

Jan/Feb 2021

# Today

refresh, refocus, renew

DISCOVERING  
JESUS

ALSO: LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY

Dear Friends:

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Mark, a follower of Jesus Christ, jotted down many important episodes of Jesus' life and ministry. This collection of stories became known as the good news (gospel) account of Mark that we have in our Bibles today. Later some other Christ-followers—Matthew, Luke, and John—were led by the Spirit to share more of Jesus' story and his teachings. Together, these gospel accounts reveal a faith-filled, surprising, and inspiring picture of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.



In January, Pastor Doug MacLeod invites us to look closely at the book of Mark. From the opening words, "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God . . ." we meet Jesus and begin to discover who he is and why he came. With vivid details and a fast-paced style, Mark tells the basic story of the one Savior who can rescue us from sin and death.

In February, I have the privilege of exploring the Bible's teachings on prayer, focusing mainly on the Lord's Prayer. In this key prayer Jesus teaches why we should pray, how we should pray, and what we should pray for. In writing these meditations, I learned a lot about prayer—and I trust that you will too as you draw near to "our Father in heaven," who wants all of us to be his children.

May God's Word refresh, refocus, and renew you each day!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

—Kurt Selles

# Today

Jan/Feb 2021

**refresh, refocus, renew**



**"Discovering Jesus"**  
**Douglas MacLeod**



**"Lord, Teach Us to Pray"**  
**Kurt Selles**

**Managing Editor:** Jeff Bulthuis  
**Executive Editor:** Kurt Selles

TODAY (USPS 185-140),  
Volume 71, Number 1,  
published bimonthly by  
ReFrame Ministries, formerly  
Back to God Ministries  
International, at 1700 28th  
Street SE, Grand Rapids, MI  
49508-1407. Periodicals  
postage paid at Grand Rapids,  
Michigan, and at additional  
mailing offices.

Postmaster: Send address changes  
to Today, 1700 28th Street SE,  
Grand Rapids, MI 49508-1407.

Copyright © 2021, Reframe  
Ministries. Printed in U.S.A.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture  
quotations in this publication  
are from The Holy Bible, New  
International Version®, NIV®.  
Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984,  
2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by  
permission. All rights reserved  
worldwide.

Cover photo: Pexels



**ReFrame**  
**Ministries**

is the new name of  
Back to God Ministries International

# january

## Discovering Jesus

**Douglas MacLeod**

This month we'll be looking through the book of Mark and thinking about many of the things Jesus said and did. And for many of the people around him, these things brought moments of discovery—because they helped people realize that Jesus was the true King and Messiah whom God had promised to send.

The gospel book of Mark introduces Jesus as the Son of God, who came to save with the power of God over evil and sin. And Mark makes clear that Jesus' mission—and thus the mission of the church—is to everyone, for the people of all nations. So let's look in Mark this month for the many ways Jesus reveals himself and calls us to follow him as the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God.

*Rev. Douglas MacLeod is a church pastor in Fremont, Michigan. He has served as a pastor for 36 years with four congregations in Michigan and Iowa. He and Cathy, his wife of 40 years, are grateful for their three children and four grandchildren.*

## THE BEGINNING

*The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.*  
—Mark 1:1

In today's consumer market, books need a bold title, an eye-catching cover, clever content, and slick graphics. Two thousand years ago books were not published, marketed, and purchased like they are today. They were written on scrolls, and most people didn't have access to them, unless they were read aloud in public.

The book of Mark does not have a flashy cover or title, but it certainly has compelling content. It's the "good news about Jesus . . . the Son of God"—and it opens with a phrase that reminds people of the very first words in Scripture: "In the beginning . . ." (Genesis 1:1). Genesis tells about the beginning of creation, and Mark is about "the beginning of the good news about Jesus."

What's more, we find that the gospel ("good news") of Mark is the beginning of a story that

goes far beyond the few years of Jesus' work and ministry on earth. In fact, this is the beginning of the world's greatest story that extends all the way into 2021—and beyond. And in reading this gospel we are challenged to find how and where this story changes everything for us today. It is here that the story begins, and it is here that our lives begin to have meaning.

Today we are beginning a new year, and in Mark we discover the beginning of the groundwork for new life in Christ.

Dear God, thank you for sending Jesus Christ and for telling us about him. May we all discover some fresh, new ways in which we can honor and live for you in 2021. Amen.

## WHO IS HE?

*A voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."*  
—Mark 1:11

We might think that the world-changing and history-making beginning of Jesus' ministry would begin with a major announcement. We might expect that this would come out as a big deal—like when a nation's president or prime minister is elected.

But the heavenly declaration that opens Jesus' ministry is rather low key. It is also rather private—Jesus hadn't yet gathered any disciples or followers to witness this event.

What's more, the heavenly power does not swoop in like a great eagle with exposed talons. Instead it is described as gently arriving like a dove. The Spirit of God, who had hovered over the waters of creation (Genesis 1:2), similarly graces the person of Jesus, giving us a sign that a new creation is getting under way and that this new effort will also be

good, very good. Here in Mark we are given the heavenly insight that Jesus is the unique and truly loved Son with whom God is well pleased.

No matter what you think of yourself, here is a wonderful hint: God has come into the world with the loving intention of bringing about a new creation that includes you. What in your life needs to be re-created by the transformation and blessing of Jesus Christ? Jesus himself declares in verse 15: "The time has come. . . . The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

Thank you, God, for introducing me to Jesus and including me in what Jesus came to do. Help me to live as part of his new creation. Amen.

## FOLLOW ME

*"Come, follow me," Jesus said.*

—Mark 1:17

I wonder why Jesus specifically called these first four disciples. It seems rather random, but maybe Jesus already knew them and was guided by the Spirit of God to single them out.

We also aren't sure why they dropped everything and followed him immediately. It could be, as some have said, that the opportunity to follow a great teacher was prized as the opportunity of a lifetime.

But what we are told is simply this: Jesus calls, and they follow. God speaks, and it happens, as in the creation story in Genesis. "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Genesis 1:3). That's pretty impressive.

In the churches I have served there would often be sign-up sheets and calls for volunteers to serve in one way or another.

But Jesus isn't looking for short-term volunteers to be disciples. He calls us to full, life-changing commitment, and his choosing makes it happen.

But he does not require us to know everything about faith or to have all the answers about the deep questions of life. He knows that in following him we will grow to understand and know him as the Lord of our lives. Even so, we won't always follow him perfectly or even particularly well. We will not always be great examples of faith, but he will keep shaping us to be examples of what it means to follow Jesus!

Lord Jesus, help me to follow you with my whole life and being. And when I don't do very well, teach me and help me to grow and be faithful. Amen.

**BE CLEAN!**

*A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." —Mark 1:40*

In Jesus' day most people believed that disease and sin were connected. Leprosy, a horrible disease that was often contagious and caused deformity, was thought to be evidence of some horrible sin. There was no cure, and lepers were declared "unclean" unless somehow they recovered and could be called "clean" again (see Leviticus 13:1-8, 45-46). They were generally banished from the community because of concerns about spreading spiritual impurity and death.

When the man with leprosy in this story came to Jesus asking to be made clean, it wasn't just a request to be cured. The man wanted his life back. Lepers were thought of as the walking dead, and he was asking, in effect, to be raised from death!

Jesus, seeming to risk being defiled, does the unthinkable in reaching out his hand and

touching the man. And then the unthinkable happens. The contagion of sin and death does not spread to Jesus; instead, the cleansing of heaven spreads to the man! This "dead man walking" is brought back to life by the touch and word of Jesus. We expect the corrosive effect of sin and disease to spread, but the healing power of Jesus prevails against it.

Jesus came in power to take away what is killing us and what we are helpless to get rid of. What is it in your life that you are unable to cleanse yourself of? Jesus can make you clean!

Gracious God, cleanse me of my sin and make me whole again. Restore to me the joy of salvation! Thank you for touching me with your healing power. Amen.



## EATING WITH TAX COLLECTORS AND SINNERS

*Many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. —Mark 2:15*

Tax collectors in those days were often despised because they overcharged people and kept some of the tax money for themselves. As a result, many tax collectors grew rich at the expense of others. And if you associated with a tax collector, you would be at risk of being despised as well.

When Jesus was seen eating with the tax collector Levi and his associates, the local religious leaders asked Jesus' disciples, "Why does Jesus eat with tax collectors and sinners?" The question is clearly meant as a criticism of Jesus, but it can be a good question for us to wonder about. After all, was it wrong to be concerned that Jesus might be influenced by such corrupt people as tax collectors and the sinners they hung around with?

Well, maybe we need to think about this a different way. Can

we assume that Jesus knew what he was doing? Can we believe that Jesus, the Son of God, loved Levi and wanted to become a part of his life and to show him what full life was about? Jesus makes clear that he is not afraid of being defiled by sin, and he is on task with "infecting" sinners with a call to discipleship! He also states that his purpose is to call sinners, so this is exactly where we should expect to see him!

Can you picture Jesus being interested and comfortable in coming to eat with you?

Dear Lord, thank you for coming into my life and meeting me where I live. And may I be glad to welcome you! Thank you for calling me to follow you. Amen.

## FRONT AND CENTER

*Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone."*  
—Mark 3:3

When you don't use a muscle for some time, it weakens. Something had happened to this man's hand so that he could not use it, and it had become virtually useless to him. For all practical purposes, the man's hand had died.

One Sabbath day, however, while the people of the town were in the synagogue (their place of worship), Jesus called this man to stand up in front of everyone. This was an invitation to be at the center of the crowd's attention. Jesus wanted to make sure that everyone could see what would happen.

Some of the people there were looking to cause trouble for Jesus. They had stubborn hearts, and that made him distressed. So Jesus used a resurrection word, inviting the man to "arise" in front of the whole crowd. And then, with all eyes on the man's dead hand, it was

suddenly and completely restored to life.

In this story Jesus shows that the purpose of the Sabbath, the law, and the Messiah is to bring life to what is dead. That's what is on display, for everyone to see, at the center of this story.

Jesus is not just doing nice things; he is demonstrating and announcing the new life he is bringing. On this day in which the church of Jesus celebrates Epiphany, let us rejoice in the ways he restores all the parts of our lives that we may have thought were dead.

Lord, I confess that I am helpless and cannot change without your restoring power. Restore my life and help me to praise you for coming to triumph over death for our sake. Amen.

## MORE THAN ENTHUSIASM

*He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons.*  
—Mark 3:14

It is understandable that large crowds followed Jesus with enthusiasm. He had healed many, and word had gotten around.

Jesus had come to call followers, but he was not seeking fame like a celebrity or a power-grabber. He came so that he could bring the good news of God's kingdom and give people new life. Remarkably, even when evil spirits saw Jesus, they would cry out, "You are the Son of God"—which of course was true.

In our reading from Mark today we see that simple enthusiasm or saying the right words about who Jesus is—both of which seem like good things—are only of value to Jesus when they are tied to discipleship. So Jesus specifically chose some followers to be his disciples.

He appointed twelve so that they could learn from him and

preach his message. Disciples come with their own flaws, needs, characters, and fears—and these twelve made their share of mistakes over the years. But they did follow Jesus, and they would show flashes of enthusiasm, even at times confessing the truth that Jesus is "the Son of God."

When we follow Jesus, some days are easier than others. Some days we can be passionate about following him, being with him, and getting our confession right. But other days are harder. Remember, Jesus isn't looking for fame; he is making disciples.

Lord Jesus, help us to grow in following you and learning to confess that you are the Son of God, our Savior. Amen.

**LISTEN!**

*He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: "Listen! . . ."*  
—Mark 4:2-3

Our lives are filled with distractions, and often we like it that way. Many of us also like background or white noise that can help to distract us from distractions! With all the noise that fills our environments, it can be hard to hear what we need to hear, and difficult to learn what we should focus on.

Jesus was a brilliant storyteller. He told stories from the life and culture of the time, and he filled them with meanings that were at once simple and profound. But unless you were able to truly listen, they were just stories.

Apart from God's giving us the insight to understand, the result will be that Jesus' parables are just stories, his miracles are just amazing, his crucifixion is just tragedy, and his resurrection is just whatever you make of it.

As a leader calls people to attention, Jesus, with the authority of the Son of God, urges us to listen in a world that seeks to distract us from the truth. He calls us to see through the obscuring fog of life, to filter out the noise in order to hear the voice of the good shepherd as he teaches us about ourselves and our lives.

"Listen!"

Dear Lord, help us to listen to your voice and to hear what we need to know and to believe about ourselves and about you. May we look forward to hearing you speak to us. Amen.

## SOWING THE SEED

*"Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed . . ."*  
—Mark 4:3-4

When someone begins to tell you a story and it sounds unusual, it draws you in as you try to figure out why the story is being told this way. For example, it wouldn't make any sense for a farmer to be so careless as to scatter his valuable seed just anywhere. But that's what this farmer is doing, and that seems to be wasteful and foolish.

It turns out that Jesus' parable begins by inviting us to see something about this farmer. From an agricultural point of view, the sower is being careless, but Jesus is not giving farming advice. He is illustrating how the Word of God is spread and how it is received.

In Jesus' parable the farmer does not prejudge the soil. The spreading of the Word does not make presumptions about the human heart, for who knows what the conditions are

until the seed has been sown there? The sower simply sows, and he does not calculate the risks and results ahead of time. He just sows.

We often cannot help thinking in terms of responsible management, efficiency, investment risks, and rates of return. As sinners, though, *we* would be a very poor risk for Jesus to take—but, thanks be to God, the Word comes our way.

What will you do with the gift of God's Word coming to you today?

Lord, it's risky to spread the good news of your grace to me, but without your Word I would be helpless. May my life receive your Word and grow from it. Amen.

## FROM SEED TO BRANCHES

*"What shall we say the kingdom of God is like . . . ?"*

—Mark 4:30

In January I look through seed catalogs and choose seeds to buy for planting our garden in the spring. It takes a sense of vision to see what those seeds will become. For example, no matter how closely you look at a tomato seed, you cannot actually see the plant or the fruit that it will develop. But if you plant it and it grows, after some time you will actually see the plant and its fruit.

A seed seems to make for such a small, insignificant beginning, but just planting it can lead to a dramatic transformation.

Jesus encourages his disciples not to be discouraged by the seeming insignificance of the seedlike beginning of the kingdom of God. He urges us to look beyond the mustard seed to see *what happens* to it. It will grow into a tall shrub that will have branches large enough

to welcome and shelter birds! Amazing!

This parable offers great encouragement to Jesus' disciples, who only later saw glimpses of what God would accomplish through the death and resurrection of Jesus: a single seed would be sown, and yet Jesus would emerge from the ground and his kingdom would begin spreading its branches everywhere so that people of all nations could enjoy its benefits.

Be encouraged, disciple of Christ! The present size of the kingdom of God is not the whole story!

Dear God, sometimes I am impatient with your kingdom not being fully grown. Thank you for its spread and for what is still yet to come! May your kingdom come fully! Amen.

## WHO IS THIS?

*"Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"*

—Mark 4:41

While the chaos of a storm threatened the disciples, Jesus slept soundly on a cushion. The disciples were just starting to get to know Jesus, and they wanted him to help. They may have thought he could help with a bucket, but they did not expect him to quiet the overwhelming wind and waves.

With a strong command Jesus overcame the death-threatening storm, rendering the tempest "completely calm." This certainly relieved the disciples, but it also stunned them into trying to figure out who Jesus was.

Their vital question, "Who is this?" is also ours. We may have expectations for what we'd like Jesus to do and to be, but isn't it better that we listen to what Jesus says and watch what he does in order to learn about him?

The sea and the wind are uncontrollable forces for us, but

not for Jesus. And like Noah and his family (Genesis 6-9), the disciples survive the deadly water by the hand of God.

Do we realize how many aspects of life are beyond our control? Wouldn't we like Jesus to help us deal with them? He is actually in complete control over them, and that could either scare us or comfort us.

The more we get to know Jesus, the more his authority over all things should bring us comfort, because we also know that he loves us.

Dear God, I am learning just how amazing Jesus' authority in this world is. May I learn more and more about Jesus' authority over all things, and how he can and does save me. Amen.

## WHAT DO YOU WANT WITH ME?

*"What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?"*

—Mark 5:7

Yesterday we saw how Jesus dealt with a storm on the sea. Today Jesus and his disciples encounter a storm on the land. The raging man in this story is dangerous and uncontrollable, and his howling voice screams like the wind but with a remarkable truth: he identifies Jesus as the "Son of the Most High God."

The disciples themselves have not yet declared this truth about Jesus, and they are only slowly coming to realize who he is. They are still learning, and so are we.

Just as he did on the sea, Jesus calms the furious storm in this man by using his authority. The man is freed from his torment by evil spirits, he returns to his right mind, and he goes home to tell his family and many others "how much Jesus had done for him."

This story has reminded people of God's work through Moses

at the Red Sea (see Exodus 14-15). The legion of destructive forces is drowned in the sea, evil is put in its place by God's authority and power, and there is deliverance, salvation. These are big themes, and Jesus is right in the middle of them.

When we correctly identify who Jesus is, we too may wonder, "What do you want with me?" May we learn who Jesus is, be delivered from the power of Satan, and be invited to faith and new life. Instead of chaos and damage, Jesus brings deliverance and peace!

Jesus, Son of the Most High God, have your way with me. I thank you for bringing peace and deliverance. Help me to tell others how much you have done for me. Amen.



## A TOUCHING POWER

*"Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."*

—Mark 5:34

Many of us have difficult personal situations and histories that we cannot escape or change. And we would really like it to be otherwise.

Somehow this woman, who was, in effect, dying for 12 years in her helpless condition, trusted that if she just touched Jesus' clothes, she would be made well. Sure enough, she did—and she was healed.

But then it seems she became worried. "Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it." Maybe she worried that Jesus would scold her for taking his power without asking, or that she would be in trouble for touching his cloak because she was "unclean," or even that Jesus might take back her healing since she didn't get permission.

She came forward, though, and told Jesus "the whole truth."

And instead of fulfilling any of her fears, he addressed her personally as "Daughter" and reassured her with holy compassion and a word of peace.

Notice again that contamination and defilement did not flow to Jesus, making him unclean; rather, power and healing flowed from Jesus to the woman, making her whole and clean.

Though we tend to think that disease, death, and destruction have the upper hand, it's good to remember that Jesus has come to reverse that notion. He has authority and power over the realities of our lives that we cannot change.

Thank you, Jesus, for the healing that you bring to our lives. I cannot fix or heal myself, but I am learning that you have the power to bring life. Amen.

## JUST ONE THING

*"Don't be afraid; just believe."*

—Mark 5:36

Jesus has controlled a storm, overpowered evil spirits, and healed a woman whose life was draining out of her. Now there is a greater test of Jesus' power, because Jairus has learned that his daughter, who was sick, has actually died.

But in the face of death Jesus says, "Don't be afraid; just believe." Through gales and storms, dangers and demons, disease and now death, Jesus invites us to have faith in him.

Going into Jairus's home where the child was, Jesus says, "Little girl, I say to you, get up!" His authority, tough on wild seas and raging demons, is also as tender as a shepherd's hand lifting a little lamb. The girl gets right up, and Jesus tells her parents to give her something to eat.

Jesus is inviting us to trust in him. This does not mean we

have a fully formed faith or even a fully informed faith. He is simply calling for an initial trust, a beginning of faith. After all, as far as the story goes, we are only in Mark 5, and Jesus has not yet died and risen from the grave to pay for our sins and give us new life.

At this point he says, "Just believe." Let's start with that, and then keep on trusting. Let's go with what Jesus is showing and telling us about him—and see where it leads. As Mark is sharing the story of Jesus, he is building his case—who can deny that Jesus is Lord?

Jesus, help me with this one thing—to keep believing in your power over all things. Open my heart to know that even when things seem hopeless, you have the power to restore and make new. Amen.

## SO MUCH UNBELIEF

*"He was amazed at their lack of faith."*

—Mark 6:6a

People often like stories about ordinary people becoming highly successful or even becoming royalty—like Cinderella. It's not unusual to hope for an escape from poverty to be blessed with prosperity.

But the people in Jesus' hometown didn't seem to think that way. They figured that because Jesus was born into a carpenter family, there was no way he could grow up to be the Messiah. So when Jesus healed the lame and the sick, when he calmed the storm and cast out demons, it was difficult for the people who knew him growing up to imagine him as anything besides a carpenter.

The trouble was that these people did not accept Jesus' amazing teachings precisely because they thought they knew him—period.

What a danger it can be for any of us who may think we know everything about Jesus. If Jesus is already familiar enough to us, will we expect anything really great from him?

Instead of the people being amazed by learning who Jesus was, Jesus was amazed that they had so much unbelief. Mark is suggesting that what is more amazing than faith is unbelief! Unbelief requires an exhausting amount of denial and dismissal when we are presented with all the evidence.

Jesus, I can be quite resistant to being impressed. Take away my doubt, my cynicism, and my not being willing to really consider what you have done for me. Forgive my unbelief, and help me to follow you. Amen.

## JUST DO IT

*"He began to send them out. . . ."*

—Mark 6:7

The disciples are still very new to their calling to follow Jesus. They have watched and listened, but they have mainly been silent, and none of them has yet confessed to believe in Jesus as the promised Messiah. Instead, they have been described as afraid and as having no faith (Mark 4:40).

It would seem that their faith still has a long way to go. Nevertheless, they are given authority to preach, drive out demons, and heal people who are sick. And they did!

Can you be reassured by this? It is not a perfect faith that qualifies you to testify for Jesus. It is not the strength of your power to believe that makes you a credible witness to the truth. It is not your education, training, or experience that equips you for serving him. You can do all that because of who Jesus is, not who you are.

Too many of Jesus' followers wait to serve as disciples in the mission of Jesus until they think their faith is well developed and strong. The disciples' faith was actually quite undeveloped, and yet they served not on the strength of their faith but on the sending of Jesus.

Lord Jesus, when I consider my qualifications, training, and strength of faith, I can only imagine that you don't have much to work with. But thank you for using me for your purposes anyway! Amen.

## THE GOOD SHEPHERD

*"They all ate and were satisfied."*

—Mark 6:42

Sometimes it can be hard to know what we really need. On a windy beach, as a man tries to start his campfire, he may think he just needs more matches. But what he really needs is someone to help block the wind.

The crowd that followed Jesus was full of people who wanted healing and people who were thrilled and amazed to see his miracles, but Jesus saw that they really needed to be taught many things. Jesus' disciples, his closest followers, wanted to know how they could find food for the crowd, but Jesus saw that they really needed to understand that he was the good shepherd who provides.

The disciples were distressed over how to feed the crowd, but they might have noticed that Jesus, like a good shepherd, had compassion because the huge crowd was like sheep

without a shepherd. So in that quiet, remote place he had them all sit down on the green grass in order to be restored. If you read Psalm 23, you will see a picture like this one, with Jesus taking care of all these people like a shepherd tending his flock. And even if the disciples didn't fully see what he was doing at the time, that's what he did.

Thank the Lord that he looks after us as the shepherd who knows what his sheep really need.

Lord Jesus, help me to know what I really need. Thank you for always caring for me. Help me to rest in you and not stress out; help me to trust that all things are already in your hands. Amen.

## NOT JUST WATER

*"Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."*

—Mark 6:50

After Jesus fed the huge crowd of thousands of people (Mark 6:30-44), he sent his disciples ahead of him in their boat to the next lakeside town. Later, in the deep of night, they were straining to make headway against a strong wind.

Jesus had gone to a quiet place to pray, and then, just before dawn, "he went out to them, walking on the lake."

Now, to our way of thinking, it's utterly amazing that Jesus would walk on water. But there is lot more going on here. In the minds of ancient peoples, he was walking on the fearful, untamable, uncontrollable, deadly sea. So he wasn't just walking on water; he was trampling on chaos!

Seeing their great trouble in the darkest part of the night (just before dawn) and on the deepest part of the lake (the middle),

Jesus goes out to his followers, and they are terrified.

But look at what happens: with great care he encourages and assures them not to be afraid. He is with them. And when he gets into the boat, all is calm.

I can identify with the disciples. I sometimes struggle with believing God's care and power are for me. But Jesus doesn't reject his tired, confused, and fearful disciples. Instead, he helps them to believe! Even through the dark and from a great distance and despite our fear, Jesus comes to us and invites us to trust in him.

Jesus, you are Lord over all that is dark and fearful and chaotic. Help me to take courage, for you come to me in my distress. With you, I need not be afraid. Amen.

## WHAT'S IN YOUR HEART?

*"It is what comes out of a person that defiles them."*

—Mark 7:15

My mother taught me always to wash my hands before dinner. "And use soap!" she would say. She didn't want any dirt or germs from my hands getting into my mouth while we were eating.

The Pharisees were also careful about washing their hands before eating. But in those days they didn't know about germs; their handwashing laws had to do with spiritual holiness. So when they asked why Jesus' disciples didn't wash, it wasn't about hygiene; they were looking for a way to criticize Jesus, as if to say that he and his disciples were not spiritually holy.

Jesus used this as an opportunity to teach. Spiritual impurity isn't about what is on our hands or what goes through our digestive system, he said.

Where does spiritual impurity come from? Our spiri-

tual impurity comes from our sinful hearts. And then Jesus listed several examples. Handwashing could not take away greed, deceit, sexual immorality, hatred, and much more.

We can try to obey all the regulations, cultural values, and expected behaviors in our society—most of which are for the good of everyone. And we can believe all the right doctrines and try to live pure lives—which can be very important. But none of that will cleanse our hearts.

Only Jesus can truly cleanse your heart.

Cleanse my heart, O God, and make me pure within. Thank you for the forgiveness and holiness that come only through Jesus. Amen.

## JUST A CRUMB

*"Lord," she replied, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."*  
—Mark 7:28

Jesus traveled to an area outside of where his own people, the Jews, lived. And a woman came to him to ask for healing for her daughter.

This woman, whose little girl was possessed by an impure spirit, came to Jesus with no credentials and no sense of entitlement. She was not looking for a reward or to make a point about worthiness. She came simply as someone who needed help, and she begged Jesus for what he had to offer.

As we reflect on this story, we might well appreciate that Jesus sent no one away empty except people who were full of themselves.

This woman knew she was not privileged to be born as one of God's chosen people, the Jews. But somehow, with the help of God's Spirit, she knew that God cared for her and her

daughter. So she had faith that Jesus could make her daughter well. She didn't expect to have special treatment. She wasn't asking for a full loaf of God's sustaining blessing; she knew that just a crumb would be enough.

Are we willing to humble ourselves before Jesus and to ask for whatever he has for us? In this story it is not about privilege or degrees of holiness, but simply that people who humbly come to Jesus find that they receive and are satisfied. The impure spirit is gone!

Thanks be to you, Jesus!  
Accept my humble plea  
and come to my assistance,  
for I am needy, and  
you are the bread of life.  
Amen.



## MORE THAN JUST A CRUMB

*"The people ate and were satisfied."*

—Mark 8:8

In today's story, Jesus has compassion for a huge crowd of people again—and this time it's simply because they are hungry!

When the disciples raise the question of available resources, Jesus begins with a resource inventory. Seven loaves and a few small fish are way too few for feeding so many people. But what the disciples are not counting, of course, is the compassion of Jesus. What's more, he only asks us to give what we have, and he will provide all that is needed.

I often find that there's a big gap between my available resources and the needs I hear about. Is that the case for you too?

In effect, the disciples have asked a particularly critical question: How can the needs of the world be met? They see the gap and do not yet see that

the answer is standing right in front of them.

This is a lesson I am forever learning. I tally up what I have, and it is not enough for all the needs around me. I do not have enough time, patience, hospitality, skills, wisdom, energy, finances—you name it. But Jesus doesn't ask me if I have enough; he asks what I have—and in his hands he will make it enough.

What about you? I hope you know that Jesus will take and use what you have to extend holy compassion to others.

Dear Jesus, I can feel as if I never have enough for what you need. Help me to concentrate on you and your power instead of the gap I cannot fill. Guide me to give you what I have. Amen.

## GAINING SIGHT

*Jesus asked, "Do you see anything?"*

—Mark 8:23

When you learn a new game—maybe a card game or board game—it can take a while before you fully understand it. The first time it is explained to you, you begin to understand, but not fully, not right away.

Discipleship is like that. It involves a learning process of coming to know who Jesus is and what he came to do.

Today's story about healing a man from blindness is a parable of sorts that also teaches us about discipleship. It is a curious story because usually when Jesus heals someone, it is like hitting a home run in baseball—you can run all the way around the bases on one hit. But in this story the healing is done in two stages. It goes part of the way at first, like a hit that gets you halfway around the bases—and then another hit gets the job done. Why is that?

The disciples were beginning to catch on to who Jesus was, and it's as if Jesus were asking them, "Do you see anything?" Well, they did see in part, but they were still not sure that they understood Jesus fully. And that is understandable because we are only halfway through the gospel of Mark.

We are at the midpoint of the book of Mark, and it's a good place to gauge how well we see Jesus, because there is much more to come. The first half is mostly about who Jesus is, and the second half will be about what he came to do.

Jesus, help me to see and understand you more fully and completely. Please be patient with me as I learn more and more about you and your love for me. Amen.

**“YOU ARE THE MESSIAH”**

*“What about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”*

—Mark 8:29

Jesus’ question is kind of like a midterm exam, when a test is given halfway through the course to see how far the students have come. After asking his disciples what they have been hearing from other people about who he is, Jesus gets to the real question: “Who do you say I am?”

Peter blurts out, “You are the Messiah,” and he is gloriously correct. This is the first time anyone—other than evil spirits—have properly and clearly identified Jesus. Peter gets high marks for this statement, but there is more to being a disciple than getting an answer right on a test.

There will also be times when Peter tragically backs down from this shining moment. Sadly, he will later deny Jesus when it becomes dangerous to follow him: “I don’t know

this man you’re talking about,” Peter says (Mark 14:71).

Some days we can see clearly who Jesus is, and we are able to confidently confess his name. These are wonderful moments, and we should celebrate them. But on other days we can compromise our testimony, and those times can turn out to be quite painful.

Thankfully Jesus isn’t finished working with Peter, even though he passes this test with flying colors. Jesus isn’t done with any of us yet either. There is still much to learn about Jesus, the Messiah!

Dearest Jesus, thank you for showing me who you are and for helping me to understand. Help me to grow in knowing that you are the Messiah, my Savior! Amen.

## DUSTY DISCIPLESHIP

*"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."*  
—Mark 8:34

In 2018 a team of boys in Thailand were dramatically rescued after being trapped for weeks in a cave. But one brave rescuer died in the process. As a trained Navy Seal, the man who died was well aware that the rescue mission was dangerous—and he did it anyway, along with the other rescuers.

Jesus begins to teach his disciples what lies ahead—that he must suffer and be killed and then rise again—and Peter finds this mission to be harsher than expected.

Jesus also begins to teach what it means to follow him. It is not about adopting a set of theological statements, signing a membership contract, or living by a moral code—although those can be good things. It is about sharing the good news that Jesus is Lord and is the only way to salvation. It's about knowing that this path can be

dangerous—and doing it anyway.

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that a disciple focuses only on Jesus and not "the road which is too hard for us. . . . He leads the way; keep close to him."

In the Jewish tradition of following a rabbi (teacher) and going everywhere he went, the saying was "May you be covered in his dust." That's the effect of spiritual tailgating!

As disciples, we are called to walk the challenging path of discipleship. And Jesus will always be right there with us.

Lord Jesus, thank you for all you have done for us. Strengthen us to follow you faithfully, knowing you are always with us. Amen.

## HELP ME

*"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"*

—Mark 9:24

The disciples were not able to drive out a demon that was harming a young boy. That made them feel useless. They ended up dealing with their frustration by arguing with critics in the crowd.

What went wrong? Did they need to think more positively? Sometimes we might hear someone say, "Just have more faith," or, "Just visualize it into reality"—meaning that anything is possible if we truly believe it can happen. But that is just self-powered optimism and has nothing to do with godly faith.

In contrast to the disciples' ineffectiveness and arguing, we hear the father of the boy pleading with Jesus, "I do believe; help my unbelief!" And from that prayer new life arises.

Faith is not first of all a matter of self-generated conviction,

but a blessed mixture of a divine gift that is received and nurtured—as in this father's prayer.

Jesus is not put off by the man's humble and honest plea. And he is not put off by ours: "I believe—but honestly, God, I'm not strong, and I'm not always certain. Please help me."

Faith and discipleship can be challenging. And we are totally dependent on the Lord to give us faith. Because he loves us, Jesus is delighted to have us ask him for help as we struggle in learning to live by faith.

Dear Jesus, I do believe;  
help me overcome my  
unbelief. Thank you.  
Amen.

## CAN I BE FIRST?

*"Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."*  
—Mark 9:35

Jesus again tells his disciples that he will be arrested and killed and then rise from the dead. But the disciples don't understand. So instead of dealing with that very uncomfortable issue, they let themselves get distracted in a dispute about which of them is the greatest.

In response to this, Jesus takes a seat. I love that little descriptive detail.

In contrast to the disciples who are climbing over each other to play "king of the hill," the Bible tells us that Jesus sat down. It was customary for Jewish teachers to sit down while teaching, and in this way Jesus showed his disciples that in the midst of all their jockeying for position, they really needed to listen to him.

Jesus teaches that in the kingdom of God, the definition of greatness is reversed from what

we would expect. Whoever wants to be first must be "the servant of all." And by his life and death for our sake, Jesus shows that he, the Son of God, is the ultimate servant.

This is a profoundly important and hard lesson to learn—and if you are like me, it's taking a lifetime to learn. It is so easy to want to compare ourselves to others, thinking we can come out on top. But Jesus invites us to see that his mission was to serve God so faithfully that he would give up his very life for our sake.

As we learn from Jesus' words and example, our personal competitiveness turns to servanthood. In what ways are you turning from self to serving?

Make me a servant, Lord,  
for Jesus' sake. Amen.

## THE SAVIOR'S TOUCH

*He took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.*  
—Mark 10:16

This is such an endearing scene! It may seem merely sentimental, but that is surely not what Jesus has in mind. Still, it is a wonderful and inspiring story that makes us feel good for the children, and none of that should be lost.

Of course, this scene is about much more than being nice to children. And it is not meant as an example for political candidates to follow in their attempts to win over adult voters. Jesus really did bless the children, and that included his hands personally conveying his holy love and care.

We all have a need to be blessed, and at the root of it all is that God created us with a desire to be blessed by God himself. We can even imagine ourselves being the children in this story—because, deep down, that is who we are. Jesus welcomes us, and in his

welcoming we receive the kingdom of God. No matter our age or size, we don't access Jesus by our credits or our victories or by the name we have made for ourselves, but only by our needfulness and the generosity of his blessing. As grown-ups or adults, we are still the children of God.

Sometimes it can be hard to believe that Jesus would really welcome us and really give his blessing to us. But when we feel that way—well, read the story again!

Thank you, Jesus, for welcoming me and blessing me. May I be assured of your love for me. Amen.

## WHO THEN CAN BE SAVED?

*The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other,  
“Who then can be saved?”*  
—Mark 10:26

In reading stories about people like the man in this episode, people who don't really understand Jesus, I'm tempted to look down on them. The man appears to have been wealthy, and he had a high opinion of how well he kept the law. But he seems to have had no idea that Jesus was simply calling him to give his whole life to God—or maybe he just didn't want to do that. I think to myself, “I guess he just doesn't get what it means to follow Jesus.”

And yet I often respond to Jesus in the same way that man did. Often I don't catch what Jesus is about, or understand what he has just said, or realize what he expects of me.

But in this story, Jesus doesn't look down on the man. Jesus looks at him *and loves him*, the Bible says.

I am so thankful that—even though the man had it all

wrong—Jesus didn't just dismiss him or condemn him. Instead, Jesus loved him and invited the man to follow him.

Right there is something wonderful I can learn from Jesus. When I don't understand his teachings, or when I misunderstand the truth about Jesus and his kingdom, there is still a loving invitation from Jesus to follow him and keep learning.

Whatever else Jesus says to the man in the story, it's in the context of Jesus' love for a person who doesn't fully get it. That is reassuring to me!

Thank you, Jesus, for looking at me with love even when I have it all wrong. Instead of seeing what I have done, show me what you have done for me. Amen.



## “I WANT TO SEE”

*“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked him.*

*The blind man said, “Rabbi, I want to see.” —Mark 10:51*

Bartimaeus had been crying out to Jesus to have mercy on him. And Jesus’ question to the man may seem a bit odd at first. Didn’t Jesus realize that Bartimaeus was blind?

Jesus certainly knew the man was blind. But Jesus’ question invited Bartimaeus to think about and tell the Lord what he really needed.

Bartimaeus had probably been asking for donations at the gate of Jericho for a long time—perhaps even years. He was in the habit of begging from everyone else for a coin or a piece of bread. But in the presence of Jesus, he could ask for his sight—and that basically meant asking for his life back.

What do you want from Jesus? All of us could use a little help or a favor. Maybe Jesus could even fix a thing or two like a broken relationship or finan-

cial debt. No doubt, he could! There are all kinds of things we could ask Jesus to help us with, but Jesus invites us to be honest enough with ourselves so as to be bold enough with him.

What we really need is God’s mercy and grace. What we really need to say is “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

So go ahead, tell Jesus what you really need—because that is the reason why he was on the road, heading toward Jerusalem.

Thank you, Jesus, for seeing what I truly need and for asking me to see it too. Give me the courage to own up to my need and to cry out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Amen.

## THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

*"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."*

—Mark 12:30

The teacher of the law who asked about the most important commandment was trying to test Jesus. He might even have been trying to trip Jesus up.

But in this classic teaching, Jesus identifies the power and primacy of loving the Lord our God as the most important thing we can ever do. Ironically, love cannot be commanded, but loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength gets at the whole purpose of all the commandments. This is a holy invitation to have our entire lives directed toward loving God.

Our *hearts* beat in rhythm with honoring God. Our hearts are aligned with the commandments, but not for the simple sake of keeping them. The purpose is to honor God.

Our *souls*, our eternal spirits, place God first in our lives. We

can serve ourselves, but how much better it is to dedicate our lives to God!

Our *minds* think in ways to give the world the shape of things to come. Minds are creative and powerful, and in training them to glorify God in all we do, we can shape the world to act with more of the justice and goodness of God's kingdom.

Our *strength* directs all our resources for God's purposes. Our money, skills, relationships, influence, abilities, and so on are strongest when applied for the love and honor of God.

Jesus, help me to grow in understanding and practicing how to love God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. Amen.

## THE SECOND GREATEST COMMANDMENT

*"Love your neighbor as yourself."*

—Mark 12:31

This month we have been challenged to follow Jesus and see how this changes us and gives meaning to our lives. And we have made lots of discoveries while Mark has been laying the groundwork for living our new life in Christ.

The call to love our neighbor is not complicated, but it can be challenging to follow. It means more than being hospitable, tolerant, patient, and kind. It means more than showing respect and honoring others. It also means more than just being civil with people you disagree with—even though it also means all of that.

Loving our neighbor implies that the well-being of others matters—so we should work for justice, protection, and opportunities for others to thrive. It means listening to others, caring about the environment and health care, and

taking apart institutionalized oppression that limits the opportunities of others. It also shows that the possibilities for showing love and care for our neighbors is endless and could leave us overwhelmed by all the needs for neighborly love!

Yet all of us can love our neighbors in the name of Jesus Christ. We can love them enough to show how the love of Jesus is shaping us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

As you are loved, Jesus says, so love one another (see John 13:34).

Thank you, Lord, for loving me so completely that I am being completely changed! Help me to love my neighbor with the love you have for the world. Amen.



***Your prayers make a difference.***

## **Join our Prayer Team!**

We receive thousands of prayer requests each year. On our team of prayer warriors, you'll help others see God's love and presence in the difficulties and joys of their day-to-day lives.

**Join our prayer team or submit a prayer request of your own at [ReFrameMinistries.com/prayer](https://ReFrameMinistries.com/prayer).**



RETURN POSTAGE GUARANTEED  
PORT DE RETOUR GARANTI

# Today

refresh, refocus, renew



## ReFrame Ministries

is the new name of  
Back to God Ministries International

3475 Mainway  
Burlington, ON L7M 1A9  
P.O. Box 5070, STN LCD 1  
Burlington, ON L7R 3Y8  
905-336-2920  
[info@todaydevotional.com](mailto:info@todaydevotional.com)  
[www.todaydevotional.com](http://www.todaydevotional.com)  
[facebook.com/todaydevotional](https://facebook.com/todaydevotional)

Periodicals postage paid at  
Grand Rapids, Mich., and at  
additional mailing offices.

# Today

refresh, refocus, renew



**ReFrame**  
Ministries

is the new name of  
Back to God Ministries International

---

1700 28th Street SE  
Grand Rapids, MI 49508-1407  
800-626-3060  
[info@todaydevotional.com](mailto:info@todaydevotional.com)  
[www.todaydevotional.com](http://www.todaydevotional.com)  
[facebook.com/todaydevotional](https://facebook.com/todaydevotional)

---