

## **Jesus's Ministry Begins**

It has been four hundred years since we finished the last chapter of “The Story” the one entitled “The Return Home.” And during those 400 years Israel waited for the next chapter, the coming of the one the Prophets promised would come one day, this strange and mysterious person who had so many names, the Holy One of Israel. He was the prophet Nathan’s “Son of David”, Ezekiel’s “Son of Man”, Haggai’s “Desire of all Nations”, Jeremiah’s “Righteous Branch”, Habbakuk’s “Holy One.” And then there were the many names Isaiah had given Israel to ponder over: “And he shall be called “Wonderful Counselor”, “Mighty God”, “Everlasting Father”, Prince of Peace”, “Immanuel” the “Alpha and the Omega”, the “Suffering Servant.”

Just exactly who was this promised person going to be? And how would they know when he arrived? Daniel described him coming from the clouds, Zechariah speaks of him riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. Isaiah has him cruising in on a highway out of the desert. And just what will Messiah do when he comes? John the Baptist warned that he would come in wrath, cutting down unfruitful trees, clearing chaff from the threshing floor and throwing both in the fire. And yet Isaiah said he would bring good news to the poor, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim freedom for the captives

and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. So many contrasting visions. So many mysterious words of prophecy. And in their 400 years of waiting Israel had almost as many theories about who Messiah would be, how he would come and what he would do.

And then, in the fullness of time, he finally comes and in a sense all the theories were right and all were wrong. For the next few weeks we will hear the story of Messiah, his life, his teaching, his ministry and most importantly his purpose, or rather his purposes for coming. According to Jesus there were many reasons he came. "I have come to fulfill the law" (Matthew 5:17). "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:13). "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34). "I have come to bring fire on the earth" (Luke 12:49). "The Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). "I have come down from heaven not to do my will but the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38). "For judgment I have come into this world so that the blind will see and those that see will become blind" (John 9:39). "I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world" (John 12:47). "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). "Now my soul is troubled and what shall I say? 'Father, save me

from this hour” No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name” (John 12:27-28). “Father, the hour has come. Glorify your son, that your Son may glorify you” (John 17:1).

Jesus’ ministry begins and what a great and terrible, mysterious and revealing, wonderful and awful, soul stirring and heartbreaking ministry it will be. And if we were to live a thousand lifetimes passionately devoted to exploring the richness of the meaning of his coming to us, at the end of that time we would still have as much yet to learn than all we might have come to know about this man Jesus. And so we begin this wonderful chapter in this marvelous story, the chapter titled “Jesus’ Ministry Begins.”

It was a ministry that began with a very strange speech, especially for this particular crowd. Most of them were desperately poor, their lives dictated to them by the whims of the politically powerful. They were hungry, unhappy, nearly hopeless people. So it was strange indeed to hear this man tell them, “Blessed are the poor,” “blessed are those who mourn,” “blessed are the persecuted.” The words stung their ears, insulting them. Was he serious, or was he mocking them?

“You try being poor, Teacher, and see how it feels. Wait till some Roman brute of a soldier kicks you around, then see how blessed it is.” They complained, but they knew their complaints were hollow. Clearly, this man

was poor. He had fewer possessions than most of them, and he knew suffering as well as any of them. Yet, if you looked into the eyes of this strange new teacher, you simply couldn't deny he was blessed.

Jesus loved life. He rejoiced in being alive, and each day, no matter what it brought, only seemed to increase his joy. He was not insensitive to the frustration of living in captivity to Rome. He did not ignore the suffering which was the constant companion of the poor and diseased, but these things had no effect on his appreciation of life. If tomorrow could have brought the end to all such pain, his celebration of life could not have increased any more, for he lived life to the fullest. His thankfulness and contentment with life's blessing was constant and a glaring contrast to the embittered who resented their lack of blessings, and the ambitious who feverishly sought more and more blessings. You would have never thought Jesus poor. He lived as if the world was his to enjoy, and he challenged others to cease their endless chasing of treasures on earth and to receive freely the treasures of heaven. These were disturbing words especially to a treasure-chasing tax collector named Matthew.

Few men have hungered more for money and power than had Matthew. How else could one explain his turning against his own people, working for Rome and collecting from his own kinsmen the harsh,

oppressive taxes Rome demanded? Tax collectors were hated among the Jews, but there was money to be made and power to wield in such an office. Matthew chose to bear the scorn. Then one day he heard about a teacher who spoke of obtaining a wealth and a contentment that does not depend on money or power. Such words surely irritated Matthew, exposing his greed. Yet, alongside his irritation, faint hints of hope stirred within him too. Matthew's path to wealth and power had not eliminated anxiety, but only introduced him to new worries and fears. He could use a little contentment.

Matthew listened as Jesus talked about the lilies and the birds, and how every need they had was supplied by a loving Father in heaven. He watched with growing attraction as Jesus delighted in a field of flowers, sat quietly in a garden absorbing its peacefulness, rose early with the dawn and celebrated the birth of each day. Matthew was not sure that the raiment of the lilies would ever impress him more than the wardrobe of Solomon, but of one thing he was certain: there was grace in this man, Jesus, who found time for sunrises and gave lectures on lilies. So he followed.

According to John's gospel, Jesus had good reason to appreciate the beauty of the world around him. He had created it. John described Jesus as "the Word become flesh" one who had been with God in the beginning and the one through whom all things were created (John 1:1-3). What a

mysterious truth this is about our Lord. Just how aware was Jesus of his divine origin when he entered into and became a part of his own creation, his skin tanned by the rays of a sun he had made, his lungs filled with the air he had fashioned, his hair soaked in raindrops he individually designed? Was it his creator DNA that made him so treasure the world's beauty and gifts?

And yet, as much as Jesus loved the creation, he seemed to love still more the crowning glory of that creation, man. And in every person he met, no matter how flawed that person may be, he could see remnants of the glory of the creation, glimpses of goodness still lingering within. It was this appreciation of the good in people that aroused Simon's curiosity about Jesus. Simon spent little time enjoying the good in people. He was too busy enforcing God's Law. Simon was a Zealot, fanatically zealous for God's Law. Synonyms for zealous include fervent, ardent, fanatical, passionate, impassioned, devout, committed, dedicated, hard-core, avid, card-carrying, vigorous, intense, fierce. That was Simon. Anyone who fell short of the demands of that Law was to be condemned and set straight. So, its not too suprising that Jesus was confusing for Simon. Clearly, Jesus knew the Law, even better than he. And even more obvious, Jesus had a deep love for the Law. When Jesus spoke of the Law, it was not with the "jot and tittle accuracy" Simon had known. No. He spoke as if the words of the Law

were his own words uttered for the first time. Yet, in spite of Jesus' love for the Law, he could still accept and appreciate all kinds of people, see that lingering goodness in even Romans and Samaritans and other sinners.

On so many occasions, Jesus' reaction to people was so different from Simon's. Simon remembered the time a centurion came asking Jesus to heal his servant. Simon hated centurions. They were the vicious claws of Rome. He resented their freedom and power. He remembered thinking how loudly he would have laughed if a centurion had asked him for help, but Jesus didn't laugh; he actually seemed eager to help. When the centurion told Jesus he didn't feel worthy to have the Lord come to his house, Simon was reluctantly amazed! Simon was not used to seeing humility in Roman centurions. Of course, Simon's conversations with centurions usually didn't encourage humility in them. But when Jesus praised the centurion for a faith that was greater than any he had seen in Israel, Simon was shocked, even offended. How could there be any faith in a Roman? How could there be anything good in a Roman?" As a Zealot he had been trained to despise Romans. Zealots were known to have even murdered them. How could any man who knew the Law of God as well as Jesus feel anything but contempt for these Roman infidels?

The combination of Jesus' love for the Law and love for the sinner mystified Simon. But Simon had to admit, Jesus' love seemed to change people. Soldiers were softened and some would even begin to show respect for Jews. Simon could even see changes in that tax collector he despised so much, Matthew, who in Simon's view, was even worse than a Roman. Matthew was a traitor, a turncoat. Matthew profited from Israel's oppression. And yet, after meeting Jesus, Matthew and other tax collectors quit cheating the people. Some were even paying people back the money they had stolen from them and more. How could Simon argue? This is what he wanted, change and reform, but he had always assumed that such changes could come only by revolution. Now Simon was seeing revolutions every day in the hearts of men and women. Jesus really did seem to love everyone. Simon cringed as the harlots flocked to Jesus, listening intently to his words. Some even anointed him with expensive perfumes. Jesus was not unaware of their wicked histories, yet he saw in them penitence and hopeful futures. The Samaritans loved him. No big surprise. Jesus was always making these losers the heroes in his stories. Sinners seem to be drawn to Jesus. Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but the sinners." (Matthew 9:12-14). The irony of Jesus' words was not lost on these sinners. They knew how the

Pharisees like to think of themselves as doctors of the soul. But they were doctors who rarely made housecalls. Jesus would enter their homes, always greeting them with gracious and welcoming words. Yet even with such grace and acceptance, no one ever felt encouragement to continue in their sin. Just the opposite really. Feeling Jesus' love was the first thing that really made them want to stop sinning. Sometimes the sinful women in town would even fall at his feet weeping, at the same time drawn to his love and convicted by it. One woman, even after Jesus had told her every wicked thing she had ever done and laid bare her wretched past, she still ran to her village and invited everyone to come and meet Jesus. Simon wasn't sure he would be so eager to invite anyone to meet a man who knew everything he had ever done.

This was all new to Simon. His own passion for the Law had not moved him to appreciate people or rejoice whenever he found any remnant of goodness in a person. It wasn't that Simon wanted to hate sinners. In his heart of hearts he knew all too well that he wasn't sinless before the Law. But he had not known there was another way, a better way to draw near to God. Jesus had quickened Simon's heart with hope. Maybe sinners could be loved, redeemed, maybe even Romans and Samaritans!

Jesus' life and ministry didn't just perplex Matthew and Simon. Pretty much everyone was disturbed by this renegade rabbi in town. The "sinners" had learned to expect condemnation from the "righteous." When Jesus, who was clearly as righteous as any man, chose not to condemn and even found things in their lives worthy of praise, these sinners began to gain hope again. Maybe they could live good lives, pleasing to God. The "righteous" on the other hand had learned to measure their righteousness by the sternness of their judgment upon sinners. Jesus did not fit the mold and though some, like Simon, grew to accept Jesus and change their hearts, many others only grew to hate Jesus more and more, clinging to their own self-righteousness. Jesus saw clearly into the hearts of the people. He saw their failings, their rebellion their greed, their lust. But he also saw within them that flicker of divinity which exists in all people, barely burning, desperately needing the quickening of the love of God incarnate, reminding man who he is, the creation of God, and who he might be, the new creation of the Spirit. But, sadly, many will reject the love, ignore their creator's visit to the world he created. As John's gospel put it, He was in the world, and though the world was made through him the world did not recognize him. He came to his own but his own did not receive him. They would allow that flickering flame within them to go out, allow the pride of life and the cares of this world to

extinguish it. But as long as the flame still burned in a soul, however faintly, Jesus would fan it by recognizing it, praising it and appreciating it.

John's gospel says Moses brought us the Law but grace and truth came to us through Jesus (John 1:14). Jesus came to show us the nature of God, a gracious nature that appreciated good wherever he found it, whether in a field of lillies, a back sliding tax-collector, an obsessive rule keeping Zealot or even Gentile strugglers like you and me. As we begin these next chapters in The Story let me encourage you to ask yourself this question. "How has Jesus' ministry begun in me?"

Like Matthew and Simon, like the Samaritan woman and the Gentile centurion, like that prostitute and all the others whose lives Jesus changed, have we begun to feel the disturbing yet compelling effect of the ministry of Jesus, calling us away from our greed, our anger, our bitterness, our lust, our pride and inviting us to pursue the blessed life, to be poor and meek in spirit, mournful of our sin, to hunger and thirst for his righteousness, to be pure in heart, merciful and peaceful to others, and to be so committed to Him that if we were persecuted and slandered for his sake, it would be to us the greatest of honors. As we read again these next few days this remarkable story of Jesus, let us ask ourselves, "How has Jesus ministry begun in me?"