

***John 20:19-23***

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the *doors being locked* where the disciples were *for fear* of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "*Peace* be with you." When he had said this, *he showed them* his hands and his side. Then the disciples were *glad* when they *saw* the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." And when he had said this, he *breathed* on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld."

When we left off it was the morning of the first day of the week and Peter and John had been to the tomb. They saw the empty tomb, the linens, and the face-cloth rolled up and they believed that Jesus had risen from the dead. In amazement they returned to their homes but Mary Magdalene stuck around. She was not at all convinced; in fact, she was an emotional wreck and just wanted to know what had been done with Jesus' body. But suddenly Jesus came to her and Mary saw Him, touched Him, talked to Him, and before He left He gave her an assignment—to tell the others that He had indeed risen and that He would be ascending to His Father and our Father, His God and our God. And Mary did just that; and then the story jumps from that amazing morning to later that evening of the same day.

But something seems seriously wrong with this picture. Come on; Jesus had risen! This is more than great news, it is unbelievable! But instead of their being out in the streets celebrating, partying and making a ruckus so that everyone would know that He rose from the dead, they are all gathered in one house, behind barred doors, afraid that at any moment the soldiers would come and take them away.

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And this is notwithstanding the fact that Luke and Mark both tell us that a couple of other disciples were walking out in the country and had an amazing encounter with Jesus. They came back and told everyone what happened, but it is apparent that no one believed.

So what do you think is going on here? Where is the faith of Peter, John, Mary, the other women who were at the tomb, and the two disciples who were on the Emmaus road? Why is everyone so afraid? Why is there no rejoicing? After all, He rose just as He said. Why are they acting like a bunch of cowering slaves? Why do they not believe the words they had heard and the things they had seen?

I stared at this passage for a long time trying to understand what the Spirit was communicating and it finally dawned on me. No matter how hard they tried, the disciples did not have either the power or the ability to believe beyond those brief moments in time when they were either in the presence of Jesus or in the presence of a miraculous work. They simply were not able to hold on to their faith; it faded with every tick of the clock; and as it faded fear filled the void.

We really cannot blame them, for at this time the disciples were what we would call “unbelievers.” They followed Jesus, they listened to His teachings, saw His miracles, called themselves disciples, and earnestly desired to believe, but there was one problem, they had yet to receive the power to believe—the power which can only come to a person from the Spirit of God when He takes up residence in their life. So no matter how hard they tried and wanted to have faith, they simply could not.

This takes us back to **John 3:3** when Jesus said a person must be born again of the Spirit in order to enter into and experience the kingdom of God. You see it is only the Spirit of God in our lives that gives any of us the ability to be faithful. At

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dinner on the night Jesus was betrayed, He explained that the Spirit had only been “with” the disciples but that He would soon be sending the Spirit to live within them such that the power to love God would come from God as He lived within their being (*John 14:17*). But as they were gathered that evening they still had not received the Spirit and were therefore unable to believe.

The Bible tells us that the base nature of every man, woman, and child is sinful, engulfed in darkness, and does not want God much less care to put in the effort to seek Him out (*Romans 3:11-19*). That is why Jesus suddenly appeared in their midst; His plan was to invade their darkness with His light. And receiving the Holy Spirit was the only way they could have received new life (and it is the only way we receive new life). Jesus is the one who comes to us, calls us, and gives us the power to see. As John said, “Life itself was in Him, and this life gives light to everyone. The light shines through the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it” (*John 1:4-5*).

This whole scene has overtones to the creation story and how darkness cloaked the world and the Spirit of God was only hovering over its surface. Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw that it was good (*Genesis 1:3-4*). The light invaded the darkness and it is only then that life was able to begin to grow on the earth. Similarly, from the moment Jesus breathed on them and gave them the Spirit of God, their true life in Christ began.

Let’s lay this story over our lives. I think it paints a perfect picture of how Jesus came to each and every one of us.

We were locked in the little room of our little life, afraid of the world, afraid of what might happen to us, afraid all that was unknown. We were prisoners of our own doing; caged by our sin. The doors were closed and we locked ourselves in

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hoping to protect ourselves, all the while knowing that even though we were hiding behind these barriers we were really not all that safe and secure. Someone could easily come along and break down our doors and carry us away. We even tried to make ourselves feel better by grouping with others who like us were caged in darkness and could not see.

Then one day Jesus decided to make us aware of His presence; we were not really looking for Him but He suddenly appeared. He said to us, “Peace be with you,” and with these words our hearts were put at ease as we knew His purposes in our life were for good and not for judgment, death or condemnation. By the way, it is no accident that in the Greek He used “Peace” as a noun and not an adjective. In other words, He said that He is our peace (*Ephesians 2:14*) and He came to give us Himself. He came to be the Peace that reconciles us with the Father. He came to be the Peace that settles in our hearts so we can fully experience the joy and gladness of His continual presence.

Prior to the time that Jesus made His presence known in our lives, we may have thought we wanted God, we may have even been a disciple in some religion that taught us about God and required us to live up to some standard that they deemed “godly,” but in reality our hearts had no light and we lived in total darkness. We were entirely self-seeking through and through. We wanted to come to God in the way we wanted; we did not even know His way. We wanted Him to be pleased with our efforts and give us credit for how hard we tried to be good. We did not even stop to find out that all He wanted was for us to believe.

It took His appearance in our lives for us to be faced with the truth that we were simply not able, on our own, to love God with our entire heart, mind and soul. We could try real hard, we could even feel that we were making some progress, but we would always fail and we would always fall short of God’s standard of perfection.

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It took His appearance in our lives for us to realize that sin's death grip on our life was something we could not manage, as evidenced by the fact that our lives were dominated by fear, doubt, and insecurity.

But He showed us His scars so that we might understand that He was the perfect sacrifice for our sins. In His resurrection He showed us that He conquered both sin and death and provided for us the way to receive not only the forgiveness of sins (the complete removal of everything we ever have done and everything we will ever do that does not meet the standard of perfection), but also to receive new life—His life. He came so that we might experience the new birth, which can only be brought about by the Spirit of God. When we believe, Jesus actually creates within us—within our being—an entirely new nature that is in His likeness—righteous, holy, and true (*Ephesians 4:24*); a nature which is not bound by sin or bound by death, but is absolutely free.

This is what happened to the disciples when Jesus breathed upon them and said: “receive the Holy Spirit.” At that moment in time His light penetrated their darkness and created a place in their being where the Spirit would take up permanent residence. In this depiction you can see *Genesis 2:7* and that famous passage in *Ezekiel 37: 1-10* come to life.

### ***Genesis 2:7-8***

Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.

***Ezekiel 37:1-10***

The Lord took hold of me, and I was carried away by the Spirit of the Lord to a valley filled with bones. He led me all around among the bones that covered the valley floor. They were scattered everywhere across the ground and were completely dried out. Then he asked me, "Son of man, can these bones become living people again?" "O Sovereign Lord," I replied, "you alone know the answer to that." Then he said to me, "Speak a prophetic message to these bones and say, 'Dry bones, listen to the word of the Lord! This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Look! I am going to put breath into you and make you live again! I will put flesh and muscles on you and cover you with skin. I will put breath into you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.'"

So I spoke this message, just as he told me. Suddenly as I spoke, there was a rattling noise all across the valley. The bones of each body came together and attached themselves as complete skeletons. Then as I watched, muscles and flesh formed over the bones. Then skin formed to cover their bodies, but they still had no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Speak a prophetic message to the winds, son of man. Speak a prophetic message and say, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come, O breath, from the four winds! Breathe into these dead bodies so they may live again.'" So I spoke the message as he commanded me, and breath came into their bodies. They all came to life and stood up on their feet—a great army.

Both of these passages provide a beautiful word picture of the life that Jesus brings to us through the Holy Spirit. In our sinful nature we are dead to the things

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of God, lifeless—mere dust and dried out bones. However, when He made His presence known in our life and we responded with gladness to His message of life, He gave us new life. And from that point forward, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are be able to love the Lord our God with our entire heart, mind, and soul.

### ***John 20:21***

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. *As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.*"

Jesus comes to us with a purpose and He has things to do through us; assignments from the Father to fulfill. In the same way that He gave Mary Magdalene her first assignment to preach the good news that He was alive, He has assignments for each of us. But before we go off all half-cocked start thinking of all that we can be doing for God, we have to remember that we are being sent out in the same way that the Father sent out Jesus, and that is to only do the Father's will. What have we learned from the gospel of John is that the Father sent Jesus to do everything that He told Him to do—no more and no less. And we know that Jesus did exactly as His Father required (***John 17:4-5***); again, no more or no less. And this is how we have been sent out—to accomplish all that the Father assigned for us to accomplish; *no more and no less*.

But I want us to take this slow for even the idea of us doing what God tells us to do is a bit of a "technical" misnomer. You see Jesus said His yoke is easy and His burden is light (***Matthew 11:30***). This is true because in actuality we don't have to worry about trying to do all these great things for God in some vain attempt to

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please Him. That is called religion but it is not true Christianity. The work of God is that we believe in Jesus (**John 6:29**) and cling to Him—literally hold on to Him for our very lives (**John 15:1-11**)—in order that our new nature will so dominate our being that He is free to do all the work through us. We are to become merely a vessel through which Jesus fulfills the Father's assignments.

### **John 14:12-14**

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who *believes* in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater than these he will do; because I go to the Father. "Whatever you ask in My name, *that will I do*, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. "If you ask Me anything in My name, *I will do*.

The key is *belief*—we must be willing to bet our lives on what we know to be true of God's character and nature and all that we know to be true from the Word of God. He will always be faithful to do His part—He will lead us, guide us, show us where to walk, and let us know what He wants us to do and say—we just need to give Him access and control. Remember, we have been sent out in the same manner that He was sent out: to only do what the Father tells us to do, only go where the Father tells us to go, and only say what He tells us to say—*nothing more and nothing less*.

### **John 20:23**

If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld." (ESV)



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***John 20:23***

"If you forgive the sins of any, have been forgiven them; if you retain, they have been retained." (NASB without the filler words)

Now this is a very difficult part of this passage and one that has led to much confusion. In fact, it is from a misinterpretation of this passage that some believe that certain men have the power to literally grant the forgiveness of sins to someone who comes to them and confesses or in turn can unilaterally refuse them forgiveness. But that is simply not a Biblical concept. So in order to ensure that we do a half way decent job of understanding this verse we need to follow a couple of general guidelines of interpretation. Number one, we must never interpret what is easy to understand by what is difficult, but we must always interpret the difficult by what is easy to understand. Second, we must ensure that we are staying within the context of this passage and how the passage fits in the overall message of the entire text, which in this case is very missional. John wrote that we might believe and Jesus made it clear that He has sent us to the world so that those in the world may know that the Father sent the Son and that the Father has loved us (***John 17:18-24***). This is so those in the world might be convinced that they too can receive the Father's love through the Son. Third, we must not come to a conclusion about a certain text if it obviously contradicts other key doctrines of the Bible.

So with that in mind, the first thing we know is that God alone is the one who forgives sins. "I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake, and I will not remember your sins (***Isaiah 43:25***). And when challenged by the Pharisees with this truth—that only God who can forgive sins—Jesus said that

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He has the authority on earth to forgive sins (*Matthew 9:6; Luke 5:24*). Peter, Paul and John also gave the following testimony:

***Acts 10:39-43***

They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

***Ephesians 1:7***

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses

***Colossians 1:13-14***

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

***1 John 1:9-10***

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

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Nowhere in the Bible do we see any of the Apostles or the disciples running around acting as if it is within their power to forgive or retain the sins of another. Jesus is the one who forgives the sins of everyone who comes to Him and believes in Him. Furthermore, this forgiveness is a once in a life time event. This means that once you have received Jesus' forgiveness it is a done deal—you are forgiven! You don't need to find someone to forgive you for any subsequent sins (*1 John 1:9*). When Jesus gives you new life and breathes into you the Holy Spirit, you are from that moment in time cleansed from all sin, which is why in *Ephesians 4:24* your new nature is called righteous, holy and true—it is created in God's likeness and is not corrupted with sin.

We therefore have no basis for concluding that any man has the authority on earth to literally forgive sins. I believe, however, that we can safely understand it in at least two ways: 1) introspectively—our relationship to forgiveness and 2) in the context of being “sent” and doing the Father's work.

First, from an introspective view, because we have new life and can choose to live from our new nature, we do not have to live with un-forgiveness in our hearts. We can forgive someone of their sins and offenses against us and they will be forgiven—literally wiped clean from our soul. It is truly miraculous. When we are willing to forgive, the offenses of others just have no place to fester in our hearts and there is no root from which grows anger, bitterness or hate. It's all gone!

### *Colossians 3:12-14*

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a

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complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

But if we choose instead to take, hold on to, or grasp to their sins (which is the literal translation in the Greek of the word we have translated “retain”), then such offenses will be held in our souls and will be inflamed by our old sinful nature. Therefore, we can choose to live from our new nature and forgive or live from our old sinful nature and hold on to, and be gripped by, offenses. We have the choice to live as freemen or as slaves. This is such a powerful truth in terms of how we live with each other and with those in the world.

Second, from a missional perspective and our being sent, forgiveness is tied ever so closely with our preaching of the gospel. Remember, we have been sent into the world so that those who live in darkness might come to believe that Jesus was sent by God. We are ambassadors of Christ and are called to show others the *pathway* by which they can be reconciled to God and receive forgiveness of sins (***2 Corinthians 5:18-21***). The preaching of the gospel and either the forgiveness or the retention of sins are intricately linked and cannot be separated.

For example, we know that shortly after Jesus breathed the Spirit into the disciples and they became born again, the Spirit empowered them, on the day of Pentecost, and these same disciples that were once afraid and hiding were suddenly out in public telling everyone that Jesus came from God, died for their sins, rose from the dead, ascended to the Father, and that forgiveness of sins is now available through belief in Jesus Christ (***Acts 2***). And when the people heard this message about 3,000 received it with *gladness* and were themselves born again forgiven of their sins, and others walked away and hardened themselves to the truth and their

sins were retained. Let's look at how the writer of Hebrews explains what happens when a person hears the truth but rejects the gospel of Jesus Christ.

***Hebrews 10:26-31***

For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

You see, Jesus died for the sins of all mankind (***John 3:16***), but each individual still has to decide for themselves if they will accept Jesus' offer to be completely forgiven of all their sins. But it is a choice; He does not force you to accept His offering. Paul says: "our hope is in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, and particularly of those who believe" (***1 Timothy 4:10***). Therefore, if you receive Jesus' offer to forgive your sins, your sins will be wiped clean and He will be your personal Lord and Savior. If, however, you reject Jesus' offer to forgive your sins, your sins will be retained and the only thing you have to look forward to in eternity is judgment.

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So the effect of our preaching of the gospel is that people are either forgiven as we give them the message of forgiveness or their sins are retained as they reject this message.

I know this was a difficult passage, but it did give us a chance to help you understand the process by which you are to handle difficult texts. Remember, we are not free to just read into verses whatever suits our fancy and we are not free to build a doctrine around a difficult text when our conclusions conflict with either the context of the immediate passage, the chapter, or the overall message of the book or letter, or if it conflicts with other easy to understand passages in the Bible.

### ***John 20:24-25***

But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples were saying to him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."

Ok, this kind of puts the exclamation mark on what we have just studied. Without the Spirit of God you simply cannot believe. In the case of Thomas it was not just a few trying to convince the many, but the entire gang was telling Thomas they had seen the Lord. And if anyone should have believed you think it would have been one of the 12; they are the ones who never left Jesus side. But he wanted physical proof; he wanted to see and he wanted to touch!

***John 20:26-29***

After eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you." Then He said to Thomas, "Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing." Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed."

I love this; after 8 days—the number of new beginnings—Thomas gets his new beginning. Jesus made another appearance and it was grand; once again the doors were shut and suddenly He appeared and again said “Peace be with you” or “I am with you.” I am sure that scared them to death. I could hear them saying to Jesus, whoa, we hate it when you do that. Could you please knock or give a shout, or something, but that is just too freaky. I’m sure Jesus had a little fun with that.

Jesus was once again on assignment and He came with a very specific purpose; He came for Thomas. This whole scene is so beautiful. Jesus approached Thomas with an amazing amount of mercy, compassion, and gentleness. He made Himself completely available to him; it was his time. And Jesus withheld nothing. You want to see me, here I am. You want to feel me, literally, in the Greek, “thrust” your hand in my side. Do whatever it takes for you to be fully convinced so that you would believe.

Thomas’ response—my Lord and my God—makes it clear that he chose to let Jesus into His heart and at that moment He became born again, for if a person confesses with their mouth that Jesus is Lord (the master of their life who gets to

call the shots in their life from then on) and *believes* in their heart that God raised Him from the dead, they are saved (*Romans 10:9*).

And then Jesus says the beautiful words that were written to comfort our hearts and encourage our souls: "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? *Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed.*" Perhaps there were others in the room that believed by the testimony of those who saw Him the first few times He appeared, but I like to think that Jesus was talking about you and me, and everyone else who has not literally seen Jesus in the flesh but has chosen to believe that He is Lord because He has made His presence and His love quite unmistakably visible in our lives. I love knowing that I am blessed! You and me, we walk by faith and not by sight yet we know we love Him and how much He loves us.

### *1 Peter 1:8-9*

You love him even though you have never seen him. Though you do not see him now, you trust him; and you rejoice with a glorious, inexpressible joy. The reward for trusting him will be the salvation of your souls.

This is awesome! What a glorious promise; just because we believe.

Let's Pray