires over the years. Others are a series of man-made rock walls with narrow openings to let the animals in and out. There are no gates or locks to these pens. The shepherd must essentially become the gate—sleeping in the opening to keep the animals in and danger out. If those sheep are as eager to get out as we saw in today's episode, this is no easy job—and remember, shepherds were and still are often young. Can you imagine being a twelve- or thirteen-year-old boy or girl and taking turns with your family to corral all these animals? It's very impressive.

In today's episode we discussed how this imagery affects our understanding of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 11. But what insight can this context offer about the story of Jesus' birth?

Luke tells us that when the angels announced Jesus' birth to the shepherds, they were "living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night" (Luke 2:8). As we just learned, there seems to be only one time each year when the shepherds might be found in the fields near Bethlehem, watching over their penned-up flocks until morning. Many Christians now celebrate Jesus' birth at the end of December, but that's generally well into the planting season. It's unlikely that you would find a shepherd in the fields on December 25. Scholars suggest that Jesus' actual birthday was more likely between harvest and planting, sometime between the end of June and the beginning of November. (This isn't a criticism of celebrating Christmas on December 25—it's

just interesting to consider the context.)

We like to picture baby Jesus in a beautiful, European-style stable with soft, attractive lighting. Our Nativity scenes depict Him in a clean manger filled with golden straw, with a single, pristine lamb sitting demurely to one side and some bearded shepherds looking on in rapture. And we know that in this time period, some nonshepherding families would keep the few animals they had in the floor, or lower, levels of a raised house. But what if the manger referred to in Luke was really in one of those makeshift pens?

What if Mary gave birth in a sheep cave, staring at a ceiling covered in cobwebs and soot and *bats*? And what if a gaggle of preteen shepherds came crowding in out of nowhere, likely followed by a lot of sheep because their shepherds were no longer blocking the entrances to their own pens? And what if it was *August*?

Perhaps the King of kings was actually born in three feet of sheep manure, to the delight of His cobweb-covered parents and a troop of sleep-deprived twelve-year-olds. What a beautiful picture of *shalom* coming to chaos—that Jesus loved us so much He chose to enter humanity in such a lowly place. There’s no way to know for sure, but context suggests it’s entirely possible.

Why Was Israel “Penned Up”?

Let’s take another look at the Micah passage that Jewish scholarship suggests Jesus might be alluding to in Matthew 11:

*“I will surely gather all of you, Jacob;
I will surely bring together the remnant of Israel.
I will bring them together like sheep in a pen,
like a flock in its pasture;
the place will throng with people.
The One who breaks open the way will go up before them;
they will break through the gate and go out.
Their King will pass through before them,
the Lord at their head.”
Micah 2:12-13 (emphasis added)*



Recall that not long after the death of Solomon, the tribes of Israel split into two kingdoms. The kingdom in the south, which included Jerusalem, was known as “Judah,” and its northern counterpart was called “Israel.” Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah and Hosea, and though he came from the kingdom of Judah, his words were meant for all of God’s people.

At this point God's people in both kingdoms had failed to live up to their role as God's partner. Occasionally there would arise a godly king like Hezekiah who would lead his respective kingdom well, but these periods of revitalization proved short-lived. In both kingdoms God's people typically descended right back into chaos once such a king was gone. They ceased to care about the marginalized, about being God's image to the nations, or about living by the words of His mouth instead of the desires of their eyes. There's no need to be overly critical of them—who among us hasn't failed in our mission? But God decided a time-out was needed, and His people went into exile.

Micah communicated God's judgments for His people's failure, but He also wrote about what God planned to do in the long run—how He wanted to bring His people out of exile when the time was right. God would indeed bring about redemption someday, and Micah advised the Israelites how to repent and what to expect from the Lord. One of the major metaphors he used is the image of the sheepfold, which we see here in Micah 2.

The message in this passage is that Israel had been benched from God's mission while He worked on their hearts. Micah preached that the Lord would prepare Israel to receive the Messiah, who would show them how to get it right. Until that time, they would feel like sheep in a pen—bleating and bickering, waiting anxiously for the light to dawn and for their Shepherd to lead them back to the mission.

Perhaps all that waiting, that feeling of being “penned up,” helped to increase their *pratz*. Perhaps it helped hone their passion and focus so that when the Messiah did come, they would be ready for Him.

Greater than John the Baptist

In His discussion about the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew 11, Jesus makes this interesting statement about John the Baptist:

“Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

Matthew 11:11 (emphasis added)



John the Baptist was a key figure in Jesus' ministry. There were two prophets who were predicted to return to Israel after the Old Testament was completed: One was a so-called “second Moses” (Deuteronomy 18:15-18), and the Jews believed this figure would be the Messiah. The other was a second Elijah, who would return to herald the arrival of the Messiah's Kingdom.

Jesus tells us point-blank that this Elijah figure was John the Baptist (Matthew 11:14).

Now that is seriously high praise. It's hard to imagine a more important role in the Kingdom. But Jesus goes on to say that as amazing as John was, even the least of those who join the mission would be greater than him. Yet how could this possibly be true?

It's not that the rest of us are going to accomplish more than John did, or that we're competing with him for greater faith or knowledge. But to be in the Kingdom of Heaven is to be a part of God's reign breaking out in a way that John the Baptist never could. To use the Micah 2 metaphor, John "broke open the way," but he never got the chance to run after the King with the rest of the flock. He died too soon. John was among the most faithful of all, but he never got to see the fruit that would come from Jesus' ministry on earth.

But we do. In fact, we get to be fruit-bearers and fruit-producers in His Kingdom.

Perhaps Jesus' statement in Matthew 11 was meant to hold John up as the ultimate example of incredible faith and faithfulness—yet at the same time reminding us:

You people who are living out the last chapter, the "seventh seven." Don't forget who you are!

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN

In the time before your next meeting, take stock of the *pratz* in your life. Are you passionately doing your best to live out God's mission, throwing your stone, bringing *shalom* to chaos in your context? Or are you more often hiding in the sheep pen? Talk this over with the Lord this week, asking Him to increase your *pratz* and prioritizing your time in the Word and with other believers.





EPISODE 6

THE COMMUNITY

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

Matthew 4:23



THE SHEMA

ON YOUR OWN

Take a moment to reflect before beginning the group meeting. Consider the emotions, experiences, and thoughts that are most on your mind right now. Lay them before the Lord and prepare your heart for the prayer you are about to speak, the commitment you make with the words of the *Shema*.

TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English, together as a group.

HEBREW

Shema Israel,
Adonai elohenu-Adonai echad
Ve'ahavta et Adonai eloeikah,
b'khol levavkah,
uve'khol naphshekah,
uve'khol me'odekah.
Ve'ahavta l're'acha comocha. Amen.

ENGLISH

Hear O Israel!
The Lord is our God—the Lord alone.
Love the Lord your God
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your might,
and love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

Compared to some of the surrounding nations, Israel in Jesus' day was relatively small. Even smaller was the area wherein Jesus conducted most of His ministry. While He obviously visited other places and travelled to Jerusalem multiple times, Jesus spent the majority of His three-year ministry in Galilee, the area along the northwest coast of the Sea of Galilee.

This was where most of the religious Jews of the first century lived. It was the "Bible Belt" of Jesus' day, a collection of small, rural villages whose inhabitants were highly committed to knowing and living out Scripture. The villages were intensely communal places where daily life revolved around the Text (the Old Testament). Each village had a synagogue—a "town hall" that functioned as a social meeting place and weekly worship center. Synagogues often included rooms for Scripture schools, which we will unpack more throughout this season and the next. Most *beth abs* (patriarchal family units) lived in what were known as *insulas*—closely constructed stone houses with one or two private rooms arranged around a central courtyard. The people of Galilee spent much of their lives in those courtyards, conducting the family trade, visiting neighbors, purchasing goods from one another, sharing the responsibility of raising kids, hosting travelers, and doing daily life together.

These *insulas* provide an excellent picture of how the people of Galilee understood life—as a community affair. In the towns where Jesus spent most of His ministry, the community was always prioritized over the individual, and this also proved true regarding their understanding of discipleship.

Are any introverts among you starting to feel your blood pressure increase? Can you imagine carrying out every aspect of daily life, including your faith walk, in such an interconnected social environment?

Modern Western culture often views discipleship very differently from those first-century Galileans. An individual's spiritual life is usually more of a personal affair, with an emphasis on individual study and development rather than the growth of a Bible-centered community. It's not that we don't value community; it's just not a commonly modeled lifestyle in our culture. The transient nature of modern careers and even the way our cities and towns are constructed can make it difficult to prioritize this kind of highly integrated community life.

As we continue studying Jesus' human life as our ultimate example, it's crucial that we understand the setting in which He did most of His teaching. Not only were the twelve disciples along for the ride as a team, but the people their rabbi spent the most time with were also deeply committed to following God as a community. Over the next few episodes, we will explore the world in which Jesus taught, focusing today on the power of community in discipleship.

Let's start the discussion as we prepare for today's episode.

TALK ABOUT IT

What might a community approach to life as a disciple look like today, in our culture? Share your ideas as a group.

WATCH THE VIDEO

As you watch the video for this episode, you may use the following outline to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

THE VERY WORDS OF GOD

*When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee.
Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake . . .*

Matthew 4:12-13



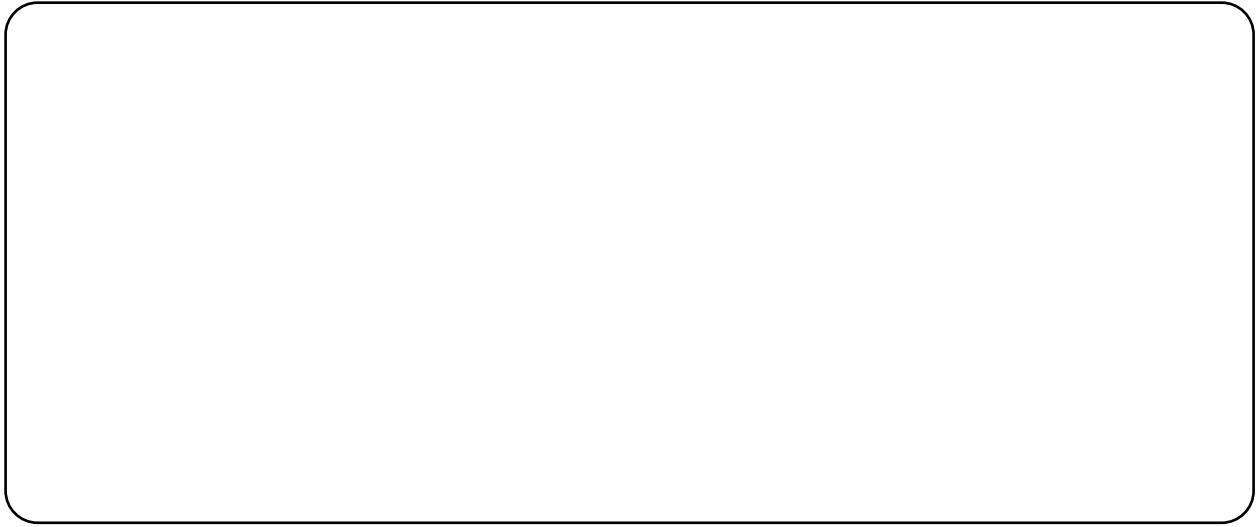
*Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good
news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.*

Matthew 4:23



Facts about life in Galilee:

Other notes:



VIDEO DISCUSSION

QUESTION 1

Let's recap. Considering today's lesson and earlier discussions about *beth ab*, how did family systems work in Jewish culture? How did the houses in Jewish communities in Jesus' day reflect the communal nature of family life? What would you enjoy about this kind of lifestyle, and what might be challenging?

QUESTION 2

Why do you think our current culture is so focused on individual growth and accomplishment? What roadblocks or cultural habits stand in the way of prioritizing communal growth in our lives today? How can you imagine overcoming them?

QUESTION 3

Take time as a group to imagine your "dream faith community." How close would you want to live to one another? What sort of daily life rhythms would you want to practice together? What would you want the members of this community to do for one another? Finally, how can we foster the kind of community that allows us to follow Jesus as a team?

TO WRAP IT UP

Understanding the setting in which Jesus did most of His teaching helps give us insight into how discipleship is supposed to work. Life in Galilee revolved around the community, and the people who lived there were apparently committed to prioritizing Scripture in every aspect of life.

These ideas are largely foreign to our culture today. We do not have the same kind of tight-knit communities that the Jews had in Jesus' day—or indeed, that the early church enjoyed. Most of us today are far more concerned with individuality than we are with communal living, and the way modern society is structured makes this kind of social approach a lot more challenging. We also don't have the same shared value of Scripture as Jesus' audience in Galilee.

But what if we did have faith communities like this?

As we discussed in season 2, we must be careful not to canonize culture. It's tempting to think, *If only we were all Jewish and lived like the Jews of the first century, then we could get it right.* God's character is present in different ways in different cultures, and we do not need to become Jewish in order to join God's story. But there are certainly things we can learn from Jesus' original audience, and the value they placed on participating in community is crucial to our understanding of discipleship.

Over the remaining episodes, we will continue to explore different aspects of the setting in which Jesus did most of His teaching. As we do so, let's commit to praying about how God might want to provide or help us create discipling communities in our own context. If we want to be disciples of Jesus, we are definitely going to need each other.

Let's move into a time of prayer as we conclude our time together.

END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

Close your time together in prayer, praying for each other's needs and encouraging one another to *shema* until you meet again.

If you'd like some ideas, here are some points you might pray about:

- Ask God to provide or help you create the kind of faith community you need in your life.
- Spend time in prayer for the community that is currently surrounding you—including the group you are going through this study with! Consider splitting off into smaller groups of two or three to pray for one another individually.
- Ask the Lord to show you real, practical ways to walk as He walked, both individually and in community.

END GROUP MEETING

To dig deeper into the content from this episode, check out the P.S. section on your own before the next meeting.

A P.S.

Jesus Went to Harvard

If you wanted to research the origin and history of hockey from its birthplace, where would you go?

(The answer is Canada—hockey was apparently invented in Canada. I know, it seems like something that would have come from Switzerland or Norway or Russia, but no. Way to go, North America.)

In the same way, if you wanted to study the rabbi-disciple relationship, you would go to Capernaum. This Jewish practice appears to have developed during Israel's time in captivity and after their return. Nowhere was more central to its development than Galilee, especially the town of Capernaum.

You could say that while the roots of discipleship appear far earlier throughout the Old Testament, the practice of Scripture teachers taking on dedicated students was born in the area around Capernaum. This small village was located on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, in an area known as the Triangle. This, not necessarily Jerusalem, was where most of the religious Jews of Jesus' day lived, and it was where following the Text seems to have been prioritized the most.

This town strongly promoted Scripture education for all ages. Records indicate that they even prioritized Scripture education for their daughters, which was not common practice elsewhere. In Capernaum, if a family couldn't afford for their kids to attend Scripture school because they needed their help with the family trade, the community would team up to meet their needs so that the children wouldn't miss out. The strength of the community was always prioritized, and in their mind, the strongest communities were highly educated in Scripture.

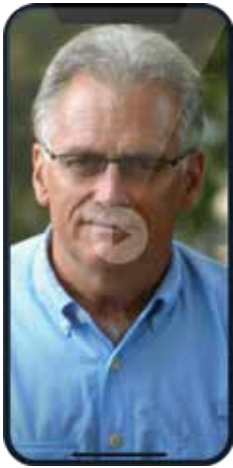
It may also surprise you to learn that many of the great rabbis were connected to Capernaum. It's easy to assume that Jesus must have spent most of His time in rural settings among uneducated people, but history tells us that this was clearly not the case. Jesus set up camp where the greatest scholars of His day were teaching. He went to the Harvard, the Yale, the Oxford of His day, teaching in their synagogues and astonishing some of the greatest minds of the first century.

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN

In the time before your next meeting, think about your group discussions around community. Continue to imagine the kind of faith community you want to be part of, and spend time in prayer asking Jesus to help you find or build it. You may find it helpful to record your thoughts in a journal.



MORE TOOLS FOR DEEPER STUDY



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EPISODE 7

THE TEXT

"For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."

Matthew 18:20



THE SHEMA

ON YOUR OWN

Take a moment to reflect before beginning the group meeting. Consider the emotions, experiences, and thoughts that are most on your mind right now. Lay them before the Lord and prepare your heart for the prayer you are about to speak, the commitment you make with the words of the *Shema*.

TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English, together as a group.

HEBREW

Shema Israel,
Adonai elohenu-Adonai echad
Ve'ahavta et Adonai eloeikah,
b'khol levavkah,
uve'khol naphshekah,
uve'khol me'odekah.
Ve'ahavta l're'acha comocha. Amen.

ENGLISH

Hear O Israel!
The Lord is our God—the Lord alone.
Love the Lord your God
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your might,
and love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

In our last episode we began to explore Galilee, the setting of most of Jesus' ministry. We noted that, by and large, almost everything was done in community. Most families lived, worked, celebrated, grieved, and worshipped in both proximity and camaraderie with their neighbors. Most notably, as we will continue to unpack throughout this study, this was also how the culture of Jesus' time approached discipleship. A person's faith was not his or hers own alone—it was something to be lived out together.

We have also emphasized just how biblically literate Jesus' audience likely was. For the most part His Jewish hearers *knew* Scripture inside and out. When Jesus made allusions to the Hebrew texts to enrich His teaching, most religious Jews—Galileans, especially—would have been able to recognize them.

But how did these people become so familiar with Scripture? How on earth could they be easily able to recognize somewhat obscure references to the words of Deuteronomy or Micah at the drop of a hat? It would make sense for real scholars to have this ability, but what about your average Sarah or Levi? How did normal, everyday people become so literate in God's Word—especially when printed versions wouldn't exist for centuries to come?

Today we will expand on our exploration of Jesus' setting in Galilee by exploring another significant aspect of life in that culture: the centrality of the Text. Let's discuss as we prepare for today's episode.

TALK ABOUT IT

Where or how did you learn most of the Scripture that you know at this point in life? What methods or practices have you found helpful in studying the Bible?

WATCH THE VIDEO

As you watch the video for this episode, you may use the following outline to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

THE VERY WORDS OF GOD

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (emphasis added)



"This is the Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people.' He was in the assembly in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living words to pass on to us."

Acts 7:37-38 (emphasis added)



For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

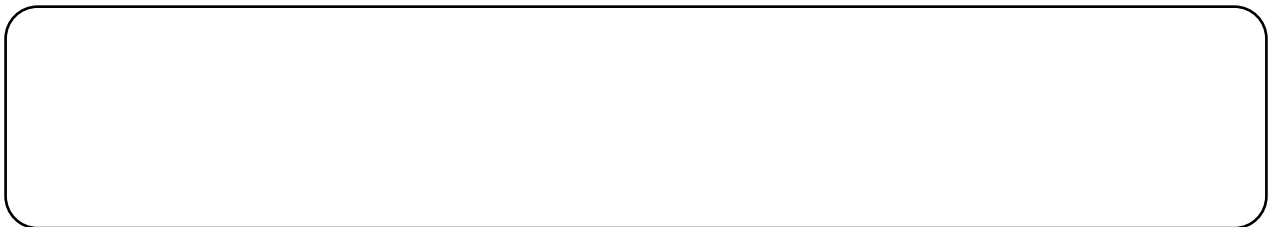
Hebrews 4:12 (emphasis added)



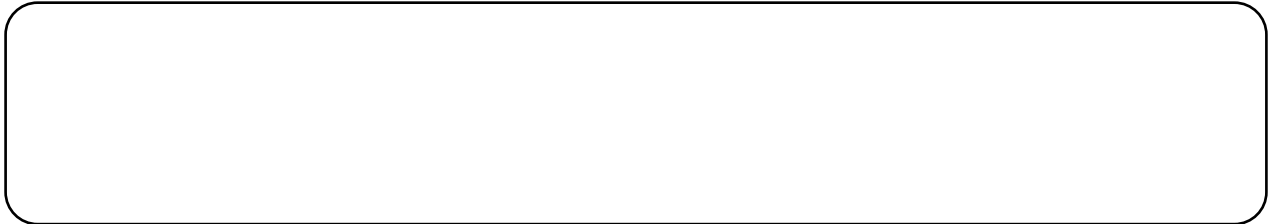
Three groups of writings in the Hebrew Text (Old Testament):



Tanakh stands for:



D'var Torah:



Other notes:



VIDEO DISCUSSION

QUESTION 1

Let's recap. What was *d'var Torah*? How did families practice this idea together?

QUESTION 2

What might a daily practice of *d'var Torah* look like in our lives? How might we avoid having it become stale or rote?

QUESTION 3

How have you experienced God's presence through His "living and active" Word, especially when reading with others? How can you imagine this same experience having an impact on the communities that you belong to—friends, family, and so on?

TO WRAP IT UP

This may not be new information to you, but it's fascinating to consider that many members of Jesus' original audience would have had the opportunity to hear the Bible recited aloud every single day of their lives. The Jews of Jesus' day followed a lectionary—a schedule of related readings from each part of *Tanakh* that took roughly three years to work all the way through. Incredibly, that same schedule is still used today! One look at the calendar would tell you exactly which passages Jesus would have been reciting with His family or followers on any given day.

Even more impressive is the fact that due to its exorbitant cost, it was extremely rare for individual families to have their own copies of the Scriptures. This meant that in their homes, people were reciting from memory virtually every time they did *d'var Torah* together!

Not only were the Galileans consistently immersed in the words of the Text; their commitment to reciting it aloud together *consistently made room for God's presence*. Can you imagine how powerfully this would have affected the way they lived their lives? If followers of Jesus today were this committed to Scripture, how different do you imagine the church in our culture would become? As we look to Jesus' life as our ultimate example for how to join God's story, we must continually emphasize the significance of spending time in Scripture—for our own sakes and for the sake of the lost around us.

As you go about your days over the rest of this study, consider how you might invite God to be more present in your home by practicing *d'var Torah* in your own context.

END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

Close your time together in prayer, praying for each other's needs and encouraging one another to *shema* until you meet again.

If you'd like some ideas, here are some points you might pray about:

- Ask God to bring His presence—His shalom—into your home as you practice reading and discussing the Bible with your family, friends, roommates, etc.
- Ask the Lord to show you real, practical ways to walk as He walked, both individually and in community.

END GROUP MEETING

To dig deeper into the content from this episode, check out the P.S.'s section on your own before the next meeting.

A FEW P.S.'S

The Cairo Genizah

To this day, religious Jews immerse themselves in the Text by following a lectionary. The Torah is divided into fifty-two weeks of readings, and followers read the portion for a certain week on a certain day throughout the year. This lectionary also includes what is known as *haf Torah*, or “the completion.” Somewhere in history, Jewish scholars took each of the assigned *Torah* portions and connected them to passages from the Prophets, so that each day’s portion includes readings from throughout the Hebrew Bible. (Recall from the *Tanakh* acronym that “Prophets” or *Nevi'im* includes both the books of prophets like Isaiah and books of history like Kings and Chronicles.) Christians today have similar forms of lectionary, obviously including New Testament passages along with readings from the Old Testament.

For much of modern history, there was no indication that the Jewish lectionary appeared in written form earlier than AD 500. Without historical proof, scholars debated whether a form of scheduled readings might have been in use during the time of Jesus. Did religious Jews read through their *Torah* regularly when Jesus was conducting His ministry? When did *haf Torah* become commonly used, and was it the same format as it is today? Can we know with any certainty what passages Jesus might have recited on a given day of the year?

In 1896 archaeologists uncovered something called the “Cairo Genizah” in Egypt. A *genizah* was a storage area in a Jewish synagogue where discontinued scrolls of the *Tanakh* were stored. This area or room would include scrolls that had become damaged or worn out from years of use, along with drafts in which a scribe made a mistake during the copying process. The idea was, you can’t just run God’s Word through the shredder and recycle it. Scripture contains the very presence of God, so it must be treated with the greatest respect—even when the paper is no longer fit for use. In this way, a *genizah* was almost like a tomb for these holy documents, preserving them as carefully as you might the bones of your ancestors.

In the Cairo Genizah, archaeologists found approximately 300,000 scrolls and other pieces of parchment. This treasure trove included several lectionaries, many of which were dated long before AD 500! This was a clear indication that in Jesus’ day, at least some form of Jewish lectionary was widely known and used.

These documents suggest that the lectionary—which appears to include both *Torah* and the Prophets—was read through every three and a half years. This conforms with additional references to the Jews celebrating *Simchat Torah*, or the completion of these readings, on much the same timeline.

Interestingly, the *haf Torah*, or the Prophets portion, of today’s Jewish lectionary is quite different from what appears to have been used in Jesus’ time. Modern-day readings include the *Torah* portion along with a similar passage from the Prophets. For example, on the day you read about Joseph blessing his brothers and sons, you will also read about David blessing Solomon.

In the ancient lectionaries, it appears that the *haf Torah* was almost always messianic. On the day Jews read the

story of Creation, they would also read Isaiah describing the new creation when the Messiah comes. When you read about the Tower of Babel, you would also read Zephaniah talking about how God will purify the speech of all nations through the Messiah.

With such a messianic focus embedded in their lectionary, it's easy to assume that the Jews in Jesus' day would have been well-prepared to recognize Him. Not only were they steeped in Scripture as a community, but their lectionary emphasized messianic prophecies on a regular basis. When Jesus did things like miraculously create gallons of new wine (cp. Joel 3) or drive the corrupt Levite money changers out of the temple (cp. Malachi 3), His audience would have had every opportunity to connect His words and actions to Scripture.

Putting In the Work

If you're an NBA fan, you've probably heard of Julius "Dr. J" Erving. Erving was one of the first great dunkers at a time when very few players did it. Fans raved about his rare talent and incredible athletic ability.

Erving once commented that although he was a talented player, people often failed to realize how many thousands of hours of practice went into cultivating that talent. It wasn't that he resented people overlooking how hard he worked, or that he felt awkward about public perception. Instead, Erving wanted his audience to realize that no amount of talent makes hard things easy. If you want to dedicate your life to something, it's going to take real effort.

How can this kind of attitude help us to approach discipleship?

It's not hard work for us to be saved. It seems like it was pretty hard work for Jesus, but He did it all *for us*—there's nothing left for us to do to earn our salvation. But it's going to require some hard work on our part to be one of His disciples, and that starts with knowing the Bible.

We've spent much of our study thus far emphasizing how important it was that Jesus' original followers were well-versed in Scripture. Our exploration of Galilee, where most of His ministry took place, has revealed some of the ways in which such intimate familiarity with Scripture was even possible. But it's important to note that none of that knowledge came about overnight. The religious Jews of Jesus' time spent every day of their lives building it, getting to know intimately the power of God through His living and active Word.

Are we willing to devote our lives, day by day, to knowing the Bible better? Are we willing to put in the work?

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN

In the time before your next meeting, try practicing *d'var Torah* with a few others—friends, family, roommates, or other participants in this group study. Pay attention to the insights you and your small community bring to each passage and pay attention to how God is present with you.





EPISODE 8

THE SYNAGOGUE

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues . . .

Matthew 4:23



THE SHEMA

ON YOUR OWN

Take a moment to reflect before beginning the group meeting. Consider the emotions, experiences, and thoughts that are most on your mind right now. Lay them before the Lord and prepare your heart for the prayer you are about to speak, the commitment you make with the words of the *Shema*.

TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English, together as a group.

HEBREW

Shema Israel,
Adonai elohenu-Adonai echad
Ve'ahavta et Adonai eloeikah,
b'khol levavkah,
uve'khol naphshekah,
uve'khol me'odekah.
Ve'ahavta l're'acha comocha. Amen.

ENGLISH

Hear O Israel!
The Lord is our God—the Lord alone.
Love the Lord your God
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your might,
and love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

In the last few episodes we have considered some key aspects of the context in which Jesus lived and taught. One of those aspects is the fact that the Text—the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament—was central to all of Jewish life.

It would be nearly impossible to grasp this concept without understanding the importance of the synagogue in this context. Along with the rise of rabbis and disciples, the synagogue system became prevalent after Israel was exiled to Babylon—back to the land of chaos. The word *synagogue* itself was actually adopted into the Hebrew language from Greek, and it simply means “meeting house.” The synagogues of Jesus’ day were like small city halls—places where the community could gather socially throughout the week. These buildings were also used for religious gatherings and Scripture education, but it wasn’t until after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70 that this became their primary purpose. Most importantly, the synagogue was where the town kept their Scripture scrolls—their shared copies of the *Tanakh*.

In today’s episode we will unpack how the synagogue system worked, how Jesus would have participated in this system, and how it contributed to the community’s high value for Scripture. Let’s continue building our context of Jesus’ life and ministry as we consider how to apply these principles to our lives today.

TALK ABOUT IT

In the P.S.’s section of our previous episode, we were challenged to practice *d’var Torah*. How did it go? What went well, and what felt awkward? How did God show up? If you didn’t have a chance to practice, try taking some time at the end of this group meeting to do so.

WATCH THE VIDEO

As you watch the video for this episode, you may use the following outline to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

THE VERY WORDS OF GOD

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

Matthew 4:23



One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God.

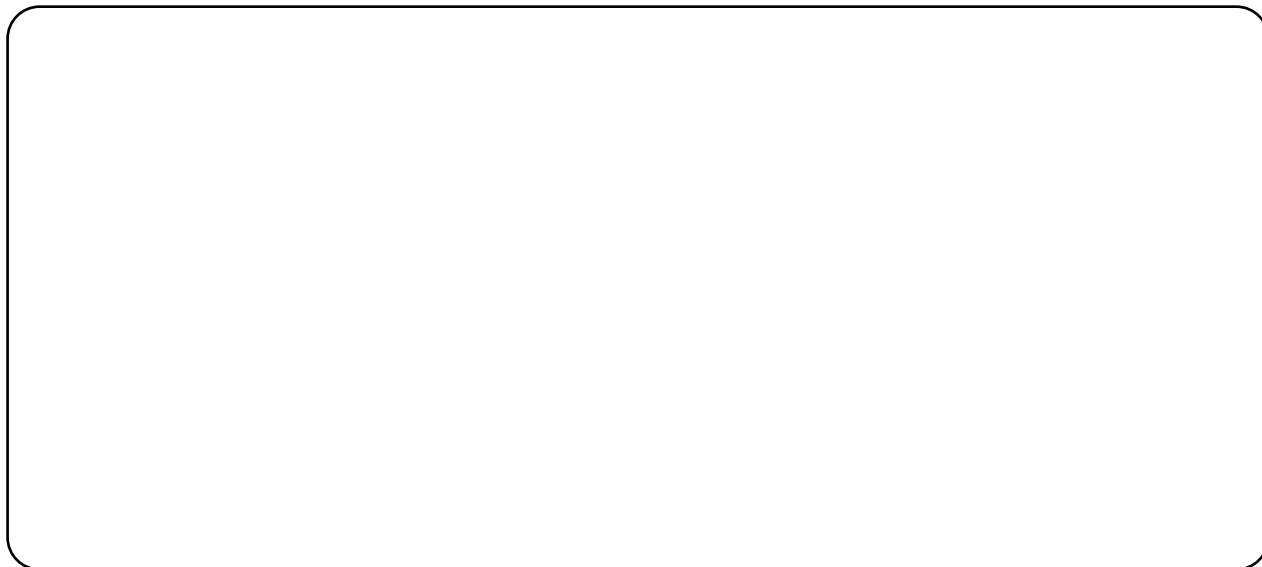
Luke 5:1



Synagogue means in Greek:

Facts about synagogues in Jesus' day:

Other notes:



VIDEO DISCUSSION

QUESTION 1

Let's recap. How were first-century synagogues similar to churches today? In what ways were they different?

QUESTION 2

What are your thoughts on standing when the Bible is read aloud? How can you see this practice being helpful in your own context? Why do you think modern congregations more often stand for the worship music instead of when the Word is read?

QUESTION 3

In Western culture we have access to the Bible in many forms, at practically any time we want to read or hear it. Where in the world is access to the Bible restricted? How do you think living in other cultures might change the way you value the Bible? How can we in the West prioritize getting our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world easier access to the Bible?

TO WRAP IT UP

As we've discussed before, disciples are those who are willing to join God's story—who catch the mission that we are God's partners in bringing *shalom* to chaos. We know that God's Kingdom exists wherever His will is done. When we do the will of God, we take one more inch away from that other kingdom.

One of the key traits of Jesus' original audience was how highly they valued Scripture. This meant that God's words were always at the forefront of their hearts and minds. They were well-equipped to do the will of God, to participate in expanding the Kingdom, and to partner in bringing *shalom* to chaos, because they were intimately connected to God's presence through His Word.

We learned in season 2 that when God led His people into the desert, He wanted to teach them to become a "people of the ears." He wanted them to live not by trusting what their eyes saw or desired, but by every word that came from His mouth. The people of Galilee did their best to immerse themselves in God's words, and this was evident in the ways they oriented their daily lives. The synagogue was a huge part of that.

So how can we, as modern-day disciples of Jesus, expect to be people of the ears if we are not also constantly experiencing God's Word? As we continue this study, consider your own commitment to this idea. We may never memorize the Text as well as the first-century Jews, but we can certainly commit to prioritizing it in our daily lives—individually and in community.

END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

Close your time together in prayer, praying for each other's needs and encouraging one another to *shema* until you meet again.

If you'd like some ideas, here are some points you might pray about:

- Ask God to bless your time studying His Word with fresh insight and the presence of His Spirit.
- Ask the Lord to show you real, practical ways to walk as He walked, both individually and in community.

END GROUP MEETING

To dig deeper into the content from this episode, check out the P.S.'s section on your own before the next meeting.

A FEW P.S.'S

The Caretaker

In the life of the synagogue, one of the most important roles was carried out by someone called the *hassan*. The *hassan's* job was to take care of the scrolls—the copies of the Text that were used by the whole village.

Remember that these scrolls were exorbitantly expensive, often costing more than a year's wages. It was very rare for an individual or family to own their own copies. Rather, a town or even a collection of towns came together to purchase their scrolls as a community. Whatever scrolls a community could afford were kept in the synagogue, housed in a secure cabinet called "the holy ark."

The *hassan*, sometimes called "the synagogue ruler" in our English translations, kept the keys to the holy ark and made sure the scrolls themselves were well cared for. More importantly, he made sure they were shared and that the people of the community had open access to read and hear the words of the Text. We covered in episode 7 how God is present in a specific way when two or more people gather to recite the Word aloud. In much the same way, the *hassan* was not only the caretaker of the scrolls themselves; he was responsible for helping his community to experience the presence of God together.

An Orderly Account

In Luke's Gospel, he begins by talking about how he got his information about Jesus:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Luke 1:1-4 (emphasis added)



In the earliest days of Christianity, the stories of Jesus hadn't been written down yet. There were apparently a set of individuals appointed to be caretakers of those stories—people who were present during specific moments or teachings and could provide eyewitness accounts of what happened. When groups got together to talk about Jesus, these individuals would work together to confirm facts and make sure the stories were

recounted accurately. They were known as *hassanim*—caretakers of the Word, much like those who were in charge of the scrolls in the synagogue.

Along with the twelve disciples, these eyewitnesses—the servants of the Word, or the *hassanim*—appear to be among the sources for the four Gospels. As Luke explains in the opening of his account, the writers could consult these eyewitnesses to confirm and recall details as they wrote their accounts of Jesus' life.

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN

In the time before your next meeting, choose a book of the Bible to commit to studying. Consult a Bible app or check out the bibliography section of this study for additional reading suggestions.





EPISODE 9

THE RABBI

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him.

Deuteronomy 18:15



THE SHEMA

ON YOUR OWN

Take a moment to reflect before beginning the group meeting. Consider the emotions, experiences, and thoughts that are most on your mind right now. Lay them before the Lord and prepare your heart for the prayer you are about to speak, the commitment you make with the words of the *Shema*.

TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English, together as a group.

HEBREW

Shema Israel,
Adonai elohenu-Adonai echad
Ve'ahavta et Adonai eloeikah,
b'khol levavkah,
uve'khol naphshekah,
uve'khol me'odekah.
Ve'ahavta l're'acha comocha. Amen.

ENGLISH

Hear O Israel!
The Lord is our God—the Lord alone.
Love the Lord your God
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your might,
and love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps you're familiar with the Angel Studios production, *The Chosen*, a multi-season retelling of Jesus' ministry and how His disciples experienced it. Early in the first season, a handful of disciples join Jesus at the wedding in Cana. Sitting on their own at a table, the group shares their thoughts about what it will be like to follow Jesus, including whether they would fail horribly and if they would even survive. In this scene, Peter makes an insightful observation:

"My brother (Andrew) has many worries. I keep reminding him of when our *abba* taught us how to fish. We just sat there and watched—until we became fishermen."

The Chosen, season 1, episode 5, "The Wedding Gift"

The Chosen is, of course, simply a creative retelling of stories from the four Gospels—it's not Scripture, and it should not be relied on as such. But Peter's statement in this scene is not only a fascinating explanation of how discipleship apparently worked, it's also a helpful insight into the job of a rabbi in Jesus' day. A rabbi was meant to be a living example, someone his audience and disciples could observe and learn to imitate. He was the fisherman who would help raise up fishers of men.

We have spent the last few episodes looking at the context of Jesus' setting, learning how His original Jewish audience lived and how the Text was such a central part of everyday life. Today we will continue our exploration of Jesus and His world by considering the origin and role of the rabbi in His culture—and what that means for us as His followers today.

TALK ABOUT IT

Just as Peter and Andrew learned to fish by watching their father do it, disciples of Jesus learned how to live out the mission by doing the same. What does it look like to "watch" Jesus in our context today? Discuss as a group.

WATCH THE VIDEO

As you watch the video for this episode, you may use the outline below to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

THE VERY WORDS OF GOD

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

John 3:36 (ESV)



Origin/role of rabbis:

Other notes:

VIDEO DISCUSSION

QUESTION 1

Let's recap. Where, when, and why did the concept of rabbis begin to emerge among the Jewish people?

QUESTION 2

What was the role of a rabbi in Jesus' day? What similarities and differences do you see regarding modern-day pastors or church leaders? Besides pastors, who are our modern-day teachers who serve by interpreting the Text?

QUESTION 3

We are 2,000 years removed from the time when Jesus taught in Galilee, but our role as disciples is the same: to follow and imitate Him as our rabbi. What does it look like to spend time with our rabbi today—both individually and in community? What are some of the ways we should imitate Jesus?

TO WRAP IT UP

As we discussed early on in this season, Jesus came as the Messiah—the anointed King who would challenge the reign of chaos on earth and establish the Kingdom of Heaven. Yet He chose to do it as a human being—still fully God, but in the form of a man in order to be an example we could imitate. He was the King whose “Good News” trumped Caesar’s a million times over. He was the Shepherd who ran ahead of His flock to lead them with 110 percent passion. He conducted His ministry as a Jewish rabbi—someone His disciples could follow and observe.

As Peter’s character explained in *The Chosen*, a disciple watches the rabbi until he or she learns to imitate him. And as we learned in today’s episode, that’s exactly what Jesus expects of His disciples—that we would not only observe and believe in His words, but actually live them out alongside Him.

Is that something we’re willing to commit to?

As we prepare for our final episode of season 3, take stock of the ways you have put Jesus’ teachings into practice in your own life—and the ways in which you haven’t done so. In your personal prayer time, ask Jesus for the courage and the *pratz* to imitate Him as your rabbi.

Let’s move into our prayer time as we consider all we learned today.

END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

Close your time together in prayer, praying for each other's needs and encouraging one another to *shema* until you meet again.

If you'd like some ideas, here are some points you might pray about:

- Ask Jesus for the courage and the *pratz* to imitate Him as your rabbi.
- Ask the Lord to show you real, practical ways to walk as He walked, both individually and in community.

END GROUP MEETING

To dig deeper into the content from this episode, check out the P.S.'s section on your own before the next meeting.

A FEW P.S.'S

Rab

The Hebrew word *rabbi* comes from the root word *rab*, pronounced “rahv,” which means “great or much” in the sense of importance. The implication is that the word describes someone who is a master of something. The word *rab* could be used about a great painter like Monet, or a great athlete like Simone Biles, or a great teacher like the apostle Paul’s rabbi, Gamaliel. If someone calls you *rab*, it means not only are you good at something; you are, in fact, a master. In this sense, Jewish students would apparently address their teachers as *rab*, not because these men were of more value than their students, but because they functioned as a superior who trains others.

Little “r” Rabbi

If you tell a religious Jew today that Jesus was a rabbi, he or she will probably say you are wrong.

In Jesus’ day, the term *rabbi* referred to an honored teacher—someone who was recognized as knowledgeable about the Text and able to teach and interpret it for others. These teachers were not formally called rabbis as a title until long after Jesus ascended to heaven. Only after the temple was destroyed in AD 70 did *Rabbi* become an official title of ordination, much like *Pastor* or *Reverend* or *Father* are used in Christian circles today.

In this sense, Jesus was not a formal rabbi. He did not conduct His earthly ministry after AD 70, and He was not officially ordained by a governing religious body. But He was certainly an honored teacher like others of His day—a little “r” rabbi, if you will. There are a number of indications of this in Scripture:

Jesus was a teacher of the Text

Jesus taught Scripture like others of His day. To be clear, He was nothing like these other teachers. He amazed His listeners with profound insights into every situation He encountered and every question He was asked. Yet like other honored teachers who were called *rab*, Jesus taught the same Scriptures.

Jesus was itinerant

Western education today is usually conducted in classrooms, either physically or virtually. Students sit in a classroom or log in to a specified platform, and that’s where teaching takes place. In Jesus’ day, however, rabbis would travel from village to village and teach in homes and synagogues and outdoor settings. By travelling throughout Galilee and elsewhere, Jesus taught in much the same manner as other rabbis of His day.

Jesus didn't get paid

A Jewish saying claimed, “The *Torah* is not a hammer.” In other words, it’s not a tool that someone with skill should use to make money. In the spirit of this conviction, first-century rabbis would not accept payment for their teaching time. Instead, they depended on donations from supporters, not unlike the way many churches today use donations to pay their staff. The Bible tells us that this was also the case with Jesus (Luke 8).

Luke tells us that one of Jesus’ financial supporters was a woman named Joanna, the wife of the manager of Herod Antipas’s household. Where do you suppose Joanna got her money? Turns out that Herod was indirectly funding Jesus’ ministry—even as he sought to get rid of Him (Luke 13:31)!

Jesus used classic rabbinic teaching techniques

We have already examined some of Jesus’ teaching techniques over the course of this study. For example, He taught using parables, and rabbis were the only group in Judaism to use parables in their teachings.

Jesus also used a technique known as *kal've'omer*, which loosely translates to “how much more.” Do you recognize this from the Gospels?

“If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, [how much more will he] clothe you—you of little faith?”

Matthew 6:30 (emphasis added)



Today we think of this as a “classic Jesus” method of teaching because, at least for most Christians, He’s the only one we’ve read about using this technique. Yet it was a common technique among the teachers—the rabbis—of His day.

Jesus also used allusion, which would later be called *remez* in the years after His ascension. We have spent much of our study focusing on this technique, because it illustrates so effectively how connected the Bible is to itself.

And Jesus used what we would call hyperbole—obvious, excessive exaggeration that was useful in making a point:

"If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell."

Matthew 5:29-30



No, Jesus does not want you to actually gouge out your eyeball or cut off your hand. He used hyperbole to illustrate how serious the matter is, as it was a common teaching technique among rabbis in His day.

Jesus was called "rabbi" by others

Sixteen times in Scripture, Jesus is called "rabbi" by those around Him. Peter uses the term in Mark 9 and 11. Judas calls Him "rabbi" in Mark 14. John's Gospel records the most instances of this, with Jesus' disciples using this title several times. And perhaps most personal of all, Mary Magdalene called Jesus "rabboni," which means "my rabbi" or "rabbi to me," when she sees Him for the first time after His resurrection (John 20:16).

It's true that rabbis were not officially ordained until long after Jesus' ascension, so He was not one of them in a formal sense. But the Bible makes it very clear that He conducted His ministry in the same way as the other honored teachers of His day, as a little "r" rabbi.

One with Authority

Matthew's Gospel records that Jesus' audience had a very interesting reaction to His Sermon on the Mount:

*When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as **one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.***

Matthew 7:28-29 (emphasis added)



In this verse, we encounter the same issue we ran into when discussing whether Jesus was a rabbi. We have historical evidence to suggest how things were done after Jesus' time, but we can't say for sure whether things were the same *in His day*.

Records show that one or two centuries later, rabbis seem to have been split in two categories: *Torah* teachers, or "teachers of the law," and teachers with authority, or *semicha*. To generalize, a *Torah* teacher was a master teacher who was fluent in the first five books of Moses, perhaps even having memorized the whole thing. However, it seems that these teachers were bound by the community as to what interpretation of Scripture they would teach. Conversely (also generalizing), there appears to have been a second group of rabbis who were thought to have *semicha*, or authority to make new interpretations. That is, they would not change or negate Scripture, but their teaching brought expanded interpretations that deepened people's understanding and potentially changed the way they thought. *Semicha* would eventually come to mean rabbinical ordination.

While scholarship recognizes such ideas to be present in rabbinical life a century or two after Jesus, we can only speculate about how they were evolving back in Jesus' time. Yet as this verse in Matthew indicates, it is clear that people recognized an authority in Jesus' teaching that they did not observe in that of their *Torah* teachers.

For one thing, Jesus taught as one who had God's authority. One example of this is in Matthew 23, as Jesus rebukes a group of Pharisees for their hypocrisy:

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing."

Matthew 23:37 (emphasis added)



Those are not the words of a mere rabbi. God Himself is the one who gathers His people when they turn their hearts back to Him—a phrase that a Jewish audience would recognize from Deuteronomy 30:

When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come on you and you take them to heart wherever the Lord your God disperses you among the nations, and when you and your children return to the Lord your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you.

Deuteronomy 30:1-3 (emphasis added)



This is just one example of Jesus alluding to the Hebrew Bible and putting Himself in the role and authority of God Himself (see the P.S.'s section of our next episode for more).

Another expression of authority that Jesus' audience appeared to recognize was that ability to present new interpretations of Scripture. As we touched on above, this does not mean that Jesus omits or negates anything from the Hebrew Bible; rather, He changes the way people thought about certain passages by deepening or challenging their understanding.

After Jesus' time, we have records of a formula for teaching such new interpretations. You will recognize it right away because Jesus appears to use this formula *many times* in the Gospels! It went something like this: "You have heard that it was said . . . but I tell you . . ."

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment."

Matthew 5:21-22 (emphasis added)



Later on, a rabbi with *semicha* would first state the teaching and its old interpretation, before following up with his new interpretation. The new interpretation did not eliminate the old—it would either expand on it or teach his listeners to think about the idea in a new way.

Jesus speaks in this context as one who has such authority, referencing "do not murder" straight from the Ten Commandments. Does He eliminate this commandment? Not at all! Rather, He is saying, "Moses taught you to govern your actions, but I am telling you that God also wants you to govern what's in your heart."

Jesus includes seven new interpretations in the Sermon on the Mount alone, which is more than any other rabbi has ever been known to do. No wonder the crowd reacted to His teaching with such awe and wonder!

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN

In the time before your next meeting, consider your group's discussions about what it might look like to watch and imitate Jesus as His disciples today. Begin putting your ideas into practice. You may find it helpful to record your group's thoughts in a journal.



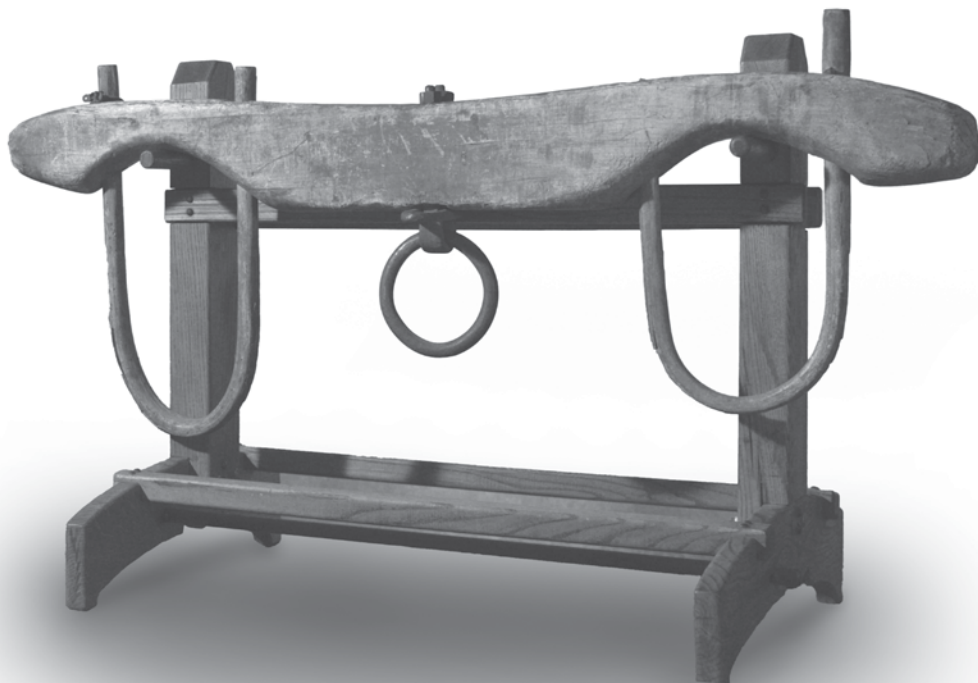


EPISODE 10

THE YOKE

"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

Matthew 11:29



THE SHEMA

ON YOUR OWN

Take a moment to reflect before beginning the group meeting. Consider the emotions, experiences, and thoughts that are most on your mind right now. Lay them before the Lord and prepare your heart for the prayer you are about to speak, the commitment you make with the words of the *Shema*.

TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English, together as a group.

HEBREW

Shema Israel,
Adonai elohenu-Adonai echad
Ve'ahavta et Adonai eloeikah,
b'khol levavkah,
uve'khol naphshekah,
uve'khol me'odekah.
Ve'ahavta l're'acha comocha. Amen.

ENGLISH

Hear O Israel!
The Lord is our God—the Lord alone.
Love the Lord your God
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your might,
and love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

As we conclude the third season of our study, we have built upon our foundation of discipleship by better understanding our rabbi. We spent the last nine sessions focusing on three major subjects:

- Jesus as our human example
- Exploring the world in which Jesus taught
- Considering what it means that Jesus is our rabbi

Today we will wrap up our season by examining another crucial aspect of a rabbi's ministry—one that Jesus emphasizes clearly in Scripture. This idea is called "the yoke," also known as "the yoke of *Torah*" or "the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven." A yoke referred to a particular interpretation of the Hebrew Bible as taught and modeled by a rabbi. In a rabbi/disciple relationship, the disciple was dedicated to living out the Scripture according to the interpretation taught by his rabbi.

Did Jesus have a yoke? And how does this idea fit into the foundation we have built so far in this study—into God's mission to bring *shalom* to chaos, into the role of His redeemed partners, and into everything we know about being a disciple so far? Let's discuss as we prepare for the final episode of season 3 together.

TALK ABOUT IT

As we conclude season 3, what are your major takeaways? What did you like? What was challenging or left you with questions?

WATCH THE VIDEO

As you watch the video for this episode, you may use the outline below to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

THE VERY WORDS OF GOD

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Matthew 11:28-30 (emphasis added)



Notes about the yoke:

Other notes:

VIDEO DISCUSSION

QUESTION 1

Let's recap. In Jesus' day, what was a yoke (yoke of *Torah*/yoke of the Kingdom) that a rabbi would teach and model? What did it mean for someone to "take the yoke" taught by a rabbi? How does this idea "harness" the power of God in Scripture?

QUESTION 2

What does Jesus' statement, "Take my yoke," mean in context of the rabbinical culture? What does it mean that His yoke is easy and His burden is light? What do you think it looks like to take Jesus' yoke as a disciple today?

QUESTION 3

How did the South African woman's actions unleash the power of God in her life and the lives of those involved? How do you imagine this kind of faithfulness to Jesus' yoke changing situations in your life or culture?

TO WRAP IT UP

"When I heard this the first time, it dawned on me that a big part of the reason I wasn't seeing more of God's power in my life was I had not consciously committed to trying to live out Jesus' interpretation of every passage, every time."
Ray Vander Laan, RVL Discipleship: The Study, season 3, episode 10.

When we decide to become disciples of Jesus, we agree to take His yoke. We partner with God in His mission, in harnessing the power of His words by learning how to put them into practice. Jesus came to earth as a human being to teach us how to do this—to show us what it's supposed to look like when redeemed people live our mission as God intended.

The South African woman in RVL's story had every reason to send her torturer to jail for life—or worse. But she knew who her rabbi was, and she knew His interpretation on the subject:

*"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'
But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may
be children of your Father in heaven."
Matthew 5:43-45*



This is one of the most well-known verses in one of the most well-known chapters of the Gospels; and yet, how many of us are actually willing to put it into practice? This woman knew the Scripture; she believed the Scripture; *and* she was willing to *obey* it. And because of that, real *shalom* came into one of the most *tohu* situations you can imagine—not only for that wretched man, but for her as well.

This is what it looks like to be a disciple of Jesus. The question we need to ask ourselves is, are we willing to take His yoke?

Let's conclude our season with a time of prayer together.

END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

Close your time together in prayer, praying for each other's needs and encouraging one another to *shema* until you meet again.

If you'd like some ideas, here are some points you might pray about:

- Spend time praying for each other individually, asking each other how you might continue to be a believing community together as the season ends.
- Ask the Lord to show you real, practical ways to walk as He walked, both individually and in community.

GET READY FOR SEASON 4

This is the end of season 3 of *RVL Discipleship: The Study*. You've made it so far! In this season, we focused on:

- Jesus as our human example
- The context of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, especially focusing on the communal nature of discipleship
- The centrality of the Text among Jesus' audience
- The role of a first-century rabbi
- What it means to take the yoke taught by a rabbi

In our fourth and final season, we will build on all the prior material by exploring the role of a disciple in the first century. How did someone become a rabbi's disciple? What was their role, and what was a disciple expected to do? How did this system mirror the way God expected His people to partner with Him? And most importantly, what does this mean for us today? Let's keep in mind all that we have learned so far as we transition into the last season of this study!

If your group hasn't made plans for season 4 yet, discuss it now. Consider how you might want to plan for those meetings and start to think about the logistics!

END GROUP MEETING

To dig deeper into the content from this episode, check out the P.S.'s section on your own before the next meeting.

A FEW P.S.'S

Testing the Interpretation

You will notice that on several occasions in Scripture, someone comes to test Jesus. Sometimes the Bible tells us that a person had been sent by the Pharisees or some other group in an attempt to trap Jesus in His words, but the motives of these individuals are not always explained.

"Testing" in and of itself was actually a common practice, and not one intended to be malicious. The idea was that a rabbi's role was to interpret Scripture. If an issue arose in daily life, people wanted to know: *Does this rabbi's interpretation fit what God said in the Scriptures? Is it correct?* So one rabbi would sometimes "test" another rabbi, holding his interpretations up to the Text. Questioning a rabbi in this way was not necessarily an indication that one disagreed with him; it was simply a common practice.

When, in Luke 10, the expert in the law asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responded:

"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

Luke 10:26



In plainer English, Jesus was asking the man, "What does the Bible say, and how do you interpret it?" Their

conversation continues from there with Jesus doing some incredible teaching, which we will explore more deeply in season 4. The point is, the two are essentially testing each other's interpretations, which was a perfectly respectable practice among rabbis.

Take the Whole Yoke

It's worth noting that most of the time in Jesus' day, it seems that rabbis didn't disagree with each other on how to interpret Scripture on major issues. Some of the more minor issues that caused disagreements were things like: After the *Shema*, what is the next most important commandment? Is divorce permissible? Do we still have to wear tassels?

When rabbis did disagree, they would say things like, "As I see it, the Yoke of the Kingdom (which, recall, refers to God's status as King) says this . . .," or "I interpret that the Yoke of *Torah* (referring to how we act out obedience to God as King) says this . . ." And they would hold their interpretations up to the Scriptures to compare.

A disciple would not follow a rabbi if he disagreed with the yoke he taught. You also couldn't pick and choose the issues on which to agree or disagree with the rabbi. When you decided to follow a teacher—unless something truly traumatic happened—you would accept the interpretation your rabbi taught every single time.

We see in the Gospels that sometimes Jesus' disciples were surprised or challenged by His interpretation of the Text, but only one of them bailed. It seems that Judas wanted Jesus to engage in a physical battle, like the Zealots were expecting. When it turned out that Jesus wasn't planning to do this—and was actually opposed to violence altogether—Judas apparently said to himself, *Nope, I don't like the way He interprets Scripture. Therefore, I reject His yoke.*

Take My Yoke Upon You . . .

Jesus' reference to His yoke in Matthew 11 is a fascinating one. We will talk in greater detail about the specifics of Jesus' yoke as we explore discipleship in season 4, but let's expand a bit on His teaching in this chapter. In just a few lines, Jesus makes three separate interpretations of Scripture, all referring to His own identity as the Messiah:

*"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."*

Matthew 11:28-30



'I will give you rest'

Unless Scripture explicitly tells us, it's impossible to know for certain how Jesus' audience reacted to any of His teachings. But when Jesus said, "I will give you rest," heads were likely turning left and right!

The reason for that is that this is a quote from Exodus 33:

Moses said to the Lord, ". . . teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people."

*The Lord replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."
Exodus 33:12-14 (emphasis added)*



In this chapter of Exodus, the people of Israel are wandering around the desert and being difficult, as usual. Moses is, not for the first or the last time, begging God not to depart from them. He asks God to teach him His ways so that he can lead the people well. This pleases God, and God promises, "I will give you rest." In other words, "I will allow you time to sit back and enjoy what I have accomplished on your behalf."

Who will give rest? God will.

The audience might have expected Jesus to say something like, "Take My yoke and *the Lord* will give you rest." But by saying, "I," who is Jesus claiming to be? The very One who gave Moses and the Israelites rest!

'And you will find rest for your souls'

Jesus' second reference in this statement is a bit more obscure, but it, too, would likely have raised eyebrows. Jesus says, ". . . and you will find rest for your souls." Lets' look at Jeremiah 6:

This is what the Lord says:

*"Stand at the crossroads and look;
ask for the ancient paths,
ask where the good way is, and walk in it,
and you will find rest for your souls."
Jeremiah 6:16 (emphasis added)*



In the Jewish mind, “the good way” is the path of righteousness, or the path that will take you to God. Walking that path, or walking in obedience to His commands, will cause you to find rest for your soul. In other words, you will find that your efforts pay off because, like God on the seventh day of Creation, you will be able to sit back and enjoy the fruit of your labor.

So what do you have to do to find this sense of exhilarating accomplishment—to find rest for your soul? You have to walk the ancient path. By saying, “Come and learn from me, and you will find rest for your souls,” what is Jesus claiming to be? The ancient path! Another way to say it is that if you walk according to Jesus’ interpretation, His yoke will model what God’s path looks like.

At this point, in just a few lines, Jesus has not only invited people to take His interpretive approach, but He’s declared, “I am God, and I am the way to God.” Can you imagine what His audience would have thought?

But He wasn’t finished . . .

‘For I am gentle and humble in heart’

Recall that as Moses prepared Israel to finally enter the Promised Land, he assured them that God would raise up “a prophet like me” among them, someone who would teach and direct the people to follow the Lord (Deuteronomy 18:15). In episode 9 we discussed how this was the origin of the idea of rabbis—teachers who would follow in Moses’ footsteps to interpret the Scriptures for God’s people. The Jews believed that the Messiah Himself would be a “second Moses”—in a sense, the teacher of teachers.

When Jesus calls Himself “gentle and humble in heart,” it’s tempting to chuckle. Can you truly be humble if you’re calling *yourself* humble? But here Jesus appears to make a third allusion to the Old Testament, yet another claim to be the Messiah:

Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.

Numbers 12:3



Who was humble? Moses. And this second Moses—the prophet God will send to His people—will be just like him. And who did the Jews understand that second Moses would be? The Messiah! When Jesus said, “Take My yoke because I am humble,” some in His audience would have thought, *He must think He’s the second Moses.*

In Matthew 11, in brilliant Jewish fashion, Jesus is saying, “I am the Lord, and I can give you rest. I am both

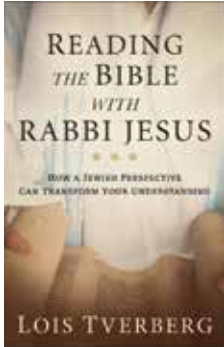
the path to God and the model for how to walk that path, so that you can find rest for your souls. And as the Messiah, I am the ultimate interpreter of Scripture.”

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN

RVL's father was fond of a common saying: “You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink.” He would always pause a moment after saying it, and RVL would often roll his eyes. But then Dad would continue: “But you *can* put salt in his food.”

As we conclude season 3 of our study in discipleship, let everything we have learned so far be the salt in your spiritual food. Allow yourself to become so thirsty to know more of God that you are willing to pursue Him in prayer, in worship, and in study—by yourself *and* with a believing community.





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GLOSSARY OF KEY WORDS

Beth ab | literally, “the father’s house.” The dominant patriarchal social construct of biblical Jewish culture, spanning from the Old Testament to the New. A *beth ab* was an extended family unit that lived together, in tents or, later, in houses. This group would include the patriarch, his wife or wives, any young children, and their adult sons and their sons’ families. Daughters would join the *beth ab* of their husbands when they got married. (Hebrew)

Biadzo | Greek translation for “violence” or “intense passion” in the Hebrew Bible (Greek)

D’var Torah | literally, “a word about the *Torah*”; the practice of inviting God’s presence as a group reads and discusses Scripture together (Hebrew)

Gematria | the Hebrew system of using letters as numbers (Hebrew)

Gospel | “gospel” or “good news,” specifically about Roman emperors; came to be used by Christians to describe Jesus’ redemptive work and invitation to humanity

Heroon | a small temple or shrine where a deified human is honored for the purpose of obtaining the ear of the gods (Greek)

Kenosis | to empty (Greek)

Ketuvim | refers to the rest of the Hebrew Bible, aside from the *Torah* and the *Nevi'im* (Hebrew)

Mevaseret | the Hebrew equivalent of Gospel, which referred to the fact that the God of Israel is reigning (Hebrew)

Nevi'im | the Prophets; refers to the histories and books of prophecy in the Hebrew Bible (Hebrew)

Pratz | Violent, explode, burst out; intense passionate, with all your might (Hebrew)

Rab | great or much (Hebrew)

Rabbi | honored teacher (Hebrew)

Shalom | perfect peace and harmony; ordered and flourishing function; deep meaning and completeness. Describes the character of God Himself (Hebrew)

Shema | to hear; to obey or respond to (Hebrew)

Synagogue | “meeting house”; a Greek word that was absorbed into the Hebrew language and referred to the public building in which the Jews of Jesus’ day would gather for social events, teaching, and education (Greek/Hebrew)

Tanakh | acronym referring to the Hebrew Bible (Hebrew)

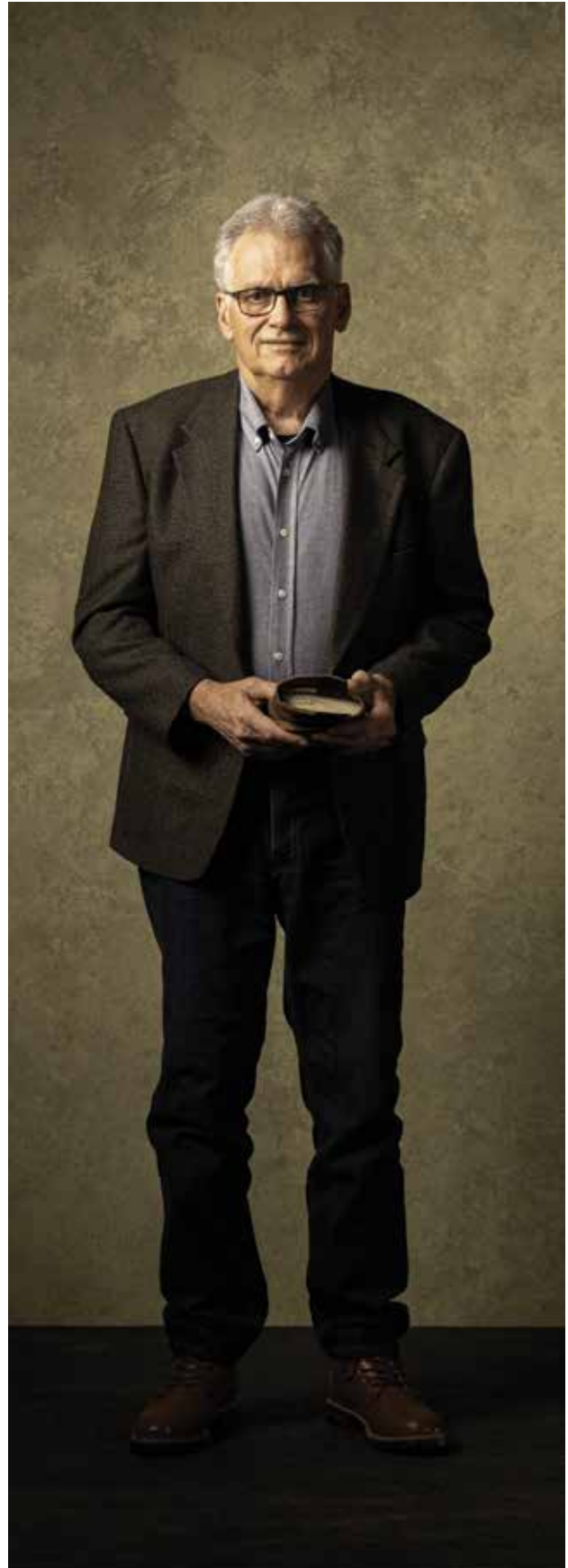
Tohu v’vohu | formless and empty; also conflict and disharmony; disorder and disfunction; deterioration or decay; confusion and brokenness. The opposite of the character of God. Symbolized in Scripture by churning water and desert. (Hebrew)

Torah | the first five books of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (Hebrew)

ABOUT RVL

Since receiving his Master of Divinity from Westminster Theological Seminary in 1976, Ray Vander Laan has been actively involved in studying and teaching Jewish culture using the methods of Jewish education. He has continued graduate studies in Jewish Studies in the United States, Israel, Turkey, and Egypt. He has been a teacher for more than thirty-five years and is an ordained minister with the Christian Reformed Church. He has also authored a book titled *Echoes of His Presence*, published by Focus on the Family. Vander Laan founded That the World May Know Ministries in 1998 and has taken thousands of people with him on his study tours of Israel, Turkey, and Egypt.

Ray's preaching and teaching ministry is focused on understanding the Bible in light of the historical and cultural context in which God placed it. This perspective on the Bible highlights God's call for His people to be a transforming influence on their culture. He uses research of the top scholars in the fields of archaeology, history, and biblical study as tools to explore the scriptural text ever more deeply. His gifts, expertise, and calling are to link that cultural information and the Bible so that its message applies to our lives today in very practical ways.



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Our Rabbi Jesus: www.ourrabbijesus.com

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