

WEEK THREE



Michael and Joseph (front, right) at World Vision's Children of War Center in Gulu, Uganda.

Jon Warren/World Vision 2006

Week 3:

BASED ON

THE HOLE IN OUR GOSPEL: THE HOLE GETS DEEPER



FACT

Today there are 42 different conflicts being waged across the world. The 20th century was the bloodiest in human history, and its war casualties were three times greater than those of the previous 500 years combined. The ongoing war in the Democratic Republic of Congo has taken more than 5 million lives, with more than 45,000 people dying each month. (*The Hole in Our Gospel*, p. 157)



SCRIPTURE | MATTHEW 25:31-46

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your

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inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

“The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

“He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”



A MOST DISTRESSING DISGUISE

Excerpt from The Hole in Our Gospel by Rich Stearns

We gathered together in a group of about 60—me, my wife, and my daughter Hannah, along with a few WorldVision Uganda staff and perhaps 40 children of various ages. We were waiting for them to arrive, planning to greet them with songs and celebration. We had been told they would arrive that morning.

As the metal gates creaked open, our anticipation grew—they were here. The SUV slowly pulled in, inched its way toward us, and finally came to a stop. Then the doors opened, and two teenage boys tentatively stepped out to face the crowd. I could see both fear and confusion on their faces—they clearly weren’t expecting this kind of welcome, not for two mass murderers.

I don’t think I’ve ever been to a place as spiritually dark as Gulu, in northern Uganda. Gulu is the epicenter of more than 20 years of violent atrocities committed by the so-called Lord’s Resistance Army and its leader, Joseph Kony, a monster who has declared himself to be the son of God. If Satan is alive and manifesting himself in our world, he is surely present in this cultish and brutal group whose trademark was the kidnapping of children who are subsequently forced at gunpoint to commit murder, rape, and even acts of cannibalism. During his reign of terror, it is believed that Kony has kidnapped more than 38,000 children, killing some and forcing the rest to become killers themselves by conscripting them into the LRA as child soldiers. As a part of their brutal indoctrination, the

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children are often forced to hack their own brothers or sisters to death with a machete—because bullets are too precious to waste—and then to drink the blood of those they have killed. The girls, often just 12 or 13, are gang-raped and forced to become sex slaves and “wives” to the rebel commanders. As a result of the LRA’s grisly raids over two decades, some 1.5 million people have been driven from their land and forced to live in camps for internally displaced persons in and around Gulu. It was in this unlikely backdrop that I witnessed the awesome power of the gospel that has become so tame to us in America.

For more than a decade, WorldVision’s Children of War Center has worked to rehabilitate and restore the children who are rescued or manage to escape from the LRA rebels. These are children with unimaginable spiritual, psychological, and emotional wounds, kids who are typically feared as monsters and rejected by the very communities they once came from because of what they have been forced to do. Sometimes their own parents do not want them back; their childhoods have been stolen from them and their very souls desecrated by horror after horror. Intense spiritual and emotional counseling, forgiveness and reconciliation, and even job skills training have been provided to thousands of these damaged children. The two boys entering the compound that day had also been subjected to the depredations of their own captivity by the LRA. They, too, had been forced to kill and maim.

Their eyes were hollow and vacant—eyes that had seen unspeakable things. Their souls seemed dead. I could see no life in them. *Jesus in His most distressing disguise.* They had been captured by the Ugandan army, and now they were being brought to WorldVision for help, for redemption, for healing. They had names, Michael and Joseph. Michael’s left arm was withered, the result of a gunshot wound sustained before he was fully grown, in some past firefight. The LRA warned their child soldiers that they would be murdered by their own people if they ever tried to go home. They were even told that if they were taken to the Children of War Center run by WorldVision, they would be poisoned—or worse. That is why these boys were terrified that day, stepping out of the car.

The 40 other “children of war”—damaged souls all—surrounded them and began singing and clapping joyfully. These songs of praise to God, anthems of healing and forgiveness, were more beautiful than any choir of angels. Michael and Joseph were dumbstruck at this welcome, so different from what they had expected. They began to see faces they knew, other kids who had escaped—who had, like them, also known the brutal hand of the LRA and had murdered at their command. Some spark of light began to return to their hollow eyes.

Hesitant smiles slowly turned up the corners of their mouths, as high fives and hugs were offered by this one and that. Soon, all 50 of us poured into the makeshift chapel of corrugated tin and rough wooden benches in the compound. A spontaneous worship service erupted as the songs of God’s healing forgiveness and power were sung over and over again. *Welcome home, welcome home, Michael and Joseph. You are home now.* The good news—the glorious, life-transforming gospel—washed over Michael and Joseph, and in that moment the unthinkable possibility of forgiveness broke over them like a new dawn. They *could* be forgiven, restored, made whole again. This was almost impossible to believe, the “glad tidings” so overwhelmingly good.

He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (Luke 4:18–19)

*“Even a small match
lit in a place of total
darkness gives off a
blinding light.”*

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Even a small match lit in a place of total darkness gives off a blinding light. So great had Michael and Joseph's darkness been that the light of the gospel, the whole gospel, was brilliant and blinding, shining with intensity, authority, and hope. Jesus, too, had been abducted. He, too, had been beaten and maimed. And He, like them, had faced unspeakable evil—and defeated it. Jesus had made forgiveness possible.

It was Easter week, and two days later, I was asked to preach at the chapel service at the Children of War Center, to the 40 child “soldiers” who had found the meaning of Easter in one of the darkest corners of the world. I decided to speak on the parable of the prodigal son, of the father embracing his estranged boy, forgiving every transgression unconditionally, slaying the fatted calf, celebrating the lost son being found—and restoring him to his place at home, *welcoming* him home. As I preached, I watched Michael and Joseph, now just two more faces in the choir, as they listened to the message with a new hope in their eyes and fervent praise on their lips. Prodigal sons too, they were home now, in the arms of their Father. They had experienced the good news, the *gospel*, and found in it their own redemption—just as I had. (pp. 61-63)



MEDITATIONS

“But what we can and must do in the present, if we are obedient to the gospel, if we are following Jesus, and if we are indwelt, energized, and directed by the Spirit, is to build *for* the kingdom. This brings us back to 1 Corinthians 15:58 once more: what you do in the Lord *is not in vain*. You are not oiling the wheels of a machine that’s about to roll over a cliff. You are not restoring a great painting that’s shortly going to be thrown on the fire. You are not planting roses in a garden that’s about to be dug up for a building site. You are—strange though it may seem, almost as hard to believe as the resurrection itself—accomplishing something that will become in due course part of God’s new world. Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or to walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support, for one’s fellow human beings and for that matter one’s fellow nonhuman creatures; and of course every prayer, all Spirit-led teaching, every deed that spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honored in the world—all of this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make. That is the logic of the mission of God.”

—*N. T. Wright* (p. 69)

“Let me take some liberties and paraphrase these verses for today’s reader: ‘For I was hungry, while you had all you needed. I was thirsty, but you drank bottled water. I was a stranger, and you wanted me deported. I needed clothes, but you needed *more* clothes. I was sick, and you pointed out the behaviors that led to my sickness. I was in prison, and you said I was getting what I deserved.’”

—*Rich Stearns* (p. 59)

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How often do you think about those around you as though they were Christ Himself? How would this change the way you treat people?
2. What strikes you about Matthew 25:31–45? How does it challenge your view of what it means to be a Christ-follower?
3. We are told that Jesus often comes to us in disguise, even in the faces of young boys who were forced to kill and maim others. Do you believe this? Why or why not?
4. Rich talks about the intensity of the light of the gospel in such darkness. Have you ever experienced this blinding and brilliant gospel message in the midst of your own darkness or in darkness that you have witnessed? If so, share that experience.
5. Why do you think many of us are so overwhelmed by the amount of pain in the world that we are inclined to look the other way and stay in our own “bubble”? How does N.T. Wright’s quote speak to this type of attitude?
6. How might seeing the poor through God’s eyes change your view?
7. How do the things you do and the choices you make build up the kingdom of God? If you were to think of these choices as something that might be resurrected into the new creation that God is constructing, how would it give you hope and stir you to do more?
8. What did you think of Rich’s paraphrase of Matthew 25? Does this version speak to you more directly? If so, how? What part stands out to you?



TAKE ACTION

As you interact with others this week, remember Matthew 25:31–45 and ask God to help you see the spirit of Christ in those you come across. Keep a listing or journal on how these experiences change your interactions. Are you more patient, attentive, kind, and encouraging to others? Think of someone you find difficult to love, and make a commitment to think about that person as one whom Christ dearly loves. Be intentional in praying for and loving that person. This exercise may prove to be very difficult for you, but when we learn to see Jesus in “His most distressing disguise,” we will begin to see Him in many places.

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CHALLENGE

Look for ways to reach out to the lonely, lost, and hurting in this world. Remember that whatever you do to the “least of these,” you do for Christ.



SCRIPTURE FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Micah 6:8
- Isaiah 58:1–11
- Luke 7:20–21
- 1 Corinthians 1:26–29
- 1 John 2:3–6
- Matthew 22:34–40



PRAYER

Pray for the children of war; pray that they will find hope in Christ. Pray for those who care for and rehabilitate child soldiers around the world. Pray that God will give the workers strength, wisdom, and compassion as they care for these deeply wounded children. Pray that you may be able to see Christ in all those you encounter each day. Pray for renewed hope in knowing that what you do in the Lord is not in vain.