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Day 1: Getting Started

■ Whether you are exploring Christianity for the first time or you're a veteran, whether you're a Bible pro or a Bible beginner, I believe these 365 daily readings will open up a whole new world for you. First of all, the Bible will make sense to you. You won't be a Bible scholar—that takes years—but you will be able to pick up any Bible written in English and know your way around. You won't be embarrassed when people talk about the Bible because you will know what they're saying. Many of your questions about the Bible will be answered in these readings. You'll walk away with a clear sense of how the Bible works and why it's by far the best selling book of all time.

More importantly, you'll learn how you can personally get to know the God behind the Bible and become His friend. You'll learn how the Christian faith works in real life, how to confront and overcome real problems with your faith in God. You'll discover little known secrets that have empowered people of faith to address and overcome addiction, anxiety, anger, guilt, loneliness, abuse and much more. You'll find the keys to a meaningful life with peace and joy.

■ If you are an experienced Christian, some of the material in the first couple days reading will be review. Please consider praying for others who are being introduced to this for the first time.

■ For thousands of years, God has been showing up in the lives of ordinary people, bringing communities together and rebuilding human lives. He empowers you to experience the supernatural, not to show off, but rather to experience how much He cares about you. The Bible tells this “God story,” and invites you to experience God for yourself. For example:

How do you decide if you like a new recipe? You taste it! God invites you to do the same with Him. Don't over analyze. Take the plunge! Try Him out, and discover how good He really is. You'll be happy when you learn to make Him your shelter in life. Psalm 34:8¹

■ This famous Bible passage also invites you into a relationship with God:

¹ Today's readings are from

■ Genesis ■ Exodus ■ Leviticus ■ Numbers ■ Deuteronomy ■ Joshua ■ Judges ■ Ruth ■ 1 Samuel ■ 25%
■ 2 Samuel ■ 1 Kings ■ 2 Kings ■ 1 Chronicles ■ 2 Chronicles ■ Ezra ■ Nehemiah ■ Esther ■ Job ■ Psalms
■ 50% ■ Proverbs ■ Ecclesiastes ■ Song of Solomon ■ Isaiah ■ Jeremiah ■ Lamentations ■ Ezekiel ■ Daniel
■ Hosea ■ Joel ■ Amos ■ Obadiah ■ Jonah ■ 75% ■ Micah ■ Nahum ■ Habakkuk ■ Zephaniah ■ Haggai
■ Zechariah ■ Malachi ■ Matthew ■ Mark ■ Luke ■ John ■ Acts ■ Romans ■ 1 Corinthians ■ 2 Corinthians
■ Galatians ■ Ephesians ■ Philippians ■ Colossians ■ 1 Thessalonians ■ 2 Thessalonians ■ 1 Timothy
■ 2 Timothy ■ Titus ■ Philemon ■ Hebrews ■ James ■ 1 Peter ■ 2 Peter ■ 1 John ■ 2 John ■ 3 John ■ Jude
■ Revelation

God cares about you, your family, your friends, everyone in your world. In fact, He cares so much that He gave what was most precious to Him: His only Son. Why did He do that? Because He wanted to rescue you from destruction, and grant you life with Him that never ends. How do you get in on this life? Just this: Center your **faith** on His Son, Jesus Christ. John 3:16

■ John 3:16 is probably the best known passage in the Bible.

■ **Faith** What is faith? Faith is a choice to rely on something or someone. For example, when you sit down in a chair, you are exercising faith that the chair will hold you. When you flip on a light switch, you believe the light will come on. When you marry someone, you trust that person to be good to you and good for you for the rest of your life. Obviously, sometimes we put our faith in someone or something that proves unreliable. For example, you might pay a mechanic to repair your car and later discover that the repair was not properly performed. God is trustworthy. He keeps His promises. He comes through for you in the end. That doesn't mean that there won't be moments of adventure when it seems like God has abandoned you or forgotten you. Those seasons happen to all of us, and they are illustrated again and again in the narrative of the Bible. But those who hang on and believe are rewarded. Faith in Jesus Christ means welcoming Him into your life and allowing Him to be all that He is.

There is a *relational* component to faith. Your faith affirms that Jesus was more than just a Jewish rabbi whose life was tragically cut short on a Roman cross nearly 2,000 years ago. Your faith says that Jesus, the Son of God, had the power to pick up His life again, rise from the dead, and ascend into heaven to take His place next to Father God, and that you are permitted to know Him personally, and enjoy a moment by moment friendship with Him.

There is a *moral and judicial* dimension to faith. Imagine living forever. Now, imagine living forever with people you don't like. Quite a difference, isn't it! The reality is that eternal life can only be good if it is shared with good people. That includes you and me. Any imperfection in us would be magnified for all eternity. That's one reason why God's standard is perfection. Our shortcomings drag us away from God. Perfection is a tall order; none of us is there ... yet.

Enter Jesus Christ. He lived the perfect life we couldn't live. He died on the cross, paying the penalty for our wrongdoings. He rose from the dead. Faith says, "Instead of relying on myself to be good enough for God, I will rely on Jesus who took my place." Faith says, "The presence of God is transforming. I will invite Jesus in, and because of Jesus I will be changed into a new and better person."

Faith, then, is the gateway to eternal life because it connects us with Jesus who secures for us God's forgiveness for our wrongdoings. Jesus earns us peace with God and a place in His family, and transforms us into beautiful, unique, perfect people who can have fun, get it right, be at peace and rule with Him forever.

There is a *leadership* component to faith. God is God. We are not. God has the right to make the rules, even when we don't understand them. Faith teaches us to follow God, even when we might not feel like it. Thankfully, Jesus is the best kind of leader who takes the time to listen to us, to understand us, and to show us that He deeply cares about us.

The first step of faith is simple. Jesus asks, "Do you want Me?" You can look to Him and give Him your answer.

Discoveries: The Invitation

How do you decide if you like a new recipe? You taste it! God invites you to do the same with Him. Don't over analyze. Take the plunge! Try Him out, and discover how good He really is. You'll be happy when you learn to make Him your shelter in life. Psalm 34:8 [Day 1]

■ Why does God invite us to taste? Why does He not say, for example, "Take it by faith: The LORD is good."? Why doesn't He structure this verse as a promise: "Someday you'll find out that the LORD is good."? Or a conditional promise: "If you obey, you will someday find out that the LORD is good."? Neither does God say: "Comprehend My goodness." There will always be things about God that we cannot comprehend or explain. This is why we need eternal life—it takes all of eternity to know God.

No. Our God presents us with an invitation. He wants us to taste. He wants us to experience His goodness and His love. This is a different kind of faith. This is not a faith that springs from the acceptance of a creed or a Bible verse. This is a faith that springs from experience. How will we know that God is good? The Lord invites us to taste and see.

You may have tasted and seen that life is bad. Life is cruel. Life is unfair. But God extends an invitation to experience something bigger than life. Taste and see that God is good.

Think about cake. The ingredients, by themselves, are disgusting. But, combined and baked, the product is delicious. How do we taste and see that the Lord is good? Sometimes our mouths are so full of the disgusting, distasteful ingredients of life, that we don't realize that we have a choice. We can hold up to God all that is bitter and sour in our lives. In fact, we must. If we don't, we will never be able to taste and see that He is good. We will be stuck trying to create a paradise we cannot create or blaming God for a hell here on earth that He did not create.

All of us believe lies about the character of God. That is part of the human condition. We don't shed these lies by deleting them from our theology. We are released from them when we feel their apparent truth and go to God to taste the real truth.

When the God of the universe enters your life, the supernatural will occur. It will be the norm, not the exception. I don't know what form it will take. It may be quiet or it may be flashy—that is God's business to determine, not mine. Look around. Open the door as wide as you can. God is here.

Questions

[How] have you experienced God? How would you characterize your spiritual journey up to this point?

What does faith mean to you? How would you describe your faith (or lack of faith) in God?

What's the biggest thing you've ever asked God for?

What would you like to experience or discover as a result of exploring the Bible?

Your main take away from today's reading...

Day 2: How the Bible Works

■ The Bible is not a single book, but a collection of 66 books written by several authors over a period of about 1600 years ending roughly 100 AD. Some of those books are longer than Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. Some are less than a page long. Centuries after the Bible was written, all but the shortest books were divided into chapters of a page or two each in length. These chapters were later divided into verses, usually each about a sentence or two in length. The Bible contains 1,189 chapters and 31,102 verses. This allows us to identify exactly where a certain quotation from the Bible is located. For example, John 3:16 is from the book of John, the 3rd chapter and the 16th verse. Publishers of the Bible arrange these 66 books in a certain order. (See chart on following pages.) But there is nothing magical about that order. The books of the Bible can be read in any order. In our readings, we're going to arrange passages from the Bible in a way that will make more sense for our purposes. The Bible says this about itself:

The Bible shows you how to get right with God and be safe forever. All of it comes from God and benefits us, teaching us what we don't know, setting us straight when we go in the wrong direction, showing us how to please God, so that God's followers can be ready for everything God requires. 2 Timothy 3:15b-17²

■ **Translations** The first 39 books (about 77% of the words in the Bible) is called the Old Testament and was written in Hebrew prior to the birth of Jesus Christ. The second section, or New Testament contains the remaining 27 books, and was originally written in Greek. Bibles written in English are usually translated directly from manuscripts written in these original languages. Having many translations helps bring clarity to the original meaning. Paraphrases of the Bible attempt to put the thoughts behind the original into words that make sense to the reader. Our version here is a guided reading paraphrase. We don't include all the words of the Bible, but pick the essential passages you need to know to have a solid foundational understanding of this important book.

■ **Content** The Bible contains many types of literature: songs, biographies, history, genealogies, architecture, correspondence (letters), predictions, essays, stories, laws, pithy sayings. The backbone of all of this is a central narrative which explores God's

² Today's readings are from

- Genesis ■ Exodus ■ Leviticus ■ Numbers ■ Deuteronomy ■ Joshua ■ Judges ■ Ruth ■ 1 Samuel ■ 25%
- 2 Samuel ■ 1 Kings ■ 2 Kings ■ 1 Chronicles ■ 2 Chronicles ■ Ezra ■ Nehemiah ■ Esther ■ Job ■ Psalms
- 50% ■ Proverbs ■ Ecclesiastes ■ Song of Solomon ■ Isaiah ■ Jeremiah ■ Lamentations ■ Ezekiel ■ Daniel
- Hosea ■ Joel ■ Amos ■ Obadiah ■ Jonah ■ 75% ■ Micah ■ Nahum ■ Habakkuk ■ Zephaniah ■ Haggai
- Zechariah ■ Malachi ■ Matthew ■ Mark ■ Luke ■ John ■ Acts ■ Romans ■ 1 Corinthians ■ 2 Corinthians
- Galatians ■ Ephesians ■ Philippians ■ Colossians ■ 1 Thessalonians ■ 2 Thessalonians ■ 1 Timothy
- 2 Timothy ■ Titus ■ Philemon ■ Hebrews ■ James ■ 1 Peter ■ 2 Peter ■ 1 John ■ 2 John ■ 3 John ■ Jude
- Revelation

involvement in human lives. Our version will focus on that central narrative while including some of these other elements.

Because the Bible was written by many authors, God used the personality and writing style of each author to communicate His message.

The process of deciding which books to include in the Bible was a group decision involving the people of God and was revisited a number of times over several centuries. Jesus quoted from 24 of the 37 Old Testament books (and the New Testament quotes from 34).

The longest books of the Bible are Psalms (150 chapters, 2461 verses, 42,685 words) and Jeremiah (52 chapters, 1366 verses, 42,652 words). Although Isaiah has 66 chapters, Ezekiel (48 chapters) comes in third in actual length (39,407 words). Word count varies, of course, depending on the translation used. By comparison, *The Old Man and the Sea* is 27,315 words. 3 John (the Third Epistle of John) is the shortest Bible book at 293 words. Psalm 119 is the longest chapter, Psalm 117 is the shortest. In most English Bibles, Esther 8:9 is the longest verse, John 11:35 is the shortest.

■ **Translation** An entire science (lower textual criticism) has developed around ensuring that the manuscripts from which the Bible was translated accurately reflect the original writings.

Our version is not intended to be a highly accurate translation suitable for scholarly study. For example, there are places where the original text is somewhat ambiguous—good people disagree on the precise meaning. A highly accurate translation would attempt to preserve that ambiguity. Our version does not. It is not a word-for-word translation or even a phrase-by-phrase translation. Rather it attempts to capture the main flow of thought in a given passage in a user friendly fashion. As your exploration of the Bible continues, you'll want to add to your library at least one other highly readable version and at least one more literal word-for-word translation.

Our combined daily readings contain less than 20% of the text of the entire Bible. This is a deliberate choice to get you acquainted with the main flow of the God story and introduce you to the different kinds of literature contained in the Bible without overwhelming you the first time through.

On BibleGateway.com you can explore a number of Bible translations. Some are designed for readability. Some are designed for word-for-word accuracy. It's good to become familiar with both.

■ How the books of the Bible are arranged

The Hebrew Scriptures which form the Old Testament are understood to be arranged into sections: Law, History, Wisdom and Prophets. Each of these sections contain narrative as well as other kinds of material such as history or poetry. The New Testament is divided into the Gospels, History, Epistles (or letters), and Prophecy. Beyond that, each book has its own unique flavor.

| Old Testament | | New Testament |
|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|
| <i>Law</i> | <i>Prophets</i> | <i>Gospels (story of Jesus)</i> |
| Genesis | Isaiah | Matthew |
| Exodus | Jeremiah | Mark |
| Leviticus | Lamentations | Luke |
| Numbers | Ezekiel | John |
| Deuteronomy | Daniel | <i>History</i> |
| | Hosea | Acts |
| <i>History</i> | Joel | <i>Epistles (letters)</i> |
| Joshua | Amos | Romans |
| Judges | Obadiah | 1 Corinthians |
| Ruth | Jonah | 2 Corinthians |
| 1 Samuel | Micah | Galatians |
| 2 Samuel | Nahum | Ephesians |
| 1 Kings | Habakkuk | Philippians |
| 2 Kings | Zephaniah | Colossians |
| 1 Chronicles | Haggai | 1 Thessalonians |
| 2 Chronicles | Zechariah | 2 Thessalonians |
| Ezra | Malachi | 1 Timothy |
| Nehemiah | | 2 Timothy |
| Esther | | Titus |
| <i>Wisdom</i> | | Philemon |
| Job | | Hebrews |
| Psalms | | James |
| Proverbs | | 1 Peter |
| Ecclesiastes | | 2 Peter |
| Song of Solomon | | 1 John |
| | | 2 John |
| | | 3 John |
| | | Jude |
| | | <i>Prophecy</i> |
| | | Revelation |

Discoveries: A Place to Begin

The Bible shows you how to get right with God and be safe forever. All of it comes from God and benefits us, teaching us what we don't know, setting us straight when we go in the

wrong direction, showing us how to please God, so that God's followers can be ready for everything God requires. / 2 Timothy 3:15b-17 [Day 2]

■ You have to start somewhere. You will build your life based on something. You might model your life after a mentor or hero who inspires you. You might live your life to prove wrong someone who insulted you. You might live out an identity that was drilled into you as a child. Or you might start with the word of God.

The Bible can be your GPS guiding you through all the twists and turns in life, navigating you past detours, getting you safely to your final destination. For hundreds of years, multiplied millions of people have relied on the Bible as their guidebook in life. The result has been hospitals, orphanages, happy families, care for the needy, rewarding marriages, successful businesses, heroic acts of courage and compassion. Yes, there have been people who claimed to believe the Bible who have committed outrageous and disgusting acts. But these people are the exception, not the rule. And, certainly, the Bible was not to blame.

Have you ever wished you could just sit down and have a conversation with God? What would you ask Him? What do you imagine He would say? Many of the questions you might want to ask have been asked, and God's answers have already been recorded in the Bible.

If you want to have that conversation with God, begin by demonstrating that you are ready and willing to listen to Him. For starters, that means listening to and obeying the Bible. It also means listening to godly leaders in a community of faith. The Bible and the community of faith serve as important safeguards allowing you to test and evaluate anything you think you might be hearing from God.

At times the Bible will contradict your circumstances. God's promises will seem like far off fantasies. But, God says that His word is like fire and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces. (Jeremiah 23:29) Give God room and give Him time. He has the power to change your circumstances, but your circumstances will never have the power to change His word.

Finally, keep in mind that the Bible is like food. If you go a few days without eating, you'll feel the difference. Let yourself enjoy a spiritual feast every day.

Questions

What experience or process has most strengthened your faith in the past?
What has most challenged your faith?

When you need guidance, where do you go? What books have been most meaningful to you in the past?

Have you ever been in a conversation where a translator was needed? Did you feel like you were being understood? Did you feel like the other person was understanding you? What was that experience like?

All of us need to make a fresh start, sometimes more than once. Has there ever been a time in your life when you've made a fresh start? What was that experience like?

Your main take away from today's reading...

Day 3: A Conversation With God

■ Throughout the Bible, God reaches out to nations, communities, families and individuals. He imagines a better life for us all, and invites us to find that life in a relationship with Him. Here's God's invitation to you ...

[Jesus speaking] "Do you want Me? I'm ready to share life with you. I'm right at your door, knocking, waiting on you to make the next move. Do you want to open the door? Just say 'yes,' and I'll come in and we will share the meal of life together."
Revelation 3:20³

■ Relationship requires the give and take of conversation. How do you even get started? How do you address God? Here's a model prayer from Jesus called the Lord's Prayer. Use it as a starting place:

God who lives in heaven where everything is perfect,
You are our Father who never leaves us.

We want everyone everywhere to know and speak the truth about You, so that all may honor You for the good and great God you are.

This way Your rule can be embraced by all.

That's what we want: All Your dreams to come true right here where we live, just as they are true in heaven.

Grant us at the right moment all we need to make that happen.

You see our shortcomings; forgive us our faults!

We also will forgive the faults of others,

for we find in You the power to take the high road.

Keep us from traps and pitfalls.

Rescue us from every kind of evil.

³ Today's readings are from

■ Genesis ■ Exodus ■ Leviticus ■ Numbers ■ Deuteronomy ■ Joshua ■ Judges ■ Ruth ■ 1 Samuel ■ 25%
■ 2 Samuel ■ 1 Kings ■ 2 Kings ■ 1 Chronicles ■ 2 Chronicles ■ Ezra ■ Nehemiah ■ Esther ■ Job ■ Psalms
■ 50% ■ Proverbs ■ Ecclesiastes ■ Song of Solomon ■ Isaiah ■ Jeremiah ■ Lamentations ■ Ezekiel ■ Daniel
■ Hosea ■ Joel ■ Amos ■ Obadiah ■ Jonah ■ 75% ■ Micah ■ Nahum ■ Habakkuk ■ Zephaniah ■ Haggai
■ Zechariah ■ Malachi ■ Matthew ■ Mark ■ Luke ■ John ■ Acts ■ Romans ■ 1 Corinthians ■ 2 Corinthians
■ Galatians ■ Ephesians ■ Philippians ■ Colossians ■ 1 Thessalonians ■ 2 Thessalonians ■ 1 Timothy
■ 2 Timothy ■ Titus ■ Philemon ■ Hebrews ■ James ■ 1 Peter ■ 2 Peter ■ 1 John ■ 2 John ■ 3 John ■ Jude
■ Revelation

Authority and power, credit and honor—these all rightfully belong to You.

And that makes us glad. Matthew 6:9b-13

■ **Lord's Prayer** You may have heard the Lord's Prayer from the King James Version of the Bible: *Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.*

(Matthew 6:9b-13) Sometimes people will add a letter—usually “a” or “b” to the end of a verse reference. In this case, the “b” means that we're only including the second half of the verse.

In the Lord's prayer, we have five elements: (1) Protecting God's name or reputation (2) Desiring God's plan (3) Asking for God's provision (4) Seeking—and offering—forgiveness (5) Protection from evil. You can use these five elements as an outline to organize your thoughts when you pray.

What can you imagine? How big can you think? God thinks bigger. He plans better. He accomplishes more. Already He's at work inside you and me—all of us. Do you want to ask Him for something? Ask big because you're dealing with a big God. Ephesians 3:20

Discoveries: Our One Power

[Jesus speaking] “Do you want Me? I'm ready to share life with you. I'm right at your door, knocking, waiting on you to make the next move. Do you want to open the door? Just say ‘yes,’ and I'll come in and we will share the meal of life together.” Revelation 3:20 [Day 3]

■ We human beings really have only one power: to say “yes” or “no” to God. If we are righteous, why are we righteous? Not because we did righteous things, but because we said “yes” to God. If we are unrighteous, look around inside. Somewhere we closed the door in God's face. Somewhere we said “no.”

Some like to use Revelation 3:20 as an instruction manual on how to find

God for the first time. Open the door of your heart and let Jesus in. But it is much more than that. Once Jesus comes in the front door, He starts knocking at the other doors inside our hearts. There are many closets in our hearts that Jesus wants to clean out. Either we say “yes” or we say “no.”

It’s very important to understand that we don’t clean out the closet first and then open the door. Many sad and discouraged people are trying to do this. We can’t do this. We don’t have the power to do this. All we have the power to do is to say “yes” or “no” to God.

This is bad news for the self righteous, but it is wonderful news for the desperate among us who realize that we have no hope unless God comes in and cleans us up. And that is exactly what He will do, one “yes” at a time.

Let me suggest something. Jesus is bringing the meal with Him. One day I drove by a homeless man who was climbing into a dumpster to find a meal. He was hungry and he was scavenging for the best food he could find. The more we invite Jesus in, the more we feed on what He brings to the table, the more dumpster food looks, smells and tastes like dumpster food. It makes little sense to criticize a homeless man for eating from the garbage. After all, that’s all he has. Instead, we may offer him something better.

We must understand that sin is the best food that most people can find. Most don’t know that Jesus offers something better. Even many Christians secretly want to sin because they are still feeding on the scraps leftover from yesterday’s encounter with Jesus or somebody else’s encounter with Jesus, instead of hosting Him at the table right now, today. All of this is wonderful news because we don’t need to wait. This moment was created for you and Jesus.

Questions

Do you think God would be willing to have a conversation with you? Why or why not?

Have you ever had the experience of inviting Jesus into your life? If so, what was that experience like? How has it changed your life? If not, would you like to invite Jesus into your life? Why or why not?

What do you think God thinks of you?

How easy or hard is it for you to talk to God? What makes it easy or difficult?

Your main take away from today's reading...

Day 4: God's Calling Card

■ God reveals His values and personality in this passage below, commonly referred to as the Ten Commandments.

God spoke and this is what He said: “For many years you and your people suffered in slavery. Let’s make a list. How many gods rescued you from your oppressors?”

“Short list, isn’t it? Freedom came from Me.

“I’m your God and Leader now. Let’s keep it that way. Following Me isn’t some inconsequential lifestyle option. Instead, it is the most important decision you will ever make. Choose Me, and you choose well. But if you replace me with someone or something else, including anything you imagine or create, punishment will follow. Don’t think that you can screw up your life and it doesn’t matter. It does. It hurts your children, your grandchildren, even your great-grandchildren. Most of all, it hurts Me, because I care deeply about you. That’s why I’m so eager to show love to you and anyone else who loves and obeys Me.

“Protect My Name. Don’t give anyone reason to think poorly of Me; I will hold you accountable if you do.

“Remember how I formed the heavens and the earth in six days, but on the seventh day I stopped, surveyed all that I had made, and smiled. I want you to remember that smile, and make it part of the rhythm of your life. One day each week, pause and celebrate with Me. We call this day the Sabbath. Work hard on the other days, but reserve this day for rest and renewal. This command is for everyone, and guards the dignity of all, regardless of class, gender or privilege.

“Join Me in upholding the things that matter. I gave you your parents because I want you to have a good and rich life; honor them. Protect life; never murder. Honor marriage by never

climbing into bed with someone who isn't your spouse. Respect the fruit of someone else's labor; never take something that doesn't belong to you. Preserve justice and the good reputation of others by telling the truth.

"I'm opening the door for you to the good life. Don't imagine that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence. It isn't. Find your satisfaction in Me and in what I provide; don't chase it somewhere else. Exodus 20:1-17⁴

■ **The Ten Commandments** could be summarized as follows: (1) God first, (2) No idols, (3) No swearing, (4) Rest weekly, (5) Honor parents, (6) No murder, (7) No adultery, (8) No theft, (9) No perjury, (10) Don't set your desire on anything that rightly belongs to someone else. But they were never meant to be a list of do's and don't's only. They are God's calling card, His introduction of Himself to an entire nation, and to the human race. When we look more carefully, we discover a much richer revelation of God's feelings, attitudes and personality. A slightly different version of the Ten Commandments is found in Deuteronomy 5:1-21.

Discoveries: Freedom

"For many years your people suffered in slavery. Let's make a list. How many gods rescued you from your oppressors?"

"Short list, isn't it? Freedom came from Me." Exodus 20:2 [Day 4]

■ The scene is a slave market. A child has broken loose. Freedom! She races through the crowd, but it's no good. Her path is blocked. A man with chains stands in her way. She turns, but that way is also blocked. She whirls around, but the slave traders are everywhere. One of them raises his whip. They will make an example out of this one. Every slave will see and fear and know the truth: There is no escape. He raises his arm to strike, but then a shadow falls over his face and he steps back. His cruel eyes, looking up-

⁴ Today's readings are from

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ward, are now filled with fear. His arm goes limp and the whip falls to the ground. A New Man stands there, towering over the rest. Instead of chains, He holds out His nail-pierced hand. Instead of a shout, He whispers to the trembling child, “Here, take My hand. You will be safe with Me.”

The moment you and I take the hand Jesus offers us, everything in the slave market changes. The slave traders cannot force us to do anything. Instead they must tempt us. “Look at these pretty chains,” they say. “We will paint them bright and glittering colors for you. Think how beautiful you will be! Let go of Christ’s restrictive hand. Step over here. These chains will give you power and knowledge. With these chains, you will be the master.”

But, when we listen to Jesus, we hear the truth: “As long as you are holding My hand, you will never be bound by any of these chains. You can look any one of these slave traders in the eye and tell him to take a hike. The slave trader’s authority is gone; he has lost his power over you.”

What is freedom? These are the lessons I glean from the Ten Commandments. Freedom is knowing the God who cares enough to be jealous, who heals, who is tough enough to stand up to evil and big enough to handle what we cannot. Freedom is being trusted with God’s name, and finding a new identity as His child. Freedom is the opportunity to make an eternal difference, and the discretion to use our power for good. It is lifelong dignity for every class and gender. It is God-given celebration and satisfaction. It is the calm assurance that God will make things right. It is knowing the truth about who we are, and seeing the value in what we already possess. It is our opportunity to find our place in God’s heart.

Questions

What does freedom mean to you? When you think of freedom, does God come to mind? Why or why not?

Why would it be important to protect God's name? What do you think is involved in doing so?

Celebration and contentment, rest and renewal are themes in the Ten Commandments. What do you celebrate? In your opinion, what is the secret to contentment? Why is a day of rest important?

Upholding family, life, marriage, property and truth are all emphasized in the Ten Commandments. Are these things important to you? Why or why not?

Your main take away from today's reading...

Day 5: How It All Started

It started here: God created the heavens and the earth.

Now the earth found itself in a state of chaos. Darkness covered the waters. There was neither shape nor form; all was empty. But God's Spirit was there, ready for what came next.

God spoke: "Let there be light." Light began, and God saw it was good. Dark and light, night and day, separated by God, named by God—the first day was complete.

God spoke into being a space between the waters below and the waters above. He called that space "sky." Evening and morning made it a second day.

Then God told the waters below to gather in one place and He ordered the dry land to appear. The water He called "seas," and the land, "earth." This is good, He thought. Then He called into being all kinds of trees and plants, each capable of reproducing its own kind. Again, He thought, This is good. Evening and morning made this day three.

Then God invited lights to shine in the sky, the sun in the day, the moon at night and the stars as well. These kept time, creating seasons, days, years. Evening and morning—day four.

With His words God created all kinds of creatures to fill the water and birds to fill the sky. He said to them, "Reproduce and multiply to fill the seas and the sky." This was good in God's sight. Another evening and morning—day five.

God spoke to the earth and allowed it to bring forth all kinds of different animals—cattle, insects, reptiles—you name it. God thought, This is good.

God said, "Let Us make people, modeled after Ourselves, reflecting who We are. Let them be in charge of all creation." That's exactly what God did; He created male and female al-

lowing and encouraging them to reproduce, fill the earth and run it. God offered grain and fruit to the humans as food, and any kind of vegetation to the animals as food.

Then God surveyed everything He had made and smiled. This is really, really good, He said to Himself. Evening and morning—day six was over. Genesis 1:1-31⁵

■ **Creation** Several theories have been advanced to reconcile scientific observation with the Biblical account of creation. One such theory holds that the universe was created billions of years ago, but some cataclysmic event rendered the earth uninhabitable. The seven days of creation (occurring 6-12 thousand years ago) were God's way of giving the earth a makeover, and told from the perspective of an observer on earth. Others say the universe was created with apparent age six to ten thousand years ago. Still others advance different theories which accommodate a more traditional scientific view or a more literal Biblical view. Hundreds of books, articles and websites are devoted to this topic.

Discoveries: Beginnings

It started here: God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth found itself in a state of chaos. Darkness covered the waters. There was neither shape nor form; all was empty. But God's Spirit was there, ready for what came next. God spoke: "Let there be light." Light began, and God saw it was good. / Genesis 1:1-4a [Day 5]

■ The Bible starts where it should: in the beginning. By kicking off the most important book in history with these words, God tells us something: We need to pay attention to where things started. God cares about how things began. Do you have a problem? If you go to God for the solution, He will probably take you back to where the problem began, there you and He will correct it together. Go back far enough, and you will find God.

⁵ Today's readings are from

[Genesis] ▪ Exodus ▪ Leviticus ▪ Numbers ▪ Deuteronomy ▪ Joshua ▪ Judges ▪ Ruth ▪ 1 Samuel ▪ [25%]
▪ 2 Samuel ▪ 1 Kings ▪ 2 Kings ▪ 1 Chronicles ▪ 2 Chronicles ▪ Ezra ▪ Nehemiah ▪ Esther ▪ Job ▪ Psalms
▪ [50%] ▪ Proverbs ▪ Ecclesiastes ▪ Song of Solomon ▪ Isaiah ▪ Jeremiah ▪ Lamentations ▪ Ezekiel ▪ Daniel
▪ Hosea ▪ Joel ▪ Amos ▪ Obadiah ▪ Jonah ▪ [75%] ▪ Micah ▪ Nahum ▪ Habakkuk ▪ Zephaniah ▪ Haggai
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▪ Revelation

And, if you need it, you will also find a new beginning.

God gives form to those things that have not yet taken shape. When our lives don't make sense, God is here, giving shape to our dreams and our experience. The day will come when our eyes are opened and we will see what has always been there, but is now hidden from our sight.

God fills what is empty. Sometimes we don't have what we should have. In the place where we should find love and assurance we find only desolation. Jesus still welcomes children to Himself. He still puts His hands on them, prays for them and blesses them. Though it may seem strange for the grown up you and the grown up me, Jesus still has room on His lap for the little child within.

God's light overcomes the darkness. Light dispels darkness effortlessly. No incantations are needed. When Jesus enters the darkened room, it will never be the same. The Spirit of God is waiting ... ready to do the impossible.

Remember that God "saw" that the light was good. Didn't He know? Yes, He knew before He created the light that it would be good. But He wanted more than knowing. He wanted to experience it. So He brought light into being and saw that it was good. Just as the Bible invites us to taste and see that God is good, so also God wants to experience us. He knows us inside and out, but that isn't enough for Him. He created us, He redeemed us, He pursues us because He wants more than knowing.

Before I married my wife I knew that she was godly, sweet and beautiful. So why bother marrying her? Because what was then just a thought is now every day an experience, a discovery, an enrichment. In the same way God desires to share life with you.

Questions

When you think about how things began, what do you imagine? Do you think it's possible to reconcile the Biblical account of creation with scientific observations? Why or why not?

Is understanding how life, human life and the universe began important? Why or why not?

What does it mean that we were modeled after God? What implications could that have for you?

What does creation say about God's character, His abilities and His rights?

Your main take away from today's reading...

Day 6: The First People

Creation was complete. God made Day Seven a special day to enjoy everything He had made.

Here's another way of telling the events of creation: When God first made earth and heaven, there weren't any plants yet, nor was there rain (water reached the earth another way), nor was there anyone to garden.

God constructed a man using dust from the ground; then He breathed life into the man. The man became a living soul.

In the east God had planted a garden in **Eden**. That became the man's home. God caused trees to grow up, beautiful to look at and filled with good fruit to eat. In the center, He planted two trees: the tree of life, and the tree of Knowing-Good-and-**Evil**. The river that watered Eden divides into four rivers: (1) the Pishon that flows through Havilah (a great place for mining gold, bdellium and onyx), (2) the Gihon that flows through Cush, (3) the Tigris flowing east of Assyria, and (4) the Euphrates.

God put the man in Eden to take care of the garden. God gave him these orders: "You are free to eat from any of these trees except the tree of Knowing-Good-and-Evil. Don't eat from that one. If you do, you die."

God said, "The man is alone. This isn't good. I will make the right kind of helper-friend for him." Remember that God had formed all the animals and birds. He brought them to the man to find out what names the man would give to each one. God honored the names the man gave to each creature. But, among all those creatures there wasn't a suitable helper-friend for **Adam**. Then God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep. While he slept, God removed a rib and closed up the surgery, healing the man. God used the rib to create a woman. When

the man woke up, God showed the man the woman He had made. The man said, “Wow! Taken from me, my bones, my flesh; I call her woman because she was brought forth from a man.” This is why a man leaves his parents and is united to his wife, becoming one in flesh. The man and his wife wore no clothes and felt no shame. Genesis 2:1-25⁶

■ **Early humans** are often thought of as hairy cave dwellers who grunt, hunt and are barely aware of their own existence. A careful reading of the Bible conveys a very different picture: highly intelligent human beings with a capacity to categorize, relate, evaluate, innovate and envision. ■ **Eden** was later destroyed. We don’t know exactly where it was located, but it may have been in what is now Iraq or Syria. ■ **Pronunciation** Don’t get too hung up on the pronunciation of Biblical names. Many names can be pronounced more than one way, and if you sound confident, most people will assume you know what you’re doing. ■ **Evil** The Bible introduces us to a moral universe where choices have consequences for the person making the choices and for others affected by those choices. This is borne out by our own experience and observation. Let’s say someone chooses to drink and drive. A car accident ensues. Innocent people suffer. God cares deeply about these things. Choices matter to Him. Wrong choices are called by many names in the Bible including evil, sin, wickedness, transgression, corruption, iniquity. The word “iniquity” carries with it the idea of something good being twisted for evil purposes. “Transgression” means crossing a line that you shouldn’t cross, of breaking a rule. “Sin” means falling short of God’s moral standard. ■ **“Adam”** means “man” in Hebrew. His wife is later named “Eve,” meaning “mother of all living.”

Discoveries: The Gift of Creation

God gave him these orders: “You are free...” Genesis 2:16
[Day 6]

■ I love watching little children play. The moments come and go with spicy unpredictability—running barefoot through mud puddles, storing dragon’s treasure in the refrigerator, digging up rocks from the garden and purifying them in the bathtub. “How ’bout this!” is what my kids used to say, just be-

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▪ Revelation

fore they made up some new twist to an old game of pretend.

God's first command to the human race starts with His enjoyment of our spontaneity. "You are free," He says. And with a twinkle in our eye and a smile on our face, we reply, "How 'bout this!"

Remember that God had formed all the animals and birds. He brought them to the man to find out what names the man would give to each one. God honored the names the man gave to each creature. But, among all those creatures there wasn't a suitable helper-friend for Adam. Then God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep. While he slept, God removed a rib and closed up the surgery, healing the man. God used the rib to create a woman. / Genesis 2:19-22 [Day 6]

■ Adam had a big job, naming all the animals. But the harder he worked, the more he realized that there was something he could not do—he could not come up with a companion that reflected back the image of God. The animals were a work of wonder, but none of them contained the very breath of God.

Nor could Adam fashion this companion himself. Unlike the Almighty, he could not gather together the dust of the ground, and breathe life into art. This task was way beyond him.

But look what God did. God put Adam in a deep sleep. And from his position of utter helplessness, Adam awoke to the greatest miracle of creation. Now humanity was complete. Now Adam and his "helper friend" (words fall short) could bring forth children stamped with the image of God.

Two lessons: First, when we set out to do the impossible, sooner or later God will put us in a deep sleep—that is, He will get us out of the way so He can do what only He can do. And second, look at the miracle of what God has done—and celebrate it every time you see a child; God has given us the gift of creation.

Questions

What do you imagine life was like for the first people? What do you imagine they were like?

God gave the first humans many freedoms, and only one restriction. Why was that restriction necessary? What does it mean to know good and evil?

Why did God give Adam the job of naming the animals? Why didn't God name them Himself?

What was significant about the first woman being formed from the first man? Why didn't God just make them both separately?

Your main take away from today's reading...

Day 7: How We Lost Our Way

A spirit spoke through a creature we'll call the **dragon** and made him enchanting, slick, mesmerizing. He asked the woman, "Is it really true? Did God say you are not allowed to eat any fruit from any of the trees in this garden you tend?"

The woman tried to set him straight. "We may eat fruit from any of these trees, except this one, because God said: 'Don't eat it. Don't touch it. If you do, you die.'"

"Whoa!" said the dragon. "Don't you believe it! You won't die. On the contrary, God Himself knows when you eat it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, really **Knowing-Good-and-Evil**."

This caused the woman to rethink. The fruit was beautiful. It looked delicious. And it seemed to her that eating it would make her wise like God. So why not? She took it and ate it. Then she gave some to her husband. He ate it. Then their eyes were opened. Then they understood that they were naked. So they sewed fig leaves together to make clothing to cover themselves. When they heard God approaching, they scrambled into a hiding place.

But God sought them out. "Where are you?"

The man answered, "I was scared and hid from You because I was naked."

The Lord said, "Naked? Did you eat the forbidden fruit?"

The man pointed at the woman. "This woman you put here with me—she's the one who gave me the fruit; so I ate it."

Then God spoke to the woman, "What have you done?"

The woman replied, "The dragon fooled me into believing a lie. That's why I ate it."

God spoke to the dragon: “You lose. You will now be a lowly, dirt eating, dirt crawling, squirming snake. You will try to bite the woman’s descendant, but He will crush your head.”

To the woman, God said, “Now childbirth will be painful for you. You will cling to your husband, and he will be in charge of you.”

To Adam, God spoke. “Because you listened to your wife and ate what I had forbidden, your whole life will be a struggle trying to bring something good from the dirt of the ground. In the end you will fall, die, and decay becoming dirt once again.”
Genesis 3:1-19⁷

■ **Fall** The events of this chapter are sometime referred to as “the fall of man,” or, “the fall.” How soon after the creation of Adam this event took place is not clear. It could have been weeks, months or years later. ■ **Dragon** (Usually translated: serpent) On two occasions in the Bible, animals were miraculously permitted to speak briefly. On this occasion it was to instigate a wrong. On the other occasion (Numbers 22:28+) it was to prevent a wrong. The creature that spoke in this instance is traditionally called a “serpent.” I’ve instead used the word “dragon” to emphasize that at this time he did not look like a snake. At the conclusion of the account, this creature was changed, and he became a snake. ■ **The tree of Knowing-Good-and-Evil** Prior to eating the fruit of this tree, Adam and Eve could only know about evil as an abstract idea. When they ate the fruit, they knew (by experience) evil. By contrast, they now understood why good was good. ■ **Woman’s descendant** This is understood to be Jesus Christ. ■ **Narrative note** The chapter concludes with animal skins being provided as clothing and the couple being expelled from the garden in Eden. Adam’s wife was named Eve, meaning mother of all living.

Discoveries: Out of the Darkness, Into the Light

He asked the woman, “Is it really true? Did God say you are not allowed to eat any fruit from any of the trees in this garden

⁷ Today’s readings are from

■ Genesis ■ Exodus ■ Leviticus ■ Numbers ■ Deuteronomy ■ Joshua ■ Judges ■ Ruth ■ 1 Samuel ■ 25%
■ 2 Samuel ■ 1 Kings ■ 2 Kings ■ 1 Chronicles ■ 2 Chronicles ■ Ezra ■ Nehemiah ■ Esther ■ Job ■ Psalms
■ 50% ■ Proverbs ■ Ecclesiastes ■ Song of Solomon ■ Isaiah ■ Jeremiah ■ Lamentations ■ Ezekiel ■ Daniel
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■ Zechariah ■ Malachi ■ Matthew ■ Mark ■ Luke ■ John ■ Acts ■ Romans ■ 1 Corinthians ■ 2 Corinthians
■ Galatians ■ Ephesians ■ Philippians ■ Colossians ■ 1 Thessalonians ■ 2 Thessalonians ■ 1 Timothy
■ 2 Timothy ■ Titus ■ Philemon ■ Hebrews ■ James ■ 1 Peter ■ 2 Peter ■ 1 John ■ 2 John ■ 3 John ■ Jude
■ Revelation

you tend?” Genesis 3:1 [Day 7]

■ The dragon opens his dialogue with Eve by creating doubt. “I heard a rumor ... could it possibly be true?” If you look at this chapter carefully, you will find that almost everything the dragon says is true, but it is twisted truth designed to deceive. Satan, the first spin doctor, dresses the truth up the way he wants us to see it.

The real message sent by the enemy is this: “Maybe there’s something about God you don’t know. Maybe once you knew, you would find that He isn’t as nice as you thought He was. In fact, God really cannot be trusted. God is trying to withhold something good from you. If you were like God (a little god yourself), then you would know what God is up to, and you could protect yourself from His schemes.”

All of us will have doubts about God at some point or another. The question is not, “Will we have doubts?” The question instead is, “With whom will we discuss those doubts?” Eve learned a bitterly painful lesson: You don’t discuss your doubts with the devil. You take them to God. God knows about our doubts, and He isn’t threatened by them. He is happy to talk them through with us any time we’re ready.

But God sought them out. “Where are you?” / Genesis 3:9 [Day 7]

Here we have God’s basic question after the fall, and humanity’s biggest problem. What we bring out into the open before God, God can fix. What we hide in the shadows, festers and infects, and keeps us unclean.

So much of life is God wooing us out of the shadows. Not violating us by dragging us into the light, but gently awakening us to the truth: Jesus is willing; He will touch us and we will be clean.

God knows all the secret corners of our hearts. What we may want so much to hide from Him, He knows about already. Jesus is not here to condemn, but here to restore the sons and daughters of God.

Questions

All of us experience temptation. What gives temptation its power?

The dragon's temptation contains a mixture of truth and error. Can you pick out which is which? Why is this significant?

Why do you think the couple suddenly felt exposed? Why did they need to hide?

The humans receive both a curse and a promise. How do both help to explain life as we know it today?

Your main take away from today's reading...

Day 8: The God-Man

■ Now we switch gears and move forward thousands of years to the story of Jesus Christ. (We'll fill in the back story later.)

God isn't hiding. From the very beginning, He has been revealing Himself. How so? God Himself is the Message. This God-Message is distinct from Father God.

The God-Message clothed Himself with human flesh and became one of us, remaining 100% God and becoming 100% human. He is the one who made everything. He is the source of life, and the life found in Him is the light of humanity. That light shines in darkness, and the darkness can't cope with it. This God-Man came into the world.

God sent another man named **John** to tell everybody about the God-Man and the light He brings. John explained that the God-Man was in a class by Himself.

But the world was clueless. They didn't know who they were dealing with. Crazy! He came to what He created, and those He created didn't recognize Him. Yet some people get it. And those who do—those who open their arms to welcome the God-Man, and believe the God-Message—these are the ones who have the power to be children of God, born by God Himself into a whole new life.

We saw the God-Man. We saw who He really is. We know He is the only one of His kind, the one who came to us from Father God in heaven. No, you can't now see Father God from earth. But the God-Man came to tell us the truth and to bring the goodness of Father God straight into the place where we live every day. The God-Man has a name. His name is Jesus Christ. John 1:1-18⁸

⁸ Today's readings are from

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■ 2 Samuel ■ 1 Kings ■ 2 Kings ■ 1 Chronicles ■ 2 Chronicles ■ Ezra ■ Nehemiah ■ Esther ■ Job ■ Psalms
(see next page)

■ **John** There are two important people in the Bible with the name “John.” The first is John the Baptist (or John the Baptizer), son of Elizabeth and Zechariah. This John baptized people as a way of signifying that they were starting a new life with a whole new perspective. He was not a Baptist in the sense of belonging to the Baptist church or denomination since that denomination did not come into existence until hundreds of years later. The John referred to in this passage is John the Baptist. The passage was written by the other John. The second John is the one who wrote the book of John (or Gospel of John). He was one of Jesus’ close followers. He may have been Jesus’ closest friend here on earth. He was one of the Twelve Apostles or Disciples (see Day 27). He also wrote the books (or epistles / letters) of 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, and the book of Revelation.

The **family tree** of Jesus Christ: God created Adam, and Adam was the father of Seth. The subsequent generations are: Enosh, Kenan, Mahalaleel, Jared, Enoch, Methuselah, Lamech, Noah, Shem, Arphaxad, Kenan, Shelah, Eber, Peleg, Reu, Serug, Nahor, Terah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Perez, Hezron, Ram, Admin, Amminadab, Nahshon, Salmon, Boaz, Obed, Jesse, David, Nathan, Mattatha, Menna, Melea, Eliakim, Jonam, Joseph, Judah, Simeon, Levi, Matthat, Jorim, Eliezer, Joshua, Er, Elmadam, Cosam, Addi, Melchi, Neri, Shealtiel, Zerubbabel, Rhesa, Joanan, Joda, Josech, Semein, Mattathias, Maath, Naggai, Esli, Nahum, Amos, Mattathias, Joseph, Jannai, Melki, Levi, Matthat, Heli, [Mary whose husband was Joseph], Jesus. Luke 3:23b-38

■ **Family tree** We have a gap of perhaps 4,000 years between Adam and Jesus. (It’s difficult to put a date on Adam, and Jesus was born around 5 BC.) We’ll cover the events surrounding some of these people later. But first, we’ll explore the story of Jesus. Some important names are indicated in bold type. Various translations will reflect variant spellings or versions of these names. A different family tree for Jesus is recorded in Matthew. Scholars believe the Matthew genealogy outlines the ancestry of Joseph, husband of Mary, mother of Jesus. These family trees may or may not include names from every generation.

■ 50% ■ Proverbs ■ Ecclesiastes ■ Song of Solomon ■ Isaiah ■ Jeremiah ■ Lamentations ■ Ezekiel ■ Daniel ■ Hosea ■ Joel ■ Amos ■ Obadiah ■ Jonah ■ 75% ■ Micah ■ Nahum ■ Habakkuk ■ Zephaniah ■ Haggai ■ Zechariah ■ Malachi ■ Matthew ■ Mark ■ Luke ■ John ■ Acts ■ Romans ■ 1 Corinthians ■ 2 Corinthians ■ Galatians ■ Ephesians ■ Philippians ■ Colossians ■ 1 Thessalonians ■ 2 Thessalonians ■ 1 Timothy ■ 2 Timothy ■ Titus ■ Philemon ■ Hebrews ■ James ■ 1 Peter ■ 2 Peter ■ 1 John ■ 2 John ■ 3 John ■ Jude ■ Revelation

Discoveries: Coming to Know God

God isn't hiding. From the very beginning, He has been revealing Himself. How so? God Himself is the Message. John 1:1 [Day 8]

■ How do you squeeze the universe small enough so you can hold it in your hand? How do you put all the oceans of the world in a single bottle? If it were left up to us to find God, we would be in big trouble. How could we hope to know anything about Him in a year, in 70 years, in 6,000 years? It would be like counting the fish in the Pacific ocean, one by one, hoping we didn't miss any.

That's why we learn the truth: No one has ever seen God. Our eyes aren't big enough. Our heart isn't pure enough. Our life isn't enduring enough to see God, unless God wants to be seen. But God wants to be seen. He wants to be known. He wants to fill our little hearts with the knowledge of Him. And He knows you can't pour the ocean into a teacup. So He gives us a drink instead from the Water of Life. What amazes me is how effortless, how automatic, how easy Jesus makes it seem—every moment of His life was a miracle as He declared to us: This is who God is.

God is not at the end of our quest; we are at the end of His quest. We didn't find Him; He found us. Jesus has placed the unknowable right in front of us. God means to be discovered.

...those who open their arms to welcome the God-Man, and believe the God-Message—these are the ones who have the power to be children of God John 1:12 [Day 8]

Before I had children, I didn't know much about being a dad. To be honest, my main thought about parenthood was this: If I ever have kids, I'm gonna teach 'em to behave. I didn't realize that my heart would melt the first time I picked up my daughter, that everything I promised myself about making those kids mind and behave would seem small and petty compared to the wonder of holding this precious little life in my hands. Suddenly it occurred to me that I was responsible for so much more than I had ever imagined before.

When I was younger, I didn't realize what was going on inside the heart of my Father in heaven. My faith was small and narrow. In my mind, God was mainly interested in turning down most of my prayer requests and making

me behave. I thought He sent His Spirit to convict me of sin. I believed He sent me to church to hear lectures on how many different ways I had messed up. I never knew that God held me in His hands, and that His eyes were shining, just like mine were, when I first held my little baby girl.

Questions

[How] has God made Himself known to you?

Why didn't the world recognize Jesus Christ or understand His significance?

What does it mean to be a child of God?

Why would the Bible record the family tree of Jesus?

Your main take away from today's reading...

Day 9: Good News for a Childless Couple

[4-7 BC] When the Roman Empire was in full swing and Herod was a puppet king over the Jewish state of Judea, we find two good people, Zechariah and Elizabeth, married, growing old, and childless.

Zechariah was a **priest**. He helped the people find peace with God. As it turned out, Zechariah was chosen to enter the sacred place of worship, the place where only a chosen priest was allowed to enter, to burn an offering of incense before God. Outside, God's people gathered to pray.

Without warning, an angel—a messenger from heaven—appeared, which scared the daylights out of Zechariah. But the angel said, “No need for fear, Zechariah. God has been listening to you. He knows the cry of your heart. You and your wife, Elizabeth, will have a son. Name him **John**. The empty place in your hearts will be filled with joy, and that joy will overflow to many, many people, because this will be no ordinary son. He will be a great man. Because of his special role, he shall drink no alcohol. Instead, God's Spirit will permeate his personality from day one. He will bring people together, softening hearts and reconciling families. Like the famous prophet, Elijah, he will stare down an entire nation without blinking, as he gets people ready for God.”

Zechariah said to the angel, “Wow. Great story. I wish I could believe it. Are you sure you got it straight? Elizabeth and I are way too old to have children.”

The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in God's presence. He sent me to you with this message. You don't believe me? Okay. You won't speak, until you see with your own eyes what you couldn't believe. Everything I told you will happen exactly on time.”

Meanwhile, the people outside were getting antsy. What could have happened to Zechariah? Why was he taking so long? When he came out, he couldn't talk. As he tried to explain himself using sign language, the people figured out that he had seen some kind of vision from God.

When his assignment was complete, he returned home. Soon his wife Elizabeth became pregnant, keeping it a secret for the first five months. Elizabeth said, "People thought I was cursed by God, a secret sinner because I had no children. But God has the last word, doesn't He?" Luke 1:5-25⁹

■ **Priest** In the Bible, priests had the job of presenting animal and grain sacrifices to God. In some cases, they were allowed to eat a portion of the sacrifice. Sometimes they also presented offerings of incense. As part of their worship process, they sometimes burned incense. (Human sacrifices were absolutely forbidden by God, but they were commonly practiced by some of the people groups that surrounded the people of Israel during a large portion of their history.) The sacrifices in this agricultural society were a graphic reminder of the cost of sin. They were also understood as a gateway to peace with God. The Bible explains that Jesus was Himself the last and perfect sacrifice; after His death and resurrection no more sacrifices were needed. (Hebrews 9 & 10) ■ **Angel** Angels are spirit messengers sent from God who are normally invisible to us, but occasionally appear in what seems to be human form. This particular angel, Gabriel, spoke with the prophet Daniel about 500 years earlier, and would soon appear to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Most believe that the devil or Satan was originally a good angel who rebelled against God. His spirit followers are known as demons, and are considered by most to be angels who were created good, but fell into sin. (See Matthew 25:41, Revelation 12:7-9) ■ **John** Zechariah and Elizabeth's son was the John who baptized people (John the Baptist), not the person who wrote the book of John.

⁹ Today's readings are from

■ Genesis ■ Exodus ■ Leviticus ■ Numbers ■ Deuteronomy ■ Joshua ■ Judges ■ Ruth ■ 1 Samuel ■ 25%
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■ Revelation

Discoveries: A Plan Worth Waiting For

But the angel said, “No need for fear, Zechariah. God has been listening to you. He knows the cry of your heart.” Luke 1:13 [Day 9]

■ Sometimes our lives are defined by a single prayer. It may be a prayer for a child, as was the case with Zechariah and Elizabeth. It may be a prayer for healing or deliverance. It may be a prayer for prosperity, as was the case with Jabez.

Think about your prayer. Look at what the Lord did. Zechariah and Elizabeth could no longer have what they longed for. They were too old. Their dream had died. It may be that you can no longer lift your face heavenward. Maybe your dream has died.

Think about your prayer. Zechariah and Elizabeth endured so many years of silence. Pleading with God. Faithfully obeying His commandments, yet moving through life with a silent cry of anguish. No response. Nothing. Where was God?

But God hadn’t given up. How long had God planned the miraculous birth of John the Baptist? Let me suggest it was planned from the beginning of time.

Our grief, our lack, our pain, our need, the betrayal and impossibilities we have experienced—none of these have escaped God’s notice. His solution—our miracle—is already on the books. When our miracle shows up, we make some discoveries, just like Zechariah did: God’s plans are bigger than ours. God hasn’t forgotten, and He hasn’t stopped caring. What God does for us isn’t just for us alone. It has a ripple effect that will touch people all over the world.

Zechariah and Elizabeth, married, growing old, and childless. / Luke 1:7 [Day 9]

■ I don’t know what statement may have characterized your life up to this point, but I want you to know that God can, in a moment, redefine your life. Elizabeth lived most of her life under the label “childless.” But in God’s mind, she was not barren. She was the mother of John the Baptist, perhaps the greatest prophet who ever lived. We remember her for her greeting to Mary—these two mothers whose sons changed a nation, a world, history.

Remember that Elizabeth lived MOST of her life with the label that didn't fit. But God changed everything. Likewise, you will not always be barren. God has a bigger plan for you.

Questions

It looks like Zechariah and Elizabeth had given up. They seemed to think there was no way they could ever have children. Have you ever faced a situation where you felt like giving up? How did you deal with it?

Do you think angels are active today? Why or why not? If so, what role do you think they play?

What do you observe about God from the account of Zechariah and Elizabeth?

There appears to be a sense of vindication on the part of Elizabeth. Have you ever had an experience where you felt vindicated? What was that like?

Your main take away from today's reading...

Day 10: Two Miracle Mothers

After Elizabeth had been pregnant for five months, God sent Gabriel—that same angel—to Nazareth, a town in the Jewish state of Galilee to meet with Mary, a virgin engaged to Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel said, “Hello, Mary, favored by God. The Lord God Himself is with you.”

Mary was speechless, rattled and bewildered by this greeting. But the angel continued, “Don’t be afraid, Mary, because God’s smile is upon your life. Here’s the news: You’re going to have a baby boy. Name Him Jesus. He will be great. His title will be Son of the Most High God. God will give Him King David’s throne. He will reign over Israel forever. His kingdom will never end.”

This was a lot to take in. So Mary asked, “How is this going to work? I’m a virgin.”

The angel explained, “God won’t work through the usual process. Instead, God will miraculously begin this new life inside you through His Holy Spirit. This is why your son will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth, your relative, is pregnant in her old age. Nothing is impossible with God.”

Mary nodded. “I follow God. I’ll embrace His plan.” Then Gabriel departed.

As quick as she could, Mary traveled to visit Elizabeth who lived in the hilly region of Judea. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s voice, the baby inside jumped, and Elizabeth, overcome by God’s Spirit, spoke these words: “What an honor to receive in my home the mother of my Lord! You are favored for you believed God’s promise, and your child is exalted. My own baby jumped with joy upon hearing your voice.”

Then Mary shared her heart with Elizabeth: “Everything inside me feels like singing because I am in awe of God. From high-

est heaven He looks down and sees me. What will future generations think? God brought me—an ordinary woman—under His wings and cared for me. But this is who He is—gathering into His care those who tremble before Him, and tossing the arrogant into history’s ash can. Seeing the hungry, He prepares a banquet, but He slams the door on the indifferent and unmerciful. Everything we hoped for and more—everything He promised in the past—all of this, He will perform, giving all of us reason for song.” Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months, then returned home. Luke 1:26-56¹⁰

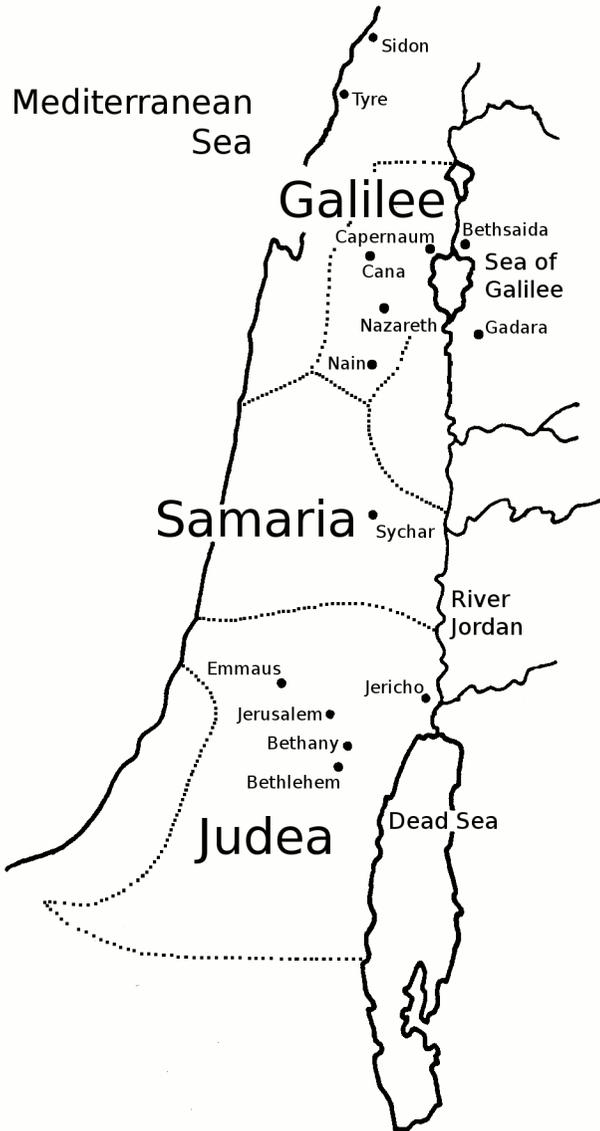
■ **Scandal** For an unmarried woman to be pregnant was scandalous to the point of being dangerous. She could be accused of prostitution, and stoned to death.

■ **Map** (next page) At this time, the nation of Israel was a Roman colony, and ordinary Jewish people were bullied by corrupt officials. There were three primary Jewish states: Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. There was a definite pecking order in these states. Judeans considered themselves superior to Galileans. Samaritans were despised as half breeds since their ancestors intermarried with non-Jewish peoples. Jews from Judea and Galilee typically would not associate with Samaritans. Nazareth was located in Galilee. Jerusalem and Bethlehem were located in Judea. The place of worship (the temple) where Zechariah met the angel was in Jerusalem. Judea got its name from Judah, one of the twelve sons of Jacob (who was also called Israel). Judah was the ancestor of Jesus Christ. From the word Judah, we get the words Jew and Jewish.

¹⁰ Today’s readings are from

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 ▪ 2 Timothy ▪ Titus ▪ Philemon ▪ Hebrews ▪ James ▪ 1 Peter ▪ 2 Peter ▪ 1 John ▪ 2 John ▪ 3 John ▪ Jude
 ▪ Revelation

Israel in the time of Jesus



Discoveries: The Ability to See

“Everything we hoped for and more—everything He promised in the past—all of this, He will perform, giving all of us reason for song.” Luke 1:46, 51, 55 [Day 10]

■ An unbeliever would scoff at Mary’s song. The boot of the Roman empire was on the neck of the Jewish nation. Mighty deeds were measured in columns of marching Roman soldiers. The great miracles of deliverance for Israel were history—ancient history it seemed. The people of Israel lived and died under the watchful eye of the Roman state.

But God gives a great gift to His children. He enables us to see what others cannot see. The unbeliever may look at our lives and see financial calamity, terminal illness, pain of every kind, addiction, hypocrisy and failure. But we look up and see the Shepherd bringing us to quiet waters. We see the Father opening His arms to us. We see our Defender demolishing the schemes of the enemy. We see our Savior holding our hands in His own, looking us in the eye and telling us that we belong to Him.

We look up and see the truth.

God isn’t hiding. From the very beginning, He has been revealing Himself. John 1:1 [Day 8]

What if your assignment was to write the story of the life of Christ?

A fisherman (John), a rich kid (Mark), a tax collector (Matthew) and a medical doctor (Luke) all set out to do just that. Same life—different stories, totally different approaches. And so we see Jesus through the lens of four different people, four different writers, each one offering something of eternal value to the Kingdom of God.

Did you know that Jesus could have written His own story? But He didn’t. Did you know that Jesus could put a billboard in the sky to tell people about Himself? But He doesn’t.

Why?

Jesus chooses to let your world see Him through the lens of you. You have something beautiful to share, something of eternal value for God’s kingdom.

Questions

Mary's readiness to take in Gabriel's announcement is astounding, and it stands in sharp contrast to Zechariah's disbelief. Why do you think Mary was so open to her assignment?

Elizabeth seems to have an immediate grasp of Mary's role. How do you think she came to understand what was happening with Mary?

What do you learn about God from Mary's statement to Elizabeth?

How do you think Mary handled the questions and the gossip that arose once her pregnancy was discovered?

Your main take away from today's reading...