

Journey to Galilee

Rich Nathan

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Journey with Jesus

Matthew 4:12-17, 23-25

Have you ever talked with someone about something that is big and complicated and they reduced it down to something that was so overly simplistic that you wondered if they understood anything about the subject at all?

I've had conversations like this over the years as I've tried to talk to someone about Christian faith. They might respond and say, "Well, you know, it's like my Grandpa always said, all religion is basically "be kind to people"." When people talk like that, I think, "No disrespect to your Grandpa. I'm sure he was a fine fellow. But it sounds like he never read a single book about Christianity or comparative religion, or even a basic magazine article about religion because if he had, he would have quickly discovered that religion in general, and Christianity in particular, is way bigger than simply being kind to each other."

Or maybe you're having a conversation with someone about political philosophies. They say, "Basically, democracy is simply "majority wins"." You're thinking, "Have you ever taken a political science class or a high school civics class? Do you know anything about democracy?" Actually, majority wins is hardly the most important thing about a democratic form of government. Other things are considered more important. Things like protecting minority rights or having an independent judiciary or a free press or a civilian control of the military. Have you ever had a conversation with someone who took something big and complicated and reduced it to something so small that you wondered if they understood the issue at all?

Or maybe you've talked with someone about sports and they say, "It all comes down to heart and desire. The team that has the biggest heart, the team that wants to win the most, wins." And you think, "You never actually played any sport did you?" I wish it were as simple as the team which has the most desire always wins. Sometimes the other team has better players who are faster and more athletic. They're gifted. The other team is just better or they have better strategy, better training, better coaching.

Whenever I think about taking something that's really big and complicated and reducing it to something really small, I think about what Christians in America have done to Jesus' message that the Bible calls

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The gospel of the Kingdom

We've been doing a series here during the season of Lent called "Journey with Jesus" to help us get spiritually prepared for Easter. We decided this year to focus on some highlights of Jesus' life and the geography of those highlights, from the time of Jesus' baptism at the beginning of his ministry, all the way to his resurrection on Easter Sunday.

Today, I will be looking with you at Jesus' ministry in Galilee in a message titled, "Journey to Galilee". Let's pray.

Slide Matthew 4:12-17, 23-25

¹² When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³ Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali—¹⁴ to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah:

¹⁵ "Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,
the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles—

¹⁶ the people living in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of the shadow of death
a light has dawned."

¹⁷ From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. ²⁴ News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. ²⁵ Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.

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Why Galilee?

What is significant about Galilee? Why did Jesus begin his ministry up in Galilee? To answer this, we have to go back in history. About 1400 years before the time of Christ, the Israelites first settled the Promised Land under the Old Testament leader, Joshua. Each of the 12 tribes of Israel was allotted a certain portion of the land according to the size of the tribe.

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Map of 12 tribes of Israel

If you look at the map of how the land was allotted, you'll see that Zebulun and Naphtali, mentioned in Matthew 4:15 that I just read, were way up in the north by the Sea of Galilee. Centuries later, following King Solomon, the Promised Land was divided between the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. This continued for a few centuries until the Assyrians – these people that came from an area that today is Iraq – invaded the Promised Land in 722 BC and destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel. Jews from the northern kingdom who weren't killed were moved to Assyria. Gentiles moved in. This region in the north became known as the region of the Gentiles.

100 years before Jesus, the northern region was renamed Galilee. After hundreds of years, it was known as the place Gentiles live. That's why we read in

Slide Matthew 4:15 (NIV)

¹⁵ “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,
the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles—

A century before Jesus, the king at the time forced all the Gentiles to convert to Judaism. Then other Jews moved up north. So, by the time of Jesus, Galilee was almost entirely Jewish.

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Map of Israel during Jesus' life

In Jesus' day, the people in Galilee were very observant Jews who regularly went to synagogue. In fact, archeologists tell us that there were a tremendous number of synagogues in first century Galilee. That's why we always see Jesus teaching in synagogues. As we read in verse 23:

Slide Matthew 4:23

²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

He went to the synagogues because that's where all the people were. Galilee was like one of those small towns in Ohio where there's a church on every corner.

What is significant about Galilee? The Jewish rabbis of Jesus' day believed that the fulfillment of God's promises in the Old Testament would begin in Galilee. Here's what we read in

Slide Matthew 4:16

¹⁶ the people living in darkness
have seen a great light;

on those living in the land of the shadow of death
a light has dawned.”

In other words, the first sign of the inbreaking of God’s kingdom would start in Galilee. That’s what the Jewish people believed in Jesus’ day. That’s the reason that God led Jesus to begin his ministry in Galilee.

Now, I want you to notice that the message Jesus preached is called by the gospel writers “the good news of the Kingdom” or the “gospel of the Kingdom”. Look with me at v. 23:

Slide Matthew 4:23

²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

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What is the gospel of the kingdom?

The gospel of the kingdom is the good news that the future, promised by God in the Old Testament through the prophets, the age of healing and wholeness and restoration of all things, that future age has begun through the coming of Jesus, the Messianic King.

The gospel of the kingdom is much larger and much more comprehensive than the good news that your sins can be forgiven through simple trust in Jesus and his sacrificial death for you on the cross. The message of the kingdom is the good news that God’s plan to restore the entire universe, to repair all things – our bodies, our relationships, our mental health, the environment, and most importantly, our relationship with God has been inaugurated through the coming of Jesus.

Now the message of the forgiveness of our sins is at the center of the gospel of the kingdom.

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2 circles graphic

The message of forgiveness is at the center of the gospel of the kingdom, but it’s not the circumference, just like being kind is part of what religion teaches, but it’s not the whole thing and playing with heart and desire is part of what it takes to win sports, but it’s certainly not the only thing required. The message of the forgiveness of sins is at the center of the gospel of the kingdom, but it’s not the circumference.

Of course, it makes no sense to partner with God in restoring everything – to restore the environment, to do justice, to restore broken relationships, to feed the hungry – if we ourselves remain unforgiven and alienated from God. This is the great tragedy of the

mainline church. People are partnering with God to heal the world while they personally remain unhealed and unforgiven and unreconciled to God.

But it equally doesn't make any sense to reduce Jesus' gospel of the kingdom simply to individuals having their sins forgiven with no regard for racial justice or hungry people being fed or our bodies being healed or our relationships being repaired or our environment being disturbed. This, brothers and sisters, is the great tragedy of the evangelical church. It's the tragedy of reducing the message of the kingdom to a message of soul salvation without regard for the material or social conditions that people are living in.

More than 35 years ago when I began learning about the gospel of the kingdom from the founder of the Vineyard, John Wimber, I was gripped, I was seized by the scope of God's plan of salvation. The longer I meditated upon the glorious gospel of the kingdom, the more thrilled I became. It was like I was born again, again! I thought, "Wow! This message of the kingdom is big enough to fix not only my life – which is great – but to fix the entire universe."

Again, we must never lose sight of the center. We always have to share with people the incredible good news that our sins can be forgiven and we can be restored to fellowship with God through simple trust in Jesus Christ as our Savior. But the gospel of the kingdom is so much bigger than simply the forgiveness of our sins!

Brothers and sisters, you could write the entire history of Vineyard Columbus over the past 35 years as our church discovering and then walking out in a practical way the implications of the gospel of the kingdom. 35 years ago, when we met John Wimber, we discovered that the gospel of the kingdom was not only about the forgiveness of our sins, but the healing of our bodies.

So, we began to learn how to pray for the physical healing of our bodies. We also began to pray that people would be freed up from spiritual bondage brought on by the demonic. We discovered in the early 1990s that the gospel of the kingdom was even bigger than that. It involved meeting the needs of the poor. We began to minister to the homeless. We started to feed the hungry and opened up a food pantry. And then said, "Wait a minute! The gospel of the kingdom is still bigger!" It involves the empowerment of women. Jesus' kingdom message elevated women and discovered that a person's gender does not limit their ability to advance God's kingdom in any dimension of ministry. And we realized that the gospel of the kingdom was not restricted to native born Americans. The kingdom Jesus inaugurated welcomes and embraces immigrants.

Then, in the 21st century, we began to discover how the gospel of the kingdom impacts racial justice. The breaking down of dividing walls between the races. I believe,

brothers and sisters, that we are going to spend the rest of our lives and, indeed, all of eternity exploring the infinite dimensions of this gospel of the kingdom.

The Apostle Paul prayed that the church might be able to comprehend how wide and long and high and deep is the love of God, and to know that love that surpasses knowledge. The gospel of the kingdom is, according to Jesus, like a gigantic tree under whose branches all the birds of the air can find their shelter. Every different color of bird is welcome. Every broken wing gets repaired. Every hungry bird finds food. Everyone finds safety and security.

Let me press this home a little more for you and ground it in Scripture. The kingdom of God was first pictured in the Old Testament. The theocracy that was the nation of Israel wasn't just about how we could have our sins forgiven. It was about how God's people could live under God's rule and reign. Now the forgiveness of sins was at the center of the life of Israel. It was symbolized by putting the tabernacle at the very center of the camp.

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Picture of the encampment of Israel

The highpoint of the year was the Day of Atonement where one day each year one person, namely the high priest, could enter behind the curtain of the Holy of Holies into God's presence and obtain the forgiveness of sins for the nation of the Israel. Forgiveness of sins was at the center of Israel's national life. But it wasn't the circumference. All of life – how the Israelites were to relate to each other, how they were to relate to their own families and immigrants and the poor and their sexuality and their animals and their work, the rhythms of their week – every area of life was brought under the reign of God.

So the gospel of the kingdom is the incredible good news that the restoration of everything wrong with the universe will be healed, beginning with the first coming of Jesus and continued until the whole universe is totally restored when Jesus returns again.

Now, for the rest of the talk I want to focus on one aspect of the gospel of the kingdom and that is healing – physical and spiritual healing. Here's what Matthew writes:

Slide Matthew 4:23-24

²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. ²⁴ News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them.

Let me ask a question.

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Why did Jesus heal?

One of the major signs that Jews were looking for to know that God's kingdom had broken in was physical healing. We know that the age to come has arrived when our bodies get fixed and sick people get well. That's what the messianic king was supposed to bring to the world – healing.

We read a prophecy about the messianic kingdom in the Old Testament prophet, Isaiah.

Slide Isaiah 35:4-6

⁴ say to those with fearful hearts,
"Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come,
he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution
he will come to save you."

⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

⁶ Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.

At the end, in the age to come Revelation 21:4 says:

Slide Revelation 21:4a

⁴ 'He will wipe every tear...

No more sickness. No more death. No more sorrow when Jesus returns! Messiah Jesus came to bring heaven to earth. Messiah Jesus came to bring the age to come into this age. Messiah Jesus came to restore all things. And as a foretaste of the future, as a kind of down payment on the restoration of the whole universe, Jesus healed the sick. Healing demonstrates the gospel of the kingdom – God is taking over and everything is being fixed.

Here's a question:

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Did Jesus really heal?

When we read about healing and miracles in the Bible, we need to ask ourselves, “Did this really happen? Is this really true? Did this man, Jesus of Nazareth, really go around healing every disease and every sickness? – cancer, diabetes, scoliosis and paralysis, mental illness and heart disease? Did Jesus actually heal the sick?”

The question of Christian faith always is “Is this true”? Not is it exciting? Or more often, is this what you’re supposed to believe if you go to church? The question for us always is this: Are the miracle stories that are told about Jesus are actually true? If you had a time machine and could go back in time to 27 AD, back to Galilee, and you had a team of physicians and diagnostic equipment, would this team of physicians conclude that this person had cancer and then after Jesus prayed for them, the cancer was completely gone? The person had severe scoliosis and after Jesus prayed for them, their back was completely straightened. This person was paralyzed and now they walk. Did Jesus really heal the sick?

I’m going to approach this from a couple of angles. First of all, you might not realize this, but stories of extraordinary healing were extremely rare in the centuries before and after Jesus. If you go back to the Greek or Roman world 200 years before and after Jesus or in the Jewish world 200 years before and after Jesus, there is virtually no account of miraculous healings by anyone in the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds. So it wasn’t that everybody was doing miraculous healings and Jesus did some of them. Jesus was the only one in a 400 year period who was miraculously healing the sick. You may not realize this either, but the historical evidence for Jesus miraculously healing is extremely strong. It’s not just found in the Bible or in the gospel accounts. A non-Christian Jewish historian who lived in the first century wrote about Jesus doing extraordinary miracles. Roman historians wrote about his miracles. Jewish rabbis report that Jesus did incredible miracles they attributed his healings to sorcery, but the rabbis did not deny that Jesus miraculously healed the sick. Jesus really did heal the sick! The stories are true!

Here’s my last question friends:

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Why don’t we see Jesus doing more healings today?

Honestly, we could do a whole sermon series on this last point that I’m going to make in about three minutes. I’m going to tick off four reasons why we don’t see Jesus doing more healing today. But the question is, if the same Jesus who healed the sick in Galilee is alive today, why don’t we see Jesus doing more healing today? We always need to remember who the “we” is that doesn’t see healing or miracles. We’re typically talking about the “we” in the western world. We have been trained to filter out the supernatural as being a relic of the past, something people used to believe in, in a more primitive age. But if you travel anywhere in the majority world – Latin America or Africa or Asia – anywhere outside of northern Europe and North America, the vast majority of

people believe in and pray for miraculous healings. We North American Christians don't see more healings because we need faith.

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We need faith

Jesus often asked people the question he asked the blind man.

Slide Matthew 9:28b

"Do you believe that I am able to do this?"

Why is faith often required for us to be healed? Let's be clear. God doesn't need our faith as a payment in return for him healing us. Faith is not a trade for healing! What faith does is it turns us away from ourselves and causes us to look to God. Faith turns us away from our own resources, our own power and causes us to totally rely on God's resources and God's power. Faith says, "Lord, I am nothing and you are everything." Faith says, "I entrust myself to your care and your healing." Faith says, "I turn to you, God, alone. My confidence is in your word and your character, no matter what happens." Faith says, "I know that you can do this and I know that you are good. I know that your heart is towards me. I'm not going to trust in myself or what I think I know. I'm going to trust in you." If we want to see healing today, we need faith.

Second,

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We need prayer

Honestly, how often do you pray for healing? Many of us would say not very often. John Wimber used to say: "Don't talk to me about not seeing physical healing until you've prayed for at least 200 people." Many of us are like baseball players who say: I've never hit a ball. Well, how many swings at the plate have you taken? Two? Five? Take 200 swings and you'll probably get your bat on the ball. I don't perceive myself to be some great healing pastor, but I've seen many people get healed simply because I've prayed for a lot of people. We need prayer.

For any of you who would like to receive training to pray, contact Kerry Davis

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Kerry's contact

Third,

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We need the right audience

One reason that we don't see many people healed is because we're praying for the wrong people. We restrict our praying to the people in the church, but that's not the primary place where God is working in the world today. The Bible says: "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned." One of our main problems is we stay primarily in the church and are not praying for people in the marketplace and the streets. Those who practice healing in the streets see more healings more regularly. The unchurched often receive healing more easily than the church. Signs and wonders are not primarily for the already converted. They are meant to be signs for those who are outside so that they can believe. We need faith. We need prayer. We need the right audience.

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We need patience

Most of us want to see instantaneous miracles all the time. That's a very small part of what most of us are going to get to see. Most of us will get to see progressive healings as we lean in and say "I will pray for you again." We will see improvement as we pray. We need patience.

The gospel of the kingdom is incredible good news that Jesus has come to restore the entire universe. But as I mentioned earlier, the center of this message is the forgiveness of sin.

Gospel call. Call for healing.

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Matthew 4:12-17, 23-25

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