

JANUARY 2023

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Each link provided in the following daily commentaries is from The Message. The full audio version of The Message (recorded by Oasis Audio, with agreement of NavPress, publisher of The Message) may be accessed through Biblegateway.com. <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/audio/?recording=msg-dolan>

Here is a link to all the audio verses for the month of January 2023 : <https://pray4healing.me/bible-in-a-year-led-by-dr-doug-resler/>

January 1 2023 Welcome

Readings for today: NONE

January 2, 2023 Ancient Near East Cosmology

Readings for today: Genesis 1-2

January 3, 2023 Tikkun Olam

Readings for today: John 1:1-3, Psalm 8, 104

January 4, 2023 The Fall

Readings for today: Genesis 3-5

January 5, 2023 Walking with God

Readings for today: Genesis 6-7

January 6, 2023 Renewing the Call

Readings for today: Genesis 8-9, Psalms 12

January 7, 2023 Table of Nations

Readings for today: Genesis 10-11

January 9, 2023 God's Initiation

Readings for today: Genesis 12-13

January 10, 2023 The God Who Sees

Readings for today: Genesis 14-16

January 11, 2023 Partnership

Readings for today: Genesis 17-19

January 12, 2023 Talking Down to Us

Readings for today: Genesis 20-23

January 13, 2023 God's Promise

Readings for today: Genesis 24-26

January 14, 2023 **Family Dysfunction**
Readings for today: Genesis 27-29

January 16, 2023 **Supplanter**
Readings for today: Genesis 30-33

January 17, 2023 **Dreamers**
Readings for today: Genesis 34-37

January 18, 2023 **God's Sovereignty**
Readings for today: Genesis 38-40

January 19, 2023 **Dreams and Visions**
Readings for today: Genesis 41-43

January 20, 2023 **Repentance**
Readings for today: Genesis 44-46

January 21, 2023 **A Hard Life**
Readings for today: Genesis 47-50

January 23, 2023 **The Book of Job**
Readings for today: Job 1-5

January 24, 2023 **Empty Platitudes**
Readings for today: Job 6-9

January 25, 2023 **Hopelessness**
Readings for today: Job 10-13

January 26, 2023 **Mortality**
Readings for today: Job 14-17

January 27, 2023 **Breakthrough**
Readings for today: Job 18-21

January 28, 2023 **Doubling Down**
Readings for today: Job 22-24

January 30, 2023 **Cultural Insulation**
Readings for today: Job 25-28

January 31, 2023 **Expectations**
Readings for today: Job 29-32

January 1, 2023
Bible in a Year 2023

Welcome, friends! My name is Doug Resler and I am a local church pastor living in Parker, CO. Over thirty years ago, I had a life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ on the campus of the University of Colorado in Boulder. Before I met Christ, my life was heading towards a very dark place. I was isolated and disconnected from family and friends. I was drinking heavily. I was flunking out of school. I was struggling with depression. In the midst of my despair, a friend of mine from high school invited me to attend a campus ministry meeting on a Tuesday night. Desperate and not knowing where else to turn, I decided to go and heard a man named Mike Gaffney preach the gospel in a way I had never heard before. After the meeting, I asked how I could learn more about this God who loved me and I was encouraged to join a small group Bible study. After studying the Bible weekly with this small group of guys, I found myself becoming more and more open to faith and that's when Jesus Christ came and found me. I can still remember the exact place I was standing on campus where it happened. After accepting Christ, my life began to change. It didn't happen all at once. I still struggled mightily with addiction and depression but God surrounded me with Christian men and women who invested in me and helped me begin to put my life back together. One of those people was a man named Don Bachman.

Don was an older Christian man who had retired early from his career to mentor college students. He and I began to meet monthly and he encouraged me to begin reading the Bible every single day. He helped me understand that if I really wanted a relationship with God, I would do all I could to get to know God and the primary way we do that is through His Word. So here I am thirty years later - still meeting with Don on a monthly basis! - reading through the Bible each year and trying to help others do the same.

If you are joining us for the first time...welcome! We are glad you are here! We want you to know there are no questions or comments that are off limits! Reading the Bible will challenge you in all sorts of ways. It can be confusing and frustrating at times. You might find yourself feeling fearful and anxious along the way as your faith is stretched. You might find yourself struggling with doubts and uncertainties. These are quite normal and expected. We've established a private Facebook group - "Bible in a Year 2023 with Doug, Greg, Johnny, and Lucy" - that you can join where you can ask these questions openly and honestly. Just search for the group and ask to join.

If you are returning for another round...welcome! We're glad you're back! Let me encourage you to read a different version this year to keep things fresh. Perhaps listen to it audibly as you read along. Maybe even journal your own thoughts along the way. There's always more to learn which is why reading the Bible never gets old.

As in previous years, the readings will be posted each day, Monday through Saturday, and we will take Sundays off. If you want to follow along in the YouVersion Bible App, you can search for and find the plan we are using under the title, "Reading God's Story: One-Year Chronological Plan." Please note the plan will not take us Genesis through Revelation but rather through the different books of the Bible as they are written which I find to be the most helpful. I trust the Lord will bless every moment you spend in His Word and I encourage you to pray each day for the Holy Spirit to open your eyes to what He wants to reveal to you. Looking forward to the journey and if you are ever in Parker, CO, look me up at Parker Evangelical Presbyterian Church!

January 2, 2023
Ancient Near East Cosmology

Readings for today: [Genesis 1-2](#) ([Introduction first five Books of Moses](#)) ([Audio Genesis 1,2](#))

The doctrine of accommodation is the theological principle that God “condescends” to us and speaks to us in a way human beings can understand and to which they can respond. This is a critically important principle to apply to the first few chapters of Genesis. We have to remember God is speaking to a group of people living in the Ancient Near East who perceive their world in a particular way based upon the particular science of the time and their particular cultural beliefs. Genesis is not written to a people starting with a blank slate. They already have fully formed beliefs about the world around them and how it all came into being. God speaks into their world to reshape their understanding of things. He reshapes their understanding of creation and humanity and reveals His divine purposes to them. He tells them their origin story with Adam and Eve. He reminds them of their high calling to be faithful stewards over all He has made. He helps them understand the “why” behind the “what” of creation.

A close reading of Genesis one and two is confusing for many in the modern world. We know far more about the world and all that is in it than our Ancient Near East ancestors. We have telescopes probing the vast reaches of outer space. We have microscopes unlocking creation on a sub-atomic level. We’ve “thought God’s thoughts after Him” (Kepler) and discovered all kinds of immutable laws, strong and weak forces, dark and light matter, and energy that makes up our universe and we still have so much to learn. The launch of the James Webb telescope has allowed us to “travel” back in time over 13 billion years and see some the earliest moments of creation when galaxies were still in their infancy and stars and plants were beginning to form. It’s truly incredible and yet it can pose all kinds of problems when we come to the Biblical text. Some attempt to resolve this problem by trying to square modern science with the circle of Genesis 1. Some attempt to resolve this problem by rejecting science and/or the Biblical text altogether. A far more fruitful approach - to my mind at least - is to apply the doctrine of accommodation and seek to discern what exactly God is trying to reveal in the opening pages of Scripture.

Here I owe a great debt to Dr. John Walton who teaches Old Testament at Wheaton College. Dr. Walton argues we should take a “functional” approach to understanding Genesis 1. The people living in the Ancient Near East were less concerned with how things came into being and more concerned with the purpose behind them. So God creates light and darkness on the first day, the sky or “atmosphere” on the second day, and the land, oceans, and all plant life on the third day. For a person living in the Ancient Near East, the “functions” of each day were clear. Light and dark represent the creation of time. The sky or atmosphere represents the creation of weather. The land, oceans, and all plant life represent the foundation for a sustainable food source. Then God creates “functionaries.” He creates the sun and moon and stars to govern time and seasons. He fills the land, oceans, and skies with all kinds of different animals to build an ecological system that can sustain life. Finally, He creates humankind in His image to care for and cultivate and exercise dominion over all He has made and He charges them to be “prosper, reproduce, and fill the earth.” Again, the point is less about how everything got here - on this point, Genesis 1:1 is clear, “First this: God created the Heavens and Earth—all you see, all you don’t see.” (MSG) - and more on the order and purpose behind God’s creative acts.

When we view Genesis 1 and 2 through Ancient Near East eyes, we can focus less on the unnecessary and completely contrived “conflict” between faith and science and instead focus on why human beings were created and the mandate God has given us to care for His creation.

Readings for tomorrow: John 1:1-3, Psalm 8, 104

[Back To Table of Contents](#)

January 3, 2023
Tikkun Olam

Readings for today: John 1:1-3, Psalm 8, 104 [\(audio reading\)](#)

My Jewish friends have this saying, “Tikkun olam.” Literally, it means “repair of the world” and it reflects the responsibility Jewish people feel for all of God’s creation. They believe they are responsible not just for themselves but for their neighbors and for society at large. They seek the good of those around them as well as creation itself. They long for renewal and restoration spiritually, emotionally, mentally, physically, and socially. For them, “repair” comes as God’s heart is reflected in the people, policies, and politics of our world and they dedicate their lives and resources towards this great end. Why do they feel so strongly about this principle? Where does such an idea come from?

Psalm 8:5-9. “We’ve so narrowly missed being gods, bright with Eden’s dawn light. You put us in charge of your handcrafted world, repeated to us your Genesis-charge, Made us stewards of sheep and cattle, even animals out in the wild, Birds flying and fish swimming, whales singing in the ocean deeps. God, brilliant Lord, your name echoes around the world.” (MSG) It’s a restatement of the creation mandate given to us in Genesis 1:26-28. “God spoke: “Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature So they can be responsible for the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the cattle, And, yes, Earth itself, and every animal that moves on the face of Earth.” God created human beings; he created them godlike, Reflecting God’s nature. He created them male and female. God blessed them: “Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge! Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air, for every living thing that moves on the face of Earth.” (MSG)

There’s just no getting around it. We are responsible for the world God has made. We are called to be stewards over all of creation. We are commanded to care for and cultivate creation. We are to work in such a way that creation flourishes and thrives. We are not to use it for our own purposes. We are not to exploit it for our own ends. We are not to consume it to feed our insatiable appetites. We are to dedicate our lives to bring repair, renewal, and restoration. We are to help heal the ravages of sin and death. We are to make whole that which was broken. This is not just our temporal calling but our eternal calling as well. This is the work we will engage in once Jesus returns!

Every day is another chance for tikkun olam. Every conversation. Every interaction. Every decision. Every action or inaction. All carry significant, even eternal weight. Imagine what could break loose in your life if tikkun olam were your daily goal? Imagine how it would change your relationships? Imagine how it would change the way you see your work? Imagine how it would change your perspective on the challenges you face? Ultimately, tikkun olam is an invitation to join God in His work of renewal and restoration. It’s an invitation to partner with Him to care for all He has made including those you love and live among. Why don’t you join Him today?

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 3-5

[Back To Table of Contents](#)

January 4, 2023

The Fall

Readings for today: Genesis 3-5 ([audio reading](#))

Like us, the ancients often wondered why the world is the way that it is. Why is the world so harsh and unyielding? Why is humanity so brutal and prone to violence? Why does evil exist? Why do people die? Why is there suffering and pain? These are existential questions that have haunted the human race from the beginning. Remember, God is speaking to a people who live in the Ancient Near East. He is speaking to people who already have a worldview. People who already have a fully formed set of beliefs about the world around them. He is reshaping their worldview. Revealing to them the truth of how things came into existence and why things are the way that they are. Through the author of Genesis - traditionally Moses - He is letting them in on the truth of human existence and helping them understand their role in the creative order.

So back to those persistent questions...why does evil exist? Why is there pain and suffering? Why do people die? Why is life in this world so hard? God's answer is clear. The fault lies with humanity. We were given charge over all of creation. We were set in a Garden to work and to cultivate it alongside our Creator. Because God wanted a partner, not a slave, we were given free will which means we had the very real choice to continue working in God's paradise or seek to remake the world according to our design. Tragically, we chose the latter. We don't know how long Adam and Eve labored in the Garden, naked and unashamed. We don't know how many millennia passed with them working side by side in perfect communion with God. We only know that one day it all came to an end. They began to covet the forbidden fruit. Whether the serpent was real or simply a metaphor for the devil, we do know they gave into temptation. They saw the fruit was good. They crossed the boundary God had set. They rejected His law and aspired to a role not their own. They wanted to be like God so like God they became. The problem, of course, is human beings do not have the power of God or the heart of God or the wisdom of God which turned us into tyrants. We began to oppress each other...the woman longing for the man and the man lording it over her. We began to oppress creation...the land itself refusing to produce for us as we exploited it. Conflict. Violence. Brokenness. All these things entered the world as a result of our decision and we've been suffering the consequences ever since.

The Bible forces us to confront our deepest, truest nature. We are sinners to the core. Corrupt and depraved. We covet. We get angry. We lash out at those we love. We even resort to violence in order to get our way. Most of all, we want to be like God. We want to be independent and free but we do not have the ability to use our freedom for godly purposes. Because of sin, our freedom gets twisted into selfishness, greed, narcissistic tendencies, pursuit of pleasure, and so many other proclivities that are not healthy nor good. The choices we make don't just impact us either. They impact those who live with us and around us. They impact the world in which we live. The earth, the sea, the climate, and all manner of living things. Why? Because God never revokes His mandate. He never removes us from our divinely ordained role in the created order. Despite our sin, we remain stewards for good or for ill and God continues to pursue a partnership with us. It's amazing when you stop to think about it. God could just as easily wiped us out and started all over but instead He chooses to persevere in chasing after us, not wishing any to perish but all to return to a relationship with Him. This is the heart of the gospel, of course, and it is why God will send us His Son.

So take a moment and consider your life today. Think about the people you will meet. The choices you will make. Where you will spend your time and energy and resources. Are you living your life in partnership with God or are you still trying to be your own god? Are you making decisions with

His purposes in mind or are you doing what's best for you? Are you cultivating and caring for all God has placed under your authority or are you using and exploiting these things for your own ends? Take these questions to prayer and ask the Holy Spirit to show you how to better align your life with God today.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 6-7

[Back To Table of Contents](#)

January 5, 2023
Walking with God

Readings for today: [Genesis 6-7](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

Enoch walked with God. Noah walked with God. Abraham walked with God. It's a phrase that's repeated over and over again throughout the Bible to describe the lives of the righteous. They walk with God. They keep in step with the Spirit of God. They do not run ahead of God. They do not lag behind God. They walk with Him every hour of every day. Does this mean they are perfect? Surely not. All have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. Does this mean they never wander away? Not at all. All like sheep have gone astray. Does this mean they never stumble or fall? Nope. All of us stumble. All of us fall from time to time. But when we do we are not down for long because God has a grip on us.

We live in terrible times. At least that's what we believe. Media outlets report horror story after horror story on a daily basis. Social media seems specifically designed to heighten tension and outrage and anger and hate. Extreme elements on either side of the political spectrum threaten to tear our country apart with their lies. Pressures on our families and communities are often too much to bear resulting in divorce, separation, and divisions. Our children bear the brunt of this stress, reporting increasingly high levels of depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicidal ideation. (See Jonathan Haidt's recent article in the Wall Street Journal on the "National Crisis of Gen Z.") In the face of all this bad news, it's easy to give up. It's easy to turn inward and simply focus on ourselves. It's easy to isolate out of a sense of self-preservation. But we are not the first to face such times...

"God saw that human evil was out of control. People thought evil, imagined evil—evil, evil, evil from morning to night. God was sorry that he had made the human race in the first place; it broke his heart. God said, "I'll get rid of my ruined creation, make a clean sweep: people, animals, snakes and bugs, birds—the works. I'm sorry I made them." But Noah was different. God liked what he saw in Noah. This is the story of Noah: Noah was a good man, a man of integrity in his community. Noah walked with God. Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. As far as God was concerned, the Earth had become a sewer; there was violence everywhere. God took one look and saw how bad it was, everyone corrupt and corrupting—life itself corrupt to the core." (Genesis 6:5-12 MSG)

But Noah was different. Noah was a good man. Noah was a man of integrity in his community. Noah walked with God. In the face of all the evil that surrounded him and hemmed him in on every side, Noah refused to isolate. Noah refused to give into the temptation to take care of himself. Noah refused to give into fear and instead chose the path of faith. Noah walked with God.

What our world needs more than ever are men and women who have the courage and faith to walk with God. To be people of integrity in their communities. To dare to be different in the name of Jesus. Today is a day of opportunity. A day to walk with God. To walk with God in our homes. To walk with God into our workplaces. To walk with God as we hang out with friends and those we love. To walk with God among our neighbors. Wherever you go and whatever you do, you are walking with God if you are a Christian. He is with you. He resides inside you through the presence of the Holy Spirit. He is there to guide you and protect you and lift you up if and when you fall. If you start to go astray, He will pursue you. He will never let you go. The call from God's Word today is simply to be the man or woman God has created you to be. To walk intentionally with God through every circumstance of life.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 8-9, Psalms 12

[Back To Table of Contents](#)

January 6, 2023
Renewing the Call

Readings for today: Genesis 8-9, Psalms 12 ([audio reading](#))

We aren't even nine chapters into the Bible and already humanity is a train wreck. Violence. Oppression. Brutality. Their evil is so great that God regrets having made them in the first place. Take a moment and imagine the grief of God? Imagine His disappointment at what the creature made in His own image has become? Imagine the heartbreak of God as He realizes humanity has reached a point of no return? The future of creation itself is at stake unless God acts. So God takes the extraordinary step of flooding the earth. Now whether the flood truly covered the entire earth or was localized to the area where humanity lived at the time is immaterial. The point here is the evil of humanity was so great that God's justice required Him to give them the death penalty. It's a stark reminder of how deep our sin runs.

Thankfully, all is not lost. Noah and his family find favor with God and are saved. They are delivered from the flood and, in turn, become deliverers themselves. Through their faithfulness, many species of animals and birds are saved. And once the floodwaters recede, they are able to repopulate the earth. It's an act of re-creation. God has remade the earth. By sending the flood, the earth became "formless and void" once again while the Spirit of God "hovered over the face of the waters." Once the waters evaporate and Noah disembarks, he is greeted with a new kind of Eden. An earth that has been profoundly reshaped. And once again, God renews the original mandate He gave to Adam. "God blessed Noah and his sons: He said, "Prosper! Reproduce! Fill the Earth! Every living creature—birds, animals, fish—will fall under your spell and be afraid of you. You're responsible for them. All living creatures are yours for food; just as I gave you the plants, now I give you everything else. Except for meat with its lifeblood still in it—don't eat that." (Genesis 9:1-4 MSG)

God has called us to be stewards of all He has made. There is no "Plan B." There is no backup if we should fail. God has determined to work in us and through us to cultivate and nourish creation. He has determined to work in us and through us to bring about His plan of salvation. He has determined to work in us and through us to bring blessing and peace upon the earth. We are responsible. Like it or not, we hold dominion and authority over all God has made. And God will hold us accountable for how we exercise such authority. Will we be tyrants? Oppressors? Exploiting others for personal gain? Or will we be servants? Liberators? Caring for and sharing the resources God has given us so all might flourish and thrive?

This is our challenge, friends. How will others experience you today? How will you steward the resources God has given you? Resources of time, talent, and treasure? Will you work today for your own gain or for the gain of others? Will you seek today your own good or the good of others? Will you resist the temptation to tear others down and instead do your best to build them up? Will you be an encourager? A man or woman of blessing? Someone who is generous and kind and gentle? Will you lift up those who have fallen? Pray for those who are hurting? Help bear the burdens of those who are struggling? Every day we have opportunities. Every day we make choices. Every day we have the chance to fulfill the mandate God has given us and help make the world a better place.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 10-11

Back To Table of Contents

January 7, 2023
Table of Nations

Readings for today: Genesis 10-11 ([audio reading](#))

Genesis 10 is the famous “Table of Nations” which lists the founders of seventy nations descended from Noah and his family. This is not an exhaustive list. The Biblical genealogies are always abridged. They include the names the ancients deemed important at the time. Lesser nations or those siblings who are less culturally relevant at the time are left out. Some of the nations listed are easily identifiable even to this day. Others are far more obscure. All attempts to identify them meet with varying degrees of success due to the time and cultural distance between our world and the ancient world. However, here’s one attempt just to help you picture it...



Why is the table important? What relevance does it have for us today? First of all, it shows those nations most important to ancient Israel. That’s why Egypt, Babylon, and Assyria all feature prominently. These empires will become Israel’s greatest enemies. It’s also why the Canaanite tribes are all mentioned because of the challenges they will present Israel on a regular basis. But perhaps most of all, it shows the deep, fundamental connection Israel has with the nations around them. When God calls Israel to be a “light to the nations”, she is being called to illuminate the gospel for her cousins no matter how distant they may be. She is being called to bring the gospel to her extended family. Yes, she

is set apart but not for isolation. She is set apart in order to put the mercies of God's grace on display so the nations will hear and be glad and turn to the Lord in faith.

One more thing...the Table of Nations reveals the plan of salvation. God working through the line of Shem all the way to Terah to bring a man named Abram into view. The man through whom God's promises for the world will come to pass. It's a great reminder that even when we may not be able to see it, God is working. Even when we may not be able to feel it or touch it, God is working. As generations come and generations go, God is always at work to bring His plans to pass. May you walk in that confidence today!

Readings for tomorrow: None

[Back To Table of Contents](#)

January 9, 2023
God's Initiation

Readings for today: [Genesis 12-13](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

The Bible is clear...God wants a relationship with us. Jews and Christians both live by this fundamental truth. Religion for us is not about a list of rules we follow in order to make our way to God. It is not a way for us to earn our way into heaven. It is not a way for us to earn God's favor or blessing upon our lives. It is fundamentally a relationship. The intersection of God's Life with human life. The exchange of Divine Love with human love. This relationship takes place at God's initiation. He makes the initial approach. He makes the decision to leave the heavenly dimension where He lives in eternal glory and come to the earthly dimension to meet us where we are. Without God making this decision, we could not have a relationship with Him for we do not have the power to move from this world to the next. He must come to us.

God speaks to Abram. "Leave your country, your family, and your father's home for a land that I will show you. I'll make you a great nation and bless you. I'll make you famous; you'll be a blessing. I'll bless those who bless you; those who curse you I'll curse. All the families of the Earth will be blessed through you." (Genesis 12:1-3 MSG) Notice God places no conditions on His covenant. He will do these things for Abram simply because He loves him. He will do these things for Abram because He has a plan for the world and He desires to use Abram to bring about His will on earth. Abram is almost a bystander to this covenant. God appears to Abram. "I will give this land to your children." (Genesis 12:7 MSG) Once again, there are no conditions. No expectations. God is simply going to give Abram a gift. One more time in our readings for today, God speaks. "Open your eyes, look around. Look north, south, east, and west. Everything you see, the whole land spread out before you, I will give to you and your children forever. I'll make your descendants like dust—counting your descendants will be as impossible as counting the dust of the Earth. So—on your feet, get moving! Walk through the country, its length and breadth; I'm giving it all to you." (Genesis 13:14-17 MSG) Once more, Abram is blessed. Not because of his obedience. Not because of his faithfulness. Not because of his goodness. He is blessed simply out of grace.

This is the difference between a covenant and a contract. A covenant is relational. A contract is transactional. A covenant operates by grace. A contract by works. In a covenant, both parties respond to each other out of love. In a contract, both parties respond out of obligation. Yes, Abram leaves his home and kindred and country. Yes, Abram builds altars to God. Yes, Abram prays. But these responses are not grounded in duty or debt but in the natural, loving response one makes when in an intimate relationship with their Creator.

In Jesus Christ, God comes to us. God meets us on our level. He takes on our sin. He removes our guilt. He does this purely out of grace. Not because we've earned it or achieved it or won it through our own effort. Through Christ, God initiates a covenant of grace with us and those who have been adopted into this covenant find themselves naturally responding to such grace with loving obedience. We don't have to think about it. We don't have to strive for it. We don't have to make ourselves do it. We love because He first loved us. We serve because He first served us. We give because He first gave to us. This is the heart of the gospel.

Take some time and reflect on your relationship with God today. Do you find yourself obeying out of gratitude or guilt? Do you find yourself worshipping out of thankfulness or obligation? Is serving Christ a chore or is it a joy? The answers to these questions will tell you whether you see your

relationship as a covenant or a contract. If the latter, know that God is extending you an invitation today to let go of your need to strive and work so hard and live by grace!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 14-16

[Back To Table of Contents](#)

January 10, 2023
The God Who Sees

Readings for today: [Genesis 14-16](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

It is both comforting and convicting to know we've caught God's attention. He is faithful. Eternally so. His eyes never leave us. He never forsakes us. He is with us when we wake. He is with us when we sleep. He is with us at work, at school, at home. There is never a moment that escapes His glance. Never a time when our thoughts or actions are hidden from His sight.

This is incredibly encouraging when we are suffering like Hagar. A woman who gets caught up in a power struggle between her master and mistress. A woman who's marginalized. Mistreated. Abused. She runs into the wilderness, fearing for her life. She doesn't know where she is going only that she cannot remain in Sarai's household. She is pregnant. Alone. Afraid. But God is with her. He sees her. He meets her along the way. Meets her in the wilderness. Meets her in her desperation. And He gives her a promise. Her son will grow strong and powerful. He will eventually break free from the bonds of slavery. God will bless him.

The reminder above is incredibly convicting when we are engaged in sin like Sarai. A woman struggling with her own fears and failures and shame. She lashes out. She mistreats Hagar though she was the one who put her in this position in the first place. She lashes out at her husband who had agreed to the plan. She even laughs at God when He suggests she will bear a son within a year.

The same God who sees our pain is the same God who sees our sin and thankfully, He meets both with grace. Perhaps you find yourself in pain today. You are suffering. Struggling. The new year has not gotten off to a great start. You feel accused. You feel mistreated. Everything in you wants to run. Get away from it all. Take comfort in the fact that God sees what you are going through and He will look after you as surely as He looked after Hagar. Perhaps you find yourself locked in sin. Thoughts, attitudes, and actions you know do not line up with God's Word. You've been battling these demons for years or maybe you've simply been content to live in sin. Be warned! God will not be mocked! And He sees everything you do. What you believe to be hidden. What you believe to be secret. The work you've done to fool everyone around you is not unknown to God. He sees it all and He is actively at work to bring you to repentance.

Grace is truly a double-edged sword. It hits us where it hurts and it brings both comfort and conviction. Will you receive the grace of God today? Will you turn and meet the gaze of the "God who sees?" The God who is faithful to look after us in our sin and in our suffering?

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 17-19

[Back To Table of Contents](#)

January 11, 2023
Partnership

Readings for today: Genesis 17-19 (audio reading)

God wants a relationship. This is the basic, fundamental truth that runs throughout the Bible. He loves us the creature He made in His own image and His desire is to partner with this creature to care for all creation. Relationships of love cannot be coerced. They must be chosen. So throughout the Bible humanity is faced with a choice. Will they embrace a relationship with God or will they go their own way? Will they love this God in return or will they keep their love to themselves? Will they partner with this God and fulfill the creation mandate they were given or will they reject His offer of partnership and instead exploit creation for their own purposes? A lot rides on the choices we make. God holds us responsible for our decisions. Because we are given “agency” or free will, we must accept the consequences of that freedom. When we are faithful, the consequences are good. When are the faithless, the consequences can be terrible.

Consider what takes place in our story today. God appears to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre. Abraham and Sarai welcome Him in true Middle Eastern style. They prepare a meal. They welcome Him to their table. They feast and fellowship with Him. When it’s time for God to leave, Abraham escorted Him from the camp. Along the way, God makes this amazing statement, “Shall I keep back from Abraham what I’m about to do? Abraham is going to become a large and strong nation; all the nations of the world are going to find themselves blessed through him. Yes, I’ve settled on him as the one to train his children and future family to observe God’s way of life, live kindly and generously and fairly, so that God can complete in Abraham what he promised him.” (Genesis 18:17-19 MSG) Here we have a window into how God sees His relationship with Abraham. It’s clear He wants a partner in Abraham. He wants someone He can work with for the good of the world. In order for Abraham to be a partner, God has to let him in on His plans.

What a contrast to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah! The brief picture we get shows a city full of horrific violence. They violate the sacred laws of hospitality that govern that part of the world to this day. Visitors to their cities are not safe. They are subjected to all kinds of violence, some of it sexual. We also know from Ezekiel 16 that these cities were filled with pride and arrogance, greed and selfishness, injustice and oppression, as well as “all manner of detestable things.” When God shows up in Sodom, He is attacked rather than welcomed. The people there have clearly rejected any offer of partnership and instead seem hell-bent on destroying all God has made. Things are so bad that God can’t even find ten righteous people. Not even among Lot’s own family.

God loves creation. He loves everything He has made. As such, He hates to see it corrupted. Hates to see it exploited. Hates to see what happens when evil seemingly runs wild. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah made their choice. They used their God-given freedom for selfish, violent, and horrific ends. God cannot allow such injustice to stand so He judges the cities. He literally reigns down fire as an act of purifying judgment to cleanse the earth of their sin. It’s terrifying. Lot and his daughters are the only survivors, fleeing to a nearby city that is spared. Lot’s wife makes her choice by looking back with longing on the life they once led and is turned into a pillar of salt. The message seems clear. God will not compromise with human sin. When we reject our partnership with Him, the impact on our lives and the lives of those we love is dreadful.

It’s a sobering read. It’s one of the the things I appreciate most about the Bible. It reveals God is all His holiness and majesty and glory and it reveals humanity in all her corruption and sin and tendency for

evil. It forces us to reflect on how far we have fallen and how much we need a Savior. Someone who will deliver us from the eternal consequences of our decisions. Spend some time today taking an honest inventory of your thoughts, attitudes, and actions. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you the depths of your sin and then let Him lead you to a deeper and greater and fuller appreciation of God's grace and forgiveness revealed in Christ on the cross. Thanks be to God that the wrath He poured out on Sodom was poured out on His Son so we could be saved!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 20-23

[Back To Table of Contents](#)

January 12, 2023
Talking Down to Us

Readings for today: Genesis 20-23 (audio reading)

Though the Bible was written for us, it was not written to us. It was originally written to a particular people at a particular time in a particular place with a particular language and cultural worldview. It is essential we keep this principle in mind, especially as we read the Old Testament. The stories can feel so foreign to us and that's because they are! You are catching a glimpse into the ancient near east and the cultural divide between us and them is as vast as the Grand Canyon.

God speaks down to us. He gets on our level. He meets us where we are. This was as true for Abraham and Sarah as it is for us. God speaks through the culture of the day. He speaks through the language of the day. He speaks through the normative attitudes and actions of the time to reveal Himself and shift our way of thinking. Consider what we read today. Abraham and Sarah hiding their relationship out of fear of how they would be received among the Philistines. The exile of Hagar and Ishmael from Abraham's camp. The incident over land and water. The purchasing of the burial plot for Sarah. And, of course, the famous story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac.

Each of these stories is difficult for us to understand. We don't understand why Abraham and Sarah felt it necessary to lie about their relationship because we live in a world where such relationships are respected and honored. You don't take another person's spouse as your own. Things were much different in the ancient near east where women were largely considered property and local kings did whatever they thought was right. We don't understand how Abraham could cast out his own son and his son's mother and leave them essentially to die and that's because we live in a world where every life has equal value and worth and property is shared equally among all children. Things were much different in the ancient near east where masters and slaves were not considered equals nor were their children. The threat to the clan was real if Ishmael were to grow up in the family and become a competitor with Isaac for leadership. We don't understand the critical, life-saving importance of wells because we live in a world where water flows from a tap. We don't understand the importance of the conversation between Abraham and Ephron over the purchase of the cave of Machpelah because we don't live in a culture with a tradition of haggling. And we, for sure, do not understand how a father could ever take his child up a mountain to sacrifice him. This makes absolutely no sense to us. It is abusive and horrific and yet it was a normative cultural practice in the ancient near east.

So what can we learn from such stories? Well, ask yourself what Abraham and Sarah are learning. Remember, they came from pagan backgrounds. They had no knowledge of God. They didn't even know His name! They had no access to the Ten Commandments. They had no experience with His miraculous saving work. They simply knew this God had reached out to them and established His covenant with them. As they walked with Him, they learned to trust Him. Learned to depend on Him. Learned to lean on Him. So, for example, they learned they didn't need to hide their relationship because God would protect them. As they dug wells and set up altars and purchased burial plots, they began to see how God's promise to give them this particular land would be fulfilled. As Ishmael grew up into a mighty leader in his own right and a prince over many nations, Abraham learned how God works through even our sinful, abusive choices for His purposes. And finally, by taking Isaac up a mountain for sacrifice and finding a ram caught in the thicket, Abraham learned that his God was different than the pagan gods he had grown up with. His God wouldn't accept human sacrifice and instead treasures the lives of those He made in His image.

The Bible wasn't written to us but it was written for us so what can we learn from these stories? What principles can we draw out that are applicable to our own time and place? Where do we find ourselves learning about God's provision and protection? Growing in our understanding of who God is and what He's all about? How is God speaking to you today? How is God revealing Himself to you in this new year?

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 24-26

[Back To Table of Contents](#)

January 13, 2023
God's Promise

Readings for today: Genesis 24-26 (audio reading)

God will fulfill His promise. God will be faithful to His covenant. God will make sure His mandate is followed. From the beginning of Genesis we have seen a common theme appear over and over again. Be fruitful. Multiply. Fill the earth. Exercise dominion over all God has made. This is God's plan for humanity. This is God's plan for His people. This is the direction given to Adam and Eve. Noah and his family. Abraham and Sarah. And now it comes to Isaac and Rebekah.

However, an important grammatical change has taken place. Instead of humanity being responsible for fulfilling this mandate, God Himself takes the responsibility on. "Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed... And the Lord appeared to him the same night and said, "I am the God of Abraham your father. Fear not, for I am with you and will bless you and multiply your offspring for my servant Abraham's sake." (Genesis 26:3-4, 24) God will not let His covenant be broken. God will not let His promises fail. Despite the mistakes and missteps we make along the way - like claiming our wives as our sisters or conflict with our neighbors - God uses all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purposes. Remember, God has committed Himself to us. He walked through the halves of the animals to signify the gravity of His resolve. The plan of God cannot fail because God will not fail.

This truth is life-changing. For people. For churches. For anyone who calls on the name of the Lord. God may not fulfill all your desires. He may not grant all your wishes. He may not answer all your prayers. But if you seek Him, He will make you fruitful. He will multiply your reach and influence. He will bless you so that you fill the earth with His glory and His image. He will give you dominion over whatever spheres of influence you find yourself in. Not so you will be healthy and wealthy. Not so you will never experience suffering or hardship. One cannot measure God's faithfulness using worldly means! No, this is about God's Kingdom. God's glory. God's honor. God's plan from before the foundations of the world. God will have His way on earth. God will have His way with us. God will not rest until His will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

So what is our role? Worship. Note Isaac's response to God's promise in his life. "He built an altar there and called upon the name of the Lord and pitched his tent..." (Genesis 26:25) God simply wants our worship. Our love. Our adoration. He simply wants us to thank Him. Praise Him. Glory in all He is doing on our behalf. He simply wants our submission. Our obedience. Our trust that His way is the best way - really, the only way - to live. God loves you, friends! God is for you! God is with you! God is working even now to bring His plan to pass in your life. Will you walk before Him like Abraham? Will you seek Him like Isaac? Will you submit your way and your will to Him like our forefathers and foremothers in the faith?

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 27-29

[Back To Table of Contents](#)

January 14, 2023
Family Dysfunction

Readings for today: Genesis 27-29 (audio reading)

Family dysfunction. It's universal. Every family has their issues. Every family has skeletons tucked away in the closet. Every family passes on sinful patterns from one generation to the next. This is as true for the families in the Bible as it is for our own families in the 21st century. This is also one of the reasons the Bible continues to hold such authority after thousands of years. It is raw. It is honest. It doesn't cover up or make excuses for the sins of believers. It lifts them up and puts them on full display in order to convey the fundamental message that all human beings are broken. All human beings are sinful. All human beings have wandered and gone astray and stand in desperate need of God's saving grace.

Consider what we read today. The sibling rivalry between Esau and Jacob has escalated to the point where even their parents have taken sides. Isaac favors Esau while Rebekah favors Jacob. Things come to a head when Isaac calls Esau in to prepare him to receive the "blessing." This was a legally binding arrangement whereby all the power and authority of the clan would pass from one generation to the next. Esau stood to inherit everything while Jacob would be left with nothing. Rebekah catches wind of the plan and hatches a plot to elevate her favored son. The whole story is full of deception, rage, betrayal, and murderous plots. Jacob is successful in stealing his brother's birthright and inheritance but has to flee for his life to Haran where Abraham's brother settled years earlier. There he is served a dish of his own medicine by his cousin Laban who tricks him into marrying Leah instead of Rachel.

Amazingly enough, God meets Jacob in the midst of all this turmoil. Jacob sets up camp for the night on his journey from Beersheba to Haran. As he slept, God spoke to him through visions and dreams. (Cue "Stairway to Heaven"...) "I am God, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. I'm giving the ground on which you are sleeping to you and to your descendants. Your descendants will be as the dust of the Earth; they'll stretch from west to east and from north to south. All the families of the Earth will bless themselves in you and your descendants. Yes. I'll stay with you, I'll protect you wherever you go, and I'll bring you back to this very ground. I'll stick with you until I've done everything I promised you." (Genesis 28:13-15 MSG) Once again, note the unilateral nature of God's promises. Their fulfillment is not contingent on anything Jacob will or will not do. They are not dependent on Jacob's works or even his faith. God simply declares to Jacob that He will be his God and Jacob will be His servant. This is the essence of grace.

All of us grew up in dysfunctional families to a certain degree. Some more so than others. Thankfully, God is gracious and merciful to work through our dysfunction to make us into the men and women He calls to be. The great news of the gospel is that God will indeed stick with us until He has fulfilled all His promises towards us. And what has God promised us? He will wash away every sin. He will wipe away every tear. He will use all things for our good and for His glory. He will make us new. Take a moment and rest in the assurances of these promises today!

Readings for tomorrow: None

[Back To Table of Contents](#)

January 16, 2023
Supplanter

Readings for today: Genesis 30-33 (audio reading)

Jacob is one of my favorites. He and I are so alike. I can remember when I was young making all these pacts with God. If God would take care of me...if God would provide for me...if God would come through for me...then I would be faithful. I would serve Him. Ultimately, of course, I was asking God to bless my plans. I was treating God like a genie in a lamp. I wanted Him to meet my needs. I wanted Him to give me what I desired. I never thought to ask Him what His desires were for my life. Nor was “submission” in my vocabulary. So I went about my life trying to make it all happen on my own. In my own strength. According to my own wisdom. There was a lot of manipulation and scheming and lying in those days. I hurt a lot of people I loved. Eventually, it all caught up to me and I found myself in a very dark place. That’s when I first wrestled with God.

Back in 2009, my life was at a breaking point. My job was not going well. I could feel the walls closing in. Every conversation with those I reported to seemed to end in conflict. I felt helpless. I was discouraged. It took a huge effort just to get out of bed each day. Rather than own my responsibility for the condition I found myself in, I blamed others. I retreated emotionally and relationally from those I loved. I neglected my wife and children. I spent hours distracting myself. All to no avail. This went on for months. My wife grew more and more distant and angry and upset. My children bore the brunt of my frustration. And I justified every bit of it because I was hurt. I was misunderstood. I was being let down. Finally my wife sat me down for the hardest conversation we’ve ever had in our marriage. “I never thought I’d ever say this but I don’t like being married to you. You need to decide between me and your job. You have 24 hours.” Her words broke me. That night I wrestled with God. I yelled at Him. Shook my fists. Blamed Him for everything that had gone wrong. For hours I paced the floor, pouring out all my fears and frustrations at Him. He simply listened and waited. Eventually I exhausted myself and said, “God, I need your help. I’ve made a mess of my life. I’ve got nothing left. And I’m afraid I’m going to lose everything I hold dear.” God replied, “I know. I’m sitting in the middle of the mess with you. I’ve never left your side. I know you are afraid. I know you’ve failed. I know you’ve hurt those you love the most. But I can restore all things if you will simply hand your life over to me.” Thankfully, I did. It’s taken years but God has not only restored my marriage and my family and my career but He has given me so much more.

Jacob begins his journey to Laban’s household in much the same way. He makes pacts with God, assuming God will bless his plans. Genesis 28:20-21, “If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God...” And for the next two decades, he worked hard at life. He got married. He had children. He amassed a fortune. He thought he was doing it all on his own. And he’s not the only one. Everyone involved in the story seems to think they are in charge. Leah and Rachel battle over who gets to sleep with Jacob, each trying to win Jacob’s affections by having as many children as possible. Leah even “buys” a night with Jacob from Rachel with mandrakes (an ancient aphrodisiac)! Laban and Jacob try to outscheme one another as they compete for flocks of goats. Laban removing a certain number. Jacob countering this (or so he thinks) by superstitiously having his goats breed in front of certain trees that have been peeled, etc. It’s all very humorous in a way and I actually think we are meant to laugh along with the story as it unfolds.

Of course, the impact of all this scheming and manipulation is brokenness. Jacob’s relationship with Laban deteriorates to the point where he realizes he needs to flee. For seven days, Laban chases him

until God comes to him in a dream warning him not to touch Jacob. But that's not the worst of it. Jacob has gone from the frying pan into the fire as he knows he will have to face his brother Esau again. The last time he saw Esau, his brother wanted to kill him and now he hears Esau is bringing four hundred men to meet him. Jacob's scared. Anxious. Afraid. He's trapped between Laban and Esau. Two men who hate him for what he's done. He cannot escape. So he does the only thing he knows how to do. He puts together a plan. He divides his camp with the hope one can escape. He puts together a large gift and sends it on ahead hoping to ease Esau's anger. And after he has completed all his preparations, he finds himself alone. Alone with his fears. Alone with his anxiety. All alone in the dark.

That's when God shows up and He begins to go to work on Jacob. Wrestling with him. Struggling with him. Forcing Jacob to come to grips with himself on a lot of levels. Forcing Jacob to face his past, his sin, his fear, his brokenness. But Jacob is a strong and stubborn man. He fights God all night long. He doesn't want to give in. Doesn't want to surrender. Finally, God dislocates his hip. And Jacob is defeated. But even in his defeat, Jacob won't let go. Not until God blesses him. So God gives him a new name. From this point forward Jacob will be known as Israel which means "God-contended." Jacob had fought with God and had prevailed. Not that he beat God but that he beat himself. He finally came to grips with who he was before God. Something he confirms in 32:30 when he says, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been spared." Jacob is humbled. He's finally surrendered. He's finally submitted himself to God and one can see his heart change in his reconciliation with Esau.

What's your relationship with God like? Is it transactional? Meaning, you scratch God's back and He scratch's yours? Do you find yourself asking God to bless your plans or are you seeking His plan for your life? Have you ever wrestled with God like Jacob? Have you ever been humbled by God? Broken by God? I certainly have been at several points in my own life. It's part of the discipleship process. We must learn to surrender our own will to His and it's not an easy or always pleasant process.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 34-37

[Back To Table of Contents](#)

January 17, 2023

Dreamers

Readings for today: Genesis 34-37 (audio reading)

Yesterday was Martin Luther King Jr. Day. A day we set aside in our nation to honor one of our heroes. A man who fought against racism and poverty and war. He dedicated his life to following the way of Jesus. Like Jesus, MLK displayed a fierce commitment to the truth. He refused to let injustice stand. He took great personal risks that put his life in danger on many occasions but never resorted to violence even in self-defense. One would think such a man would have been celebrated in his own time. Hailed as a hero especially in a nation that claimed a strong Christian heritage. Tragically, this was not the case. He was hated and violently opposed for his beliefs. Public opinion polls taken at the time of his death showed a 75% “disapproval” rating. What was it about MLK’s dream that was so dangerous? His radical commitment to peace posed a threat to a growing military industrial complex. His radical commitment to care for the poor posed a threat to runaway capitalism and corporate greed. His radical commitment to equality posed a threat to a nation who refused to repent for the sins of her racist past. And though our nation has made progress since those dark days in 1968, we still have so far to go before we see Dr. King’s dream realized.

I couldn’t help but think of Dr. King’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech as I read our passage today. Joseph’s dreams were similarly dangerous. They posed a threat to a family system governed by the strict rules of an ancient near east culture. Younger sons did not rule over older sons nor did parents ever bow down to their children. Such a notion was deeply shameful and dishonoring which is why Joseph’s brothers respond so violently. They are well within their rights to cast him out of the family. Punish him for his transgressions even if their father will not. They know he is the favored son and perhaps they worried that Jacob may indeed upend the “system” to elevate Joseph and make all his dreams come true. Little did they know how their actions were serving the larger purposes of God. Indeed, decades will pass before Joseph will see his dreams realized. In that time, he would suffer tremendous hardship and pain. He would face disappointment time and time again. He would rise only to fall and he must have had his moments of despair. But eventually he came to a point where he could see what his brothers intended for evil, God intended for good.

I have to believe God is up to something similar in our day. As I reflect back on the events of the past few years, I find myself wondering if what we are seeing are the birth pangs of a new age. I think of the words of Jesus to His disciples in Matthew 24:4-8, “See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray. And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.” You see, Jesus too has a dream. He dreams of a world where peace and justice reign. A world where wars will cease and hatred is replaced by love. A world where every injustice is made right and every wrong redressed. A world where truth and righteousness are lifted up and lies, deceit, and conspiracy theories laid low. He dreams of a world where the poor and needy and outcast are treated with compassion. He dreams of a world where sinners repent and every human being takes responsibility to steward the gifts and resources they’ve been given for glory of God and in service to His Kingdom.

Friends, our world is not friendly to dreamers. Especially those who dream God’s dreams. It will take courage to hold fast to God’s dreams in a world where violence and hatred and outrage and injustice are

on the rise. It will take courage to turn the other cheek, repay evil with good, and offer a gentle answer in response to wrath. It will take courage to follow the dreams of Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 38-40

[Back To Table of Contents](#)

January 18, 2023
God's Sovereignty

Readings for today: Genesis 38-40 (audio reading)

God is sovereign. God stands outside time and space. He is not bound by the constraints of this world. Not human history as it unfolds. Not the laws of physics He set in motion. Not the choices of His people, sinful or otherwise. God is sovereign. God is sitting on His throne in heaven even now. His hand at the controls. He moves according to His will and purpose. He acts in accordance with His character and nature. He is faithfully guiding all of history according to the plan He made from eternity.

We see this on display in the story of Judah and Tamar. Judah makes all the wrong choices in this passage. He marries a Canaanite woman. Two of his three sons are put to death for their sin. Judah reneges on his promise to Tamar. He withholds his third son out of fear of what might take place. He sleeps with someone he believes is a temple prostitute. He hypocritically accuses his daughter-in-law of sexual immorality once it's discovered she's pregnant. Finally, he repents when he realizes his own sinful choices have led him to this point. Still God uses it for His glory. Still God bends even Judah's sinful choices to His sovereign will. The twins Tamar bears will become important figures in the line of Jesus. Tamar herself will gain a mention in the Savior's genealogy.

We see God's sovereignty on display in Joseph's life as well. Arrogant and prideful, he is despised by his brothers. Sold into slavery for a profit, he ends up in Potiphar's household where he finds great success as an estate manager. Falsely accused of attempted rape, Joseph is sent to prison where he continues to find ways to bless those around him. When Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker become his cellmates, he interprets their dreams. God is slowly but surely orchestrating all things for Joseph's good. Including the evil he's endured. Including his suffering and pain and hardship. Joseph will eventually rise to become almost as powerful as Pharaoh himself. He will use his position and influence to save his family. What his brothers intended for evil, God uses for good.

God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He is still sovereignly at work, orchestrating all things according to His divine purpose and will. Yes, our choices are real, sinful, godly, or otherwise. Yes, our suffering is real and so is our success. Yes, our pain is real and so is our joy. Yes, our heartbreak is real and so is the love we experience. God promises to use all these things for our good if we but love and trust Him. He doesn't promise us an easy life. Doesn't promise us a pain-free life. In fact, following Christ in this world will often result in the opposite.

This world is not our home. This world is not what God intended it to be. Humanity is broken. Deeply flawed at a fundamental level. But God still loves humanity. God still intends to work through humanity to bring about salvation to the earth. God will not give up on humanity. He will not give up on you. He will not give up on me. He is at work even now to bring to completion the good work He began in us in Christ. No matter what you are going through. No matter how many switchbacks you take in this life. Know that God is with you. God is leading you. God is guiding you. He wastes no part of your life. He will use it all to bring about your good and His glory.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 41-43

[Back To Table of Contents](#)

January 19, 2023
Dreams and Visions

Readings for today: Genesis 41-43 ([audio reading](#))

A few years ago, I was in Ethiopia when I met a man whom God had visited several times in a dream. We were in the middle of a training session of several hundred church planters in a village called Gojo up in the highlands of the country, four and a half hours away from Addis Ababa in a pretty remote area. About halfway through the week, a few of us were walking through the village where we were staying to our training center when a man approached us. He was dressed head to toe in traditional Muslim tribal garb. Long flowing robes. Head scarf. A long scimitar belted to his hip. We weren't sure what to make of him except that he didn't seem aggressive so we sent for a translator. He told us the most amazing story. Several months previous, he had been visited by Jesus in a dream. Jesus shared the gospel with him and he woke up and gave his life to Christ. He then went around his village preaching Christ to anyone who would hear and the whole village - about 80 people - came to faith. Then he had another dream. Jesus told him to come to this town called Gojo where he would meet people who could teach him the ways of the gospel. So he started walking. And walking. And walking. Turns out he traveled two or three days to get to Gojo where he "happened" to arrive on the exact same week we were conducting our training session. Crazy!

God often speaks to us in our dreams...if we have the ears to hear and the hearts to listen. Sometimes those dreams are prophetic in that they tell the future. Sometimes those dreams are prophetic in that they convict us of sin. Sometimes dreams bring to light anxiety and fear that we need to bring to our Heavenly Father. Sometimes our dreams affirm us or reveal the deepest desires of our heart. Joseph was a dreamer. Sheaves of wheat. Stars in the sky. Sun and moon. Clusters of grapes. Baskets of bread. Fat cows and thin cows. Somehow Joseph is able to make sense of it all. Why? Because God was with him!

Over and over again throughout the Joseph "cycle" in Genesis, we see this refrain. "The Lord was with Joseph." "The Lord caused all he did to have success." "The Lord showed steadfast love and gave him favor." Despite all that happens to Joseph, God never leaves his side. And Joseph is faithful in return. "Do not all interpretations belong to God?" "It is not in me, God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer." "God has shown Pharaoh what He is about to do." Joseph never claims his gift as his own. He always acknowledges God. He always gives all the glory and honor to the Lord. And this blows Pharaoh away. "Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?" You see, the dreams are really beside the point. They are simply the signposts that point to the greater reality of God!

The same is true of Joseph's life. Yes, he faces hardship. Yes, he experiences tragedy. Yes, he is the victim of injustice. Yes, he languishes in prison. Yes, he also experiences success and wealth and great honor. But again, all these things are really beside the point. Joseph's life - and this is what he really grasps on a deep, deep level - is itself a signpost that points to the greater reality of God! Joseph's life is itself simply a tool God is using to reveal His steadfast love and faithfulness! All that happens to Joseph is not just for Joseph's sake but for the sake of the greater glory of God, the greater good of God's people, and even the greater welfare of the pagan Egyptians. It's mind-blowing.

So what dreams is God giving you these days? Not just when you are asleep. What dreams and desires has He placed on your heart? Where is He calling you to step out for His greater glory? Your greater good? And the welfare of those around you? As you look back over the course of your life, ask the

Spirit to give you the eyes to see where He has been faithful. Where He has been with you. Where He has taken the good, the bad, and the ugly and used it for His purposes.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 44-46

[Back To Table of Contents](#)

January 20, 2023

Repentance

Readings for today: Genesis 44-46 (audio reading)

Repentance is an important word in the Bible. It was central to the preaching ministry of Jesus. “Repent! For the Kingdom of God is at hand.” It is central to the lives of many saints in both Old and New Testaments. It was the sign of salvation for them. Literally, the word “repentance” means to make a 180 degree turn in one’s life. It means turning around and walking in a new direction. Instead of running from God, one now seeks after God. Instead of striving to be our own gods, we surrender our lives back to God. It is far more than simply feeling sorry for our sin. It is far more than regret over what we have said or done. It is definitely more than the shame we feel when we get caught. It signals change at a fundamental, heart level and it results in new attitudes and actions in our lives.

In today’s reading, Judah models repentance. The first time he appears on the scene in the story, he is conspiring with his brothers to kill Joseph. He is bitter and angry at his prideful little brother and wants to get rid of him. After beating his brother and throwing him into a cistern, it is Judah who comes up with the idea of trafficking Joseph to some Midianite traders on their way to Egypt. Why kill him when you can make a profit? Now here we are many years later and it is Judah who offers his own life in exchange for Benjamin. It is Judah who pulls Joseph aside and intercedes on behalf of his family. It is Judah who offers to traffic himself and remain a slave so that Benjamin and rest of his brothers can go free. What a turnaround! No wonder Joseph couldn’t control himself at that moment!

As a pastor, I’ve had the blessing of watching many people repent of their sin and come to faith. It is one of the greatest privileges of my life. I have seen marriages and families healed. Addicts delivered. The greedy become generous. The selfish become selfless. The prideful become humble. It’s truly awesome to witness. As a person, I’ve had to engage in the process of repentance myself. It is humbling to sit under the ministry of the Holy Spirit and allow Him to do His sanctifying, purifying work. I’ve become a more selfless, generous, and humble person...though I still have so far to go. I’ve given up my own addictions and compulsions. I’ve seen my own marriage and family be healed as I gave up my former ways and started walking in the newness of life Christ promises to those who place their trust in Him.

What about you? Where do you find yourself today? In what areas of your life is God calling you to repent? To turn around and start walking in a different direction so that you might become a different person? What holds you back? Would it change anything if you knew that all of heaven rejoices every time a sinner repents? Don’t you want to experience the joy of heaven in your life today?

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 47-50

[Back To Table of Contents](#)

January 21, 2023

A Hard Life

Readings for today: Genesis 47-50 (audio reading)

I remember being called to the bedside of a man who was dying. When I entered the room, I found him locked up in the fetal position in tremendous pain. The drugs they gave him provided little relief for his pain was more emotional and spiritual than it was physical. Tanner was a man who lived for himself. His sole goal was to work all week so he could make enough money to grab a case of beer on the way to his boat so he could spend the weekend fishing. He neglected his wife and children. He had few, if any, friends. His extended family wanted nothing to do with him. The stated goal for his funeral service was to make it as quick as possible. I thought about Tanner when I read these words from Jacob today, “The years of my sojourning are 130 - a short and hard life and not nearly as long as my ancestors were given.”

I doubt Jacob’s life was as bad as Tanner’s but it clearly didn’t live up to his expectations. Here was a man who schemed and lied and manipulated those around him. He stole his brother’s birthright. He defrauded his father-in-law. He played favorites with his wives and children. He even tried to bargain with God. The natural consequences of his life were not good. He experienced terrible grief and loss. His years were short and hard. His family life was deeply conflicted. And here he is at the end of his life having to flee his home due to a natural disaster and settle in a foreign land under the rule of a foreign king. Thankfully, God was gracious to Jacob. He gave him the gift of seeing his beloved son before he died. He blessed his children and grandchildren. He made them promise to bury him back in Canaan in the very same cave where his ancestors were buried.

It is good for us to spend some time reflecting on death. Set against the backdrop of eternity, our lives in this world are short and hard. So how do we make the most of them? How do we make sure we are spending our time and energy and resources building on the rock rather than sand? How do we make sure we don’t get to the end of our lives and leave only regrets behind? Jesus shows us the way. Love God and love others. Serve God and serve others. Give your life away and you will gain it. Lose your life and you will find it. Do all the good you can for as long as you can with all the strength and energy and intentionality you can and those who come after you will rise up and called you blessed. Those you leave behind will grieve to be sure but with a deep sense of thankfulness and joy. Your legacy will impact the generations who come after you and God Himself will reward you with a crown of righteousness.

Readings for tomorrow: None

[Back To Table of Contents](#)

January 23, 2023
The Book of Job

Readings for today: Job 1-5 (audio reading)

(Audio - Introduction to the Books of Wisdom – Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs)

(Audio - Introduction to the Book of Job)

“Does Job fear God for no reason?” It’s a haunting question. Job not only feared God, he revered Him. He held Him in awe. Job respected and honored God. Job loved God and devoted His life to Him. To fear God in the Old Testament meant giving God His due. Treating God as He rightfully deserved. Humbly acknowledging the infinite gap that exists between us. Job did all these things and more but the Accuser (this is what the word “satan” literally means in the original Hebrew) comes before God to test that loyalty. Some wonder if this book is literal or an allegory. Did a man named Job actually exist or is this a book written to help God’s people process the problem of evil and suffering in the world? It is the oldest book in the Bible. The first one to be written. And that makes sense to me for it deals with one of the foundational, if not the most foundational, question of our existence...why do we fear and love and honor God?

Satan argues Job fears God because of the blessings he’s been given. “Have you not put a hedge 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. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.” Satan believes if everything Job has is stripped away he will curse God and renounce his faith. It doesn’t work. In response to the loss of all his possessions and the tragic death of all his children, Job responds, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” Satan’s next tactic is to attack Job’s physical health and mental well-being. “Skin for skin! All that a man has he will give for his life. But stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.” Again, his plan fails. His accusations don’t stick. Job contracts a terrible disease. His body is a physical horror. He is terrifying to look at so he sits alone in the ashes, scraping his sores with the broken pottery of his former life. Still he holds fast to faith, “Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?”

The rest of the book is a litany of Job’s anguish and anger at God. He yells. He screams. He weeps. He is bitter. He is resentful. He is demanding. He refuses to accept easy answers. Refuses to settle for superficial theology. He plumbs the depths of unimaginable pain and suffering. It is tempting to start to believe Job is has lost his faith or at least is in the process of deconstructing but nothing could be further from the truth. It takes incredible faith to be this raw and honest before God and that’s why when Job finally comes to the end of himself, he finds God waiting for him there.

To be honest, I don’t know if Job was a real person but the anguish he expresses in the midst of his suffering is as real as it gets. The questions posed by this ancient book represent the deepest level of engagement with human pain and heartbreak. Do we fear God for no reason? Do we love God for who He is or because of the blessings He has poured out on our lives? Will our love for Him stand the test of suffering? There are no easy answers. One only faces this question when one comes face to face with the end of themselves and there in the darkness, they find God.

Andrew Brunson is a missionary and pastor. He was imprisoned for his faith in Turkey. For two years or more, he languished as his fate became a subplot in an international standoff between the United States and Turkey. Everything he had was taken from him. He was barely allowed access to his family or the outside world. The charges he faced were untrue. The trials he endured were unjust. In the midst of his imprisonment, he suffered from terrible bouts of depression and despair. After he was released, he spoke at a national meeting I attended. He relayed all he had endured. He made no attempt to glorify his persecution. He spoke humbly and authentically and powerfully about how, when he reached the lowest point, he lost faith. But in that moment when he had nothing left, when he let everything go, when all hope was lost; he found himself saying, “Jesus...Jesus...Jesus” over and over again. Like Job, Andrew found Jesus waiting for him in the darkness and despair.

You and I may never suffer like Job or Andrew but we are all familiar with pain. We all know heartache. We all know what it’s like to feel bitter disappointment. We’ve all tasted suffering on some level. We all probably know what it feels like to come to the end of ourselves. The question we all have to face in those moments is this...do we fear God for no reason? When everything is stripped away, is God enough? Is He sufficient? Is He worthy of our love and devotion simply because He is God?

Readings for tomorrow: Job 6-9

[Back To Table of Contents](#)

January 24, 2023
Empty Platitudes

Readings for today: Job 6-9 (audio reading)

I'm reading the Message version of the Bible this year and love how author, Eugene Peterson, translates the ancient meaning of the text into 21st century American vernacular. Take the gut-wrenching questions of Job as an example. "Why didn't I die at birth, my first breath out of the womb my last?" (Job 5:11) "Why does God bother giving light to the miserable, why bother keeping bitter people alive, those who want in the worst way to die, and can't, who can't imagine anything better than death, who count the day of their death and burial the happiest day of their life? What's the point of life when it doesn't make sense, when God blocks all the roads to meaning?" (Job 5:20-23) "Human life is a struggle, isn't it? It's a life sentence to hard labor." (Job 7:1) After experiencing so much misery and tragedy and pain, Job finally reaches the point of utter despair. His friends are at a loss. They don't know how to help. They are afraid for their friend. As they sit with their friend in the ashes of his life, an anxiousness begins to grow within them. Every word Job speaks only increases their anxiety and fear. Their feelings of helplessness. Their feelings of hopelessness. Finally, they can't take it anymore and they begin to respond.

How do I know this is what Job's friends are experiencing? Because it's what I experience every time I walk into a similar situation with people I love who have experienced suffering. I have been in the emergency rooms with parents as they said goodbye to their children. I have been in the neonatal units watching infants struggle for every breath. I have sat at the bedside of those dying from cancer and tried to bring comfort to their loved ones. I have been in the developing world and seen life-threatening poverty. I have prayed over men and women whose condition is utterly hopeless because they simply do not have access to the resources they need to survive. In EVERY single case, I feel helpless, inadequate, afraid, frustrated, and I despair. These feelings threaten to overwhelm me and, if I am not careful, can cause me to say things more for my own benefit than for the good of others. This is what we see play out in Job's conversations with his friends. They are experiencing all kinds of emotions as well as they sit with Job and eventually reach a breaking point where they feel they have to respond. Not for Job's sake but for their own.

Eliphaz is the first to speak. "You've been hit hard and you're reeling from the blow. But shouldn't your devout life give you confidence now? Shouldn't your exemplary life give you hope? Think! Has a truly innocent person ever ended up on the scrap heap? Do genuinely upright people ever lose out in the end?" (4:6-7) Now this is a theologically true statement. The fear of God is our confidence. Walking in integrity with God is our hope. God promises to protect the innocent and the upright. These things are all true. At the same time, speaking these words to a man who has lost all he holds dear and who, even now, suffers from sores and wounds that are infected with worms is insensitive and superficial at best. What Job needs is not an answer to why he is suffering but friends who will simply sit and listen and let him process his pain for however long it takes. Yes, it is true that "mortals are born and bred for trouble, as certainly as sparks fly upward." (5:7) But for Eliphaz to suggest to Job that if he were in Job's shoes, he'd "go straight to God, I'd throw myself on the mercy of God. After all, he's famous for great and unexpected acts; there's no end to his surprises..." (5:8-9) is patently absurd. Eliphaz simply has no idea how he would respond were he in Job's situation and that's why his words fall on deaf ears.

Job responds with a stinging rebuke. "When desperate people give up on God Almighty, their friends, at least, should stick with them. But my brothers are fickle... They arrive so confident - but what a

disappointment! They get there, and their faces fall! And you, my so-called friends, are no better - there's nothing to you!" (6:14-15, 20-21) He clearly sees their fear. He clearly sees their discomfort. He clearly sees their anxiety as they sit helpless before him. He knows they are struggling with how to respond. But he also knows Eliphaz's answer is far too simplistic. Suffering and sin do not exist in a one to one relationship. This situation has nothing to do with cause and effect. Eliphaz's theology is far too superficial to explain why some people suffer in extraordinary ways when they have not extraordinarily sinned. Nor is it adequate to explain why some people prosper in extraordinary ways when they clearly are extraordinary sinners! So Job rejects what Eliphaz has to say.

Once again, Job cries out to God. "What are mortals anyway, that you bother with them, that you even give them the time of day? That you check up on them every morning, looking in on them to see how they're doing? Let up on me, will you? Can't you even let me spit in peace? Even suppose I'd sinned—how would that hurt you? You're responsible for every human being. Don't you have better things to do than pick on me? Why make a federal case out of me? Why don't you just forgive my sins and start me off with a clean slate? The way things are going, I'll soon be dead. You'll look high and low, but I won't be around." (Job 7:17-21) This is raw. This is real. This is the kind of honest emotion God welcomes from His children. God's a big boy. We aren't going to offend Him with our words. He can handle all we throw at Him. And Job's words here in this passage invite us to share our deepest, most intimate thoughts and feelings with God.

But such raw emotion is too much for Bildad. He feels he has to rush to God's defense. (As if God ever needs us to defend Him.) "Does God mess up? Does God Almighty ever get things backward? It's plain that your children sinned against him— otherwise, why would God have punished them? Here's what you must do—and don't put it off any longer: Get down on your knees before God Almighty. If you're as innocent and upright as you say, it's not too late—he'll come running; he'll set everything right again, reestablish your fortunes." (Job 8:3-6) Brutal. Harsh. Unloving. Uncaring. Your children died because they sinned? Chalk that one up to "things never to say to people who are in pain!" But Bildad goes even further, insisting Job has clearly sinned and therefore deserves what he has received. If only Job will seek God - as if Job hasn't - then he will be healed and restored.

But Job clings to his faith. He continues to acknowledge the sovereignty of God. "So what's new? I know all this. The question is, 'How can mere mortals get right with God?' If we wanted to bring our case before him, what chance would we have? Not one in a thousand! God's wisdom is so deep, God's power so immense, who could take him on and come out in one piece? He moves mountains before they know what's happened, flips them on their heads on a whim. He gives the earth a good shaking up, rocks it down to its very foundations. He tells the sun, 'Don't shine,' and it doesn't; he pulls the blinds on the stars. All by himself he stretches out the heavens and strides on the waves of the sea... So how could I ever argue with him, construct a defense that would influence God?" (Job 9:2-8, 14) Though Job is not "guilty as charged", he understands his position before God. This really isn't about guilt or innocence because again, suffering and sin do not exist in a one to one relationship. This is about Job's pain not his purity. This is about Job's suffering not his sanctity. This is about Job's heartbreak not his holiness. He is hurting and out of his hurt, he cries out to God.

Where are you hurting today? What heartbreaks have you experienced in your life? Where have you found yourself crying out to God? Know He hears every word. He listens to every prayer. Where have you been like Job's friends? Struggling to find the right words to say when all you want to do is escape the situation? Have you ever said things more to ease your own conscience than to help the one in need? Learn to listen more deeply and be willing to sit in silence in the dust and ashes with those you love who are hurting and you will find yourself a much better counselor than Job's friends.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 10-13

[Back To Table of Contents](#)

January 25, 2023

Hopelessness

Readings for today: Job 10-13 (audio reading)

Ever felt hopeless in your life? Ever get to a place where no matter what you did, things turned out worse? Ever find yourself in a position where the walls were closing in and you had no escape? No safety net? No one to catch you when you fall? This is what Job felt like in the face of all he suffered. Hopelessness is a terrible thing. The loss of hope is one of the worst things that can happen to a human being. If we don't have hope, we lose any motivation to keep on living. We lose any desire to keep on striving. The results are often tragic. Either we give up or we find a way to end it all or we shuffle through the rest of life like a zombie with no sense of purpose or direction.

I think of the many people I have counseled over the years who found themselves on the verge of hopelessness. Some of them were fighting terrible, wasting diseases like ALS or Alzheimer's and they wondered what value their life could possibly hold as their physical bodies failed. Some were fighting terrible addictions and they wondered how life could be worth living under such oppressive, compulsive, and seemingly irresistible self-destructive desires. Some were fighting mental health conditions like schizophrenia or anorexia or clinical depression and they wondered what the point of life might be when so much of what they experienced was darkness. Still others suffered from deep emotional and relational pain. Still others had seen everything they had built come crashing down around them. There is so much pain and heartbreak in our world that leads to hopelessness and despair and we wonder where God is in the midst of it all.

Listen to how Job describes his own feelings of hopelessness, "If I'm truly guilty, I'm doomed. But if I'm innocent, it's no better - I'm still doomed. My belly is full of bitterness. I'm up to my ears in a swamp of affliction. I try to make the best of it, try to brave it out, but you're too much for me, relentless like a lion on the prowl." (Job 10:15-16) There is nothing worse than feeling like life has no point. Nothing worse than feeling like no matter what we do, we are all still doomed to suffer. Nothing worse than thinking it doesn't matter if one is good or evil because we all end up in the same place. This is where Job finds himself in our reading today and yet he refuses to give up hope. He stubbornly clings to faith. He continues to cry out to God. Demanding an audience. Demanding an answer. Somewhere deep down, he knows what he's experiencing is not right so he throws himself on God's mercy. "Yes, I've seen all this with my own eyes, heard and understood it with my own very ears. Everything you know, I know, so I'm not taking a backseat to any of you. I'm taking my case straight to God Almighty; I've had it with you - I'm going directly to God." (Job 13:1-4)

Some believe the Book of Job is about the loss of faith. Some believe it is about deconstructing faith. I beg to differ. Job is a book that plumbs the depth of faith. It presents faith in its most real, most raw form. It shows us what faith looks like under immense pressure. It shows us how faith endures under the most difficult of circumstances. Job is a faithful man precisely because he continues to cry out to God. He refuses to let go. He is like Jacob wrestling with God down by the river. He is broken. He is beaten. He is wounded terribly, perhaps even mortally, and still he will not let go until God answers him. His friends all want him to compromise. His counselors all want him to exchange his deep and profound faith for superficial, theologically correct answers. His own wife wants him to renounce his faith, curse God, and die. But Job perseveres. He endures. He only tightens his grip on his faith. He refuses to give into hopelessness. Refuses to let despair have the final word.

What about you? Where do you find yourself today? Where are you struggling with hopelessness? Where are you struggling with despair? Maybe you're like some of the people I mentioned above, battling chronic illness, addiction, or mental health issues. Maybe you've had a relationship go south or an estrangement with someone you love. Maybe your job or career has stalled or even failed and all your dreams for the future have gone up in smoke. Follow Job's example. Cry out to God. Hold nothing back. Bring it all to Him. It's only when we have nothing left that we discover faith in God is more than enough.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 14-17

[Back To Table of Contents](#)

January 26, 2023

Mortality

Readings for today: [Job 14-17](#) ([audio reading](#))

Years ago, I was helping lead a service on Ash Wednesday. For those who may not be familiar with the Christian liturgical tradition, Ash Wednesday signifies the beginning of a season called Lent. Lent is a time when Christians contemplate their mortality. They spend intentional time reflecting on the brevity and fragility of life. It is a time of preparation as we get ready to celebrate the glorious promise of resurrection on Easter. After the service, a man approached me to let me know how much he didn't like the service. It was way too scary and somber and depressing. His daughter was disturbed by the imposition of ashes and the words "from dust you came and to dust you shall return." He argued that such services were inappropriate, especially for minors, and we should never do anything like them again but instead focus our efforts on being positive and affirming. I have to admit there's a part of me that wishes I could agree with him but God's Word and the human experience requires us to face our own mortality.

"We're all adrift in the same boat: too few days, too many troubles. We spring up like wildflowers in the desert and then wilt, transient as the shadow of a cloud...mortals have such a limited life span... men and women die and stay dead. They breathe their last and that's it. Like lakes and rivers that have dried up, parched reminders of what once was, so mortals lie down and never get up, never wake up again - never." (Job 14:1-2, 5, 10-12) Job is honest before God. He has come to grips with his own mortality. He recognizes the limits God has set. He acknowledges that he is without hope apart from God. Our lives - at their best - are but a shadow. They are here today and gone tomorrow. We are forgotten within a generation or two. Our impact is minimal. Our influence is fleeting. There is very little that we work for that endures. Remember, Job was the wealthiest man in the world. He had all he wanted and more and it was taken from him in an instant. How many of us have faced a similar circumstance in our own lives?

So where do we find hope? What good is all this reflection on death and mortality and the transient nature of life? Where does it all lead? I'm glad you asked! ;-) Listen to where it leads Job, "O Earth, don't cover up the wrong done to me! Don't muffle my cry! There must be Someone in heaven who knows the truth about me, in highest heaven, some Attorney who can clear my name - my Champion, my Friend, while I'm weeping my eyes out before God. I appeal to the One who represents mortals before God as a neighbor stands up for a neighbor." (Job 16:18-21) Though Job doesn't know Christ, he points us to Christ. Though Job has not seen the hope of the resurrection and knows nothing about the One Mediator whom God has established, he believes in Him. It's a striking passage that demonstrates from the earliest writings of God's people, there was the hope of a Redeemer. A heavenly being who would take up our case before the throne of God. One who would represent us and ultimately save us by taking our place. This is why it is good to reflect on death for it points us to our ultimate need for Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 18-21

[Back To Table of Contents](#)

January 27, 2023
Breakthrough

Readings for today: Job 18-21 (audio reading)

There's a scene in the movie, *The Perfect Storm*, where the crew of the *Andrea Gail* catches a glimpse of a potential way to salvation. Their commercial fishing vessel is being battered by one of the fiercest storms ever to hit the North Atlantic. Waves measuring over sixty feet in height were tossing their little boat all over the place and the crew was rapidly losing all hope. In the midst of the darkness, a brief pinprick of light appeared. The sun broke through the clouds and illuminated a potential path out of the storm. The captain set his course but simply didn't have the power to escape. The storm closed back in and all hands were lost as the *Andrea Gail* sank to the bottom of the ocean.

Job finds himself in the midst of one of life's fiercest storms. His condition is grave. His future is bleak. His suffering is great. The darkness of despair has closed in all around him to the point where he believes God has become his enemy. "God threw a barricade across my path—I'm stymied; he turned out all the lights—I'm stuck in the dark. He destroyed my reputation, robbed me of all self-respect. He tore me apart piece by piece—I'm ruined! Then he yanked out hope by the roots. He's angry with me—oh, how he's angry! He treats me like his worst enemy. He has launched a major campaign against me, using every weapon he can think of, coming at me from all sides at once." (Job 19:8-12 MSG) I can think of nothing more terrifying than believing God has set Himself against you. You want to talk about hopelessness! If the Lord is against you, who can be for you? If the Lord has determined to destroy you, who can save you? If the Lord is coming for you, who can deliver you? Certainly no one on earth. Certainly no weapon that's formed by human hands can fend Him off. Certainly no army no matter how large and mighty can overcome the Lord.

Thankfully, in the midst of this passage, a pinprick of light appears. A break in the storm. The Son appears on the horizon, His light piercing the darkness. "Still I know that God lives - the One who gives me back my life - and eventually He will take His stand on earth. And I'll see Him - even though I get skinned alive - I will see God myself, with my very own eyes. Oh, how I long for that day!" (Job 19:24-27 MSG) Against all hope and human experience, Job trusts God. Though God seems to be his enemy, Job refuses to lose faith in Him. Though God seemingly has taken everything from him, Job continues to seek Him. It's a powerful Word in the midst of a challenging book that forces us to come face to face with the overwhelming nature of suffering.

Most of us can identify with Job on some level. If you live life for very long, chances are good that you will experience suffering. It might be a terminal disease. It might be mental illness. It might be a financial loss. It might be the implosion of a career. It might be a divorce or estrangement with someone you love. It might be a struggle with an addiction. Whatever it may be, know that God is with you in the storm. He is at work even now creating a breakthrough that will bring deliverance and salvation in this life or the next. He is faithful! He will never leave you or abandon you. He is able! There is nothing beyond the reach of His amazing and all-powerful grace. He is good! You can trust Him because He loves you as a Father and He delights in giving good gifts to His children.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 22-24

[Back To Table of Contents](#)

January 28, 2023
Doubling Down

Readings for today: Job 22-24 (audio reading)

I remember vividly the last time I gambled at a casino. It was in the late nineties before I became a pastor. I was on a business trip to Las Vegas and a friend of mine and I decided to play craps. We had a good night. When it came time for me to roll, I hit a hot streak. Rolled for almost 40 minutes without hitting a seven. It was crazy. People were cheering. Money was being made hand over fist. Frankly, I've never experienced anything quite like it. In the middle of all the chaos, a homeless man shuffled in. The lines in his face told the story of a hard life on the streets. He hadn't showered in days. His teeth were almost gone. His eyes were blurry and unfocused. He held a crumpled up \$20 bill he'd found in the gutter somewhere. He threw it down on the table. I promptly rolled a seven. The board cleared. The run was over. Everyone turned on this man. They cursed him. They jeered him. He just turned and shuffled away, never saying a word.

I sometimes think about that man when I pray. I wonder where he is? Where life took him? If he ever got any help or if he just continued to barely survive on the streets? Doubling down each chance he got when someone gave him some money? I think about my own life. In so many ways, I am just like him. Doubling down on my own sin in my own heart rather than humbly submitting to God. As I read Eliphaz's words this morning, I can feel his frustration boiling over. The general theological principle he's held to his entire life - the righteous prosper, the unrighteous are punished - has failed him. But rather than humbly recognizing the failure and taking a step back, he doubles down. He attacks his dear friend Job. He accuses him of crimes against God. "You're a first-class moral failure, because there is no end to your sins." (Job 22:5 MSG) You have robbed your brothers. You have stripped the naked. You have withheld water from the thirsty. You have not fed the hungry. You have treated widows and orphans with disdain. Over and over again, he verbally assaults his friend. Someone once asked me why Satan is not more visible in Job after the first few chapters. My answer was that we encounter him throughout the book in the words of Job's friends. Remember, satan means "accuser."

How does Job respond? He doubles down on God. "If I knew where on earth to find Him, I'd go straight to Him. I'd lay out my case before Him face-to-face, give Him all my arguments firsthand. I'd find out exactly what He's thinking, discover what's going on in His head. Do you think He'd dismiss me or bully me? No, He'd take me seriously. He'd see a straight-living man standing before Him; my Judge would acquit me for good of all charges." (Job 23:3-7 MSG) Job is confident in God's justice and righteousness. Confident God will hear his prayers. Confident God would pay attention to him, unlike his friends who seem so bent on contending with him.

The problem, of course, is Job can't seem to find God in the midst of his suffering and pain. Though he's assailed the heavens, they seem shut up. Though he's cried out, all he's received so far is deafening silence. Job has done his best but to no avail. "I travel East looking for Him - I find no one; then West, but not a trace; I go North, but He's hidden His tracks; then South, not even a glimpse." (Job 23:8-9 MSG) However, he does not despair. Why? Because he trusts God. "But He knows where I am and what I've done. He can cross-examine me all He wants, and I'll pass the test with honors." (Job 23:10 MSG) Though Job can't seem to find the way to God, God knows the way to him. And at the end of all the trials and all the trauma, Job is confident God will make things right. Job is confident he will emerge better than before.

Admittedly, I am partial to these verses. When things have been at their darkest in my own life or I've struggled with uncertainty and doubt and fear or when the trials I've faced have taken me to the end of myself and the end of my resources and the end of my plans; Job 23:10 has been my comfort and my hope. I know what it's like to double down on sin. I know what it's like to double down on self-destruction. I know what it's like to double down in my pride and arrogance. And in those moments, God has broken me utterly and completely. Humbled me in so many ways. He has laid me low to teach me about His sufficiency and grace. He has used the trials of my life to refine me. Purify me. Sanctify me. And His work is not done. Not until I reach glory.

Readings for tomorrow: None

[**Back To Table of Contents**](#)

January 30, 2023
Cultural Insulation

Readings for today: Job 25-28 (audio reading)

Eight years ago, we built a home. We got to see it take shape from the ground up. We walked through it at every stage. We spent time going over all the details with the general contractor. Among the more significant was the insulation. How much? Where would it go? What was the rating? Insulation provides a protective barrier around the home. Keeps the utility bills low. Saves energy. Keeps the home comfortable.

As a Christian living in 21st America, I am deeply aware of how much I am “insulated” from so much that goes on in the world. My government is relatively stable and has a history of peaceful transfers of power. My community is protected by faithful men and women who serve on the police force and in fire departments. I have access to the best medical care in the world. My household income places me in the top 5% of the world’s wealthiest people. As such, I can buy what I need when I need it. I live in a warm home in the winter, a cool home in the summer. My children have access to great education. College is not just a pipe dream but an expectation for them. Because of the color of my skin, I have never had to face racism either on a personal or systemic level. I have never been held back or paid less because of my gender. My sexual orientation places me at little to no risk. All these advantages create “layers of insulation” that have afforded me an almost idyllic life.

However, these layers also create “cultural distance” between myself and those who have had a much different experience in life. This includes many of my African-American, Hispanic, and Asian brothers and sisters. It includes many of my female colleagues in ministry. It includes many of my LGBTQ friends. It includes my global brothers and sisters living in Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Uganda. And it most certainly includes a man named Job who lived in the land of Uz during the time of the patriarchs of the Bible. One of the more difficult challenges when it comes to Biblical interpretation is recognizing the “cultural distance” between us and the men and women of Scripture. Job lived at a time when there was no democracy. No rule of law. No peaceful transitions of power. Job lived in an age where pain and suffering was common. There were no police, no firefighters, no first responders. Healthcare was non-existent. Disease, famine, pestilence, drought happened all too often. Job lived at a time where families and clans and tribes lived in an almost constant state of conflict. Women and children were routinely raped and murdered. The wealthiest were often the most envied and most targeted. And there were no guarantees beyond what you could guard and protect through your own strength. As such, when we read about the Sabeans raiding all of Job’s oxen and donkeys or the firestorm from heaven that kills all Job’s sheep or the Chaldeans raiding his camels or hurricane force winds collapsing a home on Job’s children, we cannot imagine what that must feel like because we are largely insulated from such tragedies. But Job is not. His friends are not. They live in a world where these things happen with some degree of regularity.

The craziest part of this whole book is that Job believes. He holds fast to his faith. The language he uses to describe God in chapter 26 is some of the most beautiful and stirring in all of Scripture. “Hell is ripped open before God, graveyards dug up and exposed. He spreads the skies over unformed space, hangs the earth out in empty space. He pours water into cumulus cloud-bags and the bags don’t burst. He makes the moon wax and wane, putting it through its phases. He draws the horizon out over the ocean, sets a boundary between light and darkness. Thunder crashes and rumbles in the skies. Listen! It’s God raising his voice! By his power he stills sea storms, by his wisdom he tames sea monsters. With one breath he clears the sky, with one finger he crushes the sea serpent. And this is only the

beginning, a mere whisper of his rule. Whatever would we do if he really raised his voice!” (Job 26:6-14 MSG) And I love how he describes his search for wisdom in chapter 28. “But where, oh where, will they find Wisdom? Where does Insight hide? Mortals don’t have a clue, haven’t the slightest idea where to look. Earth’s depths say, ‘It’s not here’; ocean deeps echo, ‘Never heard of it.’ It can’t be bought with the finest gold; no amount of silver can get it. Even famous Ophir gold can’t buy it, not even diamonds and sapphires. Neither gold nor emeralds are comparable; extravagant jewelry can’t touch it. Pearl necklaces and ruby bracelets—why bother? None of this is even a down payment on Wisdom! Pile gold and African diamonds as high as you will, they can’t hold a candle to Wisdom. “So where does Wisdom come from? And where does Insight live? It can’t be found by looking, no matter how deep you dig, no matter how high you fly. If you search through the graveyard and question the dead, they say, ‘We’ve only heard rumors of it.’”(Job 28:12-22 MSG)

In the face of all Job has suffered, he still trusts in God. One of the great truths I have discovered as I travel and teach the world over is that “insulation” is a faith-killer. The more layers, the more we struggle to believe. The more we have, the harder it is for us to trust in God. The more safe and comfortable we are, the less resilient our faith. The book of Job describes in vivid detail what happens when all the layers are peeled back. Everything we have is stripped away. All we hold dear is lost. In that moment, will we cling to faith? Will we walk the path of wisdom that God lays out for us? “God alone knows the way to Wisdom, He knows the exact place to find it...Fear-of-the-Lord - that’s Wisdom, and Insight means shunning evil.” (Job 28:23, 28)

Readings for tomorrow: Job 29-32

[Back To Table of Contents](#)

January 31, 2023
Expectations

Readings for today: Job 29-32 (audio reading)

Charles Spurgeon once wrote, “If any man thinks ill of you, do not be angry with him, for you are worse than he thinks you to be.” I remember running across this quote when life was at its darkest and I was struggling to understand what had happened. The people I worked for lacked integrity. They treated me poorly. They were purposefully deceitful and evasive and lacked transparency. Furthermore, one of them made it his mission in life to not only undermine the work I was doing but took every chance he could to speak ill of me. Accuse me. Spread false rumors about me. It was brutal. And then I read these words from Spurgeon and I realized that as badly as I was being treated, I deserved far worse. All of the things I was being accused of WERE actually happening in my heart. I was angry. I was frustrated. I was prideful and arrogant. I harbored resentment and bitterness. I refused to forgive and extend grace. When it hit me that I was all these things and more, I almost laughed out loud. It dawned on me that all my pent up emotions and feelings were just a cover for my own insecurity and fear. And once I confessed those insecurities and fears to God, I was set free. Free from the need to justify myself. Free from the need to be right. Free from the need to see justice done. Free from the need to please them and gain their approval. It was a life-changing experience for me.

Job’s friends are an easy target in this book. Their theological purity brings little comfort to their suffering friend. Furthermore, their beliefs are far too simplistic for we all know the righteous are not always rewarded nor are the wicked always punished. Therefore, their attacks on Job are without warrant. Having said that...here’s a mind-bender for you...Job actually believes the same way they do! Listen to what he says, “All my dealings with people were good. I was known for being fair to everyone I met. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame, Father to the needy, and champion of abused aliens. I grabbed street thieves by the scruff of the neck and made them give back what they’d stolen.” (Job 29:14-17 MSG) The reality is Job believes his cause is 100% just. He believes he’s done nothing to deserve his fate. Because he is a righteous man, he cannot imagine why God would allow these things to happen to him. “Thrown facedown in the muck, I’m a muddy mess, inside and out. I shout for help, God, and get nothing, no answer! I stand to face you in protest, and you give me a blank stare! You’ve turned into my tormenter— you slap me around, knock me about. You raised me up so I was riding high and then dropped me, and I crashed. I know you’re determined to kill me, to put me six feet under.” (Job 30:19-23 MSG) Essentially Job is making the same argument his friends have made throughout the book. Why does God not reward the righteous (in this case, Job himself) and punish the wicked? Job clearly believes He should. Clearly is angry with God that He doesn’t. Job has held fast to his integrity. He has not committed any sin worthy of his suffering. He even goes as far as recounting all his righteous deeds in chapter 31, making his closing argument before God.

As readers, I am sure we all find ourselves in agreement. We take Job’s side. We’re convinced. But then...if we’re careful to listen...we hear the soft whisper of Satan’s initial question. “Does Job fear God for no reason?” The honest truth is Job does expect something from God. He expects an answer. He expects a justifiable reason for his suffering. His expectations have not been met. Job believes he’s kept his end of the deal so it must be God who has failed. (A notion God Himself will correct in just a few chapters...)

So let me put the question to all of us...do we fear God for no reason? Asked another way, why do we love God? Is it for the eschatological goodies? A guaranteed pass to heaven? Health? Wealth? Blessings in this life and the next? Or is God enough? Do we love God simply because He’s God? If there were

no eternal rewards. If there were no promises. If God never gave us a single thing, would He be worthy of our love and devotion?

Readings for tomorrow: Job 33-36

[Back To Table of Contents](#)