

Your Miracle Has Begun. Now What?!

Week 1 of 4

What Just Happened?!

Whether your decision to allow Jesus Christ into your heart as Savior and Lord was from a place of great need, struggle, and trials, or if you simply heard a whisper in the depths of your being that told you that you are loved by Jesus, you have just experienced your first miracle.

After we complete today's discussion, the aim is to give you the information:

- to know and begin to understand the miraculous love of God in His Perfect Trinity,
- to see your miracle in progress that will be a lifelong process that blesses you and others,
- and to see yourself as a new creation with incredible value as an individual, to your family, to your new family of faith, to your workplace, and to your community. You're IMPORTANT! You have a great purpose.

Yes. Your salvation is a miracle!

Turn to John. This amazing account of the Gospel, or the Good News of Jesus Christ, was written by a fisherman who Jesus called. Not some theologian or elite guy of his time, but an average guy who worked for a living that God knew would allow Jesus to lead him, work with him, and then trust him to grow.

John 6:44 tells us, in red letters of some Bibles that means Jesus spoke these very words, that no one can come to know Jesus unless "the Father who sent Me draws or leads him..."

Imagine John, the fisherman, dragging a net of fish into the boat from the depths. This is the exact picture of you and all who are drawn into the love of God that presents itself in grace – giving us something we don't deserve, mercy – withholding that which we do deserve, and joy – an inner contentment that comes only through our relationship with Jesus, not relying upon our emotions, self-talk, or circumstances.

We humans can't save ourselves, because our flesh is imperfect. All of us!

We humans can't fully understand the depths, breadth, and great heights of God's love, but it is amazing; it's miraculous!

Born Again? How's That?

Flip back to **John 3. Let's read verses 1-3.** Unlike John, the fisherman called by Jesus Himself, just like you, to “follow Me,” a very religious man, schooled in traditions and good intentions of religion that grew to be elite in nature, Nicodemus, sought out Jesus as a teacher, or Rabbi, that was empowered by God to do great things that this Pharisee, or one of the leaders of the Jewish religion of Jesus' day.

Whether one is a laborer or an elite religious leader, we all need Jesus and can be called by God.

Jesus declared, *“I assure you: Unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”* You may have the same question as this very educated man, and most all. “But how can anyone be born when he is old?”

Jesus told this seasoned and highly respected religious leader that to enter the kingdom of God, or the domain of the King of Glory Whose Presence empowers us all to live in love, grace, mercy, and joy that he must be procreated again, or fathered as a new child again.

Not only is your salvation a miracle that God Himself loves you so much that He invited you to know His Son, Jesus, but that very process of salvation is miraculous.

Let's take a closer look.

John 3:16-18 are important to understand this great love of God in sending Jesus to be the sacrifice required for paying the debt of sin for each and every single person who accepts His amazing Gift, salvation. Read these verses. Jesus came in love to save, not condemn. But our actions...our actions...condemn.

Salvation is being healed, made whole, rescued, made safe. But that occurs only by God's miraculous work after we decide to accept this Gift of Christ Jesus.

Why Do We Need Salvation? Why Do We Need A Savior?

Understanding this is part of knowing that there is a battle for our souls, our spirits that live eternally – either in heaven in the Presence of God or separated from His Presence in eternal darkness and torture.

God's original plan, back in Genesis, was to create the first Adam, the first man, in His Image – as a threefold being. **Genesis 1:26-27** records the words of God who declared, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness...So God created man in His own image...”

No, this isn't erroneous grammar to speak of a single Being using a plural pronoun and a plural adjective. God accurately described Himself as He is: God the Father – the creator,

source and sustainer of all things, the authority and will, and as Father who originates or establishes all things, protects, provides, covers; God the Son – God in His fullness but in visible, living flesh, the Word made flesh, who lived a sinless life by yielding all his desires, thoughts, choices, and actions to God’s will and was empowered by the 3rd Person of the Godhead; God the Spirit – the indwelling life of God that convicts, guides, comforts, empowers, and literally transforms us into the Image of Jesus.

Now, think of you as a person: you have flesh that is born, grows through changes and maturation, and has the capacity to create other children through procreation. You have a mind, a will, a seat of reasoning that no other creations, such as animals, possess along with the ability to communicate. This mind and free will determines your thoughts, desires, and precedes every action you take, every belief you hold, and decision you make. You also have a spirit, or soul which is the God-conscious part of you and all humans that connects directly with God. Your spirit never dies.

You get to decide, however, where that aspect of your very life lives in this life and in the one to come. Read that again. You decide. God has invited you. Now you decide if you accept that invitation. You decided, even if you do accept His love, grace, and mercy, whether you’ll grow and mature by going deeper and having a faith that becomes more rich and robust, or if you’ll remain a spiritual infant or toddler.

Imagine if you had never grown or matured in your flesh. Imagine being your chronological age but having never grown in maturity, taking knowledge and applying it to become wisdom, and thriving as a grown adult. Well, that’s your decision.

So, back to this being born again miracle. God’s original intent was to have His creation fellowship in love with Him. But the minds of the first couple chose to listen to sensationalized and hyped promises from a serpent tickling their ears to become more, to be god themselves. Their minds decided, then they sinned.

Sin separated the first couple from God who knew all along this would happen and had made a predetermined way to reconcile, or set back in right relationship with Him, our sinful minds and flesh. And that “way” was and is through Jesus Christ, the sinless man who died innocently at the hands of both the world’s political systems of the day and the world’s way to relate to control man under the guise of connecting with God, religion.

Savior and Lord

Jesus Christ paid our sin debt. Without Jesus as our Savior, His blood doesn’t cover our sins before the Holy God who cannot and will not permit in His Presence the existence of sin.

You received God the Father's invitation. You accepted that Gift. You decided that you needed a Savior, the Savior Jesus Christ, to save your flesh from its sin, to have the mind of Christ by speaking His words, His love, His grace, and allowing your mindset to influence and control your behavior, your actions. Through accept Jesus as Savior, your spirit or soul is saved, or rescued from the condemnation that the flesh – all flesh and all sinful minds deserves.

Our salvation is all because of our faith – our decision to believe in Christ Jesus as the Son of God who was without blemish or sin who died in our place. Making Jesus Lord is also a decision, the first aspect of our faith.

Luke 2:11 captures the royal announcement made by the heavenly messenger that "...today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Jesus holds all power, is the master, owner, and authority. In John 13:13, Jesus Himself declares, "You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am."

But in **Matthew 7:21-23**, Jesus teaches a jarring lesson. "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord!' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of My Father in heaven."

Salvation comes from our Savior who loves us and paid the eternal and complete price for our sins. Our salvation is sure. But our faith is authenticated as we live our lives in faith that believes in Jesus as Savior and Son of God enough that we obey God's Word and live according to His ways, not our own and not this world's. That reveals the "Lord" of our lives.

Your Miracle Happened and is in Progress

Your spirit has been miraculously reborn. Daily, we decide and choose with our minds, our will whether our thoughts, words, and desires are governed by that reborn spirit, Jesus' Spirit living inside us. If so, we will say His Words, encourage, speak love and joy, and restrain our tongues – and that's a tough job!

Not only is it a decision to govern our minds and will by Jesus' Spirit, the Holy Spirit, we must put those thoughts and intentions to use to have our flesh operate differently and obediently. Our own thoughts and intentions prioritize ourselves and not the love of Jesus, not the love of others as we want to be treated, and not being Image bearers of our Creator – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit.

How do you know the thoughts of Jesus in order to live like Him and bear His Image? God's Word is our instruction manual, our self-help book, our Almanac that reveals patterns for our best and future, and the Book of the Ages.

Each and every single day we have the amazing opportunity to begin each day with new mercies, according to God's own Words. We have the amazing opportunity to begin our day talking directly to God in prayer.

No. Prayer is neither rehearsed nor recited prose. Prayer is you talking to God – Himself. He loves you and wants to hear from you and every single Christ follower daily. Just as you would speak to your best friend, your spouse, or your most trusted counselor, talk to God.

Then, spend a few minutes in fellowship with God through His Word. That's the primary way God communicates directly with you and all His followers who are His children...Yes, as Father, we were reborn to Him and adopted as His very own.

If you already have a daily devotion time reading God's Word, that's amazing! What a blessing! If not, hey, it's as simple as picking up right where we have been today.

This week, spend at least 5 minutes each day reading **John 3:1-21**. Meditate on God's Word. That simply means to read it silently. Then read it out loud. Hear yourself speak the same words of God.

Then, make it personal. You are a child of the Most High God. Abba, the Hebrew term for Daddy or Papa, delights in hearing you talk to Him in prayer and speak His words out loud.

Take the challenge this week that you can do each day. Put your own name in these verses. Look at **John 3:16-18**. "For God so loved me, _____, and the entire world so much, that He gave His One and Only Son, so that I could believe in Jesus and have everlasting life rather than perish in separation and darkness. For God did not send Jesus into this world to condemn me, _____; He sent Jesus to save me. Because I, _____. believe in Jesus, Who died for my sins, to the point that my faith is authenticated by what I say and do, I, ___ am not condemned." Jesus is my Savior, and Jesus is my Lord.

God the Father extended and extends His grace, or unmerited love and favor, to each of us. That's one of the priorities of Abba's House. Extend grace. To be Christ-like, we must do as He did and does.

Live in your miracle daily; it's in progress!

Next week: *What's Next?*

Week 2 of 4

What's Next?!

Personal Growth & Growing Deeper.

Infancy. Toddlerhood. Childhood. Adolescence. Young adulthood. Adulthood. Senior status.

There's a progression in life. There are seasons.

There are developmental stages in our flesh just like there are developmental phases to our spiritual lives. There are seasons in humanity just like there are season in the spiritual lives we have in Christ.

You each were born. You were completely dependent upon the adults in your life for the most essential things of life – food, water, shelter, and protective guidance. Then, you started consuming more than milk and accepted mushed up, pureed foods that required little digestion but greater nourishment of a variety as you began to walk and interact more with your own surroundings to satisfy your curiosity but always learning – even beginning to speak and communicate.

Then, childhood arrived. You began exploring on your own, making your own friends outside of the adults in your life, and learning how to read, then reading to learn and mature. Your food intake was little different than an adult's in a general nutrition sense. Your curiosity has changed its focus to be taking everything in as a novel experience to trying things you've never experienced, testing limits, and forming your own values and virtues.

Believe it or not, research has proven that our beliefs and worldview filter through which we run every thought, every decision, and every choice that forms our lives is highly structured and in place by the time humans reach adolescence at 13 years of age.

Teenage years are critical as we have more autonomy, should have higher expectations than the other developmental stages, but are still growing and attempting to figure out our identities and self-worth. We're still kids needing innocence that God intended for children but transitioning to adulthood with responsibilities, accountabilities, and setting ourselves up for the opportunities ahead, or missing those opportunities.

Adulthood arrives with routines, burdens, budgets, families, mistakes, successes, and all sorts of factors that are both internal and external that we're forced to contend with and fashion into our reality.

And we keep growing into our senior status and maturity.

Reborn. Now, Will We Mature?

Just like this necessary process, our spiritual lives are the same. We were reborn in Jesus Christ. In the first stage, we're all infants in Christ. We learn, adapt, test things and move to toddlerhood. We tot around, then walk with greater stability. We are fed more and more as we are able to digest.

But we keep growing. Adolescence comes and we're pushing through to greater knowledge and wisdom, but the struggles can appear so difficult as we face peers and situations that are demanding our conformity that we may need to reject that may harm our spiritual development and growth.

Remember, just as human development is a continuum of growth that if you're not growing, your dying, our spiritual development is no different. There is no static state. That's only for potted plants, fake fruit, or flowers. Life is not static. Life is everchanging and dynamic.

Are you the same today as you were when you were first born? Obviously, no. This question can and should be repeated as you move through the phases of human development but now applied to your life spiritually.

As a reborn spirit in Christ Jesus, it's so valuable to be connected to others who thrive, who share love and pour it into you as your own, and to see what Jesus looks like in others. The church term you may hear in this stage is discipleship. The cultural term is mentoring.

Consider the first developmental stages of your spiritual life as the first step. Everyone must take it to move to the second, third, fourth, etc. along the journey of life.

Shift gears a few minutes from your own personal growth to see aspects of growth as God has patterned. In Genesis, as He spoke to creation, God instructed plant life to produce according to its own kind. The same applied and applies for animals, marine life, and humanity. We reproduce according to our species of original.

Growth Intended and Expected

Turn to the Gospel as written by John the disciple of Jesus who literally walked with Him and was an eyewitness to the life, miracles, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus. Bibles have red letters in some translations that indicate that Jesus Christ spoke those words. In the case of **John 15**, the entire chapter, as is much of the book of John, is red letter text. Now, read **John 15:1-8**.

Jesus is teaching His disciples during the first century, but is also teaching us today as you read His words.

In **verse 1**, Jesus identifies Himself as the Vine and His Father, God the Father, the vineyard Keeper, or Master Gardener. There are so many Biblical truths that come from this very statement. God is named as the Master Gardener here but also tended His creation, His garden in Genesis and still does. Jesus was tied to the Hebrews and root of David in the lineage through generations of the King of Israel David of the region of Judah through His very mother and earthly father. The vineyard of Jesus' Kingdom is contrasted in the New

Testament and in our current day to the one deemed “the vine of the earth” in **Revelation 14:18** that yields wickedness and death that separates from God that will be harvested for great peril and judgment.

Verse 2 teaches that those reborn in Jesus as new creations are grafted into His very life, the Vine. We are branches. Each had been growing in “the vine of the earth,” as written in Revelation, and bound for judgment.

Think of any plant. The main root shoots up from the ground with a main trunk or stem. Branches grow from that central source of life to access all water, nutrients in the soil, and bear lives to take in sun, oxygen, and ultimately bear fruit.

You are a branch. As a believer and follower of Jesus Christ, He has literally grafted you into His very life. You gain life essentials to grow through Him for the purpose of bearing fruit and to support the health and wellbeing of your own life.

Your very best life as an individual, a spouse, a parent, a friend, an adult child caring for both an aging parent and growing children, a worker, a business owner, a community leader, and a member of your church – Abba’s House.

How Do I Grow?

How did you grow from an infant to an adult? You progress through stages of development, but in this case, you set the pace. Rather than taking the number of years of your biological age, you decide and act accordingly.

Doubt this? Keep reading.

John 15:2 continues to teach that each believer in and follower of Jesus is a branch that not only nourishes itself from the connection into the Vine, but also produces fruit. If not, God the vineyard Keeper prunes back the branch to reduce the foliage that may appear healthy, but consumes nutrients that should be yielding fruit.

Read **verses 3-4**. Don’t miss this. Living a life connected to Jesus by abiding in Him, remaining in Him means we have *decided to yield* to His grafting in for the source of our lives. Jesus explained that a branch cannot bear fruit of Jesus without this connection, without this decision to remain intact and in touch with Him constantly.

Decide to be Cultivated & Connected

Live a life that allows God to cultivate you – prune you back, lift you up out of the dirt to be cleaned off and replaced on the trellis for sunlight and air, even dung you down with fertilizer if needed. Live a life that’s connected to Him. Stay in fellowship with Jesus daily through reading His Word, praying, and doing as He has commanded – to love Him with your entire being and to love others as you love yourself. Stay in fellowship with your family of faith. Be connected at Abba’s House for the purpose of being in good soil knowing that the vineyard Keeper has incredible freedom to nourish His branches in His Presence, our praises, and our understanding of His Holy Word as we grow together in this local vineyard grafted into Jesus Christ.

Before finishing today's study, understand a few facts about your spiritual growth: You will grow if you decide to abide and yield. Your own personal commitment comes from a decision to remain in Jesus – not based on a feeling or when your fortunes change and are good. No. Decide to abide, remain in the Hand of God who will help you grow, and remain in the Vine – Jesus Christ, the Savior who is the Word of God made flesh.

Another fact is the expectation and accountability to bear fruit. Every single human bears some type of fruit. If you are of the vine of the earth, you produce fruit that looks like the culture of the day – it's approved, accepted by culture, and even convenient but is not of God. Or, if you decide to abide and remain grafted in, your life will produce some change.

When we “repent of our sins,” it simply means we have changed our minds and thinking toward sins and have turned 180 degrees and turned to Jesus. That is one evidence or fruit. Others are found in **Galatians 5:22-24** as we carry Christ's life in and through us, we have His Spirit – His Fruit. We have love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

We are also expected to yield fruit in the form of scattering seeds. Some fruit is consumed after harvesting; some fruit of the harvest is stored; some is allowed to go to seed for the next planting cycle to yield more. Like reproduces like. You should scatter seed by speaking God's Word, living Jesus' love, and sharing that love with others to the point that they see change and want this Life that they see in you.

Decide to Abide in Covenant

John 15:5-8 record Jesus' simple message. If you abide and remain in Him, your life develops, grows, matures, and bears fruit. If not, you wither.

Not only are you to live a life permitting cultivation and remaining connected that ensures your life has the love of Jesus to be shared and reproduced in others, but you'll experience the life of covenant with the Vine and the vineyard Keeper.

“If you remain in Me and My words remain in you, ask whatever you want and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this: that you produce much fruit and prove to be My disciples.” The Son of the Living God promised. His promise, however, is only for those who decide to abide, to yield, and remain.

His promise does not mean that we ask for conveniences and for our own personal ambitions. Instead, when we ask for that which makes us fruitful in God the Father's vineyard to bring forth growth and bear more fruit, the Lord of the Harvest ensures our prayers are heard and answered accordingly.

One last thing about this personal growth in Christ Jesus. The more you abide, the faster you grow. The greater your connection, the less hindered the flow of Life. As life springs forth, growth is first deeper to form a root system before it grows upward. On a vine, or the

Vine, our growth must be more vitally united in Jesus to ensure strength and endurance of the branch, then the foliage or the outward appearances, and finally the fruit.

Decide to abide. Grow by being cultivated, by being connected, and enter covenant with Christ the Vine.

Next week: *What does God's Kingdom mean in my own life?*

Week 3 of 4

What Does God’s Kingdom Mean in My Own Life?

Many are familiar with the phrases from the Model Prayer that Jesus taught as part of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew when He referenced God’s kingdom. Specifically, “Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Take a look at **Matthew 6:9-15**. The context is early in His ministry, Jesus sitting as the teacher among a large crowd and His followers. Many were there out of curiosity. Many were there out of a need seeking hope among times of civil unrest, cultural oppression, and even poverty and disease.

Among the many topics covered in the Sermon on the Mount, recorded by Matthew the tax collector turned disciple from Matthew 5 through 7, the Son of God taught the audience, and us today, the Model Prayer. In this teaching about prayer that we’re do faithfully do in private and sincerity, we find how to address God the Father in His praiseworthy Holiness, then we agree that God the Father’s will should be done on this earth as it is in heaven.

What God’s Kingdom and Will Literally Mean

In reading God’s Word, a great way to study it is to first pray. Pause for a few minutes and just offer thanks to God for your day, the blessings ahead that He promises His believers, give thanks for His love and all the opportunities that He provides, and ask His Holy Spirit, Who is God’s Spirit with us today, to reveal to you truth from reading that you couldn’t understand on your own. Oh, God is so faithful to hear and answer our prayers when we are sincere and faithful!

Then ask a few questions in your mind so that you frame your thinking to seek revelation as you read. Two really good questions to ask are: What does God’s Word say literally? And What does this mean to me? Remember, God wants to speak directly to you through His Word and His Spirit, Who reveals meaning and purpose, or revelation, to you as you read and study.

So, what does this phrase, “Your kingdom come” mean, literally?

Remember, the New Testament was originally penned by the various authors in the language of the region accepted for commerce and civil transactions – Greek. So, taking the key words in **Matthew 6:10**, let’s examine and break this down.

Jesus is instructing us to pray in agreement that God’s very own Kingdom be present in this earth, in our lives. God’s kingdom, as addressed here is noted by a personal pronoun that expresses possession.

That simply means we're declaring and asking that God's own kingdom, not ours, not that of this world, be in our own lives, our family's life, our community, our neighborhood, our workplace, and our church through us.

Then, this word "kingdom." Terms like this may seem a bit foreign to us blessed to live in America. We live in a constitutional republic where the Law of the Land enumerates and specifies the limits of government that protects the rights of individuals, which include tremendous freedoms to worship, speak, defend ourselves, own private property, and even govern ourselves.

In a kingdom, there is a monarch, not an elected ruler, as in a constitutional republic. In the case of God's kingdom, the monarch is Jesus Christ, King of kings, Lord of lords. Jesus was given this authority, actually "all authority in heaven and earth" according to **Matthew 28:18** by God the Father after His death on the cross, His burial, and His resurrection.

In Greek, the term for kingdom in Matthew 6:10 is *basileia*. It literally means a realm of rule, a sovereign reign or dominion. A simple way to remember this is that a kingdom is the domain of the King. Wherever King Jesus is present, He has authority, sovereignty, and dominion.

God's Kingdom Is More than a Place – It's Personal!

Now, reflect on this personally. While the Model Prayer instructs us to pray for the rule and reign of God through Jesus Christ our victorious King be present and in effect on this earth just as it is in heaven, we are to consider how that is to be.

How does that happen? Does God use mysterious powers and beings to bring about His Presence in our families, our communities, and our workplaces?

He uses the Spirit of Jesus Christ within us to bring this about. God so very often works His miracles through the obedience of His people. What a blessing!!! We get to be His vessels!

When you were reborn in Christ Jesus as a new creation, behold all the old passed away, and behold, the new has come (**2 Corinthians 5:17**), you were not just redeemed or purchased from being a slave to sin and indebted for missing the mark, but you were also declaring that Jesus was King of your life.

As King, Jesus rules and reigns in your life.

Hmmm. Some of you may be squinting and squirming. "Now, what?! I have a King?!" you may ask. Right?

Whether we acknowledge it or not, we have something or someone in our lives that governs all that we do. That's either our own flesh, mind, and soul based on our own reasoning that comes from our childhood raising, our experiences, our beliefs that we've assembled over time through lessons learned through firsthand experience or secondhand information by watching others' experiences, or even thirdhand information we've been told or have read about.

This is your worldview. It's a filter through which every single decision you make is run through as you make choices, develop preferences, and live life.

If your worldview is based on your own reasoning or some mixture of your own reasoning and a philosophy or ideology other than the Bible, then Jesus is *not* King of the domain of your life. That leaves you accountable in holding the debt of your sin before God. That also means you miss out on the blessings promised to God's family of faith in Jesus throughout His Word.

God's Kingdom Brings Redemption and Rewards

Based on your confession of faith that Jesus Christ is the Son of God sent to die as the sacrifice for our sins – your sins and all of humanity's – and that you want Him to save you as Savior, you are redeemed. But there's also a way to experience God's rewards. That's through living as one who allows your heart and life to be the King's domain, Jesus' domain.

How's that?

As teacher, Jesus was asked which of the commandments of the Old Testament law was greatest. The Jewish leaders had classified over 600 laws in order of importance that devout Jews were to honor. Despite the effort to trick or trap Him by His enemies, Jesus referenced an Old Testament teaching that made things simple for His followers who chose to accept His love and grace.

Look at **Matthew 22:34-40**. Jesus was being pressed by religious experts but used the occasion to teach of the beauty of His New Covenant. In **verses 37-38**, Jesus responded, *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command.”* This was not information the Jews had never heard since it come from **Deuteronomy 6:5**, of the Old Covenant or Old Testament.

He added, in **verse 39** that the second was to *“Love your neighbor as yourself.”* Again, the Jewish people would know of this teaching from **Leviticus 19:18**.

But neither of these verses were likely in the top 10 of the Jewish leaders putting Jesus once again at cross purposes with the religious crowd.

So, if Jesus taught that these two were the two most important commandments, then, they are. Living a life that puts these into action is part of living the life that God rewards.

Further, Jesus instructed His disciples during His earthly ministry and all of us today that His disciples would be known by our love, one for another. **John 13:34-35** spells it out pretty clearly: *“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”*

Experiencing God’s Kingdom Promises Thriving

When we hear a strong promise like that we sometimes get a little cautious. That’s understandable in the world of retail and aspects of life that compete for your attention, money, and devotion. Embellishing or just over promising is not unusual in those situations.

Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven extensively by using stories from Matthew 11 through 13.

Look at **Matthew 13** and look first at **verses 1-9** to understand the principle of thriving in King Jesus’ Kingdom. And it involves the principles of sowing seed and good soil.

Jesus, again in words recorded in red, explains that seeds fall in soils of varying types when the sower sows: hardened ground like a path, rocky soil, ground choked with thorns, and good soil.

In **verses 19-23**, Jesus explains the parable, or story told with a purposeful meaning and instruction. He elaborates on each type of soil and the seeds sown.

As you read these verses appreciate that in your own life at varying times, your life can be just like these varying types of soil. Sometimes, you’re worn down, beaten down, and hardened by pressures of this world walking over us. Seed can’t even take root on this soil. The response to this would be to bust up this ground and add nutrients, allow air, water, and even new soil to be added to make it good.

At other times, you may be the soil with rocks that just have barrier after barrier, obstacle after obstacle that pile up and obstruct your progress, your growth. There may be some growth in your life, but the good dirt is so shallow and coarse with the rocks of life. The remedy to this soil is to clear out the rocks. Add more good soil and keep the soil cultivated.

The third type of soil, the one with thorns that choke out the seeds sown may be the things growing around you that compete for the life of your seed. The very water, sunlight, and nutrients needed to fuel good growth is taken away by things that may pose a risk or even a harm to your very best. The solution here is to literally yank up by the roots the invasive plants that are harmful to your seed.

Finally, the good soil is that which is the good ground. It's able to take the seed deep enough for it to be planted. Then, that seed takes on water, warmth, and nutrients to open up. That seed has within it every single thing it needs to become a fully grown, fertile plant that yields fruit. Jesus described the fruit bearing as yielding "*some 100, some 60, some 30 times what was sown.*"

Thriving in God's Kingdom means to sow your life into the good soil of His Word, His church, His worship, and His fellowship.

God's Kingdom Allows Us to Serve the King

There's one more aspect to God's Kingdom: service.

Jesus was and is big on serving others. He expects us to do just as He did.

When Jesus' disciples gathered for the Passover meal and the Last Supper before His crucifixion, He washed His disciples feet, an act deemed only appropriate for the lowest of the hired hands. He said, "*For I have given you an example that you should do just as I have done for you*" (**John 13:15**).

Even before the Last Supper, Jesus had taught His disciples that "*whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life – a ransom for many*" (**Matthew 20:26-28**).

One last teaching from Jesus for this week. His emphasis on serving is not to be dismissed or thought of something we do if we have time. Our service to Jesus will be part of our lives that is judged.

Let's look at **Matthew 25:31-46**. In verses 31-34, Jesus tells of His return in glory as King. He will separate the sheep from the goats – those who chose to follow the Shepherd in contrast to the stubborn who refused to heed the call of the Shepherd.

In **verses 35-36**, Jesus tells of times when He was ministered to and served when hungry, when thirsty, when naked in poverty or even spiritually, sick or diseased, and imprisoned. In verses 42-43, Jesus points out the times when His needs were ignored and unattended.

In both cases, those who were either serving or failed to serve never saw Jesus as the recipient of their acts of kindness.

The King answered in both cases that whatever was done or not done “for one of the least of these, you did for Me.”

To experience God’s Kingdom, we are blessed to be both redeemed by our Savior Jesus Christ and rewarded by our Lord and King Whom we serve.

It’s a way of life. It’s your worldview. It’s being in this world, but not of it.

Experience Kingdom...every single day!

Week 4 of 4

What Exactly is the Church – Jesus’ Bride, His Body, or this Building?

You are a member of our family of faith at Abba’s House. It is the Father’s House that brings together His beloved children who have accepted His love and desire to live a life redeemed from the debt of sin and one that will be rewarded and blessed by God.

Abba’s House is a church. But it’s so much more than a formalized and branded entity made up of like-minded people. Abba’s House is one of thousands of local churches that form a Biblical organism, not just an organization.

This local church is a living, breathing organism that has life, purpose, and impact. You are a very important part of this living organism created and beloved by God.

The Church – The Building

Ekklesia or *ekklēsia* in Greek. How do you pronounce this? Phonetically, it’s ek-klay-see’-ah, with the emphasis on the long “e” in “see.”

This is the Greek word Jesus used to tell Peter in **Matthew 16:17-18**, “Blessed are you Simon son of John...that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” Church. Ekklesia is the Greek word used by Jesus Himself to define church.

Ek means “out of.” *Kaleo* means “to call.” The way this term was used among the Roman-Greco culture in the first century was for a gathering or assembly of citizens that would discuss the affairs of the State. Used within the context of religion, the *ekklēsia* was the congregation of those called out to follow Jesus.

Abba’s House is the *ekklēsia* that assembles at 5208 Hixson Pike. So, yes. The church assembles in buildings for the purpose of mission, service, worship, and unity. The church is, indeed, a building.

But Abba’s House and the Church of Jesus Christ established by His New Covenant in the Gospels is oh so very much more.

Again, in Jesus’ own words, He taught of those who were called out as His Bride and His very own Body.

The Church – The Bride

Jesus, as we have studied in previous sessions, spoke directly in His own words and was recorded by firsthand witnesses who wrote the Bible. Even secondhand witnesses, like Dr.

Luke who was not Jewish but “carefully investigated everything from the very first, to write to you in an orderly sequence” (Luke 1:3) and accompanied Paul in his ministries, documented our Savior’s words. These words in red should be taken as authority, along with other Scripture that continues to be archaeologically proven and bearing fruit as Truth.

Jesus referred to Himself as the Bridegroom multiple times throughout the Gospels.

Matthew 9:15, Mark 2:19-20, Luke 5:34-35 all reference and verify the same account written by three different authors. Jesus poses a question to the Jewish leaders attempting to trick Him into admitting He broke Jewish law by failing to fast. “As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast,” notes Mark’s account.

Since Jesus just referenced Himself as the Bridegroom, who would be Jesus’ Bride?

Matthew 25:1-13 records Jesus’ parable of the bridegroom who had been delayed in coming for His bride. Who would that be?

John 3:29 is John the disciple’s account of John the Baptist speaking of Jesus as the bridegroom and followers as the bride. “The one who has the bride is the bridegroom.”

Then look at Revelation, the book written to give us the identity of the resurrected Christ Who reigns as King at the Right Hand of God now and will return for His remnant – His Bride.

Revelation reveals the Bride as a prepared people in **Rev. 19:7**. “The wife of the Lamb” is noted in **Rev. 21:9**. “The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come,’” is the longing declared of the expectant Bride of her Bridegroom in **Rev. 22:17**.

The church, Abba’s House, and other Bible-believing, teaching, and living churches, are the beloved and cherished Bride of Christ for whom Jesus gave His very life.

The Church – The Body

Tune in and stay focused. The beauty of the love story of God creating His church the Building, the Bride, and the Body is unmatched.

In the Old Testament, God created man and then woman in the Garden of Eden. The First Adam, whose name literally means man in Hebrew, was formed from the dust by God’s Hand. Then, God breathed His own breath or vitality into Adam’s nostrils (**Genesis 2:7**).

Out of Adam’s side, God took the rib to give Eve, Adam’s bride, form and then life (**Gen. 2:20-22**). The first bride came from the First Adam’s side. His very flesh to be a help mate, to complement him or complete him in one flesh.

God's desire was to fellowship with Adam and Eve. But they fell to sin. Nevertheless, God used this First Couple to form the unit of all civilization – the family.

In the Old Testament, there was no church. God was present among His called out people, the Hebrews, as they organized their communities in tribes or orders of family relations. You'll read and learn of the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, Ephraim, Levi, and eight more to total twelve. In the center of the Hebrew encampment of familial tribes was the tabernacle. That's where God dwelled -in His Holy place among His people (**Exodus 25:8**).

Despite calling out the Hebrews to be His special, "peculiar people," to live set apart as God's chosen group that would fellowship with Him, experience His Presence, provision, and love, the Hebrews rejected Him. They chose, instead, culture, convenience, and acceptance among other beliefs. That should sound familiar, because it's a timeless failure of humanity.

Oh, but how God so loves the people He created. He did and does yearn for relationship, fellowship, and covenant partnership with humanity. So God made a way because of His great love for us. The Way.

Jesus, the Son of God, was born and lived a sinless life. He was conceived and carried by a virgin, Mary, and honored his parents in his traditional Jewish raising. Jesus launched His ministry around the age of 30 years old being baptized by his cousin, John the Baptist, who declared that all should repent, or turn from sin, change their minds toward sin, because the kingdom of God or of heaven was at hand (**Matthew 3:2**).

This message of repentance was the message of Jesus. His commandments, as we've already studied, were not laws, rites, or rituals. Instead, His instructions were to love. First love Him exhaustively, with all our being. Then to love others as ourselves. Finally, Jesus declared that authentic disciples or followers of His would be known for how they loved each other.

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son that whosoever believes on Him will have everlasting life (John 3:16). Love. Love is why Jesus came. Love is why Jesus emptied Himself of deity to become a man. Love is why Jesus hung on the cross for you and all.

The cross is the emblem of suffering and shame because it was a form of execution of criminals. To Christ followers, it's the ultimate symbol of love. Our response to that cross must also be in love.

When you hear of this agape, or unconditional love that cannot be earned, is not deserved, and is given in mercy and abundance, it's understandable how references in the Bible

depict Jesus as the Bridegroom and His church as His Bride. Jesus' love for His Bride, the local church, is well recorded, even in Jesus' own words.

On the cross, Jesus' side was pierced with blood and water flowing from the Second Adam (**John 19:34**). This life's blood and vitality would literally form the Body of Christ which remains in His fleshly presence and pay the price for redemption and forgiveness of sins of those who are His Body. As a member of this living organism that is purposed with the continuation of the mission of Jesus' ministry as Christ's Body, we are doing the will of God the Father as we love like Jesus loved, served like Jesus served, and share His love with others in word and deed.

Jesus instructed His disciples and followers to wait in Jerusalem. They were to wait for the promise that God the Father had made to send His very Spirit to abide with those who remained (**Luke 24:49 and Acts 1:4-5**) after the ascension of Jesus to heaven, which was witness by at least 500 onlookers (**1 Corinthians 15:6**).

This unity by Jesus' followers formed a committed core. This committed core of the disciples and other followers who totaled 120 were united in prayer, or in one accord. The day of Pentecost, or the Jewish Festival of Weeks began 50 days after the Passover. Jesus had lived for 40 days among His followers after His resurrection. Ten days had passed as the faithful obeyed Jesus and remained in Jerusalem in unity and aligned in prayer.

“Suddenly, the sound of a mighty rushing wind came from heaven and filled the whole house” (Acts 2:2).

A nice independent Bible devotion for a week might be to study **Luke 24:44-53 and Acts 1-2**, both written by Dr. Luke, to see how this newly formed group of people yielded their own wills to be “in one accord” and unified in one location, under one roof, in one assembly, and in one mind in prayer. This obedience to Jesus' instructions ensured “the Promise” of the Holy Spirit and the math of heaven – multiplication. The church increased from 120 to 3,120, to 5,000 men (meaning up to 10,000 when women were included), and “more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women” that were referenced in **Acts 5:14**.

Just as God the Father during creation had removed life from the First Adam to create and form a new body for the purpose of making one flesh that would be in fellowship with and serve God, the side of the Second Adam had released the vital life from His wound endured in love. This sacrifice produced a unified group in one accord. When the Holy Spirit filled the place where they were gathered, the power of life from God was given into a new man, a new Body whose Head is Jesus Christ.

The Church is the Remnant for Whom Christ will Return

Churches *are* physical structures and buildings built on Christ the Cornerstone for assembly. The Church is also the cherished and beloved Bride and functions in this world today as the Body of Christ Jesus, loving, serving, teaching, mentoring, rescuing, and bringing God's kingdom into our own families, neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and our family of faith.

Jesus Christ lived in flesh to show us how it's possible to bring God's kingdom to this earth in our daily lives. His death was required, as the Bible says, so that the seed of His life would fall to the ground and die, be buried in the earth, but grow into the Vine that would have many branches which bear much fruit.

To be Christians, or Christ-like, we, too, must die to our own selves daily, falling to the ground to be buried in the good soil of the family of faith at Abba's House, cultivated by the Holy Spirit for nourishment and essentials for growth. We bear fruit in having our words align with our deeds in obedient love and service. We cross pollinate with like-minded and hearts unified "in one accord" to be strengthened from the roots all the way through the very fruit produced in growth.

But the beauty of knowing we are part of the Vine of Christ, faithfully tended by the Master Gardener, God our Father, is that at the final harvest, we will have the additional promise that Jesus made Himself in **John 14:2-3**. "*I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also,*" was pledged by Jesus during the Lord's Supper just prior to His death.

The Bridegroom has gone to prepare a place in eternity for His Bride. The Bible reveals the Marriage Supper of the Lamb with His Bride throughout Revelation.

You are part of Abba's House – the Building where the Bride of Christ Jesus the Messiah and His Body worships, loves, serves, and awaits His promised return with blessings that He promised personally.

Be blessed by being faithful in **your** very important place, your critical role, using **your** beautiful contributions within Jesus' Church. **You** make a difference. **You will be rewarded!**

