

An abstract geometric design featuring a network of thick, colored lines in shades of orange, red, green, and blue. The lines intersect at various points, some of which are marked with small circles. A prominent yellow circle is centered on one of the intersections. The background is a light cream color.

God's Unfolding Story

A SCRIPTURE STUDY GUIDE

How to use this Guide

The Bible is an intimidating book. It's thousands of years old, it's full of different genres, it was written by many different people who lived in different places, it was composed, edited, and compiled over hundreds of years, there are hundreds of different contemporary translations available, and frankly, it's very long. I find that even the most basic of questions like "Where should I start reading?" can be challenging.

We all consciously or subconsciously create approaches to reading the Bible. Here are a few approaches I have encountered over the years, and a downside to each of these approaches:

I don't read the Bible. I prefer to engage Scripture through listening to sermons or lectures from religious professionals. **Downside:** I do not have habits of personal, devotional Bible reading.

I read the Bible in a year. I find a reading plan that helps me to read the whole Bible over the course of the year. **Downside:** I often burn out or experience fatigue in the longer and more tedious sections of Scripture. I often find myself reading quickly to accomplish a task.

I read for my need. I have a list of favorite Scriptures that I regularly return to which speak to the emotional and spiritual needs that I am currently experiencing. **Downside:** I find that the Bible usually confirms my intuitions and rarely challenges me.

I only read the gospels. I spend my time reading the stories and teachings of Jesus. **Downside:** I ignore other parts of Scripture and effectively have my own bible within the Bible

I thumb and point. When I feel like I should be reading my Bible more, I just open it to a spot that seems interesting. **Downside:** I have a lot of disjointed thoughts about the Bible, and I lack an understanding of the overall story.

While all of these approaches can be helpful, we are hoping that this resource will help you to engage Scripture in a more fruitful way. We have curated a year-long Scripture journey which will take you through a number of significant scripture passages beginning in Genesis and ending in Revelation. This resource is designed to be used in community, and has been written to orient first time readers of Scripture to the larger narrative of God's word. It is our hope that this resource will help you engage Scripture with your minds as you learn more about lesser known parts of Scripture and discover connections between different parts of the Bible. We also hope that this resource helps you to engage Scripture with your heart as you slow down with God's word and become attentive to the ways it challenges you and calls you into deeper faithfulness.

I offered a downside to other approaches of reading Scripture, so I should offer a downside to this resource as well. One downside of this resource is that we move quickly and selectively through large portions of Scripture. We do not linger long in any one book of the Bible. In this way, we have sacrificed depth of engagement in any one area to encourage a broad engagement with the whole of Scripture.

With this in mind, each passage is introduced with an “orienting us to our text” section which seeks to place the passage in a larger context.

If you are using this resource in a small group or a Bible study, we encourage you to follow this outline for a one hour meeting.

Welcome and checking in with one another (10 minutes)

- Where have you experienced joy this week?
- What has been challenging for you this week?
- What has been occupying your time and attention?

Engaging Scripture (35 minutes)

- Read “Orienting us to our text” out loud.
- Read the Scripture passage out loud.
- Discuss the two or three “Dig Deeper” questions.

Prayer Requests and Group Prayer (15 minutes)

- Share prayer requests with one another and pray together as a group.

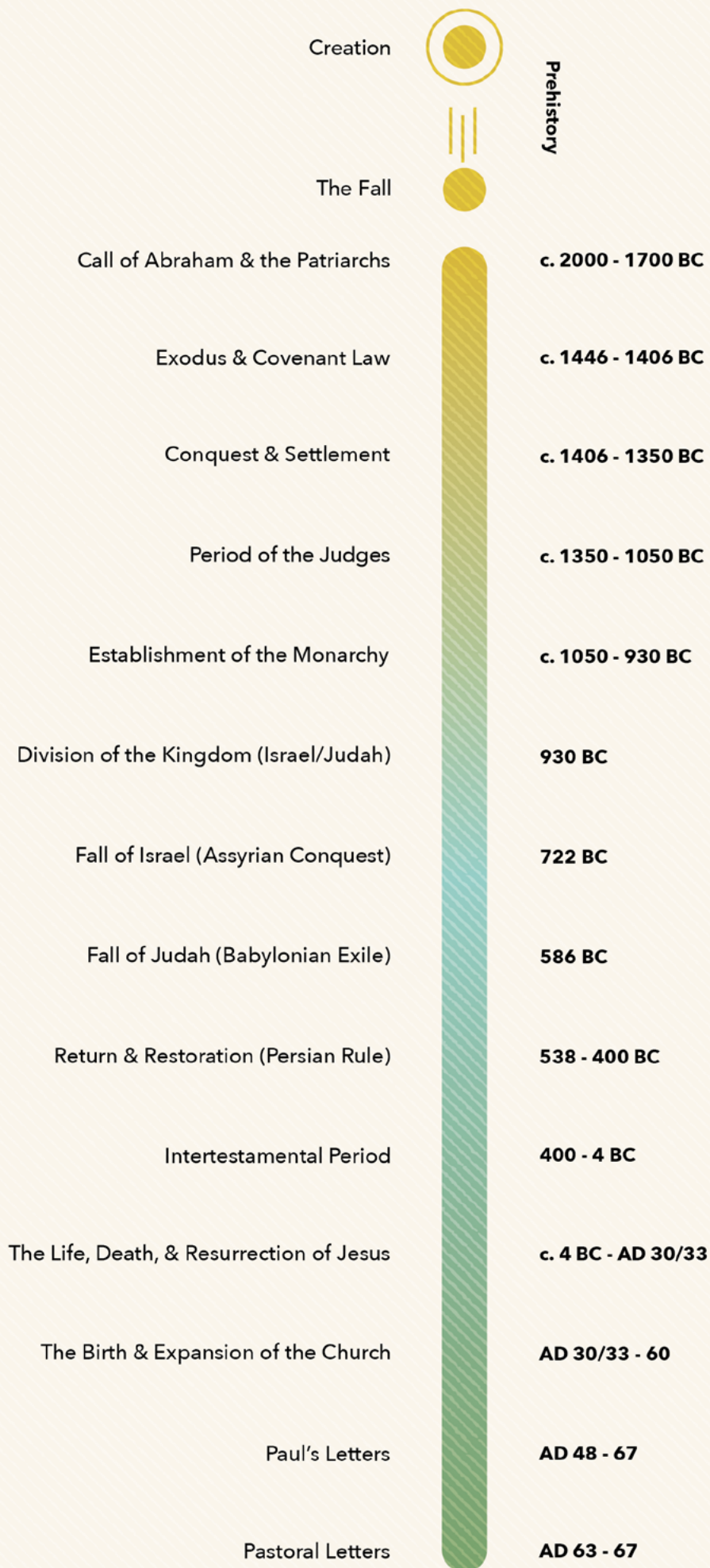
While this tool is designed to be used in a group setting, it can also be used in a personal Bible study time. You can alter the outline to accommodate a personal devotional time by beginning with silence and meditation, engaging the Scripture and journaling answers to the “dig deeper” questions, and ending in prayer asking that God would help you to apply what you have meditated on in your life.

One other note. This resource is designed to follow the church calendar year. If there are weeks that your group does not meet, you should skip the lesson you missed and move on to the next lesson that corresponds with the current calendar date. You are encouraged to complete the lesson you missed in a time of personal Bible study or with a friend.

Go with this promise from Isaiah 55:11 “so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

Peace,

Ben Davison, Allen Hilton, and Kathryn Sedberry





Week 1

August 30, 2026

GENESIS 2.1-25

There's hardly a more famous part of the Bible than this creation story. Michelangelo mused on it when he painted his classic, "The Creation of Adam", with God straining to bless the much-less-eager Adam. Song-writer Brad Roberts had it in mind when he composed, "God Shuffled His Feet", picturing a post-creation scene filled with awkward silences between the Maker and the made. Far too many not-so-funny jokes about men and women flow from the depiction of Adam and Eve. And James Weldon Johnson's brilliant poem, "The Creation", captures the outlandish truth of it all when he pictures the all-powerful Creator, "Like a mammy bending over her baby, / Kneeled down in the dust / Toiling over a lump of clay / Till he shaped it in his own image..."

How will these iconic verses land with you?

- You might compare the sculpting, hands-dirty character of God in Genesis 2 with the One in Genesis 1 who simply says "Let there be light!" and starts the whole process. Christians have thrilled through the centuries that the God who engineers galaxies is near enough to breathe life into you and me.
- You could ask what it means that God puts Adam in charge of naming the animals and seems keen to make sure the first man is well-suited. How does this caring God show up in your life?
- You might remember that we're opening some ancient people's mail here. Biblical scholars always debate dates for traditions, but this account of creation likely came very early in the shared life of the Hebrew people. We can picture grandparents telling it to their kids' kids or tribal elders telling it to the village gathered 'round a fire in the evening, all before God inspired someone to write it down. How do you think it might have formed their relationships with God and one another?

Genesis 2 is a gift. We hope you'll enjoy opening it together!

¹ Thus the heavens and the earth were finished and all their multitude. ² On the sixth day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. ³ So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

⁴ These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, ⁵ when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no vegetation of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground, ⁶ but a stream would rise from the earth and water the whole face of the ground—⁷ then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. ⁸ And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹ Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

¹⁰ A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. ¹¹ The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold, ¹² and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. ¹³ The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. ¹⁴ The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

¹⁵ The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶ And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷ but of the tree of

the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

¹⁸ Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." ¹⁹ So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air and brought them to the man to see what he would call them, and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. ²⁰ The man gave names to all cattle and to the birds of the air and to every animal of the field, but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. ²¹ So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²² And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³ Then the man said,

"This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken."

²⁴ Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. ²⁵ And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

Questions

1. *What does this passage teach us about God and his character?*
2. *What is God's action in this text, and how are we invited to participate in that work?*
3. *What are the key verbs in this passage, and who is the subject of these verbs? What theological insight do we learn from this?*



Week 2

September 6, 2026

GENESIS 6.5-22; 8.6-12; 9.8-17

"We give the hardest passages to the kids." The great 20th-century preacher and writer, Fredrick Buechner, once said about David and Goliath and Noah's Ark.

He's right: every Sunday School program worth its salt teaches children to sing cheerily about Noah and the ark and the animals and the flood. But the flood is God's response to humanity's spiral deeper and deeper into sin – so far that "the earth is filled with violence because of them". This is hardly cheery. Genesis 6-9 make us look human evil straight in the face, reckon with God's judgment on it, and reflect on God's solution: a purging of the human and animal population, but for a small family of survivors. Maybe this should be an adults-only film.

This is more than a story of judgment, though. When Noah hears the voice of God he obeys it, even though it means toting an umbrella when there isn't a cloud in the sky. Old Testament heroes have this in common. Abraham and Sarah, Moses, and Mary of Nazareth all hear God's call to very strange things. They go. They do.

But back to those kids. The ones I know, who think beyond the songs and motions, ask how the predators could hop on board and cohabit with the prey...for 40 days and 40 nights. Another reason to put our big-person pants on is the question of this narrative's value as history. Readers have long debated how this tradition of a worldwide flood came to the Bible in the first place. Flood narratives of different kinds dot the landscape of the ancient near east and make some readers ask whether the cataclysms that gave rise to them would have been local or universal.

In the end, though, whether this is history or inspired story, maybe the most pressing questions this text raises are what God sees when the divine eyes beam in on us – ourselves, our church, our state, our nation, and the world – and how we can become more Noahic-ally faithful as we live these days.

GENESIS 6:5-22

⁵The Lord saw that the wickedness of humans was great in the earth and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. ⁶ And the Lord was sorry that he had made humans on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. ⁷ So the Lord said, "I will blot out from the earth the humans I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air—for I am sorry that I have made them." ⁸ But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord.

⁹ These are the descendants of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God. ¹⁰ And Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

¹¹ Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. ¹² And God saw that the earth was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. ¹³ And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth. ¹⁴ Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. ¹⁵ This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. ¹⁶ Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above, and put the door of the ark in its side; make it with lower, second, and third decks. ¹⁷ For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. ¹⁸ But I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. ¹⁹ And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. ²⁰ Of the birds according to their kinds and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive. ²¹ Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up, and it shall serve as food for you and for them." ²² Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.

GENESIS 8:6-12

⁶ At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made ⁷ and sent out the raven, and it

went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. ⁸ Then he sent out the dove from him to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground, ⁹ but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took it and brought it into the ark with him. ¹⁰ He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the dove from the ark, ¹¹ and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. ¹² Then he waited another seven days and sent out the dove, and it did not return to him any more.

GENESIS 9:8-17

⁸ Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹ "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you ¹⁰ and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. ¹¹ I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." ¹² God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³ I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh, and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶ When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." ¹⁷ God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

Questions

1. *How does this passage speak to God's desire to create, redeem, deliver, judge, and save the world?*
2. *How does the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus transform our understanding of this passage?*
3. *What does God's promise to Noah teach us about God's intention for the salvation of people and the redemption of the world?*



Week 3

September 13, 2026

GENESIS 39.1-23

Some Bible scenes should be Rated MA (mature audiences), and this is one of them. As our story begins, Joseph, arrogant “Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat” guy and favorite son of the patriarch Jacob, has alienated his 11 brothers, been sold into Egyptian slavery by those same spiteful brothers, but somehow found himself in the good graces of mighty Pharaoh Potiphar. What happens next is the stuff of TV soaps or B movies. Pharaoh’s bored and wayward wife wants Joseph’s buff and beautiful body in her bed, and she is accustomed to getting what she wants. The steamy pursuit that follows and his noble refusal ultimately leave Joseph wrongly imprisoned.

Why is this story in the Bible? It’s scintillating, to be sure – great entertainment! But what themes make it scripture-worthy? To answer this question, it helps to know Joseph’s family story. He’s the great grandson of Abraham and Sarah, to whose family God promised great blessings, and through whom God intended to bless all the nations of the world. (Genesis 12.1-4) At this point in the family’s saga, Joseph’s survival seems unnecessary – even superfluous. He has all those brothers, after all, and they can carry on the family name and perpetuate God’s promise.

In a short few years, though, a devastating famine will plague the family’s promised land and those very brothers will come hat in hand to Egypt, starved and begging desperately for food scraps to survive. (Genesis 42) When they arrive, their rescue will await them, because guess what “handsome and good looking” former-prisoner-turned-Egyptian-Secretary-of-Agriculture will save their lives and secure the family’s future?

In this story, we can notice both God’s faithfulness to the promise, and just how important Joseph’s own faithfulness is to God’s plan on earth. Where do you see God’s faithfulness in your life? In the life of your church? And how can your small acts of faithfulness to God matter for the divine doings on earth?

³⁹Now Joseph was taken down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. ²The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man; he was in the house of his Egyptian master. ³His master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hands. ⁴So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him; he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. ⁵From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and field. ⁶So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and with him there he had no concern for anything but the food that he ate.

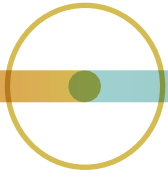
Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking. ⁷And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." ⁸But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Look, with me here, my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand. ⁹He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" ¹⁰And although she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not consent to lie beside her or to be with her. ¹¹One day, however, when he went into the house to do his work, and while no one else was in the house, ¹²she caught hold of his garment, saying, "Lie with me!" But he left his garment in her hand and fled and ran outside. ¹³When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled outside, ¹⁴she called out to the members of her household and said to them, "See, my husband[a] has brought among us a Hebrew to insult us! He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice, ¹⁵and when he heard me raise my voice and cry out, he left his garment beside me and fled outside." ¹⁶Then she kept his garment by her until his master came home, ¹⁷and she told him

the same story, saying, "The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to insult me, ¹⁸but as soon as I raised my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me and fled outside."

¹⁹When his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, saying, "This is the way your servant treated me," he became enraged. ²⁰And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; he remained there in prison. ²¹But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. ²²The chief jailer committed to Joseph's care all the prisoners who were in the prison, and whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. ²³The chief jailer paid no heed to anything that was in Joseph's care because the Lord was with him, and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper.

Questions

1. *What does Joseph receive on account of his faithfulness? How does this challenge a common assumption often held among Christians that if you obey God, he will prosper your life?*
2. *What does this passage teach us about suffering and patience?*
3. *Which promises of God in this passage do you need to lean on more deeply?*



Week 4

September 20, 2026

EXODUS 14.5-29

"Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph."

With this one sentence (rendered in the quaint language of the King James Version) the first verses of Exodus introduce a devastating plot twist. The same family who had escaped famine because a compassionate Pharaoh empowered the Hebrew hero Joseph, would now face 400 years of enslavement under a chain of abusive rulers. But God's care did not go away. When God "observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt" and "heard their cry on account of their taskmasters" he saw their sufferings, so came "down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey." These divine pledge words from Exodus 3, which God spoke to Moses from a burning bush, ultimately pave the way for the dramatic divine parting of the Red Sea.

As you read Exodus 14 in light of the burning bush encounter, God's power will be obvious and central to the story: the waters of a great sea dry up long enough to let God's people pass through. But what of God's character? The God who last week saved the Hebrew people partly through an Egyptian pharaoh's admiration for Joseph, this week rescues them in spite of the cantankerous opposition of an Egyptian enslaver. The enslaved peoples of the United States have found strength and hope in this narrative and the God it presents. In last week's episode, no Egyptians were harmed; this week's story comes on the heels of a plague that kills all the firstborn males of that land and ends with the bodies of drowned Egyptian soldiers washing up on shore. What do these mechanisms of Israel's liberation and this judgment of Egypt's abuses teach us about the God of Exodus? And how does this picture of God land in our 17th, 18th, 19th, 20th, and 21st-century American setting?

⁵When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the minds of Pharaoh and his officials were changed toward the people, and they said, "What have we done, letting Israel leave our service?" ⁶So he had his chariot made ready and took his army with him; ⁷he took six hundred elite chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them. ⁸The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he pursued the Israelites, who were going out boldly. ⁹The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh's horses and chariots, his chariot drivers and his army; they overtook them camped by the sea, by Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon.

¹⁰As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. ¹¹They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? ¹²Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone so that we can serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." ¹³But Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today, for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. ¹⁴The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still."

¹⁵Then the Lord said to Moses, "Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. ¹⁶But you lift up your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground. ¹⁷Then I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them, and so I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers. ¹⁸Then the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I have gained glory for myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his chariot drivers."

¹⁹The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them, and

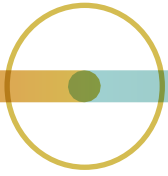
the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. ²⁰It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

²¹Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and turned the sea into dry land, and the waters were divided. ²²The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ²³The Egyptians pursued and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. ²⁴At the morning watch the Lord, in the pillar of fire and cloud, looked down on the Egyptian army and threw the Egyptian army into a panic. ²⁵He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt."

²⁶Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." ²⁷So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. ²⁸The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. ²⁹But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

Questions

1. *How does God's timing in this passage challenge our assumptions about how he should act?*
2. *What does this text expose about human sinfulness, weakness, or need?*
3. *What do we learn about the relationship between God's initiative and our human response in this passage?*



Week 5

September 27, 2026

EXODUS 19.3-7; 20.1-17

Welcome to another of the most famous parts of scripture: the Ten Commandments. You and I most often encounter this original Top Ten, not in their context within the biblical Book of Exodus, but as a list on a plaque somewhere. It matters to followers of Jesus, though, that the carved tablets didn't descend from Sinai out of nowhere. They arrived in Israel's life after 400 years of abject slavery under Pharaohs who owned their time and in a polytheistic land. The Egyptians knew nothing of the One who bears his people "on eagle's wings" and speaks the words that come before the list on our plaques begins: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." This God, Jehovah, with Moses as His partner, has rescued His people and will lead them to a new land and a new life. The Ten Commandments are this God's first assertion of how they should rightly respond to His care and what their new life with God will look like.

You and I remember well the typical "thou shalt nots" in this list. There are five of these. But don't sleep on the other five. The first three lay the groundwork, by orienting the people rightly and gratefully toward their saving God. Four and five guide their conduct of daily life in community, by orienting them properly to their elders and to a healthy and God-aware weekly rhythm of life.

We often read these ten and the other commands of scripture as exacting standards by which God will judge us. God does indeed have standards, and God does judge sin and righteousness; but given where the Ten appear in Israel's history as a people, it's worth dwelling together for a bit on what it would have been like for a people who had been in 24/7 slavery for 50 generations to be ordered by the God who ended that suffering, to "Take a day off!"

EXODUS 19:3-7

³Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the Israelites: ⁴'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, ⁶but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites."

⁷So Moses went, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him.

EXODUS 20:1-17

²⁰Then God spoke all these words,

²"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me.

⁴"You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷"You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

⁸"Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹For in six days

the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

¹²"Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

¹³"You shall not murder.

¹⁴"You shall not commit adultery.

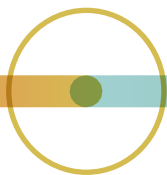
¹⁵"You shall not steal.

¹⁶"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

¹⁷"You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, male or female slave, ox, donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

Questions

1. *What do we learn about idolatry and our desire to chase after things that are not God in this passage?*
2. *Can you think of any New Testament texts that complicate this text and help us understand it more fully? (Hint: think about the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5-7.)*
3. *Pick one or two commandments to think more deeply about. Why will the violation of this commandment bring destruction to our lives?*



Week 6

October 4, 2026

LEVITICUS 15.1-27

A quarter century ago, a young evangelical pastor called Rob Bell started a church in Grand Rapids, MI. The congregation expanded quickly from a tiny few to a massive lot, and Mars Hill Bible Church became a case study in exponential church growth. This missional success was admirable, but it was also astonishing given the content and duration of Rev. Bell's very first sermon series: "Blood, Guts & Fire: The Gospel according to Leviticus" – for 18 months! Our Covenant Bible series will devote just one session to Leviticus and to some it will seem too much. But by the time you've finished your conversation this week, I hope you'll agree that Rob Bell's insight – that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has its underpinnings in this archaic, meticulous manual on animal sacrifice and priestly vestments – makes Leviticus a more-than-worthy place for us to spend some time. The Book of Revelation will eventually feature the voices of the saints in heaven singing to Jesus, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain."

All of that will come. Israel sacrificed animals to give thanks, to purify, or to atone. In this context, our passage describes God's call to an annual Day of Atonement. One goat's blood will stain the altar. The other becomes the scapegoat who walks out into the wilderness carrying the sins of the people. Animal sacrifice ended in Judaism when the Temple was destroyed in 70 A.D.; but "Yom Kippur" has been practiced every September by Jews around the world in obedience to this very passage: "This shall be a statute to you forever: on this day atonement shall be made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins you shall be clean before the Lord." (30)

Consciousness of sin can be obsessive and crippling to the guilt-obsessed; but to people who know a demanding AND forgiving God, it can be humbling and ultimately liberate us to flourish in God's presence. No wonder that Leviticus-loving Michigan church grew! Think on these things!

¹⁶The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the Lord and died. ² The Lord said to Moses:

"Tell your brother Aaron not to come just at any time into the sanctuary inside the curtain before the cover that is upon the ark, or he will die, for I appear in the cloud upon the cover. ³ Thus shall Aaron come into the holy place: with a young bull for a purification offering and a ram for a burnt offering. ⁴ He shall put on the holy linen tunic and shall have the linen undergarments next to his body, fasten the linen sash, and wear the linen turban; these are the holy vestments. He shall bathe his body in water and then put them on. ⁵ He shall take from the congregation of the Israelites two male goats for a purification offering and one ram for a burnt offering.

⁶ "Aaron shall offer the bull as a purification offering for himself and shall make atonement for himself and for his house. ⁷ He shall take the two goats and set them before the Lord at the entrance of the tent of meeting, ⁸ and Aaron shall cast lots on the two goats, one lot for the Lord and the other lot for Azazel. ⁹ Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the Lord and offer it as a purification offering, ¹⁰ but the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented alive before the Lord to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel.

¹¹ "Aaron shall present the bull as a purification offering for himself and shall make atonement for himself and for his house; he shall slaughter the bull as a purification offering for himself. ¹² He shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before the Lord and two handfuls of crushed sweet incense, and he shall bring it inside the curtain ¹³ and put the incense on the fire before the Lord, that the cloud of the incense may shroud the cover that is upon the covenant, or he will die. ¹⁴ He shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the front of the cover, and before the cover he shall sprinkle the blood with his finger seven times.

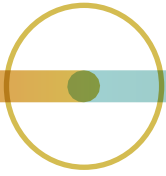
¹⁵ "He shall slaughter the goat of the purification offering that is for the people and bring its blood

inside the curtain and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it upon the cover and before the cover. ¹⁶ Thus he shall make atonement for the sanctuary, because of the uncleannesses of the Israelites and because of their transgressions, all their sins, and so he shall do for the tent of meeting, which remains with them in the midst of their uncleanness. ¹⁷ No one shall be in the tent of meeting from the time he enters to make atonement in the sanctuary until he comes out and has made atonement for himself and for his house and for all the assembly of Israel. ¹⁸ Then he shall go out to the altar that is before the Lord and make atonement on its behalf and shall take some of the blood of the bull and of the blood of the goat and put it on each of the horns of the altar. ¹⁹ He shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times and cleanse it and sanctify it from the uncleannesses of the Israelites.

²⁰ "When he has finished atoning for the holy place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall present the live goat. ²¹ Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities of the Israelites, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. ²² The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region, and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.

Questions

1. *How does this passage speak to God's desire to create, redeem, deliver, judge, and save the world?*
2. *Are there any New Testament texts that complicate this text and help us understand it more fully? (Hint: Look at John 1:29 or Revelation 5:12.)*
3. *How does the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus transform our understanding of this passage?*



Week 7

October 11, 2026

NUMBERS 11.1-23

A man called customer service to complain about a minor issue. After he had been on hold for 45 minutes, the representative finally answered and asked, "How can I help you, sir?" The man paused and replied, "You know what? I forgot what I was complaining about. But let me tell you about the hold music..."

The joke is funny because we see ourselves in the caller. We humans complain. We're disappointed when our lived reality doesn't match our expectations of how the world should be. Often we speak about our disappointment - sometimes at great length. We've all spoken and listened to our share of complaints.

In Numbers 11, the Israelite people have had enough with that tasteless manna, and Moses has had more than he can take of the people. So the people complain to Moses, and Moses complains to God. One part of the fun here is watching what happens after the complaints. First, how does God respond to the people's ungrateful carping and food critique about the manna God has provided? Second, how does God respond to Moses's desperate request for help leading the people?

The passage can also help us understand the heavy burden of leadership. Moses is at wit's end. "I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery." (verses 14-15) While God responds angrily to the people's whining about manna, Moses's desperate words reach the divine ear differently. God puts a plan in place that will spread out the burden.

Your conversation could go a number of ways, all of them good. But the difference between valid and not-so-valid complaining, on the one hand, and leadership learning, on the other, seem worthy starting points. Enjoy!

Now when the people complained in the hearing of the Lord about their misfortunes, the Lord heard it, and his anger was kindled. Then the fire of the Lord burned against them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp.² But the people cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire abated.³ So that place was called Taberah, because the fire of the Lord burned against them.

⁴ The camp followers with them had a strong craving, and the Israelites also wept again and said, "If only we had meat to eat!"⁵ We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic,⁶ but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."

⁷ Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its color was like the color of gum resin.⁸ The people went around and gathered it, ground it in mills or beat it in mortars, then boiled it in pots and made cakes of it, and the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil.⁹ When the dew fell on the camp in the night, the manna would fall with it.

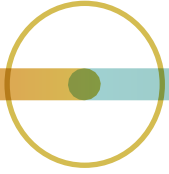
¹⁰ Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the Lord became very angry, and Moses was displeased.¹¹ So Moses said to the Lord, "Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me?"¹² Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom as a wet nurse carries a nursing child, to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors'?¹³ Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me, saying, 'Give us meat to eat!' ¹⁴ I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me.¹⁵ If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery."

¹⁶ So the Lord said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring

them to the tent of meeting and have them take their place there with you.¹⁷ I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them, and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself.¹⁸ And say to the people, 'Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat, for you have wailed in the hearing of the Lord, saying, "If only we had meat to eat! Surely it was better for us in Egypt." Therefore the Lord will give you meat, and you shall eat.¹⁹ You shall eat not only one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days,²⁰ but for a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you—because you have rejected the Lord who is among you and have wailed before him, saying, "Why did we ever leave Egypt?" ' "²¹ But Moses said, "The people I am with number six hundred thousand on foot, and you say, 'I will give them meat, that they may eat for a whole month!' ²² Are there enough flocks and herds to slaughter for them? Are there enough fish in the sea to catch for them?" ²³ The Lord said to Moses, "Is the Lord's power limited? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not."

Questions

1. *How does Israel's corporate memory contribute to their faithfulness or unfaithfulness? What role does memory play in building a steadfast faith?*
2. *What does this passage teach us about suffering and patience?*
3. *How might you pray differently in light of this passage and who God is revealed to be through it?*



Week 8

October 18, 2026

DEUTERONOMY 6

In Frank Capra's classic Christmas film, "It's a Wonderful Life", George Bailey's uncle Billy forgets things, and he knows it. So when a thing is really important, he ties a little string loop around his finger as a reminder. It doesn't always work. When Bill Clinton ran for president in 1992, his senior aide James Carville knew that distractions would be everywhere, so he posted a sign on the wall of campaign headquarters to remind him of the central issue: "It's the economy, stupid!"

Moses counted the love of God to be the gravitational center of Torah. The most important thing for Israel would forever be to love God. But Moses also knew that Israel quickly forgot how brutal slavery had been and begged to go back to Egypt when manna got boring. These people forgot a lot. So Moses supplied a finger string, a campaign headquarters sign, a sticky note: "Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." (Deuteronomy 6.6-9)

When Jesus was interrogated by lawyers to name the greatest of the 623 commands, he didn't hesitate before reciting this same command: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and might." (Matthew 22) But what does loving God look like? Both Moses and Jesus go to great lengths to help us remember how central it is. But what does loving God look like? Sometimes we skate quickly past this question to Jesus's 1b choice, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Leviticus 19) But let's not rush forward. Let's sit a little longer with 1a. How do we love God?

"Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, ² so that you and your children and your children's children may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. ³ Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

⁴ "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. ⁵ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

¹⁰ "When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, ¹¹ houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, ¹² take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ¹³ The Lord your God you shall fear, him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear. ¹⁴ Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who are all around you, ¹⁵ because the Lord your God, who is present with you, is a jealous God. The anger of the Lord your God would be kindled against you and he would destroy you from the face of the earth.

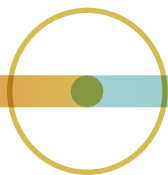
¹⁶ "Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah. ¹⁷ You must diligently keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his

decrees and his statutes that he has commanded you. ¹⁸ Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord, so that it may go well with you and so that you may go in and occupy the good land that the Lord swore to your ancestors, ¹⁹ thrusting out all your enemies from before you, as the Lord has promised.

²⁰ "When your children ask you in time to come, 'What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?' ²¹ then you shall say to your children, 'We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. ²² The Lord displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. ²³ He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors. ²⁴ Then the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case. ²⁵ If we diligently observe this entire commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us, we will be in the right.'

Questions

1. *What does this passage teach us about God and his character?*
2. *How does this passage help you think about God's desire for the flourishing of your life and all of creation?*
3. *What routines and rituals can help you love God with all your "heart, soul, and might?"*



Week 9

October 25, 2026

DEUTERONOMY 30.1-20

When Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. ascended to a Memphis dais on April 3, 1968, no one knew this would be his last speech. But Dr. King himself sensed danger, and the lines near the end of his speech hint at his intuitions: "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!"

Dr. King channeled the experience of Moses at the end of Deuteronomy. The great liberator and leader of Israel had shepherded his people out of Egyptian slavery, through 40 years wandering in the wilderness. But on the eastern shore of the Jordan River, the front porch of the promised land, God made it clear that Moses would not be crossing with them. Deuteronomy 34 chronicles what he gets instead: "Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land...The Lord said to him, 'This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants.' I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.'" (verses 1-4)

Deuteronomy 30.1-20 features some of the last words Moses spoke to Israel before that hike up Mt. Pisgah. As you read it, notice what he emphasizes – what Moses expects from them and from God on their behalf. Like Dr. King three millennia later, so Moses on the tableland east of Jordan knew time was short. Enjoy these words he saved for last. Learn from them. And read with the blessing of Moses's God.

"When all these things have happened to you, the blessings and the curses that I have set before you, if you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you ² and return to the Lord your God, and you and your children obey him with all your heart and with all your soul, just as I am commanding you today, ³ then the Lord your God will return you from your captivity and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom the Lord your God has scattered you. ⁴ Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will take you back. ⁵ The Lord your God will bring you into the land that your ancestors possessed, and you will possess it; he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors.

⁶ "Moreover, the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live. ⁷ The Lord your God will put all these curses on your enemies and on the adversaries who took advantage of you. ⁸ Then you shall again obey the Lord, observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, ⁹ and the Lord your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For the Lord will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, ¹⁰ when you obey the Lord your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

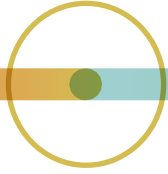
¹¹ "Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. ¹² It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' ¹³ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' ¹⁴ No, the word

is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

¹⁵ "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. ¹⁶ If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. ¹⁷ But if your heart turns away and you do not hear but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, ¹⁸ I declare to you today that you shall certainly perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. ¹⁹ I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰ loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him, for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."

Questions

1. *How does this passage demonstrate God's faithfulness?*
2. *How does God's reassurance that the "word is near" to the Israelites point to the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives today?*
3. *How is God's definition of a prosperous life different from how our culture defines a prosperous life?*



Week 10

November 1, 2026

JOSHUA 24:1-26

Good new television shows cause a buzz, so people hop on for episode three or four or five. To help late arrivers, in the days before we could stream from episode one, producers ran openings like "Previously on the West Wing..." with a montage of scenes to catch the viewers up with the flow of the show.

The first half of Joshua 24 is a "Previously on the West Wing..." moment. The whole first paragraph recounts God's dealings with Israel from the time of Abraham and Sarah through the time in Egypt, in the wilderness, and in the promised land, all the way up to the time when Joshua broadcasts God's voice at Shechem. In this montage, God's voice emphasizes what "I" have done for Israel. Take a moment to check out all of God's gifts to Israel as you read. The chain is impressive!

If our "Previously on..." montage is intended to catch the reader up with plot and characters, Joshua's scenes have a different function. They aim to evoke gratitude from the people - gratefulness to God for watching over their ancestors and seeing them through hard times. This gratitude will hopefully prompt obedience when God commands them, "Now, therefore, revere the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt and serve the Lord." The "therefore" is the key.

All of this might ring deja vu bells. A few weeks ago, we noticed that the Ten Commandments of Exodus 20 do not begin with a command. They begin with a rehearsal of God's gifts to the people: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery..." The command to have no other gods comes only after the recitation of divine benefaction.

What would your "Previously in my life with God..." gratitude montage look like? After you read the passage, this could be a great thing to talk about with one another.

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel, and they presented themselves before God. ² And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. ³ Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac, ⁴ and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I gave Esau the hill country of Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. ⁵ Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in its midst, and afterward I brought you out. ⁶ When I brought your ancestors out of Egypt, you came to the sea, and the Egyptians pursued your ancestors with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. ⁷ When they cried out to the Lord, he put darkness between you and the Egyptians and made the sea come upon them and cover them, and your eyes saw what I did to Egypt. Afterward you lived in the wilderness a long time. ⁸ Then I brought you to the land of the Amorites, who lived on the other side of the Jordan; they fought with you, and I handed them over to you, and you took possession of their land, and I destroyed them before you. ⁹ Then King Balak son of Zippor of Moab set out to fight against Israel. He sent and invited Balaam son of Beor to curse you, ¹⁰ but I would not listen to Balaam; therefore he blessed you, so I rescued you out of his hand. ¹¹ When you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho, the citizens of Jericho fought against you, as well as the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, and I handed them over to you. ¹² I sent swarms of hornets ahead of you that drove out before you the two kings of the Amorites; it was not by your sword or by your bow. ¹³ I gave you a land on which you had not labored and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant.

¹⁴ "Now, therefore, revere the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt and serve the Lord. ¹⁵ Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether

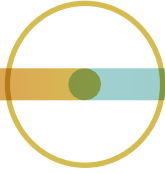
the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living, but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

¹⁶ Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods, ¹⁷ for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went and among all the peoples through whom we passed, ¹⁸ and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God."

¹⁹ But Joshua said to the people, "You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. ²⁰ If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good." ²¹ And the people said to Joshua, "No, we will serve the Lord!" ²² Then Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord, to serve him." And they said, "We are witnesses." ²³ He said, "Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel." ²⁴ The people said to Joshua, "The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey." ²⁵ So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem. ²⁶ Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God, and he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak in the sanctuary of the Lord.

Questions

1. *As you look back on your life, where have you seen God's faithfulness?*
2. *How does this passage speak to the depths God will go to rescue us?*
3. *How does this passage remind us to not lay claim to the blessings in our lives but recognize that they are a gift from the Lord?*



Week 11

November 8, 2026

JUDGES 11:1-6; 29-40

Have you ever made a promise that you later regretted? Did you keep it? Our conversation this week features a biblical character called Jephthah who made a promise more grievous than you and I can likely imagine. The Bible features wild and sometimes troubling stories – like the one about Jephthah and his daughter in Judges 11.

Before we read the story, though, let's orient ourselves to the Book of Judges. This collection of hero stories chronicles the period in Israel's history after Joshua led them into the promised land, but before the beginning of their monarchy. This transitional time, which lasted two or three centuries, moves the spotlight from the singular leadership of Moses, then Joshua, to the charismatic ascendancy of local tribal leaders called judges.

Here's the standard pattern: a neighboring people presents a menacing threat to the Israelites. At their nadir, as all hope seems lost, a single heroic figure arises to save the day and restore them to relatively normal daily life. Of course, their normal daily life has its problems. The people have sunk into idolatry (17.6), undertaken tribal turf wars with one another (18.1), and even engaged in civil war with one another (19.1). Israel has strayed far from Mount Sinai and Moses's law; they also lack a central leader to guide their life together. Hence the summary refrain that appears four times in the book: "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." (17.6; 18.1; 19.1; and 21.25)

Maybe you have made promises to God: "Help me ace this exam, and I'll stop picking on my brother!" Or, more seriously, heal my mom's cancer and I'll pledge more money to the church. Jephthah resorts to this sort of bargain, and he ends up successful in staving off the Ammonite threat. As you read the story of Jephthah's rash and fatal vow, ask yourself what would make this man think that killing his daughter would please God?

Now Jephthah the Gileadite, the son of a prostitute, was a mighty warrior. Gilead was the father of Jephthah.

² Gilead's wife also bore him sons, and when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah away, saying to him, "You shall not inherit anything in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman." ³ Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob. Outlaws gathered around Jephthah and went raiding with him.

⁴ After a time the Ammonites made war against Israel. ⁵ And when the Ammonites made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to bring Jephthah from the land of Tob. ⁶ They said to Jephthah, "Come and be our commander, so that we may fight with the Ammonites."

²⁹ Then the spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh. He passed on to Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites. ³⁰ And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and said, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, ³¹ then whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the Lord's, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering." ³² So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them, and the Lord gave them into his hand. ³³ He inflicted a massive defeat on them from Aroer to the neighborhood of Minnith, twenty towns, and as far as Abel-keramim. So the Ammonites were subdued before the Israelites.

³⁴ Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah, and there was his daughter coming out to meet him with timbrels and with dancing. She was his only child; he had no son or daughter except her. ³⁵ When he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow."

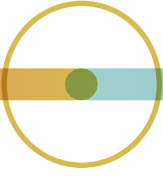
³⁶ She said to him, "My father, if you have opened your mouth to the Lord, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, now that the Lord has given you vengeance against your enemies, the Ammonites."

³⁷ And she said to her father, "Let this thing be done

for me: grant me two months, so that I may go and wander on the mountains and bewail my virginity, my companions and I." ³⁸ "Go," he said, and he sent her away for two months. So she departed, she and her companions, and bewailed her virginity on the mountains. ³⁹ At the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to the vow he had made. She had never slept with a man. So there arose an Israelite custom that ⁴⁰ for four days every year the daughters of Israel would go out to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

Questions

1. *Do you think God was happy with Jephthah's vow and his actions? Why or why not?*
2. *What does this passage teach us about our tendency to invoke God's name for our own selfish causes?*
3. *Why is it significant that God remains silent in the back half of the story?*



Week 12

November 15, 2026

2 SAMUEL 11

Is the King above the law? This question helps us understand a nation's governmental system. In an Absolute Monarchy, the king or queen has the prerogative to disobey, supersede, or alter the laws of the land at their whim. In a Constitutional Monarchy, the sovereign is bound by the same laws as the populace. In the first ten chapters of 2 Samuel, Israel begins to live out its life as a monarchy, first under the ultimately-failed King Saul, and then under the upstart slayer of giant Goliath, King David. Our passage of the week will ultimately sort out this political question for them.

2 Samuel 11 takes us to one of the most heinous acts in Israel's history. The protagonist is the great King David, author of many psalms, military genius, fabled ruler over the nation's glory years. Here, he sees and wants the beautiful Bathsheeba, his neighbor's wife. So he abducts her at his pleasure, has his way with her, and then successfully plots the murder of her husband Uriah. In this reckless, brazen venture he breaks first the 10th commandment ("thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife"), then the 6th ("thou shalt not commit adultery"), and finally the 7th ("thou shalt not kill"). By the time we reach the penultimate verse of our chapter, the king has literally gotten away with murder, and this looks for all the world like an Absolute Monarchy.

But then there's that final verse: "But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord..." (11.27b) In what follows, the prophet Nathan will bring God's severe judgment down on the King (12.1-14) and consign him to writing an apology to God (Psalm 51). In his condemnation, Nathan, speaking with the voice of God, alludes to the commandments as he shouts, "Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight?"

So what sort of government is this, in which a prophet brings a king to his knees? And what sort of God is this who stands up for his people against their king? Talk amongst yourselves.

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.

² It happened, late one afternoon when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. ³ David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, "This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite." ⁴ So David sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself after her period.) Then she returned to her house. ⁵ The woman conceived, and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant."

⁶ So David sent word to Joab, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent Uriah to David. ⁷ When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab and the people fared and how the war was going. ⁸ Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house and wash your feet." Uriah went out of the king's house, and there followed him a present from the king. ⁹ But Uriah slept at the entrance of the king's house with all the servants of his lord and did not go down to his house. ¹⁰ When they told David, "Uriah did not go down to his house," David said to Uriah, "You have just come from a journey. Why did you not go down to your house?" ¹¹ Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths, and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house to eat and to drink and to lie with my wife? As you live and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing." ¹² Then David said to Uriah, "Remain here today also, and tomorrow I will send you back." So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day. On the next day, ¹³ David invited him to eat and drink in his presence and made him drunk, and in the evening he went out to lie on his couch with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house.

¹⁴ In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it by the hand of Uriah. ¹⁵ In the letter he wrote, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck

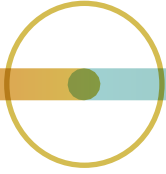
down and die." ¹⁶ As Joab kept watch over the city, he assigned Uriah to the place where he knew there were valiant warriors. ¹⁷ The men of the city came out and fought with Joab, and some of the servants of David among the people fell. Uriah the Hittite was killed as well. ¹⁸ Then Joab sent and told David all the news about the fighting, ¹⁹ and he instructed the messenger, "When you have finished telling the king all the news about the fighting, ²⁰ if the king's anger rises and if he says to you, 'Why did you go so near the city to fight? Did you not know that they would shoot from the wall?' ²¹ Who killed Abimelech son of Jerubbaal? Did not a woman throw an upper millstone on him from the wall, so that he died at Thebez? Why did you go so near the wall?' then you shall say, 'Your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead, too.' "

²² So the messenger went and came and told David all that Joab had sent him to tell. ²³ The messenger said to David, "The men gained an advantage over us and came out against us in the field, but we drove them back to the entrance of the gate. ²⁴ Then the archers shot at your servants from the wall; some of the king's servants are dead, and your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also." ²⁵ David said to the messenger, "Thus you shall say to Joab, 'Do not let this matter trouble you, for the sword devours now one and now another; press your attack on the city and overthrow it.' And encourage him."

²⁶ When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. ²⁷ When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son.

Questions

1. *What does Bathsheba's quiet submission reveal to us about oppressed people groups and the misuse of power?*
2. *What does this text expose about human sinfulness, weakness, or need?*
3. *What remains unresolved in this text?*



Week 13

November 22, 2026

1 KINGS 3.3-15

"The attempt to combine wisdom and power has only rarely been successful, and then only for a short while." This week's passage puts Albert Einstein's sage observation to the test. As a young man, Solomon the Great, son of King David, gets to rub the heavenly Aladdin's lamp and request one wish. He could choose wealth or long life, but he does not. Instead, he asks God to give him wisdom so he may rule Israel justly and well.

Here's something to know about our ancient context: throughout the lands that surrounded Israel, wisdom was prized and practitioners produced a significant library of wisdom literature. Sumeria, Babylon, and Egypt sages purveyed passed this wisdom down in two forms.

- "Conservative Positive Wisdom" featured adages and common-sense sayings to guide everyday life. A Mesopotamian manual called the "Instructions of Shupe-Ameli" counseled young men to work with friends, avoid bad company, not desire other men's wives, and other common-sense advice for living a good (and safe) life. The Bible's example of this kind of wisdom appears in Proverbs.
- "Critical Negative Wisdom" presented a more pessimistic view of the world. These writings are skeptical about the durability of human achievements, dwell on the inevitability of death, and often arrive at a sort of "carpe diem" moral to the story. The "Instructions of Shupe-Ameli" also bring this approach to wisdom, when the sage's son insists that all of his father's adages are pointless, and then we die. In the Bible, Job and Ecclesiastes ask these questions.

All of this is relevant to our reading in this session, because the wisdom-gifted Solomon is credited with both the Book of Proverbs and the Book of Ecclesiastes. Solomon's great wisdom did not exist in a vacuum. It must have been informed by his interaction with the leaders of surrounding nations.

In later life, Solomon amassed boundless riches and countless wives and concubines. I wonder what Einstein's verdict would have been on this great Israelite king. Do wisdom and power play well together in the life of Solomon?

Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David, except that he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places.⁴ The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place; Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar.⁵ At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night, and God said, "Ask what I should give you."⁶ And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you, and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love and have given him a son to sit on his throne today."⁷ And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in.⁸ And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted.⁹ Give your servant, therefore, an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil, for who can govern this great people of yours?"

¹⁰ It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this.

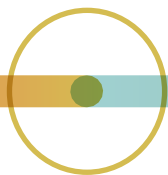
¹¹ God said to him, "Because you have asked this and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or for the life of your enemies but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right,¹² I now do according to your word. Indeed, I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you, and no one like you shall arise after you.

¹³ I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you.¹⁴ If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life."

¹⁵ Then Solomon awoke; it had been a dream. He came to Jerusalem, where he stood before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. He offered up burnt offerings and offerings of well-being and provided a feast for all his servants.

Questions

1. *What does this passage reveal about God's heart for us and how much it pleases him when we approach him in prayer?*
2. *What do we learn about God's desire for our lives based upon his reaction to Solomon's request?*
3. *As noted in the beginning commentary, Solomon's life will descend into idolatry. What are some key temptations in the world and our culture that tempt us to compromise our devotion to God?*



Week 14

November 29, 2026

MICAH 5.2-6

In 1865 an Episcopal priest from Philadelphia traveled to the Holy Land and changed his life. A couple years later, he wrote a poem about a village that still occupied his heart. I'll bet Philip Brooks and his congregation relished his journey together every Advent as they sang that poem, "O Little Town of Bethlehem". And I'm sure he knew that more than 2500 years earlier and 700 years before Jesus's birth an Israelite prophet called Micah was already talking about Bethlehem.

You and I have already met the prophet Nathan, who courageously called David out for his sins against Bathsheba and Uriah. Our man Micah brought God's words to the inhabitants of Jerusalem 250 years after David.

As we turn to Micah, let's take a moment to ask what a prophet is. Our English word comes from the Greek word PRO-PHEMI, which combines "to speak" (Greek PHEMI) with the prefix PRO, which can mean either "forth" or "before". So while we often think of prophets as Nostradamian sorts who "speak before" in uncannily accurate predictions, prophets also "speak forth" God's perspective on their people's present lives and ways. This latter meaning we use when we call Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. a prophet.

Micah "spoke forth" God's judgment on Jerusalem for their worship of idols, which they bought with the earnings of prostitutes. But he also "spoke before" future events to give them hope through the terrible Syrian invasion of Jerusalem in 701 B.C. Bethlehem would birth a future ruler who would feed his people and secure their future - whose greatness would span the whole earth and who would bring peace. Imagine what those stricken Jerusalemites felt as their trusted man of God brought news of better days to come.

We celebrate the fulfillment of those better days to come in this season. (Matthew 2.6) Don't you feel something stir in you when we sing Philip Brooks' "hopes and fears of all the years" being "met in thee tonight"?

²But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.

³Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.

⁴And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth,

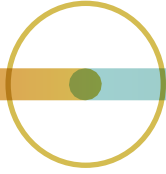
⁵and he shall be the one of peace.

If the Assyrians come into our land
and tread upon our soil,
we will raise against them seven shepherds
and eight rulers.

⁶They shall rule the land of Assyria with the sword
and the land of Nimrod with the drawn sword;
they shall rescue us from the Assyrians
if they come into our land
or tread within our border.

Questions

1. *What does this passage teach us about strength and weakness as seen through the eyes of God?*
2. *What type of waiting was happening in this passage, and how does that waiting translate to our current Advent waiting as we await the day when Christ will come again?*
3. *How can we enter into this season of Advent more fully as we live as a faithful, waiting people?*



Week 15

December 6, 2026

ISAIAH 9:2-7

Goose bumps galore are what I associate with Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" from "The Messiah". When orchestra and choir sing the immortal words about a "wonderful counselor, almighty God, the everlasting father, the prince of peace" (Isaiah 9.6), it's hard to stay seated. But in an age of AI composition, it's important to notice that Handel didn't come up with all of his lyrics. He cribbed some of the most famous ones from an 8th-century B.C. Jewish prophet called Isaiah – words from the very passage we're reading together this week.

Isaiah's prophetic career overlapped our friend Micah's from last session. So when we arrive at Isaiah 9, good Bible readers want to know what 8th-century moment of "darkness" Isaiah is pointing to, which this "great light" will interrupt.

- The last words of Isaiah 8 describe hideous days of "distress and darkness and fearful gloom, [when] they will be thrust into utter darkness." (8.22)
- The troubling time Isaiah describes is the Assyrian invasion of Jerusalem.
- Zebulun and Naphtali (9.1) are two of the northernmost of the twelve tribal regions of Israel, who have been the first to fall.
- But Galilee (the region in which Jesus will eventually live most of his life) will one day be blessed (9.1)

So 9.2-7 describe a ruler to come who will be large enough to give the people of God a future. This one "will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever." This prophecy is good news for future generations of Israelites, but it's not such good news for their present rulers, who are the source of their current distress. Isaiah is casting the people's eyes forward to a brighter future that God will author.

Isaiah's words later rang a bell for people who met Jesus of Nazareth. Later, the same thing happened to George Frideric Handel. Which parts of this passage give you the most hope?

The people who walked in darkness
 have seen a great light;
 those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
 on them light has shined.

³ You have multiplied exultation;
 you have increased its joy;
 they rejoice before you
 as with joy at the harvest,
 as people exult when dividing plunder.

⁴ For the yoke of their burden
 and the bar across their shoulders,
 the rod of their oppressor,
 you have broken as on the day of Midian.

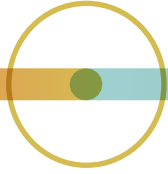
⁵ For all the boots of the tramping warriors
 and all the garments rolled in blood
 shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

⁶ For a child has been born for us,
 a son given to us;
 authority rests upon his shoulders,
 and he is named
 Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷ Great will be his authority,
 and there shall be endless peace
 for the throne of David and his kingdom.
 He will establish and uphold it
 with justice and with righteousness
 from this time onward and forevermore.
 The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Questions

1. *What is the relationship between darkness and Christian hope? Does it resonate with you that God's hope is most apparent in times of deep darkness?*
2. *Ponder the amazing titles attributed to Christ in this passage: "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Where do we see the truthfulness and beauty of these titles worked out in biblical history and in our world?*
3. *How do we faithfully await the day of Christ's kingdom where endless peace shall reign?*



Week 16

December 13, 2026

ISAIAH 11:1-9

Wolves and lambs, leopards and baby goats, calves and lions all chilling together in the cool evening breeze – these striking impossibilities caught the imagination of a Quaker called Edward Hicks as his beloved Pennsylvania meeting houses began to battle one another and faced the threat of schism in the early 1800s. He knew them because a prophet saw them in a vision 2500 years earlier.

Isaiah brought “The Peaceable Kingdom” into circumstances we learned about last session. Externally, the threat of Assyrian conquest of Israel loomed; internally, the people behaved unjustly and robbed the poor of their rights. (Isaiah 10.1-2) Amid this bleak combo of circumstances and sin, both prophet and people sought some ground for hope. Isaiah’s eyes fastened on the rising king Hezekiah. Many interpreters believe he was Isaiah’s “stump from the root of Jesse” on whom the Spirit of the Lord would rest. (11.1-2) He’d bring justice for the poor, defense for the oppressed, and punishment to the wicked. (11.3-4) This hope that Hezekiah would right Israel’s wrongs gave rise to Isaiah’s brilliant vision of the Peaceable Kingdom in 11.6-7. Not only Israel but eventually the whole world would see strife cease in the cessation of the predatory cycle.

In the end, Hezekiah didn’t save the world. He was praised as one of the most righteous kings (2 Kings 11), but his character and justice would not outlast his reign. Soon, the people would return to their sin and his successors would return to idolatry and injustice. (2 Kings 12 and following) Blessedly, though, Isaiah’s vision didn’t die with Hezekiah. It’s continued to animate hope in the people who’ve heard his prophecies through the ages – including the people who experienced Jesus...and us.

Just as Edward Hicks hoped that Isaiah could speak into his rivalrous Quaker meetings, you and I might continue to hope that the God who gave Isaiah the vision can visit the divided Christian church and the divided states of America. You might talk about this hope together.

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

² The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

³ His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see
or decide by what his ears hear,

⁴ but with righteousness he shall judge for the poor
and decide with equity for the oppressed of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

⁵ Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

⁶ The wolf shall live with the lamb;
the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
the calf and the lion will feed together,
and a little child shall lead them.

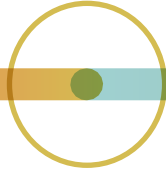
⁷ The cow and the bear shall graze;
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

⁸ The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

⁹ They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

Questions

1. *What does this passage teach us about the relational triune life of God as Father, Son, and Spirit?*
2. *What does God want to make new in our world and in our lives?*
3. *In what ways can we live faithfully as we await God's new creation where he will come to make all things new?*



Week 17

December 20, 2026

MATTHEW 1:18-25

In the mid-1990s, a Hollywood producer aired the mysteries of God on primetime TV. “Touched by an Angel” according to one commentator “smashed a hole in the stained-glass ceiling of prime-time television...starring a White angel who spoke with an Irish lilt (Roma Downey) and her Black supervisor (Della Reese), who spoke with equal measure sass and reverence, sang like a heavenly host, and drove a red Cadillac convertible.”

Joseph, son of Jacob, was a good man. He’d already decided (unaided by angels) to lay aside vengeance about Mary’s apparent infidelity and divorce her quietly – a profound mercy in an honor/shame culture that avenged such perceived offenses violently.

That night, Joseph dreamed. If this sounds familiar, the only other Joseph in the Bible – the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat guy – was a dreamer too, and it won him Pharaoh’s favor. Dreams that come true are a very Joseph-ish thing in the Bible.

Our Joseph – or Mary’s Joseph – has a good dream. In it, the angel of the Lord tells him...“Uh, listen, I know you’ve sweat blood making this excruciating choice (good job, by the way), but I’ve got another idea. Marry Mary!”

You and I may be tempted to say, “Joseph’s choice was easy! He had an ANGEL! But Joseph’s “yes” doesn’t suddenly lead down a primrose path to the altar. Mary’s still pregnant, after all, and she’s not supposed to get pregnant during their betrothal. The shunning and ridicule will still come, but Joseph signs up anyway.

Your pre-Christmas conversation could consider this: Joseph’s angel isn’t such a big advantage. Discovering what we’re supposed to do is not the main challenge we face as followers of Mary and Joseph’s kid. Mostly, we know what’s right. Either scripture or Christian teaching or reason or experience or just the way we were raised tells us that. Our main challenge is mustering up the courage and determination simply to do what we know is right, and that’s where Joseph takes us... twice. A good thought as we walk toward the birth in Bethlehem.

Merry Christmas!

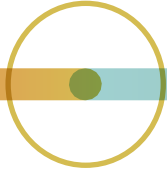
Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ "Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means, "God is with us." ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus.

Questions

1. *How does God's timing in this passage challenge our assumptions about how he should act?*
2. *What do we learn about the relationship between God's initiative and our human response in this passage?*
3. *How do Joseph's actions model faithfulness for us?*



Week 18

December 27, 2026

1 KINGS 17

Today's session describes the everyday life of the prophet Elijah. God sends him to tell King Ahab a famine will come to Israel. Of course, the announcer won't be shielded from what he's announced; so to survive Elijah must go by God's direction to the care of a spring and ravens who will feed him at the Wadi Cherith, then on to Zarepath beyond the northern boundary of Israel to seek the care of a widow whom God has commissioned to help. How would you describe the relationship between the prophet and his God in this paragraph?

In Zarepath, Elijah discovers that the widow and son are destitute and have resigned themselves to certain starvation, until God miraculously multiplies her food supply.

The most dramatic element in our chapter involves the young son's sudden illness. Notice to what cause both widow and prophet attribute this sickness unto death. "You have come to me," cries the widow, "to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son!" And Elijah assumes the same when he prays, "O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?" Why do you imagine both the widow and Elijah think that this death has been God's doing?

This theological question matters to you and me: Does God cause all that happens in the world, good and ill? And does God punish our sin by the daily happenings in our lives? The Old Testament asks this question over and over. In Deuteronomy, Moses tells Israel that obedience will bring blessing and disobedience, a curse. But in the Book of Job, it is not Job's sin that has cursed his life, no matter how much his friends would like to accuse otherwise.

Notice that the voice of God in 1 Kings 11 neither confirms nor denies the accuracy of their assumption that he has caused the son's death - as if to leave the question for our discussion!

Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word."² The word of the Lord came to him, saying,³ "Go from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan."⁴ You shall drink from the wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there."⁵ So he went and did according to the word of the Lord; he went and lived by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan.⁶ The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the wadi.⁷ But after a while the wadi dried up because there was no rain in the land.

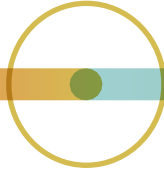
⁸ Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, ⁹ "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there, for I have commanded a widow there to feed you."¹⁰ So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink."¹¹ As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand."¹² But she said, "As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die."¹³ Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said, but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son."¹⁴ For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth."¹⁵ She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days.¹⁶ The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

¹⁷ After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him.¹⁸ She then said to Elijah, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have

come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son!"¹⁹ But he said to her, "Give me your son." He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed.²⁰ He cried out to the Lord, "O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?"²¹ Then he stretched himself upon the child three times and cried out to the Lord, "O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again."²² The Lord listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived.²³ Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, "See, your son is alive."²⁴ So the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth."

Questions

1. *What does this passage reveal about God's heart for the world?*
2. *Where do we see God's faithfulness in this text?*
3. *Does God cause all that happens in the world, both good and ill? How do you hold together both God's goodness and the heartbreaking pain of the world?*



Week 19

January 3, 2027

2 KINGS 5:1-15

Alexander the Great, the ancient Greek conqueror of kingdoms and surely the most powerful man in the world, once happened upon the famous but lowly philosopher, Diogenes of Sinope, lying by the road. Looking up at Alexander and his ensemble of toadies, the philosopher had one request: "Stop blocking my sun." As he walked away, Alexander confided to his attendants, "If I were not Alexander, I would choose to be Diogenes."

Powerful people need (and sometimes actually want) to be dealt a dose of perspective. In our passage, the great and powerful Syrian General Naaman begins the story altogether unaware of that need. He has been brought low by a skin disease that keeps him out of battles and even secluded from public life. Potential remedies have all failed, until a Hebrew slave girl in his household suggests that he visit an Israelite prophet called Elisha. Elisha's utter disregard for Naaman's station ends up being the best thing that ever happened to the General.

Here we see again, as we did when the prophet Nathan brought King David to his knees, that prophets have a bit of Diogenes in them. This disregard of status and power allows them to speak truth and hope that it will land – often at their great peril. In this episode, Elisha can't even rely on Israel's regard for God's representatives, because Naaman is a Syrian, unschooled in the ways of this Hebrew God. The only leverage Elisha has is Naaman's desperation.

This is one Bible story that could have been specifically prescribed for our time. Jonathan Sacks, the superhero London rabbi, once dubbed humility "the orphaned virtue of our age". Many of us have a lot of Naaman in us. Whether we hold positions of power or not, we're often too sure that we deserve more and are right more often than the people around us. Naaman's transformation from scoffer to humble believer might be just what the doctor ordered for us. Enjoy!

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from a skin disease. ² Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³ She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his skin disease." ⁴ So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. ⁵ And the king of Aram said, "Go, then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel."

He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. ⁶ He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his skin disease." ⁷ When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his skin disease? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

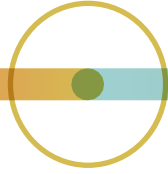
⁸ But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." ⁹ So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. ¹⁰ Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean." ¹¹ But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God and would wave his hand over the spot and cure the skin disease! ¹² Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. ¹³ But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when

all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean?'" ¹⁴ So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

¹⁵ Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant."

Questions

1. *What do we learn about the relationship between God's initiative and our human response in this passage?*
2. *What does this passage reveal about God's heart for the world?*
3. *What does this text expose about human sinfulness, weakness, or need?*



Week 20

January 10, 2027

NEHEMIAH 1.1-11

Leadership coaches mine the Book of Nehemiah for examples and principles that will help their mentees. Somehow, beset by menacing opposition with sometimes-unreliable allies, Nehemiah managed to lead a project that reconstructed the walls around Jerusalem in a mere 52 days.

"Wait!" you may say. "What temple? Who built that? And who destroyed it?" Good questions! Our passages to this point haven't focused us on Jerusalem or the great temple of Solomon (built in the mid-900s B.C.), so to understand Nehemiah's feat, you and I need a little history. As Elijah was resurrecting a widow's son and Elisha healed a foreign dignitary, the Israelites were ensconced in their Promised Land. In fact they lived there for nearly 600 years under judges and then kings mostly descended from David.

Around 600 B.C., though, there came a violent disruption. The powerful King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon besieged Jerusalem, force-marched its leaders and citizens eastward to present-day Iraq, and destroyed both palace and temple. The Holy City was left smoldering and in ruins, with the people stuck in Babylon's foreign culture, language, and religions - a captivity that prompted a Hebrew poet to ask, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137)

After, Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon a half century later, Persian rulers were kinder to the Jews than the Babylonians had been, allowing them to return to their land and rebuild their temple. Cyrus even subsidized the project, which they completed around 515 B.C. Over the next centuries, many Israelite families returned to their tattered ancestral home.

The Book of Nehemiah starts 150 years after Jerusalem was destroyed and 60 years after the temple was rebuilt. Nehemiah himself was still in Persia (present-day Iran), enjoying position and privilege as "the cupbearer to the King", when he got a call from his brother and learned that the rebuilt city was in dire trouble. This book plays out the passion and courage of Nehemiah for his people and their homeland. It is more than worth your time!

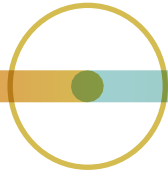
The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah. In the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, ² one of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from Judah, and I asked them about the Jews who escaped, those who had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem. ³ They replied, "The remnant there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire."

⁴ When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven. ⁵ I said, "O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, ⁶ let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for your servants, the Israelites, confessing the sins of the Israelites, which we have sinned against you. Both I and my family have sinned. ⁷ We have offended you deeply, failing to keep the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that you commanded Moses your servant. ⁸ Remember the word that you commanded Moses your servant, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, ⁹ but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place where I have chosen to establish my name.' ¹⁰ They are your servants and your people whom you redeemed by your great power and your strong hand. ¹¹ O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man!"

At the time, I was cupbearer to the king.

Questions

1. *What do we learn about idolatry and our desire to chase after things that are not God in this passage?*
2. *In other parts of Scripture we find people who live lives of obedience, yet continue to face hardship. The primary example is Christ himself. How are we to understand the relationship between obedience and reward in light of the instructions to Moses that Nehemiah cites?*
3. *How might you pray differently in light of this passage and who God is revealed to be through it?*



Week 21

January 17, 2027

JOB 1:1-22

Why do bad things happen to good people? The question swims in most people's minds sooner or later. The phenomenon has caused some people to stop believing in God. Others find variations on a patch-through answer.

- God is all good, but not all powerful.
- God is all powerful, but not all good.
- Love and goodness originate in the human heart and not in God, who ends up looking cruel.
(*Archibald McLeish, J.B.*)

Still others recognize and take seriously the scale of the question, realize its dense mystery, and reconcile themselves to not fully knowing. "Theodicy" (literally God's rightness or justness) is the name theologians and philosophers give this whole inquiry. To understate, it is one of life's big questions.

The Book of Job opens this conversation, and there's a reason it is grouped with the "wisdom literature" section of our Bible. In the first chapter, we meet Job, an excellent and faithful human being, who follows God's ways without exception and even offers sacrifices for sins his children might commit. Tension arises when Satan ("the Accuser") claims that Job is merely good for the reward of riches and ease. "Take those away, and he'll curse you in a minute!" Satan invites God to wager on the question, God accepts, and the drama plays out for the next 41 chapters.

The history of interpretation of this book is long and various. One intriguing strand of it asks the question whether the prologue (1.1-22) and epilogue (42.10-17) were later additions to a standalone poem. If so, the original featured a righteous man who complained that his suffering was undeserved, until he met God face to face and realized God's freedom and wisdom. His repentance was not for sins committed, but for his failure to recognize God's majesty.

However we interpret it – and you will have an excellent conversation with any reading partners! – the Book of Job invites us to ask large questions of a larger God. Enjoy!

There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. ² There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. ³ He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the East. ⁴ His sons used to go and hold feasts in one another's houses in turn, and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. ⁵ And when the feast days had run their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all, for Job said, "It may be that my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." This is what Job always did.

⁶ One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and the accuser also came among them. ⁷ The Lord said to the accuser, "Where have you come from?" The accuser answered the Lord, "From going to and fro on the earth and from walking up and down on it." ⁸ The Lord said to the accuser, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil." ⁹ Then the accuser answered the Lord, "Does Job fear God for nothing? ¹⁰ Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. ¹¹ But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." ¹² The Lord said to the accuser, "Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!" So the accuser went out from the presence of the Lord.

¹³ One day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in the eldest brother's house, ¹⁴ a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were feeding beside them, ¹⁵ and the Sabeans fell on them and carried them off and killed the servants with the edge of the

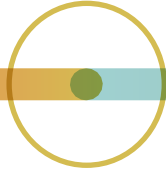
sword; I alone have escaped to tell you." ¹⁶ While he was still speaking, another came and said, "The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants and consumed them; I alone have escaped to tell you." ¹⁷ While he was still speaking, another came and said, "The Chaldeans formed three columns, made a raid on the camels and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you." ¹⁸ While he was still speaking, another came and said, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house, ¹⁹ and suddenly a great wind came across the desert, struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they are dead; I alone have escaped to tell you."

²⁰ Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped. ²¹ He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

²² In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing.

Questions

1. *What does this passage teach us about suffering and patience?*
2. *What remains unresolved in this text?*
3. *What do we learn about the relationship between God's initiative and our human response in this passage?*



Week 22

January 24, 2027

JOB 38:1-13; 42:1-6, 10-17

Have you ever imagined seeing God face-to-face? Do you think you'd like it? Or would it be scary?

This almost never happens even in the Bible. When Moses glimpses God his face lights up. (Exodus 34) The prophet Isaiah reports, "The year after King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe filled the temple." The result? Isaiah cries out, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" (Isaiah 6)

In Job 38-41, after chapters of complaining and speculation, Job finally hears God's majestic voice, and his response resembles Isaiah's: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." (42.5-6)

In C.S. Lewis's novel *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the Christ figure is called Aslan. As the Pevensee children make their way through the forests of Narnia, they are helped and befriended by Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, who mention Aslan and reveal that this rightful ruler of Narnia is a lion, the children shudder. "'Ooh' said Susan. 'I'd thought he was a man. Is he-quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion'..." "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver ... "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

The last chapters of Job present the prospect of awe and humility in the face of a holy and powerful God. Often Christian worship paints a picture of Jesus as friend or brother, God as kindly parent. But scripture, in Job and elsewhere, often speaks of an awe before God that borders on fear. In your conversation about Job, it will be worth asking how you picture God: as humble or humbling or both.

JOB 38:1-13

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:

² “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

³ Gird up your loins like a man;
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

⁴ “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

⁵ Who determined its measurements—surely you know!

Or who stretched the line upon it?

⁶ On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone

⁷ when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

⁸ “Or who shut in the sea with doors
when it burst out from the womb,

⁹ when I made the clouds its garment
and thick darkness its swaddling band,

¹⁰ and prescribed bounds for it,
and set bars and doors,

¹¹ and said, ‘Thus far shall you come and no farther,
and here shall your proud waves be stopped’?

¹² “Have you commanded the morning since your days began

and caused the dawn to know its place,

¹³ so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth,
and the wicked be shaken out of it?

JOB 42:1-6

Then Job answered the Lord:

² “I know that you can do all things
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

³ ‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me that I did not know.

⁴ ‘Hear, and I will speak;
I will question you, and you declare to me.’

⁵ I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,

but now my eye sees you;

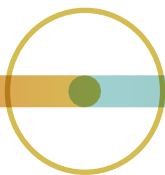
⁶ therefore I despise myself
and repent in dust and ashes.”

JOB 42:10-17

¹⁰ And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends, and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. ¹¹ Then there came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and they ate bread with him in his house; they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money and a gold ring. ¹² The Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning, and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys. ¹³ He also had seven sons and three daughters. ¹⁴ He named the first Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Keren-happuch. ¹⁵ In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job’s daughters, and their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers. ¹⁶ After this Job lived one hundred and forty years and saw his children and his children’s children, four generations. ¹⁷ And Job died, old and full of days.

Questions

1. *What remains unanswered and unresolved in you after engaging this passage?*
2. *How does God’s timing in this passage challenge our assumptions about how he should act?*
3. *What do we learn about the relationship between God’s initiative and our human response in this passage?*



Week 23

January 31, 2027

EZEKIEL 37:1-14

Let's go back to the odd world of Israel's prophets. (Remember our off-beat friends Elijah in Zarepath and Elisha near the Jordan River?) Hosea named his children "Unloved" and "Not My People" to make a point to Israel. (Hosea 1) Isaiah wandered around naked to do the same (Isaiah 20); Jeremiah hid his underwear in a rock (Jeremiah 13) and wore an ox's yoke for weeks (Jeremiah 27-28). You get the picture. These people heard God tell them to do very odd things and they did them!

What a strange, scary, superb scene we get to read together this session! God puts the prophet Ezekiel in a dry and desolate valley filled with skeletons of long-dead people. God then tells him to preach a sermon. Preach to skeletons? Yep. And God writes the sermon: "I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord." And if this isn't weird enough for you, Ezekiel actually preaches the sermon in an actual valley filled with actual bones. And, weirder still? The resuscitation that God describes in the sermon actually happens. Bones get flesh and breathe and stand up and walk around. What's going on here?!

In Ezekiel 37, the prophet is speaking to exiles in Babylon (remember them from our time with Nehemiah?). These displaced Israelites, now years into their Babylonian captivity, have given up all hope as they languish in a foreign land under foreign rule. They believe they are in exile because they've sinned against God, and they presume that God will remain angry with them. Ezekiel reminds them through this sermon that God can do impossible things.

As exotic as this scene is, it surely lands right in the middle of our hopeless moments. What are the dry bones days in your life? And how does God show up in them for you?

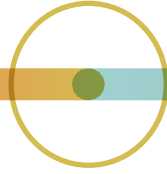
The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ² He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³ He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." ⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. ⁵ Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶ I will lay sinews on you and will cause flesh to come upon you and cover you with skin and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord."

⁷ So I prophesied as I had been commanded, and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸ I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them, but there was no breath in them. ⁹ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." ¹⁰ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹ Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' ¹² Therefore prophecy and say to them: Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people, and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³ And you shall know that I am the Lord when I open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴ I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord."

Questions

1. *What words in this passage stand out to you? Do they bring to mind any other Bible passages?*
2. *What role does the image or illustration in this text play?*
3. *What does God want to make new in our world and in our lives?*



Week 24

February 7, 2027

AMOS 5:18-24

We all know the difference between the stock gift snagged from Amazon in order to check the box and the thoughtful one that moves the giver through three or four stores to find what's just right. Socks on Father's Day and flowers on Mother's Day are nice, but every dad and mom knows they're also easy. A gift's impact most often grows with the giver's personal investment.

In Amos 5 we learn that Israel has badly missed the mark with the "gift" they've chosen to give God. They're offering flashy religious ceremonies, of which the Almighty has clearly grown tired. They've ordered the easy thing hastily online, instead of doing the extra work of a thoughtful shopper for that truly God-pleasing gift.

Amos is grouped among the "minor prophets" - the ones from Hosea to Malachi at the end of our Old Testament. It's an unfortunate label. Merriam-Webster defines "minor" as "inferior in importance, size, or degree : comparatively unimportant", so we talk of "minor league" baseball and "minor artists". But these prophets speak some of the most powerful words in the Bible.

- "What is good, and what does the Lord requires of us? To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6.8)
- "The righteous shall live by faith." (Habakkuk 2.4 = Romans 1.17)
- "'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the Lord Almighty." (Zechariah 4.6)
- "I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions." (Joel 2.8 = Acts 2.17)

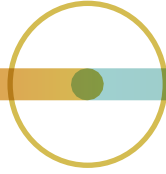
And most pertinently for our reading today, Amos spoke words that have resounded through faithful Jewish and Christian communities through the ages: "Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (5.23-24)

Enjoy your conversation about Amos, a Major Little Prophet!

- ¹⁸ Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord!
Why do you want the day of the Lord?
It is darkness, not light,
¹⁹ as if someone fled from a lion
and was met by a bear
or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall
and was bitten by a snake.
²⁰ Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light,
and gloom with no brightness in it?
- ²¹ I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
²² Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them,
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.
²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
²⁴ But let justice roll down like water
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Questions

1. *How does this passage speak to God's desire to create, redeem, deliver, judge, and save the world?*
2. *What does this text expose about human sinfulness, weakness, and need?*
3. *Do the language, imagery, or themes of this passage have resonances in the New Testament? (Hint: Think about Jesus' interaction with the Pharisees throughout the four gospels.)*



Week 25

February 14, 2027

MATTHEW 18:23-35

In his early years, English musical artist Sir Elton John gathered a whole lot of human experience into his one line, "Oh it seems to me that sorry seems to be the hardest word." The parent commands the child to apologize to a sibling. The couple suffers days of frozen silence because neither of them will say "I'm sorry." Sorry is hard. But "I forgive you" may be even harder. Frederick Buechner, the eloquent American pulpiteer, once preached on the topic, admitting how delicious righteous anger can be. But then he reveals a catch: "The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you."

It would be difficult to find a more relevant passage than the parable of the unforgiving servant. It lands in the middle of so much of our human experience! If we add to it the passages in Matthew 18 that lead up to it, it becomes a symphony of forgiveness. Earlier in the chapter, Jesus lays out a model for dealing with conflict in the community. In it, the offended confronts the offender, and the offender who won't apologize becomes the villain in the story. But the last word of that section has hardly been uttered before Jesus refuses to place a limit on the times a person needs to forgive offenders. "Infinity times!" he says, though not in so many words.

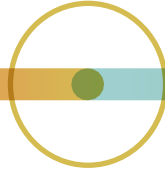
All of this recalls Jesus's insistence in the Sermon on the Mount that not even the very act of worship should keep us from sprinting toward reconciliation. "If you're offering a sacrifice at the altar and recall that a brother or sister has something against you, go and be reconciled to the offended, then return to give your gift." (Matthew 5:23-24) Elton John and Rev. Buechner were spot on: "I'm sorry" and "I forgive you" are terribly hard to say, but they are two of the most important words in a Jesus person's vocab.

Now, talk amongst yourselves!

"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him, ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, the lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him by the throat he said, 'Pay what you owe.' ²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Questions

1. *What does this passage teach us about God and his character?*
2. *How does this passage challenge the common assumptions of our modern culture?*
3. *What does this passage teach us about what it means to worship God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength?*



Week 26

February 21, 2027

MATTHEW 20:1-16

Charged to hold forth on this passage from the pulpit one Sunday, the great American preacher Barbara Brown Taylor urged her congregation to imagine a hot July day waiting outside for the opening of a blockbuster movie's screen debut. The temp has soared past 100 degrees. Enthusiasts who arrived hours early to be first, second, third, fourth, fifth in line are sweating buckets. The steady stream of ticket-seekers who come after them have pressed in so body heat has been added to already scorching heat. Then, with the line stretching around the corner, as a few last stragglers sidle in a couple minutes before showtime, a theater employee comes out looking authoritative and opens the door nearest to the latecomers. "We'll file in this way. Enjoy the film!" Jesus says, "That's the kingdom of heaven!"

Jesus spoke often in parables. They could be jarring. An owner lavishes praise on a wretchedly dishonest employee. (Luke 16.1-9) A father throws a lavish party for his family-fortune-swiping son when he snivels home, while the older son has risen early and finished late day after day on the family farm and goes party-less. (Luke 15.11-32) Bridesmaids step out for a second to refill their lamp oil just before the very-late bridegroom arrives...and locks them out. (Matthew 25.1-13)

Then there's the one we're talking about this time. Calculate the wages, and you've got 12-hour workers taking home precisely the same check as 3-hour and even 1-hour workers. Imagine the complaint emails to the HR department! What is Jesus doing here?!

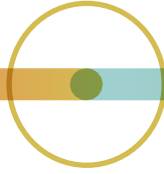
And it wasn't just Jesus's words. I wonder how good synagogue-going Jews felt when Jesus put tax collectors and sinners on his daily calendar. (Matthew 9:10-17, Mark 2:15-22, Luke 5:29-39); how crowds watching the crucifixion felt when Jesus turned to the criminal on the cross next to him, who had barely two minutes ago asked "Jesus remember me...", and invited him to Paradise.

Is the Kingdom of Heaven fair? Is it good?

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴ and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. ⁵ When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. ⁶ And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around, and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' ⁷ They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' ⁸ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' ⁹ When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received a denarius. ¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹² saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' ¹³ But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius?' ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.

Questions

1. *What are the key verbs in this passage and who is the subject of these verbs? What theological insight do we learn from this?*
2. *What does this passage teach us about God and his character?*
3. *How might you pray differently in light of this passage and who God is revealed to be through it?*



Week 27

February 28, 2027

MATTHEW 22:1-14

When we read the Parable of the Great Banquet, one image that does not speed to mind is the the old gospel hymn, "Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild". Nor does "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" hit the tip of our tongue. There are times when a confrontational Jesus simply scares us, and this story is one of them.

Our parable has two parts.

In the first, a King throws a banquet and his A, B, and C List invitees blow him off. Worse yet, these scoffers kill his messengers. The angry king sends troops to destroy the ungrateful invitees then throws the doors open to everyone else and fills the hall.

There are different ways to read Jesus's parables. Most often, it helps to look for a single moral or message. Occasionally, though, Jesus seems to weave an allegory, in which the parable's characters seem to represent real people in the real world. Many interpreters of the Parable of the Great Banquet see it as this second kind, with God as the king, the prophets as the slaves sent out with invitations, faithless Israel as the people who refuse and then kill the messengers, and the Gentiles as the late-invited people who attend in the end. Is it fair to assign such parts? What could be the danger of reading that way?

If we try on this allegorical way of seeing the parable, its second part becomes a challenge. What in the world are these shoddy clothes that get the lone unrobed guest tossed into the outer darkness? Do you see yourself in any of the characters?

It's a tall task to read this parable well. Blessedly, Jesus throws his ancient audience and us a bone by putting the answer in the back of the book: "For many are called, but few are chosen." Ask yourselves what this parable tells us about the God Jesus describes? And how does a person get into that final few?

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ² "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. ³ He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴ Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' ⁵ But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶ while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. ⁷ The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. ⁸ Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹ Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' ¹⁰ Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad, so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

¹¹ "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹² and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. ¹³ Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' ¹⁴ For many are called, but few are chosen."

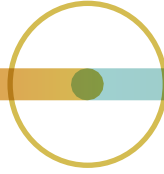
"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. He asked, 'How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?' The man was speechless.

"Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

"For many are invited, but few are chosen."

Questions

1. *What does this passage teach us about God and his character?*
2. *Do the language, imagery, or themes of this passage have resonances with other parts of scripture? If so, what is the significance of those connections?*
3. *What do we learn about the relationship between God's initiative and our human response in this passage?*



Week 28

March 7, 2027

MATTHEW 15.21-28

What an odd scene this is! As Jesus and his disciples walk through Gentile territory in present-day Lebanon, a local woman accosts him: "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!" she cries. Then she reveals the reason for her urgency: "My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly." After her poignant appeal, though, we hear crickets. Or as Matthew puts it, "Jesus did not answer a word."

I wonder what expression crosses Jesus's face just then. The text doesn't answer this. But I ask because his eventual reply is odd for him, and it's not exactly an answer: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." Again, what is his tone? Matter-of-fact? Or over-resolute, as if he's wavering and hopes to persuade himself?

Though we're not sure what's going on in Jesus here, the Canaanite woman is an open book. She shouts again, "Lord, help me!" At first Jesus himself looks ready to move on. "It's not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

(A handy fact: in the popular understanding of the Jewish people in this period, "children" = Jews, "the dogs" = Gentiles) But this does not sound Jesus-ish, does it? Is he testing her? Or does he actually believe this?

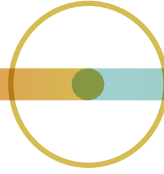
This mama bear doesn't flinch at the insult. She'll do whatever it takes to help her anguished daughter. "Yes it is, Lord." This Gentile woman has the gall to contest the claim of Jesus himself. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

This is the magic moment when a desperate Canaanite woman passes her test or wins Jesus over. However he has entered this encounter, something happens when this woman dares to debate him.

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." ²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶ He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed from that moment.

Questions

1. *How does the human action in this passage clarify the nature and character of God?*
2. *How might the original audience of this passage have understood this differently than we do?*
3. *What remains unanswered and unresolved in you after engaging this passage?*



Week 29

March 14, 2027

MATTHEW 25.31-46

These are the last words Jesus speaks in Matthew before the fateful Thursday evening meal with his disciples. Ahead lie betrayal, arrest, trials, cross, tomb, and resurrection. This dramatic position matters. Jesus saves a big thing 'til last.

So...the parable. "I was hungry," he says to the sheep, "and you gave me something to eat, thirsty, and you gave me something to drink, a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me, was sick and you looked after me, was in prison and you came to visit me." (Matthew 25.35-36)

That's a formidable check list, and some Christians keep track, task by task. It's not a bad thing to do, actually. If more of us built a task list to find hungry and thirsty strangers who need clothes, doctors, or prison visits, the world would be a much better place. I'm all for the doing of Matthew 25. But there's more here for us – a still more excellent way.

What stops me in my tracks is that one word, "When?!" The sheep speak: "When did we see you needing all these things and help you?!" "When?!" may be the key to the whole passage. The sheep are surprised, you see. They can't for the life of them remember helping Jesus. "I know I've served a lot of hungry-thirsty-naked-sick-imprisoned people in my day," you can imagine them mumbling to one another. "But I'm sure I'd have recognized Jesus if he'd come through. "

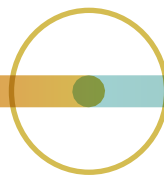
The sheep are surprised because they simply ARE helpers. These aren't people who keep a check list and make sure to DO their good deeds so they can be sheep. These are people whose doing springs from who they ARE. By second nature they recognize the utter value of the people in front of them. When that value is clear, the doing just happens. They've accidentally helped Jesus hundreds of time, that's just who they are.

So much to talk about with this parable. Enjoy!

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory.³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world,³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink?³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing?³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.'⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You who are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels,⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?'⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life."

Questions

1. *What do you think we are supposed to learn through repetition of phrases and words in this text?*
2. *How do we hold the themes of this passage together with the foundational claim that salvation is by faith alone and not on account of our works?*
3. *How might this passage impact our understanding of justice in our community and our world?*



Week 30

March 21, 2027

MATTHEW 21:1-17

Our Palm Sunday passage summons a brilliant moment when ancient throngs acknowledged Christ the King. Jesus rides into Jerusalem to loud acclaim that honors “the Son of David” – at long last the Messiah whom Israel has anticipated for centuries.

To understand this acclamation, it helps to know that 1,000 years before it, in the early days of Israel’s monarchy, the prophet Nathan revealed God’s promise that David’s kingdom would be everlasting – that there would always be a son of a son of David on the throne. (2 Samuel 7.12-16) This prophecy held for almost 400 years, but when Babylonian soldiers exiled its inhabitants from Jerusalem around 600 B.C., David’s dynasty came to an abrupt end. From that time forward, many Jews looked out for the Messiah (literally “the anointed one”) who would one day resume David’s dynasty and set things right. These expectations varied, but after suffering under imperial rulers in Babylon, Persia, Greece, and now Rome, many in Jesus’s time pictured a military-political leader who’d throw off their political oppressors and return self-rule to Israel.

Back to our parade...If we could see them, the thought bubbles above the crowd shouting Hosanna (“Save us!”) would reflect this expectation of a powerful military leader. But Jesus had no such aspiration. No wonder Jesus’s massive popularity on Palm Sunday becomes the crowd’s “crucify him!” by Friday. The shadow of the cross looms over Jesus’s triumphal entry.

Mary Oliver casts soulful eyes on biblical scenes and makes poetry about what she sees. In “The Poet Thinks about the Donkey” she contemplates our scene through the eyes of the beast Jesus rides, who senses already the opposition that awaits. This ambivalence appears poignantly in her last lines about the foal.

“I hope, finally, he felt brave.

I hope, finally, he loved the man who rode so lightly upon him,

as he lifted one dusty hoof and stepped,

as he had to, forward.”

As you read, you might ask what kind of saving Jesus did intend. And which of our expectations need mending.

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away."

This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

"Say to Daughter Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"

The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"

The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. "It is written," he said to them, "'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it 'a den of robbers.'"

The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple courts,

"Hosanna to the Son of David," they were indignant.

"Do you hear what these children are saying?" they asked him.

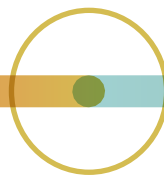
"Yes," replied Jesus, "have you never read,

"'From the lips of children and infants you, Lord, have called forth your praise'?"

And he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night.

Questions

1. *What does this passage teach us about Jesus and his character?*
2. *How does this passage challenge the common assumptions we have around power and kingship?*
3. *What are the key verbs in this passage, and who is the subject of these verbs? What theological insight do we learn from this?*



Week 31

March 28, 2027

MATTHEW 28:1-10

Every April churches around the world gather for a festival. We dress in our Easter best, sing celebratory songs with brass and strings in the U.S., drums in Africa, festivities everywhere. To ensure that we'll get a place to park and a seat in Covenant's worship we arrive early and expectant.

In this familiar story, the women who follow Jesus rise before dawn and make their way to his tomb, but they've come to embalm the body, not to celebrate its vacancy. On their way, they sing, not a Hallelujah, but a dirge. What happens next is the pivot point in history. On this morning, Jesus, who had healed diseases, stilled storms, walked on water, and cast out demons moved into another realm all together: he conquered death itself.

Your challenge will be to enter this brilliant report freshly. The bare facts of the resurrection, so astonishingly new to those first followers of Jesus, have been with us from our childhood egg hunts: he was dead, now he lives. What new thing could we possibly uncover? But Matthew's telling of Easter is fascinating in its fine details.

- **Guards.** In chapter 27, Jewish authorities worry that these disciples will fake a rising, so they request Roman guards to keep watch.
- **Earthquake.** Matthew is the only Gospel to give this detail. What does it mean when a death shakes even the earth itself?
- **Cover-Up.** When the guards report the resurrection, Jewish leaders offer hush money to silence them.
- **Jesus.** The angel's instructions almost get interrupted by the One he announces - as if the Savior can't wait to encourage these forlorn women himself.

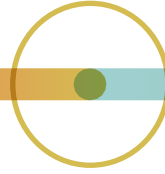
What intrigue and what meaning do these odd details add to the bare facts?

Really, though, the bare facts alone can carry your conversation. Don't be afraid to air your skepticism if you have it. In 28.16 we'll learn that even the pre-scientific-revolution disciples have their doubts. And don't be afraid to shout your Hallelujahs. As the apostle Paul puts it, "Death has lost its sting!" Happy Easter!

After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.² And suddenly there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.³ His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow.⁴ For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.⁵ But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified.⁶ He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you."⁸ So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples.⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him.¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Questions

1. *The resurrection changes everything. How would you articulate the hope of the resurrection?*
2. *What is God's action in this text, and how are we invited to respond and participate?*
3. *What remains unanswered and unresolved in you after engaging with this passage?*



Week 32

April 4, 2027

MATTHEW 28:16-20

What part of living Christianly scares you the most? This may feel like a strange question and certainly is an abrupt way to begin, but I'm really asking. What do you fear?

Jesus spoke the Great Commission (Matthew 28.16-20) at an exceedingly scary time for the disciples -- days after his crushing death by execution followed by his awe-and-confusion-inspiring resurrection and immediately after he gave them the hardest job they could imagine. "Go and make disciples of all nations." Remember, he'd been building faith in these eleven men intensively for three years, and according to 28.16 "some (still!) doubted".

So Jesus sends 11 disciples, some of them quite shaky, to make solid disciples around the whole world. Scary!

But this is precisely when we can relish that huge word "WITH" in verse 20. "I am WITH you always" says Jesus, "even to the end of the age." Twenty-seven chapters ago, in a rugged Bethlehem cattle stall, Matthew introduced us to the newborn Emmanuel (which means "God is with us" - Matthew 1.23); and in today's passage we hear that very One saying there's nowhere we can go that God won't go with us -- even to the most scary parts of our faith walk.

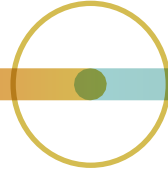
Those shaky disciples seem to have taken their Lord at his word. They went to the nations and he went with them...so here we are 5,000 miles and 20 centuries away from that moment in Galilee. In your discussion, I urge you to do an inventory. Dig down and realize what fear is keeping you from doing -- the scary parts of faithful living. Then imagine doing just one of them, walking right into the fire -- but not alone. WITH Jesus.

On Easter Sunday morning nearly 2000 years later, you and I will gather for worship along with hundreds of millions of disciples from every nation in the world. If those fearful, faithful disciples could count on Jesus's presence WITH, we should be able to do it too. So pray...and conquer a faith fear soon.

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him, but they doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Questions

1. *What do we learn about the relationship between God's initiative and our human response in this passage?*
2. *What does this passage reveal about God's heart for the world?*
3. *Is there someone in your life whom God has put on your heart to encourage and walk alongside in the coming days?*



Week 33

April 11, 2027

ACTS 10:1-17, 34-48

The groups you and I are a part of in our daily lives all define who's in and who's out. In most cases, our boundaries aren't consciously drawn (e.g., a clique in the cafeteria); in other cases we define requirements for membership (e.g, education levels required for employment) .

The first big issue the first Christians faced as the movement spread beyond Jerusalem was a group boundary question. They were all Jews, so they asked: When Jesus told us to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1.8), did he mean we ought to talk to Jews only? Or did he mean to include Gentiles? A bit of context: many Jews were taught from a young age to separate themselves from Gentiles. Kosher laws made it difficult to eat in mixed company, Torah and the rabbis strongly discouraged marrying across Jew-Gentile lines, and if none of these discouragements prevailed, the phrase "Gentile dogs" (Matthew 15.26) was a strong hint that Jews were socialized to be separate.

This episode with Peter and Cornelius answered the Gentile question resoundingly – but very clearly against Peter's prior assumption that Gentiles were unclean. In some ways, the Gentile questions should have been easier to answer. The Hebrew prophets had pictured God's welcome of Gentiles (e.g., Isaiah 49.6), there were already Gentile converts to Judaism before Jesus arrived on the scene, and Jesus even mentions badly-executed Jewish proselytism in his harangue against pharisaic hypocrisy (Matthew 23.15).

This inclusive epiphany of the early church matters for how we faithful people look at people outside our groups. Christian history features a wide variety of boundary definitions. Medieval catholicism infamously featured heresy hunts and a brutal inquisition. On the other hand, some churches have had no required belief statements or covenants of behavior.

Think about your own small group or Covenant Presbyterian Church or other Christian associations you frequent. How do you define boundaries? Are there disqualifying behaviors or beliefs? What determines who's in and who's out? And what do we learn from Peter, Cornelius, and a sheet full of food?

ACTS 10:1-17

In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. ² He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. ³ One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius." ⁴ He stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" He answered, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵ Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; ⁶ he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside." ⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, ⁸ and after telling them everything he sent them to Joppa.

⁹ About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰ He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while it was being prepared he fell into a trance. ¹¹ He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. ¹² In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³ Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." ¹⁴ But Peter said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." ¹⁵ The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." ¹⁶ This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven. ¹⁷ Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon's house and were standing by the gate.

ACTS 10:34-48

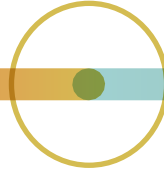
³⁴ Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every people anyone who fears him and practices righteousness is acceptable to him. ³⁶ You know

the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ – he is Lord of all. ³⁷ That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹ We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the gentiles, ⁴⁶ for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷ "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" ⁴⁸ So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

Questions

1. Are there any Old Testament texts that complicate this text? How does the work of Jesus and the Spirit help us to understand the new thing that God has done?
2. How does this passage speak to God's desire to create, redeem, deliver, judge, and save the world?
3. What does this passage reveal about God's heart for the world?



Week 34

April 18, 2027

ACTS 17:16-34

Paul could have shouted at an idolatrous people, clinging to their worthless idols. In a faithful Jewish household, Paul recited from his earliest days the shema of Deuteronomy 6: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is One." In scripture, he would have seen the prophets rail against people who embraced many gods. So the apostle could have imitated Jonah, who cursed the people of Nineveh for their pagan ways. (Jonah 1.1-2) In Paul's own day, Jewish preachers often chastised the blind idolatries of the Roman world. And Paul knew how to shout -- as in his speech to the Jewish leaders he gathered in his house-arrest apartment in Rome. (Acts 28.25-28)

Paul could have berated the Athenian passersby and philosophers for their idolatry. Instead he opened a conversation. "You Athenians seem very religious....That's a good thing. In fact, I'd like to talk with you about the One your shrine calls 'the Unknown God'..." Paul takes one more step in the Athenians' direction when he quotes a line they may have heard before: "For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.'" (Acts 17.28) By treating the Athenian people and their religiosity this way, Paul acknowledges the goodness of their quest and in the meantime presents a God who longs to welcome them.

In his famous "Creation of Adam" for the Sistine Chapel, Michaelangelo painted God eagerly reaching to the somewhat diffident Adam. This humano-centric vision was very Renaissance-ish, of course. The period is famous for featuring the glories of humanity. But the picture of God is worth noticing, because this eager, reaching God is the One Paul takes with him to Athens, the One that showed up in a wretched Bethlehem cattle stall, and the One who reaches to you and me.

How do you experience the God Paul presents to the Athenians?

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols.¹⁷ So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.¹⁸ Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, "What does this pretentious babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities." (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.)¹⁹ So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?"²⁰ It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means."²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

²² Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely spiritual you are in every way.²³ For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands,²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.²⁶ From one ancestor he made all peoples to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live,²⁷ so that they would search for God and perhaps fumble about for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us.²⁸ For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said,

'For we, too, are his offspring.'

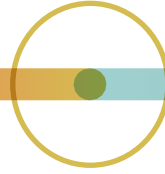
²⁹ "Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.³⁰ While God has overlooked the times of

human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent,³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

³² When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed, but others said, "We will hear you again about this."³³ At that point Paul left them.³⁴ But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

Questions

1. *What does this passage teach us about God and his character?*
2. *What do we learn about idolatry and our desire to chase after things that are not God in this passage?*
3. *How does this passage challenge the common assumptions of our modern culture?*



Week 35

April 25, 2027

ROMANS 5:1-11

When big things need expression, adequate words can be hard to find. Consider the big moments of your life. How have you told people about them? Any parts of the experience that you just couldn't describe?

Even though Romans 5.1-11 is one of Paul's most famous paragraphs and maybe the most expressive, succinct presentation of what we call Paul's gospel, I think he felt this frustration as he was writing its opening words. There he says, "since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." He hopes here to communicate the holy glee of being reconciled to the Creator. But there's a big problem.

The Greek word EIRENE, like the English word PEACE that translates it here, means a mere cessation of conflict. For Paul it doesn't begin to describe the brilliant experience of peace with God. He comes closer in another letter, but to do it he must tack on extra words. People who pray instead of worrying will receive "the peace of God, which passes all understanding". (Philippians 4.6-7) He's trying to communicate the "peace, harmony, wholeness, completeness, prosperity, and welfare" that define the Hebrew word SHALOM. But for a Hebrew-speaking Jew, a one-word translation of SHALOM into Greek must have felt like trying to funnel a cool clear mountain lake through a tiny, brittle straw.

So what brings this inexplicable, inexpressible shalom that Paul felt through Christ? This new rightness with God, the "grace in which we stand", is a deep connection with God that is our largest life. It's a newfound SHALOM, the restoration of God's intended wholeness for all. And we didn't even have to measure up to receive this gift. Christ died for us "while we were still sinners"! It's all God's doing through the faithfulness of Jesus, and all we need to do is receive it.

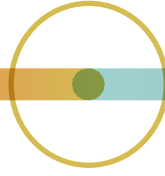
Read Romans 5.1-11 and see for yourself. It's almost too big for words!

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,² through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.³ And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance,⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.⁷ Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.⁸ But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.⁹ Much more surely, therefore, since we have now been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God.¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.¹¹ But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Questions

1. *How does the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus transform our understanding of this passage?*
2. *What is God's action in this text, and how are we invited to participate in that work?*
3. *How can we live with hope and resilience as we await God's new creation?*



Week 36

May 2, 2027

ROMANS 6:1-14

Grace is great, isn't it?! The unearned love of a forgiving God is a glory beyond words. But a thinking person must ask questions. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the faithful German martyr under the Nazis, worried that his fellow Christians were succumbing to "cheap grace...the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline...absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate." (*The Cost of Discipleship*) It's what he blamed for their failure to resist Hitler.

Paul worried about this, too. Immediately after Grace Central in Romans 5, Paul hears voices pushing back: "What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may increase?" It's an excellent question. If grace is the best thing in the world, and grace multiplies to cover sin, don't I help the ball club by sinning more to bring more grace? To counter the charge, Paul uses the strongest possible Greek negative: *MAY GENOITO* – may it never be! Then comes his retort: "How can we who died to sin go on living in it?"

To "get" Paul, it helps to know what baptism was for him and his groups. Most Covenant welcome infants as children of God. They're beautiful moments in our life together!! As you read Romans 6.1-14, though, it will help to picture Paul's practice. A leader lowered the convert into a river or pond, dying with Christ to the old self, then raised the body out of the water to new life with Christ. No wonder Paul asks the Romans, "Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (6.4)

Paul's picture of abrupt change may not match with your own experience. Most of us continue to battle the old self. Frederick Buechner wrote, "I know Old Adam and Old Eve are supposed to be drowned in the waters of baptism, but those two are awfully good swimmers." Talk amongst yourselves!

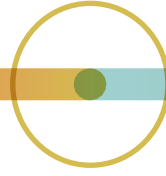
What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may increase? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? ³ Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ Therefore we were buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life.

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, so we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷ For whoever has died is freed from sin. ⁸ But if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰ The death he died, he died to sin once for all, but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

¹² Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal bodies, so that you obey their desires. ¹³ No longer present your members to sin as instruments of unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. ¹⁴ For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

Questions

1. *What does this text expose about human sinfulness, weakness, or need?*
2. *What do we learn about the relationship between God's initiative and our human response in this passage?*
3. *How does this passage speak to the incarnational nature of our God who takes on flesh and walks through life with us?*



Week 37

May 9, 2027

ROMANS 12

What was your college major? And, after hours and hours of classes focused in that area, how prepared were you when you graduated actually to use what you'd learned?

In our walk through the whole Bible, you and I have lately been majoring in the apostle Paul. Two weeks ago, we drank in the glories of God's grace from Romans 5; last week, we realized in Romans 6 that a legit experience of grace changes the way we behave in the world because through baptism we've died to our old lives and been raised to new life. This week in Romans 12, Paul breaks the news to us that we're not the only ones – that this transformation God works in us (12.1-2) puts us in company with brothers and sisters in Christ.

This isn't obvious from the first two verses. Many Christians know or have even memorized Romans 12.1-2. By itself, it can fit an individualistic American ethos. "I've been transformed!" could then send me to solo practices that improve MY relationship with Jesus. But Paul won't allow that. Our third verse says, "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among y'all (Greek plural) not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think." Then verse 4 puts us smack dab in the middle of a flesh and blood Christian community.

I emphasize this because American culture wants you and me to think first about "myself". It takes determination to read Paul bravely here and realize that Christianity is about us – living out our spiritual gifts for the sake of the body (12.4-8), loving one another genuinely (12.9-12), and loving even our enemies (12.14-21). Turns out grace, new life, and transformation are all about us...and the stranger. (12.13)

Chat together about divine transformation and spiritual gifts and godly love. And remember that Paul turns us toward one another with them. Enjoy!

(And by the way, watch out for this Pauline Studies major. It might just change us!!)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. ² Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

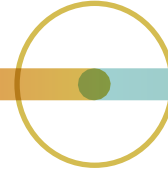
³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴ For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶ We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸ the encourager, in encouragement; the giver, in sincerity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

⁹ Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰ love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another; do not be arrogant, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰ Instead, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Questions

1. *What does this passage teach us about what it means to worship God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength?*
2. *How does the nature and character of God in this text clarify for us how we ought to live in the world?*
3. *Who might God be calling you to be in light of this passage?*



Week 38

May 16, 2027

ACTS 2:1-42

This is Pentecost – the birthday of the church. Here’s the strange thing: a promise was the only thing these Jesus people really had during the long days and weeks between his, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you,” (Acts 1.8) and the actual moment when the Holy Spirit broke out. (Acts 2.1) But we have no report of a single defector. They had learned that Jesus was worth the wait, so they leaned forward wondering, “How’s he going to pull this thing off?!” That upper room was charged with expectancy.

The crowded space of waiting also featured fear. Jesus had no qualms about pushing them beyond their comfort zone. He coaxed Peter out to walk on water (Matthew 14); he sent his followers out two-by-two to places they’d never been (Luke 9); he stretched them in ways that were never easy and often risky.

Along with expectancy and fear, Pentecost is also an explosion. In *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Annie Dillard reflects on contemporary Christianity’s complacency and risk aversion. “Why do people in church seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ... Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us to where we can never return.”

The disciples didn’t evacuate when Jesus pushed them. It scared them, but the risks Jesus ran led to new and better things. What in your own journey following Jesus leaves you expectant? What scares you? And when is the next explosion?

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³ But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Fellow Jews and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ 'In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.

¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit,
and they shall prophesy.

¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

²² "Fellow Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— ²³ this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. ²⁴ But God raised him up, having released him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. ²⁵ For David says concerning him,

'I saw the Lord always before me,
for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken;
²⁶ therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;
moreover, my flesh will live in hope.
²⁷ For you will not abandon my soul to Hades
or let your Holy One experience corruption.
²⁸ You have made known to me the ways of life;
you will make me full of gladness with your presence.'

²⁹ "Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. ³⁰ Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. ³¹ Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying,

'He was not abandoned to Hades,
nor did his flesh experience corruption.'

³² "This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. ³³ Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you see and hear. ³⁴ For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says,

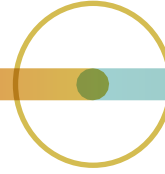
'The Lord said to my Lord,
"Sit at my right hand,
³⁵ until I make your enemies your footstool."'

³⁶ "Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."

³⁷ Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" ³⁸ Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." ⁴⁰ And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." ⁴¹ So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. ⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Questions

1. Does the language in this passage or any of its themes have resonances from other parts of Scripture? If so, what is the significance of that connection?
2. How might the original audience of this passage have understood this differently than we do?
3. What does God want to make new in our world and in our lives?



Week 39

May 23, 2027

1 CORINTHIANS 8

It would be hard to find a topic less relevant to us than Paul's focus in this chapter. You probably can't even remember the last time you and your friends argued about whether 21st-century Christians should eat meat that's been sacrificed to pagan gods. But as you read Paul's counsel to his Corinthian converts, a whole social conflict will open itself to you; and you may quickly perceive that while the specific cause is alien, the human dynamic sounds very familiar. As you read together, you can ask what specific settings in your lives might present some of the same tensions and profit from Paul's insights.

Here are a couple things about ancient Corinth that may help you navigate your conversation:

1. One well-known scholar of ancient Rome estimates that 99% of the meat consumed in the first century would have already been sacrificed to some Greco-Roman deity. First it was flamed toward a god, then it was prepared in the household or sold in the market. So eating meat at all almost always meant eating meat that had been sacrificed to a god.
2. The Corinthian church was slow to learn that they belonged, not only to God, but to one another. This lack had them believing that what they did sexually was no one else's business (1 Cor 5.1); that they could sue one another in civil courts (1 Cor 6); and that the rich who showed up to church early could scarf all the food down with no regard for their day-working brothers and sisters, who would arrive later and go hungry. (1 Cor 11)

Chapter 8 is one of many places where Paul challenges them to stop revolving around themselves and become "the body of Christ" together. This seems exceedingly relevant to our hyper-individualistic culture. You and your group might discuss contemporary obstacles to the high regard that Paul calls the Corinthians to extend toward one another. Ask to what specific situations in your life this passage specifically speaks.

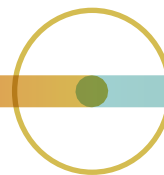
Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.² Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge,³ but anyone who loves God is known by him.

⁴ Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists” and that “there is no God but one.”⁵ Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—⁶ yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

⁷ It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.⁸ “Food will not bring us close to God.” We are no worse off if we do not eat and no better off if we do.⁹ But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.¹⁰ For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? ¹¹ So by your knowledge the weak brother or sister for whom Christ died is destroyed. ¹² But when you thus sin against brothers and sisters and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never again eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

Questions

1. *What does this passage teach us about who the church ought to be?*
2. *Are there any Old Testament texts that complicate this text and help us understand it more fully?*
3. *How might we apply Paul's admonition to our personal lives and to our corporate life as a church?*



Week 40

May 30, 2027

CORINTHIANS 15:35-58

A few weeks ago, we celebrated Easter with the glorious news of the angel to the women at the empty tomb: "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said." (Matthew 28) Then we sang some songs and went to brunch. I exaggerate, but it really is quite a shame that Lent gets six weeks and Easter passes as quickly as it came. This week we get to remedy that, because resurrection is central to the whole rest of the New Testament and the apostle Paul takes it out for a closer look in 1 Corinthians 15.

A bit of Corinthian context will help us into Paul's conversation. Four centuries before the apostle wrote his letter to the Corinthians, the Greek philosopher Plato famously coined a pun that describes a theme within the Greek ethos: "SOMA SEMA" ("The body is a tomb.") For Plato and many other ancient neighbors to the early Christians, the fleshy body is the inferior and sometimes confining part of the mind-soul-body complex.

Maybe this is why some people in Paul's Corinthian church chimed in to ask, perhaps with sarcasm dripping off their pens, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" Against this grain of Greek disdain for flesh, Paul waxes bold in his reply. He announces the very good news that resurrection is not simply about a disembodied soul's ascent - either for us or for Jesus. For Paul bodies are raised, so he talks to these skeptics about a "resurrection body". (1 Cor 15.35)

Paul's answer to this line of questioning brings his Jewish and Hebrew concept of body into conversation with Greek themes and produces the brilliant language that we haul out every Easter to celebrate Christ's rising (and our own).

But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" ³⁶ Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. ³⁷ And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. ³⁸ But God gives it a body as he has chosen and to each kind of seed its own body. ³⁹ Not all flesh is alike, but there is one flesh for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. ⁴⁰ There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. ⁴¹ There is one glory of the sun and another glory of the moon and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory.

⁴² So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. ⁴³ It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. ⁴⁴ It is sown a physical body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. ⁴⁵ Thus it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. ⁴⁶ But it is not the spiritual that is first but the physical and then the spiritual. ⁴⁷ The first man was from the earth, made of dust; the second man is from heaven. ⁴⁸ As one of dust, so are those who are of the dust, and as one of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. ⁴⁹ Just as we have borne the image of the one of dust, we will also bear the image of the one of heaven.

⁵⁰ What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹ Look, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ When this perishable body puts on imperishability and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

"Death has been swallowed up in victory."

⁵⁵ "Where, O death, is your victory?

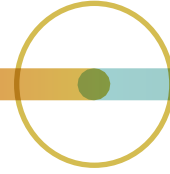
Where, O death, is your sting?"

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Questions

1. *How does the idea that there will be bodies in heaven challenge the common assumption that heaven will be a place of bodiless souls?*
2. *What role does the image or illustration in this text play?*
3. *Which promises of God in this passage do you need to lean on more deeply?*



Week 41

June 6, 2027

2 CORINTHIANS 4:1-15

In our instant communication age, nastygrams – angry e-mails or texts – are a common occurrence. What you may not know is that nastygrams are not infrequent in a pastor's inbox. Irritated congregants launch harsh critiques, and the wise pastor's difficult job is to turn a nastygram attack into a constructive conversation.

2 Corinthians is Paul's pastoral reply to his group's nastygrams. In 1 Corinthians, Paul mentions a note he wrote to them and theirs to him (7.1). In 2nd Corinthians, though, the tension has increased. Instead of queries, they've launched complaints against Paul:

- Paul's changed travel plans ghost them; (1.15-18, 23)
- strong letters, weak person, C+ preaching; (10.10)
- under-qualified compared to the "super apostles"; (11.5; 12.11)
- suspicious fundraising techniques. (12.16-18)

As the dark old joke goes, other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, how was the play?

No wonder Paul uses some of his strongest language here. Speaking with "complete frankness" (3.12), he defends against each charge and even throws shade back at them for their insolence. Our passage speaks good news powerfully, while also continuing Paul's defense.

Paul weaves good news subtly here. He uses language from an Old Testament passage about the veil Moses wore when he came away from God's presence. (Exodus 34.29-35) The glory is clearest in verse 15: "The one who raised Jesus will also raise us with Jesus and will present us with you in his presence."

The defense: when Paul is backed into a corner, he answers with his battle scars. Later in the letter, he will offer a catalog of his sacrifices for the gospel. (11.16-33) Here he tucks his own suffering – being "afflicted...persecuted...struck down"-- within the larger point that God has deigned to shine his light through clay jars – fleshy people.

What will you learn from this brief moment in a charged exchange between pastor and people? There's good news here. You also might reckon with the fact of Christian conflict. I wish you well!

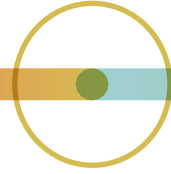
Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.² We have renounced the shameful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing clearly the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.⁵ For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus's sake.⁶ For it is the God who said, "Light will shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

⁷ But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.⁸ We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair,⁹ persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed,¹⁰ always carrying around in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.¹¹ For we who are living are always being handed over to death for Jesus's sake, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our mortal flesh.¹² So death is at work in us but life in you.

¹³ But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—"I believed, and so I spoke"—we also believe, and therefore we also speak,¹⁴ because we know that the one who raised Jesus will also raise us with Jesus and will present us with you in his presence.¹⁵ Indeed, everything is for your sake, so that grace, when it has extended to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

Questions

1. *What does this passage teach us about suffering and patience?*
2. *How can we live with hope and resilience as we await God's new creation?*
3. *How might you pray differently in light of this passage and who God is revealed to be through it?*



Week 42

June 13, 2027

GALATIANS 3:1-14

Paul begins every letter but one with lavish praise for his addressees. After his greeting, “I always thank God...” sets the tone of every Pauline missive except Galatians. Here, he barely breathes a brief hello before he shouts, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel!” (Galatians 1.6) Paul is not happy, and in this session we get to read the reason why.

We’re not sure from where Paul wrote this letter to the Galatians, but he had clearly heard plenty of news about them. “Who has bewitched you?!” (3.1) reflects the content of an intelligence briefing: interloping Jewish-Christian teachers have infiltrated the Galatian church after Paul left, and they’re preaching the opposite of Paul’s gospel of grace that we read about a few weeks ago in Romans 5. Their message: the way to become righteous is by joining the ancient covenant God made with Abraham through circumcision (Genesis 17) and keeping the law as given by God to Moses (Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy).

Paul is apoplectic! The whole letter is a passionate invitation back to grace – a return to the Galatians’ enlightened and enSpirited selves when Paul left. To accomplish this, Paul takes them down memory lane to the explosion that took place when he was with them. He preached Christ crucified, they believed, and the Spirit began to do wonders. Paul asks them to remember, “Did all of this happen because you obeyed some ancient law?” Desired answer: NO! They began this journey in the Spirit, but they’re in danger of lapsing back into flesh – this time through circumcision.

All of this can sound to us like an irrelevant ancient squabble until we recognize just how often we ourselves are tempted to believe we can earn God’s affection by being good. As you read, you may wish to reflect together on why this happens – and how to remedy our own various bewitchments.

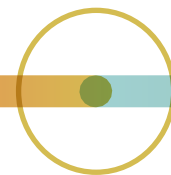
You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! ² The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? ³ Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? ⁴ Did you experience so much for nothing?—if it really was for nothing. ⁵ Well then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law or by your believing what you heard?

⁶ Just as Abraham “believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” ⁷ so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham. ⁸ And the scripture, foreseeing that God would reckon as righteous the gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the gentiles shall be blessed in you.” ⁹ For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed.

¹⁰ For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.” ¹¹ Now it is evident that no one is reckoned as righteous before God by the law, for “the one who is righteous will live by faith.” ¹² But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary, “Whoever does the works of the law will live by them.” ¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”— ¹⁴ in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Questions

1. *What are the key verbs in this passage, and who is the subject of these verbs? What theological insight do we learn from this?*
2. *What do you think we are supposed to learn through repetition of phrases and words in this text?*
3. *Are there any Old Testament texts that complicate this text and help us understand it more fully?*



Week 43

June 20, 2027

EPHESIANS 2.1-10

Before and After split screens can sell weight-loss plans, weight-lifting programs, home renovations, and other such transformation prospects. It's easy enough to tell me the widget works, but I want proof of concept: how does it change things.

Our section of Paul's letter to the Ephesians features a Before and After picture. The apostle first paints "Before", by reminding his people of their past lives on the cheatin' side of town. He even says "we've all been there" (v. 3), then describes their former life with enough detail to bring it painfully to his hearers' minds.

The "After" portrait depicts a blessed, raised-up, heavenly life lived with Christ. But this is not some sort of "too-heavenly-minded-to-be-any-earthly-good" life, lived with heads in the clouds. God has crafted us precisely "for good works in Christ." (2.10)

Of course, Before and After pitches are all about what caused the change. In this passage, I urge you to focus your attention and conversation on 2.4-9. There, Paul interrupts his description of the like-everybody old life with the key words of the whole section: "...but God..." God is the actor in the change. Even the very famous 8th verse uses a passive voice to make God primary: "For by grace you HAVE BEEN saved, and that not of yourselves." (2.8 - NASB)

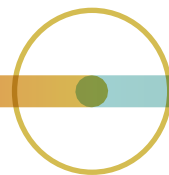
All of this may sound familiar. A few weeks ago, in Romans 5, Paul used similar language ("while we were still sinners") to introduce Christ's intervention of the cross ("Christ died for the ungodly.") Here Paul pictures the same transformation, but this time as an outcome of the resurrection ("raised up with Christ").

Transformation is required for any Before and After project. What does this passage summon in you? Is it gratitude? Is it a new resolve to live like one who's been changed? Is it both? Or something else? Have a great conversation!

You were dead through the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³ All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, doing the will of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else, ⁴ but God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵ even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹ not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we may walk in them.

Questions

1. *What does God want to make new in our world and in our lives?*
2. *What does this text expose about human sinfulness, weakness, or need?*
3. *How does this passage shape our understanding of what grace and faith are?*



Week 44

June 27, 2027

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11

Paul pens his note to the Philippians while shackled in the hell hole of a Roman prison, pressed against moaning men who often attempt suicide, void of friendly company unless his Christian friends bribe guards so they can bring food. In fact, these friendly visits explain how Paul could possibly eke out this dictated letter. Nonetheless, he reports that this torment actually helps the gospel, because he has evangelized guards, whose rotation will take them to other parts of the empire soon. (1.12-14)

On the other end of the correspondence, the Philippian Christians are enduring social pressure and perhaps physical persecution from their neighbors. (1.27-30) This opposition threatens to discourage faith and divide their group. It has likely brought conflict between two of their leaders. (4.2-3)

Philippians 2.1-11 is Paul's prescription for this group's survival and thriving. The remedy is mutual caring. As you read it, compare Paul's call to put others before ourselves to our current self-serving, individualistic American ethos.

The crowning moment here is Paul's remarkable "Hymn to Christ" in 2.6-11. In case his bare description of healthy communal practices in 2.1-4 doesn't quite compute, he quotes a worship song that the Philippians may have sung with Paul when he first worshiped with them. It describes Jesus's self-giving journey - in the very form of God, but emptying himself for our sakes. "Have this mind in you!" he says in 2.5. But the song's story is not all sacrifice. Its second half features Jesus's rising and exaltation. Somewhere in its undertones, the Philippians might just see light at the other end of their own tunnel.

Imprisoned Paul uses the words joy, joyful, and rejoice 16 times in the 104 verses of this letter. Is he in denial? Is Paul Pollyanna? Or has he found a secret most of us don't know?

If this letter and these specific verses showed up in one of your e-boxes, not addressed to Philippi but to you or Covenant, how would it help?

If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection and sympathy, ² make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others.

⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, though he existed in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be grasped,

⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
assuming human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a human,

⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

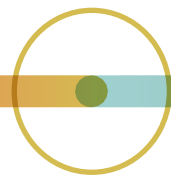
⁹ Therefore God exalted him even more highly
and gave him the name
that is above every other name,

¹⁰ so that at the name given to Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹ and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Questions

1. *What does this passage teach us about God and his character?*
2. *What is God's action in this text, and how are we invited to participate in that work?*
3. *Who might God be calling you to be in light of this passage?*



Week 45

July 4, 2027

COLOSSIANS 1:15-23

What's the difference between a letter and a book? Strange query, but it's worth asking as we continue reading Paul's writings. Most letters are personal. "How are the kids? Jane is applying to med school, right?" Most books can't be. It would be odd to get to page 15 of a paperback and suddenly have it describe you or your group precisely. "I saw you guys at the concert. How did you like it?" doesn't work in a mass market tome.

Paul's "Letter" to the Colossians (like Ephesians) is more like a tiny book than a letter. The author doesn't point to specific glories or foibles in his audience, and his language is cosmic rather than local. Compare this to 1 Corinthians, where Paul knows that people there are arguing with one another, tolerating gross sexual immorality, suing one another in Roman courts, withholding sex from their spouses – need I go on? You can't get more personal than this! But you'll scour Paul's "Letter" to the Colossians in vain if you're looking for specifics about their life together. 1 Corinthians is tailored. Colossians is more "one size fits all".

None of this reduces the power of Colossians, as you can tell from reading our passage. These nine verses shout the cosmic significance of the Christ. They read like a superlative resume. They parallel John 1 (involved in creating - Col 1.16), Hebrews 1 (express image of the invisible God - Col 1.15), and 2 Corinthians 5 (reconciling all things to himself - Col 1.20). And beyond these, "all things hold together" in him (Col 1.17), so it seems that if Christ were to disappear, the universe would dissolve.

If paragraph #1 is cosmic, then #2 brings all of this largeness home to human lives. Miracle of miracles, this mighty force in the universe took on a fleshy body to retrieve the Colossians and us from our old lives to a life with God.

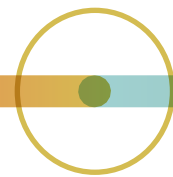
How does a person respond? Great question! Hint: read verse 23 several times together. Enjoy!

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, ¹⁶ for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He himself is before all things, and in[b] him all things hold together. ¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

²¹ And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, ²³ provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a minister of this gospel.

Questions

1. *What do we learn about the relationship between the Father and the Son in this passage?*
2. *What does this passage teach us about what it means to worship God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength?*
3. *Who might God be calling you to be in light of this passage?*



Week 46

July 11, 2027

1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18; 5:1-11

Imagine you're trying to assemble a complex Ikea dresser and have somehow lost pages 2-8 of the instruction manual. Several slats and 150 little metal pieces lie on your garage floor with nowhere to go, because you are lost.

This may be how the Thessalonians felt about their faith in Jesus. When the apostle Paul came to their city, they embraced his initial message. But before he reached phase two of his teaching, persecutions forced him to flee death threats for refuge in Athens, 200 miles south. This brand new Christian group had to fend for themselves far earlier than Paul would have hoped. No wonder this letter is two thirds reassurance, one third instruction; but it's important to notice what Paul takes up first when he starts to teach.

Between a brief word about sexual morality (4.1-12) and a short section on how to treat others in community (5.12-22), Paul spends these three paragraphs (4.13-5.11) reassuring the Thessalonians about their ultimate future. We aren't sure what prompts their concern. Perhaps one of them has died since Paul left, and they thought Jesus would come back before that could happen. Or maybe Paul just wants to remind them about the astonishing hope that lies in store for people who believe, and he didn't have time to get that message across when he was with them.

Whatever the prompt, his presentation about Jesus's return has three main emphases. As you read, notice that Paul assures them that Jesus will come back, reminds them that no one knows when this will happen, then reiterates that Jesus will return, not to punish but to save. "He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him." (5.10)

You and I walk the world amid politicians and others spreading apocalyptic fear. They want us to live scared so we'll trust them to save us. Paul's words to the Thessalonians offer us help by assuring us that Jesus has the last word, no matter what shrill voices may say. What consolation does this offer you?

1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

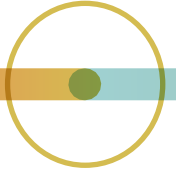
But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. ¹⁵ For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. ² For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³ When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! ⁴ But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; ⁵ for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. ⁶ So, then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober, ⁷ for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. ⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be sober and put on the breastplate of faith and love and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹ For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰ who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Questions

1. *What do we learn about the relationship between God's initiative and our human response in this passage?*
2. *How can we live with hope and resilience as we await God's new creation?*
3. *Which promises of God in this passage do you need to lean on more deeply?*



Week 48

July 18, 2027

1 TIMOTHY 3:1-13

Every spring at Covenant, we dedicate a significant stretch of one Sunday's 9:30 AM worship service to the ordination of our elders and deacons. Well before the service the Congregational Nominating Committee discerns who will serve these offices well; then they propose a slate for congregational vote; the ordination is the final stage in the process. A pastor asks a string of questions for the candidates, then once the elders and deacons have answered those, past elders and deacons along with pastors and other congregants lay hands on them as we pray.

Rituals like this have evolved over the history of the church, but our passage from 1 Timothy 3 lets us in on a list of qualifications from the early church. As you read this section, some criteria will seem obvious and others may surprise you. For example, the elders' list (which sets the pace for the deacons' description as well) combines a standard slate of Greco-Roman virtues – things like temperance, self-control, respectability, hospitableness, moderation with alcohol, gentleness, agreeability, and contentment (3.2-3) – with a few that seem specific to the Christian group – a block against people who have remarried, an emphasis on good parenting, years of experience as a believer, and a good reputation in town seem this way.

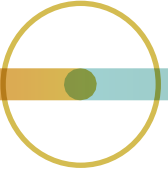
Our Covenant ordination questions overlap these values, but the emphases differ and there's no query about domestic life or how each candidate fares in the view of the wider public. As you read these, it might help to ask what specific values lie behind the profiles. Ask what qualities are most important to you as you seek leaders or lead yourself.

The saying is sure: whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task. ²Now a bishop must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, ³not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money. ⁴He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way—⁵for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of God's church? ⁶He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. ⁷Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace and the snare of the devil.

⁸Deacons likewise must be serious, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine, not greedy for money; ⁹they must hold fast to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰And let them first be tested; then, if they prove themselves blameless, let them serve as deacons. ¹¹Women likewise must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things. ¹²Let deacons be married only once and let them manage their children and their households well; ¹³for those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

Questions

1. *How does this passage challenge the common assumptions of our modern culture?*
2. *What does this passage teach us about what it means to worship God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength?*
3. *Why do you think the church puts such a strong emphasis on the character and lives of its leaders?*



Week 49

July 25, 2027

PHILEMON

Slavery is the original sin of the U.S., and Christians made the case for it from scripture. 18th- and 19th-century southern preachers claimed from the pulpit that God meant for humans to enslave one another; that some races are innately inferior to others; and that American slavery was God's plan for the heathens of Africa to receive the good news of Jesus Christ. Our biblical authors generally treat slavery as a given, an enduring part of the existing culture, which is why the Bible could be used this way by pro-slavery preachers.

Our passage for this week could have steered these preachers to holier ground. In his brief Letter to Philemon, the apostle Paul calls for his addressee to free his slave Onesimus. In Galatians 3, Paul famously pronounced that baptism erases human distinctions. "There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free...for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3.28) But in other letters (Ephesians and Colossians), he advises people to treat their slaves more humanely – not to emancipate them. Galatians 3 finally hits the street in Paul's appeal to see Philemon free his runaway slave Onesimus. His reason? In Christ "he is a beloved brother" – both to Paul and to Philemon.

Paul's appeal ends up gentle: "Perhaps this is the reason Onesimus [the slave] was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother." (15-16) Philemon is older, wealthier, more established, and has many other advantages over Paul in society. But Paul knows that even the enslaved Onesimus is a man created in God's image, so he persists.

Friends, in this tiny letter to Philemon Paul shows what seem to have been his true colors. He loved Philemon and Onesimus far too much to let them own and be owned by one another, and this revolutionary love Paul found through the gospel of Jesus.

That's worth a conversation!

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker,² to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow-soldier, and to the church in your house:

³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God ⁵because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith towards the Lord Jesus. ⁶I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. ⁷I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

⁸For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, ⁹yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. ¹⁰I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. ¹¹Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. ¹²I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. ¹³I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; ¹⁴but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. ¹⁵Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

¹⁷So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. ²⁰Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in

Christ. ²¹Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

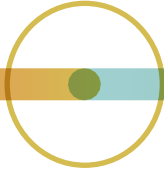
²²One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.

²³Epaphras, my fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, ²⁴and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

²⁵The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Questions

1. *How might the original audience of this passage have understood this differently than we do?*
2. *Philemon has been used to both justify and challenge the institution of slavery. Why do you think that is?*
3. *What does God want to make new in our world and in our lives?*



Week 50

August 1, 2027

JAMES 2:14-26

When I reach the sweet bye and bye, I want to buy James and Paul breakfast.

- Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, is most famous for a gospel of salvation and justification by grace through faith alone, apart from works... (Romans 5, Ephesians 2)
- James, on the other hand, writes, "A person is justified by works, not by faith alone." (James 2.14, 24)

I imagine an animated conversation over celestial eggs and bacon, and it makes me wonder if people shout in heaven.

The Letter of James offers practical counsel to "the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad", (James 1.1) – Jewish-Christian communities spread beyond Jerusalem. His very close-to-the-ground wisdom speaks consecutively about wealth and poverty, temptation, integrity, prudent speech, etc. (chapter 1). Chapter 2 frames the faith vs works conversation. Chapter 3 returns to the misuse of the tongue and profiles worldly and heavenly wisdom; in chapter 4 he treats worldliness, judgmentalism, and boasting; and chapter 5 sides with the lowly against rich oppressors, helps suffering ones endure, and offers healing prayer. Practical people love James, and for good reason.

Our passage offers a brief Bible study, as James grounds his argument about works in Hebrew scripture (our Old Testament). His paragons of faithful work are an unlikely pair: Abraham, an A-List celebrity who started Jewish history by receiving God's promise (Genesis 12), and Rahab, a B-Movie Canaanite prostitute in Jericho who helped and sheltered Jewish spies before Israel crossed the Jordan into the holy land (Joshua 2). Their common ground is that we know them for signature works. Abraham trusted God enough to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice; Rahab (who had never heard of God before) hid, sheltered, and abetted the spies' escape in spite of the threat of her execution by the king.

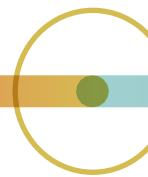
Martin Luther lobbied to throw James out of the canon. I'm glad he didn't prevail. Faith is a complex thing. Two voices emphasizing its different aspects can only be a win for us, right? Now, back to that breakfast...

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

¹⁸But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith without works, and I by my works will show you my faith. ¹⁹You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. ²⁰Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith without works is barren? ²¹Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. ²³Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness', and he was called the friend of God. ²⁴You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? ²⁶For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

Questions

1. *What does this text expose about human sinfulness, weakness or need?*
2. *How do other parts of Scripture challenge this passage, and how are we to hold this tension together?*
3. *What's the verdict? Are we saved by grace or by our works?*



Week 51

August 8, 2027

I JOHN 4:7-21

Here's a mouthful for you: "Illicit conversion is an invalid inference in Formal Logic where you swap the subject and predicate of a categorical statement and keep the same truth." Boring! But here's a hot take: one instance of this fallacy has had a dreadful effect on popular American theology. And it lands in our passage. Here's how.

John 4.7-8 is one of the most oft-quoted passages in the Bible. It culminates in the three-word English sentence, "God is love." It's beautiful! The problem comes when less-than-serious thinkers flip the order and either claim or live as if "Love is God." But God is a lot of things beyond his quality of love. Saying love is God reduces God, because, as the logicians continue, "A categorical statement tells you how one class relates to another, but it does not always say the reverse relation is true."

Phew. That was sweaty work. Now let's widen to the whole passage – and even to the whole world that the Gospel and the three letters of John create. In the Gospel, on Maundy Thursday, Jesus gave his disciples "a new commandment" (Mandatum Novum), "that you love one another." He specified: "As I've loved you, so you must love one another" (A high bar!). His next words drove home its significance: "All people will know that you're my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13.34-35).

Jesus's words on the eve of his death seared themselves in John's heart. So when he wrote his letter, he not only quoted Jesus – "Beloved, let us love one another!" (4.7) – but devoted this whole section to making it clear. Jesus invited imitation – "as I have loved you" – so John returns several times to the way Jesus loved. Notice how many times Jesus shows up as an embodiment of God's love. Then, as if to leave no illusions, John closes with plain speech: "People who say they love God and hate their neighbor lie" (4.20).

Let's read the passage and talk about making that kind of love our calling card. Enjoy!

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

¹³By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. ¹⁵God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Questions

1. *What does this passage teach us about what it means to worship God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength?*
2. *What are the key verbs in this passage, and who is the subject of these verbs?*
3. *Who might God be calling you to be in light of this passage?*

Week 52

August 15, 2027

REVELATION 21:1-8

Revelation can be a scary book. Some of us avoid it for that reason. But here's good news: John the Revelator, exiled to the Isle of Patmos for his faith, wrote it to reassure and comfort his seven churches of Western Turkey. In spite of losing their leader to exile, in spite of persecutions that menaced them, in spite of the sheer difficulty of their day-to-day lives, God held their and the world's present and future.

This does not mean that all parts of Revelation are comfy and cozy. After an opening that narrates John's summons to heaven "in the Spirit" to see the bigger picture of history, chapters 2 and 3 feature a report card for each of the seven churches, and Jesus is a tough grader. Then chapters 4-19 alternate between visions of what's happening in heaven (e.g., the throne room in chapter 4) and what's happening on earth (e.g., wars and curses).

Our passage holds the most beautiful language in the book, as John narrates the final glory of experiencing God's fullness at last. (21.3) In God's eternal presence there will be no tears or wars or grief. As John puts it, "The former things have passed away."

You and I have fears and we need hope. The specific threats of our time are much different than the ones John's Turkish Christians faced; but the message of Revelation fits us nonetheless. Time and again the Word instills in us the profound truth that, as John's Gospel has it, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it." (John 1.5) Forces that, in Luther's immortal words, "threaten to undo us," ultimately cannot, because God is a mighty fortress.

God bless you as the Bible and the Book of Revelation become more and more your own story. God bless you with the enduring value of a journey through scripture. May the God who makes all things new bless you through this Austin summer and beyond. Amen.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

'See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.'

⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.' ⁶Then he said to me, 'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. ⁷Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children. ⁸But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.'

Questions

1. *What does God want to make new in our world and in our lives?*
2. *Where do we see God's faithfulness in this text?*
3. *What does this passage reveal about God's heart for the world?*

