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GROUP GUIDE

In 2019 we started our journey in Matthew's Gospel. We discovered that Jesus is the promised King of God's Kingdom who has come to end the exile (Matt. 1:1-17). He will do this by saving His people from their sins (1:22). Yet, we also discovered that Jesus is Immanuel: "God with us" (1:23). Jesus is the divine King of God's Kingdom. Furthermore, He is everything Israel and Moses should have been, succeeding in the wilderness where Israel had failed (4:1-11). Being like Moses, yet greater than Moses, Jesus gives His Law to His people. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reveals what it means to be a citizen of His Kingdom, living with Jesus as our King (Matt. 5-7).

Now, in 2021, we continue the journey in Matthew's Gospel, following Jesus "*down from the mountainside*" (Matt. 8:1). For the next two terms we will be focusing on Matthew 8-13. We will be walking with Jesus throughout the region of Galilee, discovering more about who He is, what He has come to do and what it means to be His followers.

It is our prayer that as we journey with Jesus in Matthew 8-13, we will cultivate the following in our faith and life:

- a) A deeper understanding of who Jesus is. Like Jesus' disciples, we need to ask ourselves: "*What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!*" (Matt. 8:27)
- b) A greater appreciation for whom Jesus came and to be challenged to do the same: "But go and learn what this means: '*I desire mercy, not sacrifice.*' For *I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.*" (Matt. 9:13)
- c) A true grasp of what to expect as followers of Jesus: "*Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword*" (Matt. 10:34)
- d) Be encouraged to continue witnessing to the Gospel of Jesus: "*The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.*" (Matt. 13:33).

May God empower you by His Spirit to grasp the wonder of this call: "*Follow me*" (Matt. 8:22). May you discover who it is calling you and what it means to follow Him.

In Christ,
Carel Pienaar
Phil. 1:21

SERMON NOTES ON MATTHEW 8:1-17



The Kingdom in Action:
God with us

Matthew 8:1-17

The Kingdom in Action: God with Us

STUDY 1

Work through the following statements. Compare and discuss your answers as a group.

Statement	True	Not sure	False
“God is not able to allow sinners into His presence.”			
“Sinners are not able to enter into God’s presence.”			
“God is not willing to allow sinners into His presence.”			
“Sinners are not willing to enter into God’s presence.”			

Don’t worry about getting a ‘correct’ answer. Rather, think through the reasons and implications of your answers.

Investigate

1. **Read Leviticus 13:45-46 and Acts 10:28, as well as the comments made by Carson and Blomberg below:**

<p>The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp.</p> <p>Leviticus 13:45-46</p>	<p>And he said to them, “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean.</p> <p>Acts 10:28</p>	<p>Jewish Halakah forbade touching persons with many kinds of fever.</p> <p>Carson (1988:204)</p> <p>Touching woman...was banned by at least some Jewish traditions.</p> <p>Blomberg (1992:143)</p>
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What states, according to Jewish Scripture and tradition made a person unclean?
What were some of the consequences of an unclean state?

Read Matthew 8:1-17

1. Fill in the following table:

	8:1-4	8:5-13	8:14-15	8:16-17
Who does Jesus encounter?				
What do they need from Jesus?				
How does Jesus demonstrate that He is willing to help them?				
How does Jesus demonstrate that He is able to help them?				

2. How does Jesus heal the leper and Peter's mother-in-law? In contrast, how does he heal the centurion's servant? Why was this?
3. What gave the centurion confidence that Jesus could heal in this way?
4. What teaching point does the Centurion's faith give Jesus the opportunity to make in vs.11-12?
5. According to 8:17, what does Matthew see Jesus' healings as fulfilling?



Thinking & Living

1. Do you find Jesus' comments in 8:11-12 encouraging or ominous? Why?
2. Considering Leviticus 13:45-46 and Acts 11:28: What sort of limitations would have been imposed on the 'unclean' people in these miracles? Remembering that Jesus is Immanuel (Matthew 1:23), how does this make Jesus' actions in this passage even more remarkable?
3. Is Jesus threatened by the state of these individuals? What does this tell us about him? What are the implications for us?
4. Why do you think Matthew includes 8:17? How does Jesus remove a state of uncleanness?
5. What can 8:17 teach us about his death on the cross? How does the cross remove the barriers to our relationship with God?
6. Reflect again on the introductory question. What prevents a person from entering God's presence? How could this be challenging and how could it be encouraging to a non-Christian?

Points to Pray

(now and during the week)...

- 1.** Praise Jesus, Immanuel, for being both sufficiently powerful and willing to approach us in our sin and uncleanness. Thank Him that our sin is not an obstacle to his saving and healing power.
- 2.** Thank Jesus that He has included people from 'the east and west' in his kingdom, including the Deep South!
- 3.** Pray that we as a church would learn to reach out to all kinds of people, in all sorts of conditions, with the news that Jesus is prepared to meet them in their sin. Pray especially for Jon Morrison and our Missions Support Teams as they train us and encourage us in this.
- 4.** Pray for Peter Laubscher and his team who work with lepers in Southern Africa. Thank God for the way in which they demonstrate Christ's love and compassion to lepers. Peter has asked us to give thanks especially for Gundula Koething who works amongst lepers in Mpumalanga. He says in his March newsletter: "Gundula brings a Christlike love, passion, joy, and bundles of energy to her work which is second to none".
- 5.** Pray for our Teen Ministry. Pray that more teens would attend outreach events and our Friday Night Hood meetings. Pray that the teens in our church would reach out and welcome teens from our valley.



SERMON NOTES ON MATTHEW 8:18-22

The Cost of Following Jesus



Matthew 8:18-22

Cost of Following Jesus

STUDY 2

1. What are some of the joys and difficulties you find about being a Christian?

Investigating

Read Matthew 8:18-22...

After the series of miracles, a crowd started forming around Jesus (8:16-18). Yet, Jesus decides to “*cross to the other side of the lake*” (8:18). Just as Jesus was about to leave, we have two people who approach Jesus...

What do they say/ask Jesus?	How does Jesus respond?
V. 19	V. 20
V. 21	V. 22

1. Why did Jesus respond this way to the scribe? (cf. Matt. 10:15-16; 23:6-7)
2. Why did Jesus respond this way to the disciple? (cf. Matt. 10:34-39)



Thinking & Living

1. What do you find surprising or challenging about Jesus' words?
2. Christians are called to a) provide for their families (1 Tim. 5:8), b) honour their parents (Eph. 6:2). How should we understand Jesus' words then?
3. How can the following pressures make us stray from following Jesus?
 - a) Social pressures (Example, desiring to fit in, pressures from your job, whether it's ungodly choices or causes an ungodly lifestyle where your job always take priority)
 - b) Family pressures (Example, if your family has different religious views, you might be worried about speaking to them about Christ)
4. What are some privileges/things/relationships you can think of that might hinder you from following Jesus?
5. Why is it important for us as Christians to understand the cost that comes with following Jesus?

Points to Pray (now and during the week)...

- 1.** Pray that your group would be able to persevere and help encourage one another when the cost of following Jesus becomes difficult.
- 2.** Pray that God would open our hearts and allow us to see where we are failing to give up something for Christ's sake.
- 3.** Pray for those in our church and in uBabalo neThemba who are struggling to follow Jesus because of pressure from their families. (Whether it's different family beliefs or rejection)
- 4.** Pray that St Peter's will remain truthful to the Gospel and sharing its message when it faces social pressures.
- 5.** Pray that we would not be overwhelmed by the costs of following Christ, but rather that we would be encouraged and willingly be able to face the costs with God's help.



THE MARTYRDOM OF PERPETUA AND FELICITAS

In Matthew 8:22, Jesus explains that our allegiance to Him should supersede all other relationships. Following Jesus might cost us our relationships in our community and immediate family (cf. Matt. 10:34-39). To follow Jesus, we need to love Him above everyone and everything else. Two people who had to grapple with this reality in a vivid way were Perpetua and Felicitas, who lived in Carthage at the turn of the 3rd Century. Following the Edict of Trajan, the Roman Empire did not actively persecute Christians, but only if they were accused by their neighbours. In the words of Emperor Trajan: *“They are not to be sought out; if they are denounced and proved guilty, they are to be punished”* (Epistulae X).

Felicitas was a young female servant. Vivia Perpetua was a noble, a married woman and well-educated. She had a son who was less than 6 months old. Both she and Felicitas were recent converts and were being disciplined (being called “catechumens”). Sadly, following an accusation, five disciples (including Perpetua and Felicitas) were arrested.

While being prosecuted, Perpetua wrote of her ordeal, mentioning regularly how her father: *“for the sake of his affection for me, was persisting in seeking to turn me away, and to cast me down from the faith”* (Passion of Perpetua and Felicity, 1:2). Perpetua insisted that she could not call herself by any other name, but Christian. This drove her father mad: *“Then my father, provoked at this saying, threw himself upon me, as if he would tear my eyes out”*. Such a scene caused so much distress for her that she considered it a blessing once she felt her father’s absence for a few days. During this time, the 5 disciples were baptised (an official sign of fully identifying with the Christian faith). A few days later they were imprisoned.

Being imprisoned caused much distress and anxiety for Perpetua (especially for the wellbeing of her young child). After a few days in prison, her father arrived. *“Worn out with anxiety”*, her father told her: *“have pity my daughter, on my grey hairs”* (Passion of Perpetua and Felicity, 2:1). Her father knew that if she did not denounce her faith, then he would be penalized for her dishonouring her family. So, her father begged her to: *“lay aside your courage, and do not bring us all to destruction.”* The father had such affection while saying these things he kissed her hand and threw himself at her feet with tears. Although torn with grief, Perpetua confessed that she would only do God’s will.

Eventually, the five disciples were taken to the town hall to be judged for their faith. During the trial, the prosecutor told her to denounce her faith so that she may have pity on her child and prevent her father from suffering a penalty for dishonouring their family. Resolute to follow Jesus, Perpetua did not denounce her faith. In response, it was ordered that her father be beaten with rods. She wept as she watched her father being beaten. Furthermore, it was judged that those who confessed Jesus must be killed by wild beasts in the arena. After being sentenced to death, Perpetua’s family refused to let her see her 6-month baby again.

One of the five disciples, Felicitas, was pregnant. Due to her pregnancy, her execution was delayed: *“because pregnant women are not allowed to be publicly punished”* (Passion of Perpetua and Felicity, 5:2). Wanting to be martyred with the other disciples, Felicitas prayed that she might deliver early (being pregnant for 8 months). By God’s grace, Felicitas’ baby was born earlier and given to her sister to be raised as her own.

When the day of their public execution came, the 5 disciples were not fearful of what was coming, but filled with joy. Before the prosecutor, they declared aloud: *“You judge us, but God will judge you”* (Passion of Perpetua and Felicity, 6:1). The five disciples were allocated different forms of death: some were killed by a leopard, some by a bear and others by a wild boar. Felicitas and Perpetua, however, were to face an enraged cow. The young women were then stripped, clothed with nets and led to face the beast. Felicitas was crushed, but Perpetua was continually mauled. Eventually, Perpetua was pierced by the sword. (Passion of Perpetua and Felicity 6:4). For Perpetua and Felicitas, Jesus’ words in Matthew 8:22 & 10:34-39 were not hypothetical. Both had to face the stark choice of choosing between their family and Jesus. In the end, both loved Jesus more, being willing to lose everything for Him.

We might not be in the same position as the 5 disciples. Yet, some of us might have experienced the conflict Jesus spoke of in Matthew 10:36-37: *“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law — a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.”* It is difficult to follow Jesus when your family and friends don’t and oppose/resist the fact that you do. It is in those moments, you need to remind yourself of Jesus’ words: *“Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me”* (10:37-38).

And remember, Jesus had to do the same. Part of Jesus’ mission was that: *“the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me”* (Jn. 14:31). In love of His Father, Jesus lost His family, His friends and ultimately was rejected by his own people. He picked up His cross, because He loved His Father and (as we discover when we turn to Jesus), he loved you.

SERMON NOTES ON MATTHEW 8:23-34

Jesus is Lord



Matthew 8:23-34

Jesus is Lord

STUDY 3

1. Who is the most important/impressive person you have ever met? What did it feel like to meet him/her?

Investigating

Read Matthew 8:23-27... The Storm

1. What is Jesus doing (v. 24)? How are the disciples responding to the situation (v. 25)?
2. What does Jesus' reply to the disciples show us about the disciples' understanding of Jesus (v. 26a)?
3. How does the storm respond to Jesus' rebuke? (v. 26b)
4. What is the response of the disciples to what happened (v. 27)?

Read Matthew 8:28-34... The Demoniac

5. Who do Jesus and His disciples meet when they arrive on the other side (v. 28)? How are they described?
6. What do vs. 29-31 reveal about how much the demons know about the identity of Jesus? Notice how the demons answer the question the disciples asked back in v. 27.
7. What are some of the responses to Jesus' action of telling the demons to "Go!" (vs. 32-34)?



Thinking & Living

“Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided.”

(Exodus 14:21)

*“The LORD is slow to anger and great in power,
and the LORD will by no means clear the guilty.*

*His way is in whirlwind and storm,
and the clouds are the dust of his feet.*

He rebukes the sea and makes it dry;

he dries up all the rivers;

Bashan and Carmel wither;

the bloom of Lebanon withers”

(Nahum 1:3-4)

1. Why would the disciples be shocked that Jesus calmed the sea? Consider the above Old Testament passages.
2. Why is the title “Son of God” (v. 29) a fitting title for Jesus according to what we see Him do in both scenes?
3. How does remembering what Jesus taught in Matthew 6:25-34, help us understand Jesus’ correction to the disciples in v. 26?
4. We experience crises in our own lives as well: the pandemic, financial strains, job scarcity and political uncertainty etc. How does Matthew 8:23-27 help you work through these crises?
5. Although evil spirits do not always manifest themselves with this type of possession, the New Testament is clear that evil spirits exist (Acts 16:16-21). What comfort can come from this passage for those who are united to Christ by faith?

Points to Pray (now and during the week)...

- 1.** Consider each other in your group. Are there any of you facing a crisis which may be challenging your faith? Pray for each other in this.
- 2.** Pray that your group would grow in awe of who Jesus is as the “Son of God.”
- 3.** Pray for opportunities to share with those we know about Jesus. Pray that we would be bold enough to tell and show them that Jesus is our Lord and Lord of all.



SERMON NOTES ON MATTHEW 9:1-17

Calling Sinners



Matthew 9:1-17

Calling Sinners

STUDY 4

“There are some people who are just too broken and corrupt to experience a life change. In fact, they just drag others down with them.”

1. What do you think of the above statement?

Investigating

1. Discuss the following columns following the flow of the text.

	Read Matthew 9:1-8	Read Matthew 9:9-13	Read Matthew 9:14-17
Who is questioning Jesus?	(v.3)	(v.11)	(v.14)
What about Jesus are they upset at?	(v.3)	(v.11)	(v.14)
What is Jesus's response?	(vs.4-7)	(vs.12-13)	(vs.15-17)

2. What is Jesus' primary aim in performing this miracle (v.6)? How does the physical healing prove this (v.5)?
3. Who does Jesus say He came for (vs.12-13) What does this mean?
4. What do the picture of the cloth and the wine skins and wine have in common (v.16-17)? What is the connection to the picture of the groom and guests (v.15)? What do you think this means?



Thinking & Living

1. What is blasphemy? Give reasons for whether you think Jesus is committing blasphemy or not when He forgives the sins of the paralytic (vs. 1-7).
2. Consider the text below. What motivates Jesus to hang out with these kinds of people (vs. 12-13)?

Blomberg explains the contempt the Pharisees had for tax collectors: “*The combination of ‘tax collectors’ with ‘sinners,’ ‘prostitutes’ or ‘Gentiles’ (‘pagan[s]’) recurs throughout the Gospels (Matt 11:19; 18:17; 21:31-32; Luke 15:1). Such references became idiomatic, demonstrating how unwelcome the tax collectors were to the Pharisees*” (1992:156). If tax collectors were lumped in with prostitutes, sinners and gentiles in general, it is clear what strong offence was taken at their occupation. Their work for the Roman government was seen as ungodly and unclean for they had sided with the enemy. It seems common for tax collectors to have cheated those they collected from. This is hinted at in Jesus’ response to a tax collector in Luke (Luke 3:12-13) and the account of Zacchaeus the tax collector (Luke 19:1-10). There are even accounts of tax collectors beating people to extract their money from them (Keener 1997: 187). Their corruption and brutality naturally made tax collectors enemies of the Jewish people.

3. The phrase “I desire mercy and not sacrifice” comes from Hosea 6:6 (cf. Hos. 6:4-7). Why would Jesus quote this verse in His response to the Pharisees? What are the parallels between the description from God in Hosea, and the position of the Pharisees in Matthew?
4. Who might be the “tax collectors” of our day?
5. How can we encourage one another not to shun the “tax collector” type but to reach out to them with the gospel message and friendship?
6. We understand Jesus to be the bridegroom, the unshrunk cloth, and the new wine. What proves this?
7. Some people today, like the scribes, pharisees and John’s disciples, try to put new wine into old wineskins. For example: “On a Sunday we should only play the harp and other such instruments mentioned in the Old Testament, because that is how we are taught to praise God.”

What are some “old wineskins” that you have heard people use? How could you respond to them?

Points to Pray

(now and during the week)...

- 1.** Praise God for sending Jesus to bring about the forgiveness of sins so that we, no matter how sinful or rejected by society we are, may have fellowship with God!
- 2.** Pray that we would in turn humbly love and share this good news with the “tax collectors” of our day.
- 3.** Pray for wisdom as we live in this new era that Jesus has brought about. Pray that we would live faithfully in light of the Old Testament and the New Testament.



SERMON NOTES ON MATTHEW 9:18-34

David's Messiah

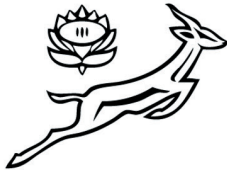


Matthew 9:18-34

The Kingdom in Action: David's Messiah

STUDY 5

1. Take a look at some of the following icons. How many do you recognize? What sort of characteristics/features make these brands instantly recognizable?



In this next section in Matthew's Gospel, we will discover Jesus acting in a way in which those familiar with the Jewish Scriptures would start to recognize as matching a very famous 'brand': that of the promised Messiah.

Investigating

Read Matthew 9:18-38...

1. Consider Isaiah 35:4-6 below. What sort of characteristics will mark the time when God's king returns to His people and restores them?

*³Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;
⁴say to those with fearful hearts,
"Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come,
he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution
he will come to save you."
⁵Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
⁶Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.*

- Isaiah 35:4-6

2. What is requested of Jesus in Matt. 9:18? Who makes the request?
3. What happens to Jesus on the way to this ruler's house? (9:20-22)
4. How would you describe the scene in 9:23? What sort of emotions might Jesus' arrival and words provoke in 9:24?
5. By what title is Jesus addressed in 9:27? What are those who address Jesus in this way hoping for?
6. What does Jesus do in 9:32-33? What two responses does this provoke? (9:33-34)
7. How does the response of the Pharisees to Jesus compare with that of the bleeding woman and the blind men? Look especially at what Jesus draws attention to in 9:22 and 9:29.



Thinking & Living

Like those we encountered in Study 1 (The Kingdom in Action: God with Us), both women in 9:18-26 are ritually unclean. Touching fluids associated with sexual intercourse (cf. Leviticus 15), such as menstrual bleeding, and things associated with death, such as dead bodies (cf. Numbers 19), made the toucher unclean as well. You might like to refer to Study 1 to remind yourself of the extra significance this gives to Jesus' conduct and its result.

1. Think back to the 'brand' characteristics you identified in Isaiah 35. Which characteristics – in this and previous studies – has Jesus met thus far? What sort of emotion do you think this would create in a contemporary of Jesus familiar with a passage like Isaiah 35?
2. There are only three instances in the entire Old Testament of individuals being raised to life: 1 Kings 17:17-24 & 2 Kings 4:32-37. What does this tell you about the importance of a.) this passage, and b.) Jesus? What implications does this have for us today?
3. Why do you think the blind men appeal to Jesus as 'the Son of David'? What difference does this 'brand' identity make to what they expect from Him? In what ways do our expectations of who Jesus is impact what we expect from Him?
4. Jesus' actions leave those who witness them amazed (9:33). Does this remain true of our world today? Why do you think this is? Do we have more or less reason to be amazed?

BONUS:

Read through the Beatitudes again (5:2-10). Which Beatitudes do you see becoming a reality in this passage?

Points to Pray

(now and during the week)...

- 1.** Praise Jesus for bringing His kingdom to the “poor in spirit” (5:3), those who “mourn” (5:4), the “meek” (5:5). As well as for showing “mercy” (5:7) to those who appeal for it, and for giving those who cry out to Him the chance to “see God” (5:8).
- 2.** Pray for yourself and your Fellowship Group. Pray that Jesus’ tenderness and willingness to make the unclean clean and the unwell well, will move you to return to Him and His Kingdom after every personal failing.
- 3.** Pray for those in our church family who have lost loved ones to death recently. Pray that Jesus’ power and purpose provide hope and comfort to them. Pray also, that we as a church family would mirror Jesus to them in our care and affection for them.
- 4.** Pray that those who visit us during this King:Jesus series would be amazed at Jesus’ conduct and miracles and that they would grow curious to learn more about His Kingship and Kingdom.
- 5.** Thank God for all those involved in the music and liturgy (structure & content) of our services. Pray that God would give them wisdom, creativity, and excellence as they strive to help us to respond in an emotionally appropriate way to what we learn in Matthew’s Gospel.



HOW SHOULD WE UNDERSTAND MIRACLES?

In this King:Jesus series we encounter several 'miraculous' acts performed by Jesus, as well as instructions given by Jesus to his disciples to go out into various Jewish towns to "drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness" (Matt. 10:1). These accounts or miracles are likely to raise several questions for those of us reading these stories today.

In this article we will aim to take some time to think about how we should approach these questions. We will do this first, by considering two incorrect ways of approaching miracles and then by attempting to understand the place of miracles in the Bible, and especially Matthew's Gospel.

Two incorrect ways of understanding miracles

As we consider miracles, it is first necessary to give some thought to exactly what we mean by the word 'miracle'. Google defines a miracle as an "event that is not explicable by natural or scientific laws and is therefore attributed to a divine agency". For many, this phrase 'divine agency' is the operative phrase.

In casual conversation we often tend to speak of 'miracles' in a more diluted sense, for example the so-called 2015 'Brighton Miracle' where underdogs Japan managed to beat our mighty Springboks in their Rugby World Cup game! For cases such as these, Google offers an alternative translation: "an exceptional product or achievement, or an outstanding example of something". In this case, there is no attribution to a 'divine agency', it is merely attributed to the ordinary 'natural' laws which 'govern' our world. Herein we find the first unbiblical way of thinking about miracles, namely the division of the events of our world into two categories of events - those where the divine is at work, and those events from which God merely allows creation to 'play out'.

1. **Error:** "God works only through the miracles"

Our modern Western traditional society places a significant value on the importance of science and a scientific understanding of the world we live in. This understanding of our world is established through a **scientific method** which works to produce explanations which are held as true until they can be proven false. Through these theories and through attempts to disprove them, the scientific method draws conclusions based on results it can observe, measure and repeat. The shortcoming of this method is that it is unable to account for events which are not observable, measurable or repeatable.

It is this shortcoming – science being unable to observe and measure the divine in creation – that has led to a predominant worldview in which God is relegated from the workings of the natural world to a spiritual realm. What we are taught, both implicitly and explicitly, is that the universe is a closed mechanical system in which everything works according to fixed laws. We are taught that while there may have been an original designer, that original designer no longer interferes with the system – and we are certain of this because our scientific models have proven to be so reliable. This view is sometimes called **Deism**.

1. Correction: God is immediately and imminently involved in the natural world

Yet, there is one major problem with this view. It fails to recognize that the scientific method's inability to prove the presences of the divine in the ordinary workings of our world is not proof that the divine is not present! In fact, the Bible presents a world where God is actively present in his creation.

For example, according to Genesis 2:7, the only reason any human being is alive is because God: *“breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature”*. According to Genesis 6:3, it is God's Spirit that sustains our very life. Ps. 104:29-30 reminds us that all of life within creation is dependent on God's life-giving Spirit: *“When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground.”* Moreover, God is not merely involved in the giving and taking of life, but in every aspect of the day-to-day events within the universe. King Ahab needed to realize in 1 Kings 16:29-18:46 that it was not Baal (the Canaanite god he worshiped) that controlled the weather, but Yahweh. As the Psalmist puts it: *“He covers the heavens with clouds; he prepares rain for the earth; he makes grass grow on the hills”* (Ps. 147:8). Jesus taught His disciples: *“He (God the Father) makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust”* (Matt. 5:45). Consequently, in every ordinary moment of life, God is involved: *“he upholds the universe by the word of his power”* (Heb. 1:3). He is intricately involved in every aspect of our lives. That's why Paul could say in Acts 17:24-27: *“The God who made the world and everything in it... He himself gives all men life and breath and everything else... For in Him we live and move and have our being”*.

God is not merely involved in the giving and taking of life, but in every aspect of the day-to-day events within the universe.

2. Error: God works only though natural laws

While it is incorrect to say that God only works through the miraculous, it is equally incorrect to say that God never works through the miraculous. Some may happily concede that God's divine power is active and present in the workings and sustaining of our universe. However, they may object to the possibility that God ever acts in a way contrary to the ordinary ordering of the universe.

This perspective on God comes from two perspectives. The first perspective comes from our modern western society's skepticism of the inexplicable and supernatural. This comes again from the pride of place we give the scientific method. Exceptions to the natural laws which we have observed and feel firmly established threaten a secular understanding of the universe. For instance, David Hume in 'On the irrationality of believing in miracles' rejected any possibility of the miraculous on the basis that the laws of nature are so 'firm and unalterable': "*A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined*" (Hume, Sect. X. Part I).

The second perspective comes from Christians who are concerned about the abuse of the idea that God works in extra-ordinary, supernatural ways. Due to an overemphasis or fixation on the miraculous, some have acted in ways which display a frightening disregard for the way in which God has organized the universe! For instance, some might refuse to take the very best medicine that medical scientists have developed (using the knowledge which we have from the divine-ordinary ordering of our world) and instead prefer to pray for God to act in an extraordinary way to heal them. In other instances, unscrupulous people have used the possibility of the miraculous to manipulate people and fleece them of their money - in South Africa you need only to look at the posters on our lampposts and trains to find people promising miraculous wealth and the return of lost lovers. This gross twisting of a belief in the miraculous has naturally created an aversion and suspicion of the possibility of God acting in out-of-the-ordinary ways, both in history and today.

2. Correction: God is not bound to the natural order He has created!

While it is true to say that God is present and works in every ordinary moment of life, God is not bound by the ordinary and is able to work outside His normal regular patterns. In fact, as the creator and sustainer of nature's laws, God is also sufficiently powerful to suspend or alter the way in which He sustains our world. It is for this reason that while, as Christians, we can fully support the scientific method, we must also hold to biblical truths which cannot have a 'scientific explanation' precisely because God has on occasion chosen to order creation – for a moment in time – in an extraordinary way which was observable and measurable, but not repeatable. It is for this reason that John can record in John 2:1-11 that water *became* wine – since the liquid which had been water, was there for all to drink! On that day the very molecular structure of that liquid behaved in a way which it had never done before – and has never done since!

These occasions are appropriately called 'wonders' or 'mighty works' in scripture because they are exceptional, or *extra-ordinary* moments in human history. We should not think that the ancient people who recorded these stories were fools. They knew, full well, that the sea does not part (cf. Exodus 14), that the sun does not stop in the sky (cf. Joshua 10) and that dead people do not come back to life (cf. John 11). The Bible's authors are fully aware that what they witness is remarkable. It is precisely because it was "*the dead man came out*" (John 11:44) that they record these stories. There are absolutely moments in history where God has suspended the very laws of physics which he sustains. The important question to ask is: Why?

Why does God sometimes act through extra-ordinary means?

It seems appropriate to assume that God chooses to sustain the world in a way that is predictable for our sake. Without this, we would live in a world of chaos akin to the churning cosmic ocean of Genesis 1. With this ordering, we can make considerable sense of our universe and invent technology and measurements which enable us to navigate life in this world. However, the question remains: if this ordering of the world is for our benefit, why would God occasionally suspend this natural order?

Well, the authors of the Bible see God's miraculous acts as being moments which demonstrate something about God's character and salvation plan in a specific and unique way. In other words, miracles are not random. Instead, they are deliberate actions, initiated by God, to reveal an aspect of Himself to us.

Take for instance the Apostle John, who throughout his Gospel calls

miracles 'signs'. These signs provide specific insight into the person and mission of Jesus. Thus, Jesus' raising of Lazarus in John 11 is an extraordinary work of God which occurred to reveal God's glory (11:4) and so that those who saw it would believe (11:14; 11:41). Similarly, even miracles performed by early Christians, such as Peter's and John's healing of a cripple (cf. Acts 3), were occurring to reveal the authenticity of their witness to the revelation of God in Jesus. As Peter and John correct those who saw this miracle: *"Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we made this man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our Fathers has glorified his servant Jesus"* (Acts 3:12-13).

It is God's wisdom that He chooses to sometimes demonstrate his character and plan through extraordinary means

Nevertheless, we should not presume that God only reveals Himself in this way. It is God's wisdom that He chooses to sometimes demonstrate his character and plan

through extraordinary means, and at other times through ordinary means. Jesus did not heal every single person in Palestine, nor did Jesus reverse the death of every single person who died during His ministry. Similarly, whereas the Apostle Peter was miraculously released from prison in Acts 12:6ff, you also need to see that the Apostle James was not (he was executed) in Acts 12:2.

What about miracles today?

When we consider the question of miracles today, we must consider these abovementioned correctives. If we do not see God active in supernatural and extraordinary ways, we should not think that He is not present and at work in our lives and world. We should also avoid believing that God is limited to acting only through the ordinary means through which He has ordered the world. Lastly, we must always bear in mind that the biblical evidence points to the purpose of miraculous events being to reveal God's character and authenticate His appointed king: Jesus. Christians today may healthily differ on whether, or the extent to which, miracles occur today so long as they continue to keep these factors front and centre.

Some Christians, hold to a view of **cessationism (miracles having ceased)**, believing that God chooses to work entirely, or almost entirely, through the ordinary means of Christian work and witness. Those who hold to this view explain the miracles of the New Testament as being closely associated with God's purpose of authenticating the newly commissioned church and Apostles for a unique period. They will draw on a personal experience of the scarcity of extra-ordinary works today.

Those who hold to this view must be cautious not to hold it merely out of fear of the theologically dangerous movements that have arisen out of heavily miracle-focused traditions and must be cautious never to make claims about the cessation of miracles that the Bible does not make.

For more: See Thomas Schreiner's article: 'Why I am a Cessaionist' at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/cessationist/>

Other Christians, hold to a view of **continuationism (miracles having continued)**, believing that God still works in supernatural and extraordinary ways that reveal and authenticate His character and message. Unlike cessationists, these Christians hold that God through His Spirit acts in the same way He did during the New Testament times and that Christians should not be surprised to find the Spirit working in extraordinary ways to authenticate the message of Jesus. Continuationists may also draw on their own personal experience of supernatural and extra-ordinary events. Those who hold to this view must be cautious to test miraculous claims carefully so that the message of Christ is not brought into disrepute either through a false miracle, or through a supernatural event brought about by spiritual forces apart from God, such as those done by Pharoah's magicians (Exodus 7:11; 8:7), or Simon the Sorcerer (Acts 8:9-11). Those who hold to this view ought also to be cautious of demanding God to act in extraordinary ways when He is fully capable of bringing about his purposes through ordinary means which are just as divine.

For more: See Sam Storm's article: 'Why I am a Continuationist' at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/continuationist/>

Regardless of which view we decide seems to us to be most fitting we ought to keep the Bible's truths about miracles at the forefront and to treat all our Christian brothers and sisters with charity and patience. As Paul wraps up his advice to the Corinthian church on the matter of miracles and spiritual gifts, he has this to say: *"If I speak human or angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so that I can move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing."* (1 Corinthians 13:1-2)

Carel Pienaar's Experience: The following story is Carel's recollection of an extraordinary event which served the message of Jesus.

When a group of us from St. Peters went to Dumisani in King William's Town in 2015, I had the joy of staying with Luaan Goosen, a missionary working among the Xhosa people, in particular the Zion Churches. On one occasion, Luaan was called by the community to see a little girl they believed was demon possessed (showing the same signs of the type of demon possession you would read about in the Gospels). Not knowing what to do, Luaan prayed and decided he would just share the Gospel with her. The message of Jesus. After quite a struggle just to get the girl to stand in front of him, Luaan was eventually able to share the Gospel with her. To the astonishment/amazement of everyone there, when Luaan asked the girl whether she would like to place her trust in Jesus, she looked at him and replied "Yes". In that moment, every sign of demonic possession vanished. Her transformation in character was so contrasting that the entire community wanted to hear about Jesus.

Today, this girl still believes and follows Jesus, having personally experienced the power of the Gospel. Yet notice, Luaan pointed her to Jesus (something the Holy Spirit would do) and the fruit of his ministry was the girl serving, loving and worshipping Jesus alone (faith-obedience). Was that an extra-ordinary work of the Holy Spirit? According to the biblical criteria and the evidence... yes. This is no false miracle. It was never about Luaan, it was always about the worship of Jesus (that His message is true and that He is supreme over whatever evil power held sway over this girl).

SERMON NOTES ON MATTHEW 9:35-10:15



Harvesters for the Kingdom

Matthew 9:35-10:15

Harvesters for the Kingdom

STUDY 6

1. What are some of the responses to the mission of the church today?

Investigating

Read Matthew 9:35-38...

1. What did Jesus do as He went through the towns and villages? (v. 35)
2. Jesus had compassion on the crowd because they were like lost sheep (v. 36). What do you think this means? (cf. Isaiah 53:6; Ezekiel 34:6, 11-12).
3. Jesus uses farming language to communicate to His followers the crowd's needs, v. 36. What does His use of the metaphor in v. 37 suggest?
4. What is Jesus' conclusion in v. 38?

Read Matt. 10:1-15...

1. What does Jesus give to His disciples to equip them to go on mission? (v. 1)
2. Where does Jesus tell them not to go? (v. 5) (see Ezekiel 34:5-8, 10-16). For further reading go to <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/why-did-jesus-say-he-came-only-for-israel/>
3. What are the disciples to do on mission? (Compare with v. 35).
4. What are they not to take along, and why? (vs. 9-10)
5. What determines whether the people of a particular home receive a blessing or not from the disciples? (vs. 11-15)



Thinking & Living

1. Generally speaking, how does the call of the disciples then, apply to us today? (Matt. 28:19-20).
2. What should our attitude be towards unbelievers? (Matt 9:36; cf. 9:12-13)
3. How can you be a “worker” in the harvest field?
4. What does Jesus say the disciples and we today are to do? (v. 38)
5. What area do you feel you need equipping in, in order to be a “harvester”?
6. What response can you expect from the “lost sheep” of the Fish Hoek valley?
7. For some the thought of going out to make disciples is overwhelming but what are things *you can do* to be faithful in responding to these verses? (especially looking at v. 36).

Points to Pray

(now and during the week)...

- 1.** Pray that Christians at St Peters would be outward-looking when it comes to the people in the Deep South.
- 2.** Pray for compassion for the lost to drive ministry and mission at St Peters.
- 3.** Pray that those in your fellowship group would be “workers” and “harvesters” in their own capacity.
- 4.** Pray for the desire to be equipped for works of service.
- 5.** Pray that the lost sheep would cross your path and that you might be able to witness to them with the message of the gospel.



SERMON NOTES ON MATTHEW 10:16-42

Opposition in Mission



Matthew 10:16-42

Opposition in Mission

STUDY 7

1. What is the hardest thing about being a Jesus follower for you personally?

Investigating

Read Matthew 10:16-42

1. There are 4 different animals mentioned in v. 16. What do you think the meaning of this verse is?
2. Knowing their environment (v. 16), Jesus gives a series of instructions regarding what they should expect, how they should respond and why they should respond in this way (vs. 17-28). Discuss...

What should they expect	How should they respond?	Why should they respond in this way?

3. How do vs. 29-31 bring comfort and assurance to His disciples' mission in the face of fear?
4. On what basis will Jesus acknowledge or disown someone before His father? (vs. 32-33)
5. What did Jesus come to do on the earth according to vs. 34-35?

6. Read through **vs. 37-39...**

What difficulties will they face?	Why will they face these difficulties?
What promises does Jesus give?	What warnings does Jesus give?



Thinking & Living

1. In our Christian walk today, in our context, we don't really experience opposition in a formal way (i.e. being handed over to authorities), but in reading through the difficulties Jesus foretells in vs. 37- 39 what might these difficulties look like today?
2. When do you need to be reminded of the promises Jesus gives here?
3. When do you need to be reminded of the warnings here?
4. How can we deal with family members who oppose what we believe in a way that honours Jesus?
5. What do you think it means to "*stand firm to the end*" (v. 22)?
6. Most of us have some fear or concerns surrounding our own death. How can we find real comfort in Jesus' words in v. 28?
7. For you personally, what are the implications of Jesus bringing a sword to the earth? (See Micah 7:5-6).
8. Do you consider yourself worthy of Jesus? Why / why not?

Points to Pray

(now and during the week)...

- 1.** Pray for a sense of peace for those around the world who experience formal persecution.
- 2.** Pray for your family members who do not believe in Jesus. May you have the opportunity to witness to them.
- 3.** Pray that at St Peters we would encourage each other to stand firm in the Lord.
- 4.** Pray that we would not fear death as the world fears death and that our hope for eternal life is evident by the way we live.
- 5.** Pray that you and others in your FG would have real assurance of being worthy of Jesus through faith in his work on the cross.



SERMON NOTES ON MATTHEW 11:1-24

The King Rejected



Matthew 11:1-24

The King Rejected

STUDY 8

1. Can you think of a situation in your life when you've regretted not responding to an invitation or someone's warning/advice? Tell your story.

Investigating

Read Matthew 11:1-6... Who is Jesus?

In Matthew 3:12, John the Baptist said that the Messiah: *“will clear His threshing-floor, gathering His wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire”*. Jesus came and was baptised. Yet, John was arrested (Matt. 4:12) and nothing seems to be happening to the *“chaff”*...

1. What is John asking Jesus? (vs. 1-2)
2. How does Jesus answer? Compare...

The Age of the Messiah	What Jesus is doing
“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)	Matthew 11:4-6
“Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows...” (Isaiah 53:4)	
“But your dead will live; their bodies will rise. You 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” (Is. 26:19)	
“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor” (Is. 61:1)	

Read Matthew 11:7-15... Who is John?

- 2. Who is John the Baptist? (vs. 7-10, 14)
- 3. Why is John “greater” than anyone before him, yet everyone after him is “greater than he”? (vs. 11-15)

Read Matthew 11:16-24... Rejection and Judgement

- 1. How have people responded to God’s messengers?

To the Messengers in the OT	To John the Baptist	To Jesus
v. 12	Vs. 16-18	V. 19

- 2. What does Jesus say will happen to the towns that did not respond to Him and his teaching? (vs. 20-24; cf. Gen. 19:24-25 regarding Sodom and Gomorrah)



Thinking & Living

What puzzled John the Baptist was why Jesus was not throwing God's enemies, the unrighteous, into the *"unquenchable fire"* (Matt. 3:10, 12). We have the *"undeniable reality of the continued experience of the effects of evil in this world"* (Hagner). Thinking about John's doubt and Jesus' gentle warning (11:6)...

1. How does Jesus and His invitation remain an "offense" to people today? Give examples of this.
2. How does Jesus' answer (11:4-6) help us understand the purpose of His first coming? Why is this Good News? (cf. Matt. 9:12-13)
3. Jesus does not deny John the Baptist's message of "unquenchable fire", but when will this day come?
4. John doubted Jesus (11:2), many did not respond to Jesus' call (11:16-19) and entire towns rejected Jesus (11:20-24) ...
 - Have you experienced this when you shared the Gospel with someone? Tell your story...
 - How does Jesus' experience encourage us to continue sharing the Gospel?
 - How do Jesus' warnings (11:20-24) encourage us to continue sharing the Gospel?
 - What should be the core of our message when we share the Gospel? (cf. 9:12-13; 11:5)

Points to Pray

(now and during the week)...

1. Pray for family and friends you know who have also not responded to Jesus' message. Specifically, that they will come to Him and receive His offer of grace. He has come to *"call... sinners"*.
2. Pray for our missions partners (Eugene & Dawn Reyneke; Greg & Carol Phillips; Rod and Glenda Thomas; Cricket Meyer; Katleho & Delight Meslane; Explore Course [theological training in Africa]; Ana a Yesu [education in Malawi]). Specifically, that they would not be discouraged if people take "offense" to the Gospel but continue to offer God's grace in Christ.
3. Pray for our church family at St. Peters: that we will continue to *"call... sinners"...*
 - Personally (using our homes, coffee shops, beaches as spaces to witness)
 - Together as we invite and serve at LIFE, Friday Night ministries and Sundays
4. Pray for Ubabalo neThemba as the church family in Masi keeps witnessing to Jesus and offering God's grace in Christ to our community



SERMON NOTES ON MATTHEW 11:25-30

The King Revealed



Matthew 11:25-30

The King Revealed

STUDY 9

1. The Gospel will always facilitate two responses: some will believe the message, while others will reject it. Why does this happen?

Investigate

Read Matthew 11:25-27... The Will of God

In Matthew 8-9, it is surprising to see who came to Jesus and who did not. The unclean (leper, gentile, a man whose daughter died, a women with bleeding etc.), the “sinners” (tax collectors) and the broken (paralytic, blind and mute). Yet, the religious leaders reject and resist Jesus. Entire towns reject Jesus (11:20-24). In response, Jesus prays...

1. What does Jesus reveal regarding what is going on? (vs. 25-26)
2. How will someone be able to “know” the Father? (v. 27)
3. What do these verses tell us about Jesus? Specifically, His relationship with the Father.

Read Matthew 11:28-30... The Call to Come

In response to Jesus’ prayer of praise, Jesus extends an invitation...

1. Whom does Jesus call and what does He promise them (v. 28)?
2. How do vs. 29-30 elaborate on:
 - a. What it means to “come to Jesus”?
 - b. The type of rest He offers?



Thinking & Living

In Matthew 11:25-30, Jesus has revealed a paradox (something that seems contradictory, but it is actually complementary) and mystery (something we cannot fully understand) about Himself and salvation...

1. Who is Jesus? How does Matthew 11:25-27 add to our understanding of Jesus' identity?

Matthew 1:23	Matthew 3:17	Matthew 5:17	Matthew 8:26-27	Matthew 9:6
"They will call him Immanuel - which means - God with us"	"This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased"	"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them"	"Then He got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. The men were amazed and asked: 'What kind of man is this? Even the wind and waves obey him!'"	"The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"

2. How do vs. 25-27 encourage us to continue sharing the Gospel...
 - When we experience rejection from the "wise and learned"?
 - With everyone, irrespective of their background or situation?
3. According to vs. 25-27, what should we expect when we share the Gospel?
4. How does Jesus' invitation in vs. 28-30 challenge the following views:
 - "You must first repent/clean up your act before you can come to Jesus"
 - "Christianity is stifling. It is about keeping rules to get into heaven. You will only know whether you've made it at the end of your life"
 - "Jesus is just another religious leader"
 - "God's sovereignty in election means we don't really need to do evangelism."

Points to Pray

(now and during the week)...

- 1.** Praise God that you have responded to the Gospel. Realize that at that moment the Father and Son personally revealed this to you! It is a gift God gave you when you were a helpless “little child”.
- 2.** Pray for people you know who have not yet responded to Jesus’ invitation. Pray that God the Father and Son will reveal the Gospel to them.
- 3.** Pray for yourself...
 - To be courageous in sharing the Gospel (God will reveal Himself)
 - To be humble in sharing the Gospel (God chooses, not you)
 - To be loving in sharing the Gospel (the call to receive Christ is to everyone, not who we think is “worthy”)
- 4.** Pray for the church (our church family, but other churches you know) ...
 - That God would use us (as His instruments and agents) to reveal Himself through our witness
 - That people will respond to the invitation to come to Jesus and find rest for their souls. That they will no longer rely upon themselves (their own learning and wisdom), but like little children, helplessly come to Jesus.



THE MYSTERIOUS PARADOX OF GOD

When reading passages like Matthew 11:20-30, we might feel perplexed by what we read. In vs. 20-24, Jesus denounces the towns that have rejected His message. Yet, in vs. 25-27, Jesus praises the Father and declares that the Father and the Son have “*hidden*” the message from the wise and learned but revealed it to others as “*the Son chooses*”. Then, Jesus extends an invitation: “*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest*” (v. 28). How can we reconcile His choosing and His invitation?

In a similar way, in Matthew 13:1-30, Jesus will explain that the Gospel is “sowed” everywhere, but only one type of soil will produce a harvest. Then Jesus tells the crowd: “*He who has ears, let him hear*” (v. 9). Yet, in vv. 10-17, Jesus explains that He is deliberately withholding the meaning of the parables to the crowd, only revealing it to His disciples. So, the Gospel is sowed everywhere, but Jesus determines who will “see” and “hear” (v. 16). Hearing and seeing is not something accomplished/earned by human effort, but is a gift given by the Son.

The most vivid picture of this perplexing reality is in Acts 4:1ff. The Apostle Peter declared to the Sanhedrin: “*Rulers and Elders of the people!*”, that: “*you crucified*” Jesus (4:10). They determined (by their own evil desires) to crucify the Messiah. Yet, a little later they pray: “*Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus... They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen*” (Acts 4:27-28). Which one is true? Did they crucify Jesus, or did God determine that they crucify Jesus? We would think that you need to choose between the two, but both are affirmed as true.

Encountering God = Encountering Paradox and Mystery

The “problem” highlighted here is the ancient debate of human responsibility vs. God’s sovereignty. Yet, there are many such “problems” when we start to encounter God in the Bible. For example, is God one being: “*The LORD our God, the LORD is one*” (Deut. 6:4) or is He three: “*The Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*” (Matt. 28:19)? Yes, He is one God and three Persons. Is Jesus a human being “sleeping” or is He God who: “*... rebuked the winds and waves, and it was completely calm*” (Matt. 8:23-27)? If Jesus is God, why would He sleep? If Jesus was a man, how could He calm the sea by speaking? Yes, He is God and Man.

This might seem problematic (how can this be?), yet what we are encountering at these moments is not a problem, but a...

a) Paradox

A paradox is something that seems contradictory, but it is actually complementary (when you start thinking about the implications). For example, if Jesus truly is “God”, “Light”, “Life” and “through whom all things were made” (Jn. 1:1-5), then it makes logical sense why He could reveal God (Jn. 1:14) and recreate us to be “children of God” (Jn. 1:12). It will make sense why He can claim to be: “*The Resurrection and the Life*” (Jn. 11:25). Yet, if Jesus is also truly “man” or “became flesh” (Jn. 1:14), then it makes sense why He ate and drank (Jn. 4:7), wept and felt all the emotions tied to death (11:35, 38) and ultimately died (19:33). Jesus’ unique identity as the God-Man makes Him the perfect mediator between God and Man (1 Tim. 2:5). The fact that Jesus’ humanity was resurrected into new life, gives us the assurance that we too (in our humanity) will “live with Him” (2 Timothy 2:11-12). His journey as a human being (death-resurrection-glorification), becomes my journey as a human being.

Yet, paradox does not necessarily resolve the phenomenon for us. Tied to the concept of something being a paradox is the idea of...

b) Mystery

The reality is: a paradox is not necessarily something we will fully understand. There will always be “mystery”. To give a definition: “*The term mystery refers to that which is true but which we do not understand. The Trinity for example, is a mystery*” (Sproul 1982:46). Life is full of mystery (things we do not understand), yet we accept these things as true. For example, for centuries there has been a debate regarding what light is. Isaac Newton (17th Century) argued that light is particles, while Christian Huygens (17th Century) argued it was waves. Although waves and particles were viewed as distinct phenomena in our universe, further scientific study has revealed that, paradoxically, light is both waves and particles. Although we can say (to a degree) what light is (waves and particles), we still don’t fully understand this. It still remains an unknown, a mystery. Yet, we don’t deny the reality of light because we don’t fully understand it. It is fallacy to argue: “*I will not believe something is real unless I understand it*”. Light is just one example (of many) that disproves this way of thinking.

In a more profound way, it should not surprise us that the more we encounter God in the Bible, the more we discover paradox and mystery. If creation (like light) is filled with paradox and mystery, then we can expect that the Creator (who is infinitely greater than His creation) will be filled with paradox and mystery. For example, when Hilary (4th Century Christian writer) wrote about the Trinity, he explained: “*perfect knowledge is so to know God that He is not viewed as unknown but that you know Him as indescribable*” (De Trinitate II:7). In fact, as Augustine preached, God wouldn’t be God if we could fully understand Him: “*We are speaking of God. Is it any wonder that you do not comprehend? For if you comprehend Him, He is not God*” (Sermo CXVII:5, 5th Century).

Coming to our passage, in Matthew 11:20-30, Jesus has revealed an incredible paradox and mystery to us. The paradox is that although Jesus invites all to come to Him, many will reject Him (entire towns [11:20-24] and the religious leaders do [12:24]). Their rejection is due to their sinful/hostile/evil disposition (cf. Matt. 7:11) and their own arrogance/pride believing that they are good/righteous (9:12-13), wise and learned (11:25). We are naïve and ignorant of human nature if we don't expect this (cf. Gen. 6:5; Eccl. 9:3; Jn. 3:19; Rom. 3:9-20; Eph. 2:1-3). Yet, if this was the only reality, then sharing the Gospel would seem futile. Why try when you know people will just reject it? Yet, Jesus reveals another aspect to sharing the Gospel in Matt. 11:25-27 that should encourage us. People will respond, because in God's grace He has chosen to reveal Himself to them. There might be three types of soil that ultimately give no fruit, but God has determined that there will be good soil as well (Matt. 13:1-30). We are naïve and ignorant of God if we don't expect people to respond in faith (is God unable to rescue and fulfil His promise? [cf. Rom. 9:6-33]).

The Purpose of Paradox and Mystery

We would like God to clear all the paradoxes and explain all the mysteries. Job wanted to fully understand why God allowed him to suffer as he did (cf. Job 13:22; 23:4-5; 30:20; 31:35). It is in our nature to try and understand (and this is good). It's encouraging to know that God did not rebuke Job for asking this or grappling with this, but only highlighted that Job's words: "*obscures my (God's) plans*" and that they were "*words without knowledge*" (Job 38:2). At the end of the discourse, Job confesses that God's assessment is true: "*Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know*" (Job 42:3). Job's change from demanding, to humbly confessing and trusting, is an example of why God gives us paradox and mystery.

When we encounter paradox and mystery, it becomes a moment that can...

a) Cultivate humility

God never told Job why he suffered. Instead, God questioned Job about his knowledge and involvement in the intricacies of creation and whether Job can really understand the fullness of God's creative genius. This short tour of creation caused Job to realize the vast difference between God (the Creator) and himself (the creature). Job's wrestling with God ends with humility (Job 42:1-6). In a similar way, King Nebuchadnezzar arrogantly believed that the Empire's success was due to his: "*mighty power... and... majesty*" (Dan. 4:29). It was by his actions alone that things were as they were. True to the temptation of Genesis 3:1-6,

Nebuchadnezzar believed he was like God (sovereign and in control). To humble Nebuchadnezzar, God removed the king's "royal authority" (Dan. 4:31) and he became a like a beast (Dan. 4:31-33). When God restored his "sanity", Nebuchadnezzar ends at a place of humility, acknowledging that God alone is truly or fully sovereign (Dan. 4:34-37).

In the same way, when someone responds to the call to come to Jesus, we cannot take the credit for it. Instead, we recognize that "God made it grow" (1 Cor. 3:6). The only thing I can claim is that I had the privilege/gift of being God's instrument/agent through whom He called that person.

b) It fills us with Awe/Love/Worship of God

Encountering paradox and mystery also makes us aware of God being "holy" (other, transcendent, utterly unique). It is in these moments, when we have reached the limit of our understanding, that we are filled with awe and wonder, and are moved to worship. After Paul's lengthy discourse on the relationship between God's sovereignty and our responsibility in Romans 9-11, Paul does not end with frustration. Instead, he is filled with wonder, awe and worship. When Paul reached the end of his understanding, he proclaims: "*Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments, and His paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counsellor? Who has ever given to God that God should repay Him? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen*" (Rom. 11:33-36). It is the indescribable nature of who God is that moves us to worship Him.

Yet, there is also a challenge in this...

c) It calls us to trust God (holding tensions)

In the Garden of Eden, God told Adam and Eve: "*Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule...*" (Gen. 1:28). Furthermore, God gives them one prohibition: "*You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die*" (Gen. 2:16). God does not explain why this is the case. Although God could have ruled all of creation directly, God determined to rule His creation through agency: human beings. As the story will progress, we discover that humanity (living as a community) was meant to mirror God's own community of love (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). Yet, for now, this purpose is hidden (apart from the revelation that we are made in God's image). Adam and Eve were called to trust God's goodness in the command. Like a parent, God has no obligation to explain everything to His children.

In Genesis 3:1-6, the Serpent focuses his attack on the “hidden” elements of God’s instructions. Rather than trusting God (even though we don’t have all the information), the serpent tempts Adam and Eve to doubt God’s goodness in withholding the information. In the same way, the paradigm of the two trees of Genesis 2-3 remains the paradigm for all of us. We can either a) trust God and by faith and eat from the tree of life (Jesus: cf. John 6:48-69; 15:1-17) or b) doubt God and by our doubt eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (listening to the father of lies: Jn. 8:42-45).

In Matthew 10-11, Jesus has revealed a paradox and mystery. We are called to go and proclaim the Gospel of Jesus, yet God is the one who raises up workers (9:37-38). The Gospel will always facilitate two responses: acceptance and rejection (Matt. 10:11-16, 32-42). We are responsible for rejecting the Gospel of Jesus. Yet, if we believe/accept the Gospel, then it is God who has graciously revealed Himself to us in Jesus (11:25-27). This paradox poses a challenge to us: although I cannot and will not fully understand this, will I trust Jesus that this is true? Will I, by faith, hold the tension between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility (as revealed in the Bible) or will I reject the tension and create my own definition that I consider to be good and which makes sense to me?

God has revealed enough for us to understand why certain things happen (people rejecting God, but also accepting God). God has also revealed how He calls people (by working through us as His instruments or agents: our prayers, living and sharing the Gospel). God has given us enough to know that we are responsible for our actions, and that our witness matters. God has also revealed enough so that we are not crushed by rejection and opposition but keep witnessing in hope. Like light being waves and particles, God has revealed two aspects to the reality of someone hearing, believing and following Jesus (human responsibility and God’s sovereignty). Sure, we don’t fully understand this, but will we trust God that what He revealed is true? Will we trust God that what He has chosen to reveal to us is good?

