

LIVING THE QUESTIONS IN Matthew

LIVING THE QUESTIONS IN Matthew

A NavStudy Featuring

The
MESSAGE



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ABOUT THE LIVING THE QUESTIONS SERIES

I want to beg you, as much as I can . . . to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. . . . Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

RAINER MARIA RILKE, *LETTERS TO A YOUNG POET*

Christians usually think about Jesus as the One with all the answers; the God-man with the evidence the verdict demands; a divine answer-man, sent down to earth to give us just what we need. And yes, he did give us just what we needed. Yet a careful reading of the Gospels shows that Jesus asked just as many questions as he gave outright answers. You would not have found a “The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it” bumper sticker on Jesus’ backpack. It was more like, “This is God’s Word. Stop and think about it, and let’s talk about it.”

However, the perception of Jesus as the divine answer-man appeals to a great many people. Life has questions, so you go to the Scriptures, look on the right page, find the answers, and everything’s good. But while that works great for algebra class, it just doesn’t seem to work well for this thing called *life*. Could the “divine answer-man” approach be too simplistic? Too one-dimensional for such a deep character as Jesus Christ? For one, it seems to leave you and me, the children of

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God, out of the picture. We're not collaborators with God; we're just laborers.

Jesus went about doing good. Apparently part of this “good” was asking great questions—questions that would cause people to stop and pause and ponder the things they were living for and what might be worth dying for; questions not bound by a calendar but applicable to the ages; questions as poignant today as they were then.

The book you hold in your hand takes the approach of looking at the questions found in the Gospels—the questions Jesus asked. The questions are specific to the text of Eugene Peterson's *The Message*. I'm talking about questions such as, “All this time and money wasted on fashion—do you think it makes that much difference?” or “Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick?” Our temptation might be to respond quickly because we think we know the answers. But what if these questions must be lived? Lived out in dimensions such as friendship, family, and church? Lived out in locales such as homes, classrooms, and forests primeval? Lived by the flesh and blood whose main focus is the future, and lived by those who think mainly of the past? And what if living out these questions might lead us one day, gradually, without noticing it, into The Answer—the One who described himself as the way, truth, and life?

Live the questions now.

HOW TO USE THIS DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. This NavStudy is meant to be completed on your own *and* in a small group. You'll want to line up your study group ahead of time. A group of four to six is optimal—any bigger and one or more members will likely be shut out of discussions. Your small group can also be two. Each person will need his or her own copy of this book.

2. Lessons open with a Scripture passage intended to help you to prepare your heart and mind for the content that follows. Don't skip over this preparation time. Use it to reflect, slow down from a busy life, and transition into your study time.

3. *Read* the Scripture passages and other readings in each lesson. Let it all soak in. Re-read if necessary. There's no blue ribbon for finishing quickly. Make notes in the white space on the page. If you like journaling, think of this as a space to journal. If you don't like journaling, just think of it as space to "think out loud on paper."

4. *Think* about what you read. Respond to the questions we've provided. Always ask, "What does this mean?" and "Why does this matter?" about the readings. Compare different Bible translations for Scripture readings. Respond to the questions we've provided, and then discuss the questions when you're in your small group. Allow the experience of others to broaden your wisdom. You'll be stretched—called upon to evaluate what you've discovered and asked to make practical sense of it. In community, that stretching can often be painful and sometimes even embarrassing. But your willingness to be transparent—your openness to the possibility of personal growth—will reap great rewards.

5. *Pray* as you go through the entire session: before you read a word, in the middle of your thinking process, when you get stuck on a concept or passage, and as you approach the time when you'll explore

these passages and thoughts together in a small group. Pause when you need to ask God for inspiration or when you need to cry out in frustration. Compose a prayer prompted by what you've uncovered in the readings and your responses to the "Think" questions.

6. *Live.* (That's "live" as in "rhymes with give" as in "Give me something I can really use in my life.") This is a place to choose one thing you can do to live out the question posed in the lesson. Don't try to craft a plan that is lofty or unreachable. Choose something small, something doable. Then, in your small group, talk about this "one thing." Commit to following through on your idea, wrestle with what that means in practical terms, and call upon your group members to hold you accountable.

7. *Follow up.* Don't let the life application drift away without action. Be accountable to small-group members and refer to previous "Live" as in "rhymes with give" sections often. Take time at the beginning of each new study to review. See how you're doing.

SMALL-GROUP STUDY TIPS

After going through each week's study on your own, it's time to sit down with others and go deeper. Here are a few thoughts on how to make the most of your small-group discussion time.

Set ground rules. You don't need many. Here are two:

First, you'll want group members to make a commitment to the entire ten-week study. Significant personal growth happens when group members spend enough time together to really get to know each other. Hit-and-miss attendance can hinder this growth.

Second, agree together that everyone's story is important. Time is a valuable commodity, so if you have an hour to spend together, do your best to give each person ample time to express concerns, pass along insights, and generally feel like a participating member of the group. Small-group discussions are not monologues. However, a one-person-dominated discussion isn't always a bad thing. Not only is your role in a small group to explore and expand your own understanding, it's also to support one another. If someone truly needs more of the floor, give it to him or her. There will be times when the needs of the one outweigh the needs of the many. Use good judgment and allow extra space when needed. *Your* time might be next week.

Meet regularly. Choose a time and place, and stick to it. Consistency removes stress that could otherwise frustrate discussion and subsequent personal growth.

Follow the book outline. Each week, open your small-group time with prayer, and read aloud the reflective Scripture passage that opens

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the lesson. Then go through the study together, reading each section aloud and discussing it with your group members. Tell others what you wrote. Write down new insights gleaned from other group members. Wrestle the questions together. When you get to the “Pray” section, ask for volunteers willing to read aloud their written prayers. Finally, spend a few minutes talking together about each person’s “one thing” and how to achieve that goal.

Talk openly. If you enter this study with shields up, you’re probably not alone. And you’re not a “bad person” for your hesitation to unpack your life in front of friends or strangers. Maybe you’re skeptical about the value of revealing to others the deepest parts of who you are. Maybe you’re simply too afraid of what might fall out of the suitcase. You don’t have to go to a place where you’re uncomfortable. If you want to sit and listen, offer a few thoughts, or even express a surface level of your own pain, go ahead. But don’t neglect what brings you to this place—that longing for meaning. You can’t ignore it away. Dip your feet in the water of brutally honest discussion, and you may choose to dive in. There is healing here.

Stay on task. Refrain from sharing material that falls into the “too much information” category. Don’t spill unnecessary stuff. If structure isn’t your group’s strength, try a few minutes of general comments about the study, and then take each question one at a time and give everyone in the group a chance to respond.

LESSON 1

“If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you?” (Matthew 5:15)

Before You Begin

Take some time to reflect and prepare your heart and mind for this study. Read the following Scripture passage. Soak up God’s Word. There’s no hurry. Then, when you’re ready, turn the page and begin.

1 JOHN 4:16-18

God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. This way, love has the run of the house, becomes at home and mature in us, so that we’re free of worry on Judgment Day—our standing in the world is identical with Christ’s. There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life—fear of death, fear of judgment—is one not yet fully formed in love.

READ

Matthew 5:13-16

“Let me tell you why you are here. You’re here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You’ve lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.

“Here’s another way to put it: You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. **If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you?** I’m putting you on a light stand. Now that I’ve put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.”

THINK

“If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you?”

- What is your immediate response to this question?
- Why do you think you responded in this way?
- As you were growing up, what did you hear/think were the reasons why you’re on earth? Who or where did that come from?
- Has that belief changed over time? Now what do you believe about why you’re here?
- Look again at what Jesus said. What, if any, differences and similarities are there between his words and yours?

READ

From *Man's Search for Meaning*, by Viktor Frankl¹

The tender beginnings of a psychotherapy or psychohygiene were, when they were possible at all in the camp, either individual or collective in nature. The individual psychotherapeutic attempts were often a kind of “life-saving procedure.” The efforts were usually concerned with the prevention of suicides. A very strict camp ruling forbade any efforts to save a man who attempted suicide. It was forbidden, for example, to cut down a man who was trying to hang himself. Therefore, it was all important to prevent these attempts from occurring.

I remember two cases of would-be suicide, which bore a striking similarity to each other. Both men had talked of their intentions to commit suicide. Both used the typical argument—they had nothing more to expect from life. In both cases it was a question of getting them to realize that life was still expecting something from them; something in the future was expected of them. We found, in fact, that for the one it was his child whom he adored and who was waiting for him in a foreign country. For the other it was a thing, not a person.

This man was a scientist and had written a series of books which still needed to be finished. His work could not be done by anyone else, any more than another person could ever take the place of the father in his child's affections.

This uniqueness and singleness which distinguishes each individual and gives a meaning to his existence has a bearing on creative work as much as it does on human love. When the impossibility of replacing a person is realized, it allows the responsibility which a man has for his existence and its continuance to appear in all its magnitude. A man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears toward a human being who affectionately waits for him, or to an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away his life. He knows the “why” for his existence, and will be able to bear almost any “how.”

THINK

“If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you?”

- What thoughts do Frankl’s words stir in you?
- “In both cases it was a question of getting them to realize that life was still expecting something from them; something in the future was expected of them.” What are some things that life might still be expecting of you?
- What are your thoughts about this in light of Jesus’ question? Does the prospect of being a light-bearer imply something God is expecting of you? Explain.
- “When the impossibility of replacing a person is realized, it allows the responsibility which a man has for his existence and its continuance to appear in all its magnitude.” Do you really believe it’s impossible to replace you? Why or why not?

READ

From *A River Runs Through It*, by Norman Maclean²

One great thing about fly fishing is that after a while nothing exists of the world but thoughts about fly fishing. It is also interesting that thoughts about fishing are often carried on in dialogue form where Hope and Fear—or, many times, two Fears—try to outweigh each other.

One Fear looked down the shoreline and said to me (a third person distinct from the two Fears), “There is nothing but rocks for thirty yards, but don’t get scared and try to land him before you get all the way down to the first sandbar.”

The Second Fear said, “It’s forty, not thirty, yards to the first sandbar and the weather has been warm and the fish’s mouth will be soft and he will work off the hook if you try to fight him forty yards downriver. It’s not good but it will be best to try and land him on a rock that is closer.”

The First Fear said, “There is a big rock in the river that you will have to take him past before you land him, but, if you hold the line tight enough on him to keep him this side of the rock, you will probably lose him.”

The Second Fear said, “But if you let him get on the far side of the rock, the line will get caught under it, and you will be sure to lose him.”

That’s how you know when you have thought too much—when you become a dialogue between *You’ll probably lose* and *You’re sure to lose*.

THINK

“If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you?”

- “Thoughts about fishing are often carried on in dialogue form where Hope and Fear . . . try to outweigh each other.” Does this sound anything at all like someone you know? Does it sound like you?

- When was the last time a “dialogue” between Hope and Fear took place for you? Be specific.
- “When you become a dialogue between *You’ll probably lose* and *You’re sure to lose*,” Maclean says, “That’s how you know when you have thought too much.” Martin Luther King called it the “paralysis of analysis.” Think about a moment when you “thought too much” or became paralyzed in your actions, speech, and so on. Looking back, what was that moment asking for from you?
- In what ways, if any, does the “paralysis of analysis” live in your response to Jesus’ question?

READ

From *Alley Violinist*, by Robert Lax³

if you were an alley violinist
and they threw you money from
three windows

and the first note contained
a nickel and said:
when you play, we dance and
sing, signed
a very poor family

and the second one contained
a dime and said:
I like your playing very much,
signed
a sick old lady

and the last one contained
a dollar and said:
beat it,

would you:
stand there and play?
beat it?
walk away playing your fiddle?

THINK

“If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you?”

- If you were an alley violinist, how would you answer the question at the conclusion of the poem? Why?
- Have you ever let someone buy you off so you’d lay down your fiddle and leave? How did you feel when that happened? Looking back, what did it cost you?

- What do your answers to the poem and the previous question say about your willingness to be a light-bearer?

READ

Daniel 1:3-13

The king told Ashpenaz, head of the palace staff, to get some Israelites from the royal family and nobility— young men who were healthy and handsome, intelligent and well-educated, good prospects for leadership positions in the government, perfect specimens!— and indoctrinate them in the Babylonian language and the lore of magic and fortunetelling. The king then ordered that they be served from the same menu as the royal table—the best food, the finest wine. After three years of training they would be given positions in the king’s court.

Four young men from Judah . . . were among those selected. The head of the palace staff gave them Babylonian names: Daniel was named Belteshazzar, Hananiah was named Shadrach, Mishael was named Meshach, Azariah was named Abednego.

But Daniel determined that he would not defile himself by eating the king’s food or drinking his wine, so he asked the head of the palace staff to exempt him from the royal diet. The head of the palace staff, by God’s grace, liked Daniel, but he warned him, “I’m afraid of what my master the king will do. He is the one who assigned this diet and if he sees that you are not as healthy as the rest, he’ll have my head!”

But Daniel appealed to a steward who had been assigned by the head of the palace staff to be in charge of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: “Try us out for ten days on a simple diet of vegetables and water. Then compare us with the young men who eat from the royal menu. Make your decision on the basis of what you see.”

THINK

“If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you?”

- Do you think you would have been as bold as Daniel in a circumstance similar to this one? Why or why not?

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- When in life do you tend to “hide yourself under a bucket”?
- What would it take to give you confidence to be a light-bearer in even difficult or challenging situations?

PRAY

Look back at the “Think” sections. Ruminates on your responses. Let them distill into a prayer, and then write that prayer below.

O Perfect Love . . .

The issue of prayer is not prayer; the issue of prayer is God.

ABRAHAM HESCHEL

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LIVE

"If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you?"

The challenge now is to take this question further along—to live out this question. Think of one thing, *just one*, that you can personally do to wrestle with the question, inhabit the character of it, and live it in everyday life. In the following space, jot down your thoughts on this "one thing." Read the Scripture and quotes that follow for additional inspiration. During the coming week, pray about this "one thing," talk with a close friend about it, and learn to live the question.

One thing...

There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life—fear of death, fear of judgment—is one not yet fully formed in love.

1 John 4:18

Playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. . . . And, as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

Nelson Mandela

Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

RAINER MARIA RILKE, *LETTERS TO A YOUNG POET*

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