

Masterwork of the Messiah

Expositional Study Of Matthew's Gospel

The Focus Of The Faithful

Written By

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During the Vietnam War, my uncle, Ray, a Captain in the Air Force, came home on a much needed furlough. One day he took me and my grandpa Dorsey up in his little Piper Cub for a fun flight around the Imperial Valley. I'll never forget that day. My grandpa climbed in the back, letting me sit in the passenger's seat for a better view. My uncle, of course, sat in the pilot's seat.

As we approached the Chocolate Mountains, located on the northern rim of the sandy and rocky desert floor, my uncle said, "Hey Marty. Would you like to fly the plane?"

How would you expect a twelve-year-old to respond? I replied, "I sure would, but I need you to show me what to do."

Over the next several minutes my uncle showed me what the gauges meant, and then he said, "Ok. What I want you to do now is grab the yoke in front of you with both hands in a 10-2 position, and then just make sure you keep this little line on this gauge, which can potentially move up and down, right in middle. If you pull back on the yoke, the line will go up, meaning you need to pull back down. If you push too hard on the yoke, the line will go down, meaning you are going down. So, to keep us on a level course make sure you keep the line level."

I had the time of my life ... that is ... until two F-4 Phantoms flew, slightly inverted, right in front of my window. We were on a pleasure flight, and they were on a bombing run at the target area just to our left. The sight of those fighters, coupled with the loud roar so surprised me, I did what any novice pilot would do: I pushed down on hard the yoke, causing our little

plane to go into a dive. What was I thinking? Why didn't I keep my eyes on the proper focus? Why did I get so quickly distracted from my task at hand?

I'll never forget what my uncle did next. After barking a command for me to let go of the yoke, he took control and pulled us out of the short dive, leveled us off, enabling us to have a great rest of the flight. Trust me. It pays to have a seasoned, combat hardened pilot in the cockpit with you, to not only show you how to fly right but who will be there to save you when, not if, you get distracted from you main foci.

Believe me, my experience in that Piper Cub back in 1969 is, in many respects, a perfect picture of spiritual living for Jesus Christ. We are called to keep our eyes fixed on Him (Hebrews 12:2), meaning we should be paying strict attention to studying and modeling His life and following His life-giving teachings. But, oh, how easily and naturally we get distracted by the jets flying by us, jets like spiritual pride, presumption, power and placement. From Christ's verbal exchanges and teaching in Matthew 19:27-20:16 with the disciples, it was readily apparent to Jesus that His pilots were highly distracted. Instead of being consumed with His person and redemptive mission, they were greedily locked-on the spiritual rewards and power positions awaiting them at the arrival of the Messiah's long-awaited messianic kingdom (Psalm 89; Isaiah 9:6-7; 11, 24, 25, 54, 60, 61; Jeremiah 23:4-6; 30:8-9; 33:14-21; Ezekiel 37:24-25; Daniel 7:13-14; Hosea 3:4-5; Amos 9:11; Zechariah 14:4-9).

After showing them their out-of-focus living in the Parable of the Workers (Matthew 20:1-16), Jesus sought, one more time, to get them to focus on the gauges which should matter most to His pilots. If you are His pilot right now, I'm sure Christ's words will be instructive for you, for I have a good hunch you just may not be flying right. Like the disciples, you may be distracted by all the wrong things, even if those things have the appearance of spirituality about them.¹ In reality, you have taken your spiritual eyes off the godly gauges and are in a dangerous dive, a dive you may not even be aware of because pride ... like those two F-4s ... has blinded you ... just like it did the disciples.

To pull out of the dive, Jesus calls you, as He called His deviating disciples to our eyes on this one main concept:

Faithful Flyers Focus On God's Plan & Purpose (Matthew 20:17-19)

Did you hear me? God doesn't want us to be consumed with our plans and purposes, but His. What are His? To further develop our metaphor, let's think of them as our two main gauges:

Gauge #1: It's Called The Crucifixion (Matthew 20:17-19a)

Jesus had alluded to His coming death by crucifixion on several other occasions with His disciples.

When the Pharisees asked for a supernatural sign from Jesus, even though they had already seen and heard about countless spectacular signs only God could perform, Jesus condemned them with these words:

¹ In Revelation 2, Christ, our High Priest, castigated the Ephesian church for failing to love Him like they did at the first, even though they were a great teaching center. Don't you believe for a moment you (we) can't fall into the same spiritual trap. A right relationship with Jesus takes constant care and confession.

³⁹ But He answered and said to them, ‘An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet, ⁴⁰ for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:39-40).

Obviously, this is clear reference to His death, with an implicit reference of His resurrection back to life, as the life of Jonah pictured. Jesus employed this same imagery again with the Pharisees and the Sadducees in chapter 16, verse 4, driving home the truth of His eventual death and resurrection ... or the sign of all signs.

Right after Jesus castigated these religious leaders for their blindness, Jesus, for the first time, explicitly taught His disciples about His up and coming crucifixion at the hands of these same godless religious leaders:

²¹ From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day (Matthew 16).

We know how that went over from Peter’s response, which, I’m convinced, represented the general tenor of the rest of the disciples:

²² Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You.”

Despite clear prophecies about the mission of the Master from the Old Testament (Isaiah 53 in particular), coupled with precise teaching from the Messiah Himself, the disciples initially rejected outright the concept of the Messiah’s death. From what we have seen, thus far, their motivation was probably tied to their firm belief that the Messiah, Jesus, would, in short order, destroy all earthly empires as prophesied followed by the erection of His magnificent Davidic empire (Isaiah 2).

Not long before the conclusion of His amazing Galilean ministry, Jesus taught the disciples again about what the future held for Him:

²² And while they were gathering together in Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be ¹delivered into the hands of men; ²³ and they will kill Him, and He will be raised on the third day.” And they were deeply grieved (Matthew 17).

This time instead of arguing, they are overcome with grief; however, from Peter’s question to Jesus in Matthew 19:27, and Christ’s response in the closing verses of this chapter, coupled with the Parable of the Workers (Matthew 20:1-16), Jesus reprimanded them for continuing to focus on the jets flying by the window instead of the gauges at hand.

To get the disciples to stop looking out their selfish windows and start looking at the godly gauges, Jesus took them aside and privately went over all too familiar ground:

¹⁷ As Jesus was about to go up to Jerusalem, He took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and on the way He said to them, ¹⁸ “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, ¹⁹ and will hand Him over to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify Him ...

Why a private teaching time? Because crowds, no doubt, surrounded and followed them. Wouldn't you have? In private Jesus could make sure they really grasped the concept of His impending crucifixion. And this wasn't just any ordinary crucifixion. The infinitival use of the verb “to go up” (ἀναβαίνειν) is not only an intensive construction denoting the arduous trek up the mountains of Jerusalem from the desert floor of the Jordan valley, but it can be classified as denoting purpose.

Here the purpose is a divinely ordered one; namely, the divinely destined death of the God's only Son and the Messiah, Jesus.



Just Christ's articulation of this precise information underscores not only His role as THE prophet (Deuteronomy 18), but it emphasizes His deity by showcasing His omniscience.² The only way He could know what His enemies would do to Him after His triumphal entry was by divine prerogative and precision. Further, there is no way He could have controlled all that the religious leaders eventually did to Him (i.e., the trumped up court and illegal condemnation), nor the activity of the Romans (i.e., mocking, scourging, and crucifixion). Only God could know the outcome of future events. Truly, this was the God of the Old Testament standing before them, the same one who spoke through the pen of Isaiah:

⁹ Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, ¹⁰ Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure; ¹¹ Calling a bird of prey

² Other instances of Christ's omniscience: Matthew 16:21; Luke 6:8; 11:17; John 4:29.

from the east, The man of My purpose from a far country. Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it (Isaiah 46).

The swift bird of prey here which would wipe out and devour the Babylonians, who would be divinely responsible judging wayward Judah in 586 B.C., would be Cyrus, king of Persia. Isaiah had already mentioned him by name twice (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1), and this was 150 years before the leader walked the earth. You might need to re-read this sentence. The best financial managers can't tell you where to put your money for maximum performance a week out, let alone 150 years out. Only God could know the future and in the Old Testament He demonstrated His divine prowess and person to Israel through prophets like Isaiah. In the New Testament age He revealed His identity through the person of Jesus, the Christ. And what did He prophesy? The divinely ordered crucifixion of the Messiah was imminent.

All of this leads us to ask, "Why did Jesus have to die?" If we are supposed to be focused intently and constantly on this gauge, we must, by definition, know the answer to this critical and pivotal question. I could spend many pages giving you viable answers to the question of all questions; however, for sake of time and space, permit me to give you just a few.

- Only He, the God-man, could take away/forgive man's sin by His perfect and acceptable sacrifice. John the Baptist reminded us of this truth: John 1:29 *"The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'"*
- Only He, the God-man, could provide the perfect and acceptable substitutionary death for sinful people: Matthew 20:28: " ... just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." And who can forget the memorable words of Paul, Galatians 3:13: *"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us-- for it is written, 'CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE.'"*
- Only He, the God-man, could free us from inherited sin from Adam, who serves as our genetic linkage to sin (for the seminal view consider Hebrews 7:9-10. Levi, who wasn't born until hundreds of years after Abraham, paid tithes through Abraham). Paul teaches us this much: Romans 5:12: *"Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned."* And you thought you could, as a sinner, clean yourself up for God by your good works. That is impossible.
- Only He, the God-man, could pay the exorbitant cost to purchase our salvation. We defer to Peter how understood this point all too well: 2 Peter 2:1 *"But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves."* Did you get that? False teachers are the ones telling you, "Jesus didn't pay for the penalty of sin. Don't believe such garbage."
- Only He, the God-man, could reconcile repentant sinners to the Holy Father. Paul drove this concept home on more than one occasion, 2 Corinthians 5:18-19: *Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave*

us the ministry of reconciliation, ¹⁹ namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.” The broken relationship between God and man which originated in man’s fall in the Garden of Eden is only restored by the work of Jesus as the crucified and resurrected victor of all victors.

- Only He, the God-man, could appease, through His substitutionary death, the wrath of God against a sinner. Again, we defer to Paul: Romans 3:23-26: ²³ “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; ²⁵ whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶ for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” The phrasing “displayed publicly” refers to the very public crucifixion of the Messiah, Jesus. His death in this fashion gives the sinner the opportunity to be declared righteous before God’s judgment bar solely by means of his/her personal articulation of faith in His divine person (Romans 10:9) and redemptive work. When the sinner embraces the free gift of salvation, secured by Christ’s substitutionary death for the sinner’s sin, God’s holy anger toward the sinner is propitiated, or covered.³
- Only He, the God man, could become a perfect sacrifice as prophesied almost eight hundred years before His birth through the words of Isaiah. In chapter 53, the Messiah is the Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53:1-6: “Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? ² For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of parched ground; He has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him. ³ He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. ⁴ Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,

³Easton, M. G. *Easton’s Bible Dictionary*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893. PROPITIATION—that by which God is rendered propitious, i.e., by which it becomes consistent with his character and government to pardon and bless the sinner. The propitiation does not procure his love or make him loving; it only renders it consistent for him to exercise his love towards sinners.

In Rom. 3:25 and Heb. 9:5 (A.V., “mercy-seat”) the Greek word *hilasterion* is used. It is the word employed by the LXX. translators in Ex. 25:17 and elsewhere as the equivalent for the Hebrew *kapporeth*, which means “covering,” and is used of the lid of the ark of the covenant (Ex. 25:21; 30:6). This Greek word (*hilasterion*) came to denote not only the mercy-seat or lid of the ark, but also propitiation or reconciliation by blood. On the great day of atonement the high priest carried the blood of the sacrifice he offered for all the people within the veil and sprinkled with it the “mercy-seat,” and so made propitiation.

In 1 John 2:2; 4:10, Christ is called the “propitiation for our sins.” Here a different Greek word is used (*hilasmos*). Christ is “the propitiation,” because by his becoming our substitute and assuming our obligations he expiated our guilt, covered it, by the vicarious punishment which he endured. (Comp. Heb. 2:17, where the expression “make reconciliation” of the A.V. is more correctly in the R.V. “make propitiation.”)

smitten of God, and afflicted”⁵ But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed.⁶ All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.” Initially, Jewish sources identified this person as the Messiah; however, as the early Christians began to use this as a major proof-text for the person and work of Jesus, the Jews modified their interpretation by transferring the suffering of the Servant to the suffering of the nation.⁴ Isaiah’s prophesy, as you can readily see, is a direct referral to the mission of the Messiah. He would be THE perfect sacrificial lamb to make atonement for man’s sin. Such is the majority position on this central passage concerning His prophesied activity.

Hopefully, from all of these quotes you are getting a little insight as to why you need to focus more often than not on this particular gauge as you fly through life. Christ *had to* go up to Jerusalem to fulfill the Father’s redemptive destiny will for His Son. Had He not gone up to the cross, we, as sinners would never have the opportunity to go up to heaven with Him.

In our pluralistic, relativistic world I have to ask you some questions, “Are you actually giving time and attention to this key gauge? Do you know these reasons why Jesus had to die? Do you know what His death has accomplished for us, as sinners? If you keep your eyes on these gauges as you fly on the mission He has sovereignly assigned to you, you will reap a rich spiritual harvest, and your pride will be kept in check because you’ll be constantly humbled by what He did for you on that lonely, rocky, windswept hill called Golgotha.

And what motivated Jesus to take on the toughest mission of all time? One word: Love. As John 3:16 reminds us with its opening words, “*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son ...*” Focusing on this kind of love will keep your ego in check like nothing else. Focusing on this kind of love will motivate you to share it with those who desperately need to receive it. Focusing on this kind of love will, well, move you to want to sing a song to Him in worship. I love the old tune, *If That Isn’t Love*.

He left the splendor of heaven
Knowing His destiny
Was the lonely hill of Golgotha
There to lay down His life for me

And if that isn’t love
Then the ocean is dry
There’s no stars in the sky
And the little sparrows can’t fly
Yeah if that isn’t love
Then heaven’s a myth
There’s no feeling like this
If that isn’t love

⁴ John F. A. Sawyer, *Isaiah*, Vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1986): 149.

If you are a distracted saint right now, I think you have sufficient reasons right now to get your eyes back on the gauge in the cockpit called Christ's crucifixion. You need to remember that love put that gauge on your panel, and now it is your responsibility to make sure others who are still lost in sin get the opportunity to come face to face with the purpose His act of love upon that old rugged cross.

A second and important gauge all spiritual pilots need to keep before them at all times logically follows the first one:

Gauge #2: It's Called The Resurrection (Matthew 20:19b)

Christ mentioned the resurrection before in His teaching to the disciples (Matthew 16:21), and as He headed toward the cross He developed the concept again to these out-of-focus, distracted followers.

⁹ and will hand Him over to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify Him, and on the third day He will be raised up.

Note well: He didn't just say He would be crucified and killed and that He would be resurrected thereafter at some point. No, He specifically said His resurrection from death to life would occur three days after His crucifixion. History shows us He was telling the truth.

That God has the ability to give life in the place of death is a fact of both testaments.

In the Old Testament we see the concept of God granting life where death has occurred in several historical situations:

- When Abraham moved to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, based on the premise that God could easily break the bonds of death if He so chose (Hebrews 11:19).
- When Elijah raised the widow's son (1 Kings 17:17-24). Jesus would be the greater Elijah, the prophet.
- When Elisha raised the Shunammite's son (2 Kings 4:18-37). Jesus would be greater than Elisha, the prophet.
- When Aaron's dead, lifeless wooden rod budded and produced almonds (Numbers 17:8-10).
- When Isaiah prophesied that the Suffering Servant would taste death and then life (Isaiah 53:10-12).

Carefully woven through the Old Testament Scriptures is the motif of God's ability to give life in the place of death.

In the New Testament this concept is developed further, especially, in the person of Jesus. He showed He was, in fact, God by raising several people from the bonds of death:

- The resurrection of the synagogue official's daughter (Matthew 9:23-26).
- The resurrection of the son from Nain (Luke 7:11-17). He actually stopped the funeral procession to perform this miracle. Wish I could have been there to see the looks on the faces of the unbelievers.

- The resurrection of his best friend, Lazarus, after he had been dead for four days (John 11:17-44).

All of these historical evidences from the ancient scriptural documents demonstrate His absolute deity and ability to defeat sin and death. And that phrase is what is so important about His resurrection. As Paul states so definitively:

¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; ¹⁷ and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied. ²⁰ But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who ^care asleep (1 Corinthians 15).

Reflecting on this moved C.S. Lewis to observe, “If the thing happened, it was the central event in the history of the earth.”⁵ It did happen and it is the central event in human history. It’s central because in this one event Jesus categorically defeated sin, Satan, and death, thereby the prospects of spiritual and physical resurrection unto life for all those who would come to Him in faith.

The New Testament Church got the memo about staying focused on this particular gauge. To read the book of Acts is to see they constantly talked about two things, no matter what distractions flew by: The death and the resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah (Acts 1:22; 2:31; 4:2, 33; 17:18, 32; 23:68; 24:15, 21. No wonder their witness turned the unbelieving world upside down, topping the stronghold of sin and Satan in innumerable lives.

Church. We need to get to studying, understanding, defending, and talking about these two gauges on our dash. If you are distracted, I think the Spirit of God is calling you to get your eyes back on what matters most for flying well for Jesus.

If you are non-Christ follower right now, then there is a decision which needs to be made. What will you do with the One who died and rose from the grave to grant you eternal forgiveness and life?

⁵ *The New Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations*: 865.