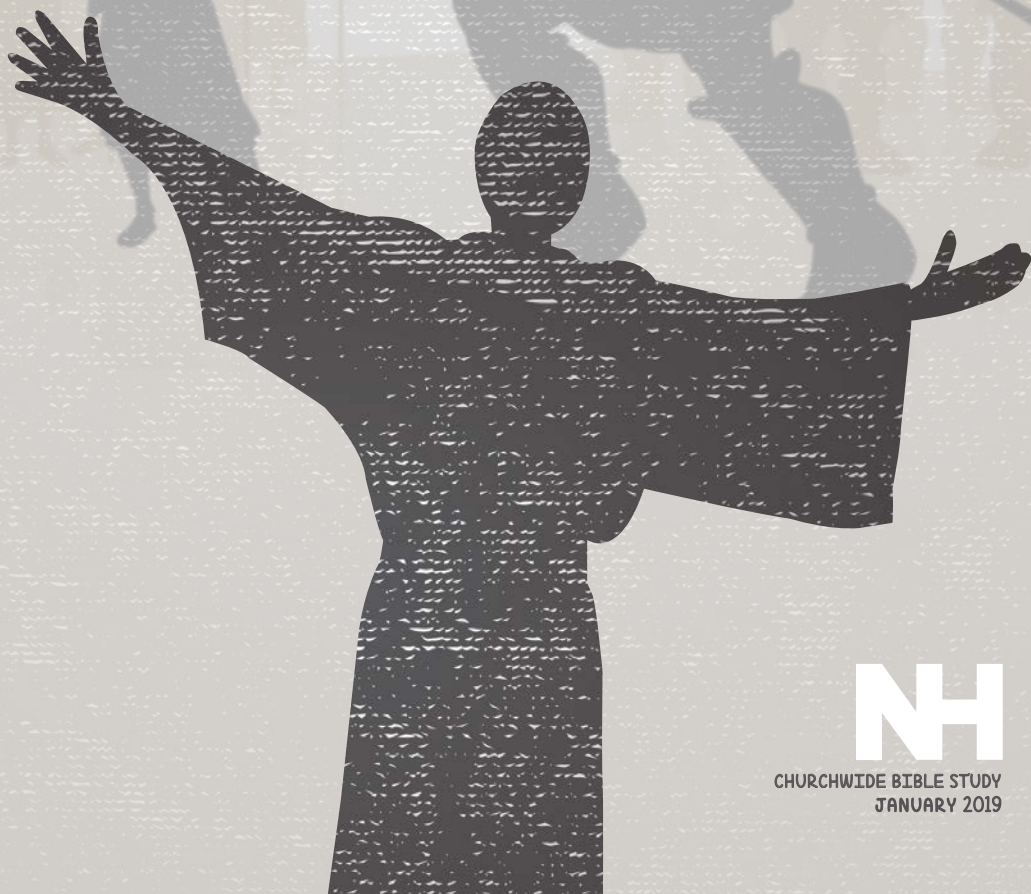


FINDING YOUR STORY IN
HIS-STORY



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CHURCHWIDE BIBLE STUDY
JANUARY 2019

INTRODUCTION

Do you ever feel unqualified to share your salvation story with others in your world? As New Hope Church attendees we value *Learning, Loving, Worship and Prayer*. These are essential disciplines that cultivate relationship with God and grow us into greater Christlikeness.

Our prayer is that this devotional will serve to build a firm foundation of understanding beneath your salvation story. The lessons will take you quickly through the biblical narrative while emphasizing God's redemptive heart for the world. We encourage you to read the Scriptures carefully and make the suggested observations. In the first lesson, for example, you will be asked to underline observations about the character of God. If you are working through this material as a family unit and have children in the house, simplify the concepts in each lesson for your children.

The most important questions you will answer each day are, "Who is God? Who am I and how do I relate to God?" As our Wonderful Counselor is eager to share His-Story with us, let us seek His counsel, and be amazed as we find our story in His-Story.

We pray for you as you embark on this journey of understanding - that your heart will be thrilled by what you are *Learning*. We can assure you that our hearts rejoiced as we wrote each lesson with you in mind.

RICH BRUCE

Pastor of Discipleship

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Have you ever had a relationship suffer because people made false assumptions about your character? Have you ever passed judgment on someone's motives, only to find out that you were mistaken? In that same sense, think about some of the assumptions we make about God. Are they consistent with who He says He is through His word? Read the following verses and underline the truths about God that you encounter:

6 Let them praise Your great and awesome name; Holy is He. **PSALM 99:3**

27 But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You, how much less this house which I have built! **1 KINGS 8:27**

8 The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. **1 JOHN 4:8**

7 Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? **8** If I ascend to heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there. **9** If I take the wings of the dawn, If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea, **10** even there Your hand will lead me, and Your right hand will lay hold of me. **11** If I say, "Surely the darkness will overwhelm me, And the light around me will be night." **PSALM 139:7-11**

9 Exalt the LORD our God and worship at his holy hill, for holy is the LORD our God. **PSALM 99:9**

24 The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; **25** nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; **26** and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, **27** that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; **28** for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' **ACTS 17:24-28**

6 For I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed. **MALACHI 3:6**

18 "And I will be a father to you, And you shall be sons and daughters to Me," Says the Lord Almighty. **2 CORINTHIANS 6:18**

8 "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." **REVELATION 1:8**

6 Then I heard something like the voice of a great multitude and like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, saying, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns. **REVELATION 19:6**

2 Before the mountains were born or You gave birth to the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, you are God. **PSALM 90:2**

Why do our assumptions about God matter? The most important thing about you is what comes into your mind when you think about God.¹ Pastor Mark Kring is often quoted as saying, “What you believe about God determines what you do next.” This means that you and I will never grow beyond what we are living convinced of about God.² With that in mind, consider these truths about Jehovah God:

- 1** According to Psalm 90:2, God lives for all of eternity, past and future, as in the same present moment. God’s eternity means that He exists outside of time, and has perfect knowledge of all things.
- 2** 1 Kings 8:27 encourages us by stating that the observable universe cannot contain God. Scientists argue about how large the universe is, but estimates range from 150 to 800 billion light-years wide. God is even bigger than that - a spirit being that is larger than the immeasurable universe that He spoke into existence.
- 3** In Malachi 3:6, we see that He is unchanging... which means that all of his attributes exist fully and simultaneously in the present. For example, this means that he is, simultaneously and continually, perfectly merciful and perfectly just. God never has to explain Himself... and our attempts to explain Him are futile. The Lord has infinite capacity to be the never-changing Almighty God.
- 4** When Moses led the children of Israel from a life of paganism in Egypt, he was afraid that, given their history of idol worship, they would have no idea which God they were following. At that point, God named himself to Moses as the great “I AM THAT I AM”. This means that God is self-existent. He has no creator. He has no beginning, no end, and no equal. Not only that, God positions Himself as the standard by which *all* reality is determined. If I say I “love” something, what I am feeling *may* truly be love... but it may not be. My perspective, as a mortal, is skewed. God’s expression of love, on the other hand, is the reference point for true love.

These few points don’t even scratch the surface when it comes to understanding the magnitude of our awesome God. As limited human beings, understanding God is like a toddler trying to understand nuclear physics. This lack of understanding leads us down a path where we make up untrue thoughts about God and we draw wrong conclusions.

When we say things like “God is unfair,” or “God hates me,” we are accusing God of untrue things. We are making untrue assumptions about God - that He shares our faults and limitations. That He is something that He could never be. The psalmist said, “...you [humans] thought I [God] was just like you”.³

But He is God, and I am not. This humbling perspective frames reality... for our thinking about God, and about everything else.

POINT TO PONDER

Am I worshipping God or my ideas of God?

“Dear Almighty Unchanging God, I do not have the privilege of making things up about you. May your character be the measure of all reality for me. Amen.”



Creator God exists in three persons. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. All three participated in creating you. Underline any evidence you see for the Trinity in the following verses:

6 26 Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." **GENESIS 1:26**

4 Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! **DEUTERONOMY 6:4**

2 ...according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure. **1 PETER 1:2**
[Hint: All 3 members of the Trinity are mentioned.]

4 And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, "Why are you thinking evil in your hearts?" **MATTHEW 9:4** *[Hint: Jesus is doing a "God thing".]*

18 And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth." **MATTHEW 28:18**

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **JOHN 1:1**

3 But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? 4 While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control?"

Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." **ACTS 5:3-4**

16 The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God. **ROMANS 8:16**

19 Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? **1 CORINTHIANS 6:19**

19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. **MATTHEW 28:19**

As humans we tend to disregard the things we can't easily understand. But we shouldn't disregard the nature of God. The word "Trinity" is not used in Scripture. That being said, scriptural evidence points us to the truth that "God is one and that three persons are God clearly imply this view."¹ Lofty biblical concepts like the Trinity require careful thought. Remember, God is a thinking God; He created us to think, and to live convinced of the right things. Consider these powerful arguments for the Trinity:

- 1** God uses plural pronouns to describe Himself. This becomes even more convincing when we consider that Genesis 1:27 literally reads in the Hebrew, "Then **God said** [singular], 'Let **us make** [plural] mankind in **our image** [plural].'" This means that, according to the Hebrew pronouns, this verse can be understood as "I [God] made man to reflect all three of us."
- 2** All three members of the Trinity are mentioned throughout Scripture. Let's look at 1 Peter 1:2, "...according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure." Notice how, in this verse, we see **all three** members of the Trinity doing what only God can do... God the Father has foreknowledge, the Holy Spirit sets apart, and Jesus Christ's blood atones for sin.
- 3** We see all three members of the Trinity exhibiting God-like qualities. Father God is presented as the creator and owner of all things. God the Son knows the hearts of men (Matthew 9:4) and lying to God the Holy Spirit is equated with lying to God. (Acts 5:3,4).

All three members of the Trinity made you.

God the Father created you into a living soul. You bear His image. He made you, and you have traits and tendencies that reflect His own.

God the Son helped fashion your physical body to embody your soul. He would later identify with that human body... by appearing in the flesh on your behalf.

God the Spirit helped shape your innermost being. He uses the depths of that inner being that he designed as a "prayer room," in order to approach Father God on your behalf (see Romans 8:26).

The Triune God designed your entire being as a place to know and mirror His glory. What a wonderful God who knows and loves me so!



POINT TO PONDER

God inhabits my whole being... all the time.

"Dear Almighty Triune God. We recognize you as the resident owner of our whole being. May every detail of our being reflect the purpose of your original perfect design."



The Triune God created innumerable spirit beings to inhabit the unseen world. They are most often described as spirit messengers, and they carry out God’s directives. Underline truths about angels as you read through the following verses:

6 5 Let them [angels] praise the name of the Lord, For He commanded, and they were created.

PSALM 148:5

16 For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him.

COLOSSIANS 1:16

21 I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of His chosen angels, to maintain these principles without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality.

1 TIMOTHY 5:21

4 “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding, **5** who

set its measurements? Since you know. Or who stretched the line on it? **6** “On what were its bases sunk? Or who laid its cornerstone, **7** when the morning stars sang together. And all the sons of God shouted for joy?

JOB 38:4-7

14 Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation.

HEBREWS 1:14

12 It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look.

1 PETER 1:12

25 For when they rise from the dead, they neither

marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.

MARK 12:25

36 ...for they cannot even die anymore, because they are like angels, and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. **LUKE 20:36**

5 He [Elijah] lay down and slept under a juniper tree; and behold, there was an angel touching him, and he said to him, “Arise, eat.” **6** Then he looked and behold, there was at his head a bread cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. So, he ate and drank and lay down again. **7** The angel of the Lord came again a second time and touched him and said, “Arise, eat, because the journey is too great for you.” **18** So he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God.

1 KINGS 19:5-8

The triune God does not *need* anything. God created spirit beings that minister in His presence and carry out His will. Most cultures, while not even affirming Scripture, believe in an order of spirit beings above humans.¹ These cultures often have self-proclaimed “experts” in the spirit realm called “witch doctors.” Scripture mentions angels in 34 books of the Bible and “teaching about angels is widely diffused through scripture.”² Angels in the Bible seem to be outfitted with qualities to help them carry out their God-given duties. This means they can be made visible to humans, and interact with us. Let’s make a few observations about angels from the above verses.

- 1 Angels are created beings. God created them, and He owns the spirit world. This means the spirit world, while powerful, is never more powerful than God. Be very wary of individuals claiming special insight into the spirit realm. They can easily become Christian “witch doctors.” Remember: we are bound by physical senses, and these limit our ability to truly see the spirit world. As fellow created beings, angels are not, nor would they ever be, fit objects for worship. (Some religious systems teach that angels are apparitions of humans who have died. There is no biblical support for this idea.)
- 2 Angels are personal beings. This means they have personalities, will, and individual traits. “They possess intelligence (1 Peter 1:12), feelings (Luke 2:13), and will (Jude 6).”³ This means that they were also created with God-like abilities that we share... in some sense. In the verses you read above, angels stood in awe of God’s creation, contemplated the beauty, and exercised their own will to exalt God.
- 3 We read in Job 34:4 that all the angels of God were present at creation. That being said, angels exist in a hierarchy of privilege and responsibility. For example, Michael is mentioned in the book of Daniel as a “chief prince” and also in Jude 9 as an “archangel.”
- 4 There is some biblical evidence for guardian angels. However, our conceptions of what guardian angels are often departs from other clearly revealed scriptural truths about angels. Here’s a good example of this error: assigning credit to a “guardian angel” for preserving the life of an irresponsible individual. The greater biblical evidence suggests that angelic help is given for those struggling to carry out God’s will. We should be careful to limit our ideas about angels to what God has clearly revealed in Scripture.

God created a realm of spirit beings who were existing in a state of *untested innocence*. Angels are empowered, highly organized, and are given the capacity to carry out God’s desires. As God’s story continues to unfold, we stand in awe of this creative act.



POINT TO PONDER

All that God creates is designed to reflect His nature. He has shown Himself to be creative, purposeful, and orderly. His creation is given God-like qualities, privileges, and responsibilities.

“God, as your creation, may my chaotic heart reflect order and organization, as you originally intended. Thank you for being a communicative caregiver.”



The multitudes of Heaven waited on God to speak the words of creation: “Let there be...” Underline the references to God in the verses below:

6 **1** In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. **2** The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters. **3** Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. **4** God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. **5** God called the light day, and the darkness He called night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day. **6** Then God said, “Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” **7** God made the expanse and separated the waters which were below the expanse from the waters which were above the expanse; and it was so. **8** God called the expanse heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day. **9** Then God said, “Let the waters below the heavens be gathered into one place, and let the dry land appear”; and it was so. **10** God called the dry land earth, and the gathering of the waters He called seas; and God saw that it was good. **11** Then God said, “Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees on the earth bearing fruit after their kind with seed in them”; and it was so. **12** The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed after their kind, and trees bearing fruit with seed in them, after their kind; and God saw that it was good. **13** There was evening and there was morning, a third day. **14** Then God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years; **15** and let them be for lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth”; and it was so. **16** God made the two great lights, the greater light to govern the

day, and the lesser light to govern the night; He made the stars also. **17** God placed them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, **18** and to govern the day and the night, and to separate the light from the darkness; and God saw that it was good. **19** There was evening and there was morning, a fourth day. **20** Then God said, “Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the heavens.” **21** God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarmed after their kind, and every winged bird after its kind; and God saw that it was good. **22** God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” **23** There was evening and there was morning, a fifth day. **24** Then God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth after their kind”; and it was so. **25** God made the beasts of the earth after their kind, and the cattle after their kind, and everything that creeps on the ground after its kind; and God saw that it was good. **26** Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” **27** God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. **28** God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” **29** Then God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that

is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you; **30** and to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the sky and to every thing that moves on the earth which has life, I

have given every green plant for food"; and it was so. **31** God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

GENESIS 1:1-31

Imagine the sheer awe those Heavenly spectators felt at creation. God made them with the faculties to share in the grandeur of creation. Can you imagine the eruption of spontaneous rejoicing, as the crowning joy of God's creation walked unashamedly through the glory of an unspoiled paradise? God's attributes and His ideals were represented in every shimmering detail. Ideal relationships. Ideal unity. Ideal intentions. All creation existing in perfect order. All that God designed was fulfilling its intended purpose. Let's consider a couple of important points about creation:

1 The Bible affirms a literal six-day creation.

- The Hebrew word for 'day' (Hebrew: Yom) is a literal 24-hour period. (Most conservative Bible scholars interpret it this way.)
- Evolution, in any form, teaches that an original single cell creature stalked, maimed, and murdered its way to the top of the food chain. However, the Bible clearly states, death was introduced through Adam (Romans 5:12). Therefore, a creation period of millions of years is poor biblical interpretation. Adam was created as an adult (in apparent age). The conclusion should be that God created the universe fully developed to "look old" as well.
- Another issue with evolution: behavior is built on belief. How personal can God be to me if I trace my heritage of origin to a single-celled creature that murdered its way to prominence? Who gets the glory for that? Humans would then receive the glory for clawing their way, independently of God, to the top of the food chain.
- A random intersection of chemicals combining to form a single cell organism with complex DNA driven processes is mathematically impossible. "Molecular biophysicist Harold Morowitz calculated that if one were to take the simplest living cell and break every chemical bond within it, the odds that the cell would reassemble under ideal conditions would be $10^{-100,000,000,000}$." ¹ The chance of this happening is about as likely as a "the assemblage of a 747 by a tornado whirling through a junkyard".²

2 God is good. He created a world without defect in six literal days. He created humans who were living in what theologians call "unconfirmed holiness." He made humans lower than angels, but higher than animals. Humans have a unique soul... one that yearns after answers that only our Creator God possesses.

Note: Recommended resource: www.isgenesishistory.com



POINT TO PONDER

Which belief is my behavior built on? Evolution or Special Creation?

"Dear Almighty, Unchanging God. You made me. You own me. You gifted me traits for fellowship, dependence, and obedience. I pray my life choices may reflect the appropriate gratitude and accountability for crafting me into your image. Amen."



Have you ever had someone delight in breaking your heart? Maybe you said to yourself, “Wow, that’s evil!” Satan, a prominent angel, led a rebellion in Heaven and became the author of evil. He wanted to be God, and he led a rebellion against God. Evil exists in the heart of mankind... and it echoes Satan’s desires. Underline truths you read about Satan in the following verses:

“**11** Again the word of the Lord came to me saying, **12** “Son of man, take up a lamentation over the king of Tyre and say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord God, “You had the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. **13** “You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering: The ruby, the topaz and the diamond; the beryl, the onyx and the jasper; the lapis lazuli, the turquoise and the emerald; and the gold, the workmanship of your settings and sockets, was in you. On the day that you were created, they were prepared. **14** “You were the anointed cherub who covers, and I placed you there. You were on the holy mountain of God; you walked in the midst of the stones of fire. **15** “You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created until unrighteousness was found in you. **16** “By the abundance

of your trade you were internally filled with violence, and you sinned; therefore I have cast you as profane from the mountain of God. And I have destroyed you, O covering cherub, from the midst of the stones of fire. **17** “Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom by reason of your splendor. I cast you to the ground; I put you before kings, that they may see you.

18 “By the multitude of your iniquities, in the unrighteousness of your trade you profaned your sanctuaries. Therefore I have brought fire from the midst of you; it has consumed you, and I have turned you to ashes on the earth in the eyes of all who see you. **19** “All who know you among the peoples are appalled at you; you have become terrified and you will cease to be forever.”” **EZEKIEL 28:11-19**

The Bible speaks with honesty about the person of Satan and his work. In the case of Satan, one could never say that ignorance is bliss. Satan works to kill steal and destroy. He is subtle and cruel. He led a rebellion in Heaven, one that took one-third of all the angels with him. The fallen angels are now his demon “wingmen,” and they share his hatred for the works of God. Consider these truths...

- 1** Satan is the god of this world (or ‘age.’) “...Jesus referred to Satan as the prince of the Satanic system: ‘Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world [Satanic system] be cast out’ (John 12:31)...”¹ This means that the systems of this world (i.e. the political and economic systems of this age) are designed to entrap, enslave, marginalize and ultimately destroy all who participate in them. The worlds’ systems of greedy and lustful thinking draw us in with unnerving precision. But God gives us sufficient warning to not be destroyed by the world.
- 2** Satan’s supreme motive is to be God. “Even fallen humanity would not, at first, acknowledge Satan as its object of worship...Satan will be received supreme...in the person of the first Beast of Revelation 13.”² Satan is eerily patient. He will be content to live in the shadows... until he reveals himself as the usurper king at the end of the age.
- 3** Satan’s methods are compared to that of a roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8). Lions quietly and patiently stalk their unsuspecting prey. They wait until the time is just right... and then they pounce. The prey receives no mercy as the lion slowly shreds it, limb from limb. Then the proud lion will lay around like a fat cat, and bask in the gory glow of their killing spree. “The believer is the object of the Satanic attack because of the fact that unto the child of God is committed the great ministry of reconciliation...If Satan can cripple the believer He can do much in resisting the present purpose of God.”³
- 4** Satan is a spirit being. Beware of Christian “witch doctors” who are self-proclaimed experts in the spirit realm. They claim specifics about the spirit realm, where they have neither knowledge or authority. This situation becomes even more confusing, because their “expert” claims can neither be supported or denied. We can’t see into the spirit realm, so it is best to limit our claims to what God has revealed in Scripture.

God is greater than Satan... oh so much greater!



POINT TO PONDER

1 John 2:16 reads, “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the father, but is from the world [where Satan rules the systems].”

“God, gift me discernment that I may know the areas where I am being stalked by Satan. Is my heart given over to the lies of the relational dysfunction of this age... whether through the media, finances, or politics? Does my thinking about reality originate from the lair of Satan... or from your throne room?”

WHAT IS WRONG WITH EVERYTHING? LESSON 6



I try to be a good person... and then I get cut off in traffic, and anger flows naturally from me. I go to work and try hard to do well... and then I'm angry that nobody is noticing. I think everyone should get along... but there are people I hate to be with. What is wrong with me? Answer: The Fall of Man.

Underline the subtle lies of Satan in the following verses (hint: "any tree", "...not die", "...be like God"):

“1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, “Indeed, has God said, ‘You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?’” 2 The woman said to the serpent, “From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; 3 but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.’” 4 The serpent said to the woman, “You surely will not die! 5 For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” 6 When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise,

she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. 7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings.

8 They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

9 Then the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” 10 He said, “I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself.” **GENESIS 3:1-10**

The moment Adam and Eve disobeyed God, their hearts were marred by the horror of sin. They responded by blaming others and denying their brokenness. It became as natural as breathing to hate, kill, and destroy. Their natural inclinations became anti-God. Their best efforts at being good would forever fall short of God's ideals. Man was no longer acceptable to God. Man needed to be saved from the consequences of sin. Consider the following:

- 1 Satan wanted to be God. He spoke *just enough* truth to influence Adam and Eve to believe his lies. He is a liar that hates God. Satan promised freedom, but he delivered a prison of shame. He made Adam and Eve question God's motives and character. Our hearts reflect these same lies when we accuse God of being unfair or unloving.
- 2 Think about how Satan enticed Adam and Eve. He used a psychological appeal... *disobedience will make you wise*. He lured them in with an appeal to the eyes... *forbidden fruit is good for food*. Now, pay special attention to his grand finale of deception, because it revealed His true heart... *the forbidden fruit will make you wise like God*. He lures us into his same rebellion.
- 3 God created us to live a productive life, but we choose *aimless busyness*. He created us to live a rewarding existence, but we fatalistically choose *fun*. He created us for the joy of lasting relationships, but we choose to *use others* and throw them away for *personal happiness*. He made us to worship Him, but we *worship* other pointless activities (sports, finances, careers, etc.)
- 4 Adam and Eve brought sin into a perfect world. "Sin is a failure to conform to God's moral law not only in *action* and *attitude*, but also in our *moral nature*, the internal character of who we are as persons."¹ We aren't sinners because we sin. We sin because we are hopeless, helpless sinners in desperate need of a savior.



POINT TO PONDER

God demands a standard of righteousness I could never live up to. Mankind is now in desperate need of a savior.

"God, may I live each day sobered by the realities of the Fall of Man. May the truth about my nature humble me, and grow me in my appreciation of your grace. May I begin to humbly admit my fallenness instead of blaming others, or justifying my sin with lame arguments. May I stop blaming you for natural disasters, war and suffering that are consequences of The Fall."



How many times have we heard Christianity compared to other religions? Many non-Christians assume that Christianity is just like “every other religion.” Is this accusation true? If it isn’t, what’s the difference?

After Adam and Eve sinned, they didn’t turn to God. Instead, they resorted to religious efforts to address the problem of sin. Underline what Adam and Eve did to try and make themselves acceptable to God in the following verses:

1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, “Indeed, has God said, ‘You shall not eat from any tree of the garden’?” **2** The woman said to the serpent, “From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; **3** from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.’” **4** The serpent said to the woman, “You surely will not die! **5** For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” **6** When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. **7** Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were

naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings.

8 They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. **9** Then the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” **10** He said, “I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself.” **GENESIS 3:1-10**

15 And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel.” **GENESIS 3:15**

21 The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, and clothed them. **GENESIS 3:21**

It's important to understand the real definition of religion. It is man seeking to find his own truth and make himself acceptable to his idea of God. Religious zealots make up convenient beliefs about pleasing God... that, of course, happen to suit their own thinking. All the world's religions try to fix the problem of sin on their own terms. In this, they are deceived by Satan. They are self-deceived into thinking that God will accept their efforts. Consider the following points:

- 1** Guiltily, Adam and Eve made clothes to please God... who they were now afraid of. They loved their religious efforts to hide their shame more than they loved the person of God! They forfeited the *privilege* of friendship with God for the *pride* of independence. At this point, spiritually speaking, Adam and Eve are dead. They have disowned God, so God is dead to them. Mankind was created in the image of God, and as such is born capable of doing some good things. But, at conception, we are spiritually separated from God.
- 2** Religion is about self-righteous men seeking to elevate their own ideas about God. Christianity, however, is about a Holy God seeking to save a desperately sinful mankind. That's the difference between Christianity and all other religions. We are the objects of His undeserved, stubbornly kind grace. In His grace He accomplishes salvation for us through substitutionary atonement.
- 3** God pursues man... and He insists that things be done His way. He rejected Adam and Eve's efforts. The great quandary of sin is this: we have a sin problem that requires a level of righteousness that we are not able to live up to. Because of this, God shed the blood of an innocent animal. He took the skin of the animal and fashioned clothing for Adam and Eve that was suitable to Him. The innocent blood of that substituted for the sin in Adam and Eve, which now needed to be cleansed.
- 4** In Genesis 3:15, God promised a redeemer that would crush the head of Satan. The savior would suffer a bruised heel in the process. These words have been called the 'proto evangelium' (first gospel), and 'the mother of all promises.' In His mercy, God announced deliverance for humans even before He pronounced sentence upon them; someone has said, 'The friend of sinners stood that day in Eden.'¹ This is the first Good News of the Bible!



POINT TO PONDER

As we learn from the Garden of Eden: if God played "Hide and Seek," we would always hide, and He would always seek.

"Dear Creator God, thank you for pursuing me. I admit my tendency to try and live independently from you. My default tendency is to rely on religious effort, instead of your gracious provision. I tend to strive to please you on my own terms, instead of thriving in your provision."



In the Bible, sin is often compared to yeast. Yeast does its work secretly and thoroughly. A single-celled fungus begins a process that metabolizes simple sugars into carbon dioxide and alcohol. As the yeast spreads, these air bubbles permeate an entire lump of dough... which transforms its whole nature. The nature of sin is like that. What begins as a barely noticeable thought ends in complete destruction. Underline the subtle, yeast-like effects of sin you see in the following verses:

1 Now the man had relations with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain, and she said, "I have gotten a manchild with the help of the Lord."
2 Again, she gave birth to his brother Abel. And Abel was a keeper of flocks, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. **3** So it came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the Lord of the fruit of the ground. **4** Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and for his offering; **5** but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard. So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell. **6** Then the Lord said

to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? **7** If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it." **8** Cain told Abel his brother. And it came about when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him. **GENESIS 4:1-8**
4 By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks. **HEBREWS 11:4**

What do we see in the above verses? An earth that is increasingly affected by sin. Eve suffered in childbirth, needing help from God. We see man toiling away, just to grow food. What weeds and pestilence didn't destroy on the outside, intestinal parasites consumed on the inside. Sin will make living on earth a miserable task. Consider the following points:

- 1** Sin separated Adam and Eve from God. They used to enjoy uninterrupted fellowship with Him. Now, man's tendency is to live like God doesn't exist. At the same time, God is bound to the honor of His untainted nature: He is the eternal Light that repels darkness. As we move through the Scriptures, we will see more and more evidence of the hurtful chasm between God and man. God pursues sinful man with the only answer to his sin problem.
- 2** Sin affected Adam and Eve's relationship with each other. Before sin, they cared for the garden *together*. They had hours of uninterrupted teamwork. Then, after the Fall, they were raising rebellious kids at home while trying to care for difficult fields in order to survive. Sound familiar?
- 3** Murderous urges rose from Cain's heart. We mistakenly believe that our urges to hate, kill and destroy originate from somewhere outside of us. That the behavior of others is what puts those feelings in there. What we begin to realize by reading His word is that our carnal urges are already inside us. According to Paul Tripp, "The behavior goes where the heart has already gone." When I blame others for my behavior, I'm acting like Adam when he blamed Eve.
- 4** We live in a hopelessly broken world full of despair. The results of our human efforts will always yield at least a hint of brokenness. Marriage. Parenting. Work. All these things will be accomplished in an atmosphere of struggle. Our frustration arises when we logically expect the perfection we were designed for. We are then forced to live with brokenness, which we try to deny, but then begrudgingly accept as normal. We [humans] are the yeasty [sinful] lump of dough. Once yeast has begun its work, the dough cannot remove the yeast from itself. Only God can save us from ourselves.



POINT TO PONDER

"The sinfulness of mankind is the one doctrine none of us believe." – Paul Tripp

"Dear Friend of Sinners, I pray the reality of sin will allow me to soberly adjust my expectations, for myself and for those around me. While, at the same time, may I live inspired by the transforming power of your mercy and grace."



Do you catch yourself trying to determine the heart condition of others? *Is this used car salesman sincere? Is this politician corrupt?* We search the eyes of others for a hint of hypocrisy, for signs of dislike, and for evidence of pain. The story of Noah is a story of revealing hearts. This story features the gracious heart of God, and the wicked heart of man. In the following verses, underline the activities of God (hint: He saw, He grieved, etc.):

5 Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. **6** The Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. **7** The Lord said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky; for I am sorry that I have made them." **8** But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. **9** These are the records of the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God. **10** Noah became the father of three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. **11** Now the earth was corrupt in the sight of God, and the earth was filled with violence. **12** God looked on the earth, and behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth. **13** Then God said to Noah, "The end of all flesh has come before Me; for the earth is filled with violence because of them; and behold, I am about to destroy them with the earth. **14** Make for yourself an ark of gopher wood; you shall make the ark with rooms, and shall cover it inside and out with pitch. **15** This is how you shall make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its breadth fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. **16** You shall make a window for the ark, and finish it to a cubit from the top; and set the door of the ark in the side of it; you shall make it with

lower, second, and third decks. **17** Behold, I, even I am bringing the flood of water upon the earth, to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life, from under heaven; everything that is on the earth shall perish. **18** But I will establish My covenant with you; and you shall enter the ark—you and your sons and your wife, and your sons' wives with you. **19** And of every living thing of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. **20** Of the birds after their kind, and of the animals after their kind, of every creeping thing of the ground after its kind, two of every kind will come to you to keep them alive. **21** As for you, take for yourself some of all food which is edible, and gather it to yourself; and it shall be for food for you and for them." **22** Thus Noah did; according to all that God had commanded him, so he did. **GENESIS 6:5-22**

19 Every beast, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out by their families from the ark. **20** Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. **21** The Lord smelled the soothing aroma; and the Lord said to Himself, "I will never again curse the ground on account of man, for the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth; and I will never again destroy every living thing, as I have done." **GENESIS 8:19-21**

If you paid close attention to the activities of God mentioned in the previous verses, you saw that God reiterates His ownership of man. He laments their wickedness, while establishing the fact that He made man. It was God's responsibility and privilege to act in righteous judgement. Remember: God is unchanging and eternal. He is all of His attributes all of the time. He is perfectly loving, and wholly just. Consider the following points:

- 1** "Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord" (Genesis 4:8). Noah was living a life of faith in God, while at the same time his neighbors were living a debauched, godless existence. He had true faith, which is believing that what God declares is the truth about reality, and trusting that over one's own senses. Rae Bruce sums this up well, saying "you either believe God or you don't."

Noah wasn't "better" than everyone else - he simply trusted and obeyed God, where others refused to do so. Obedience was not a fun life for him in the moment, but it was very rewarding for His family... on earth, and in eternity.
- 2** Noah didn't follow his own plan to deal with man's wickedness. God had a plan. He commanded Noah to build a boat 450 ft long, 75 ft wide and 45 ft tall. Wikipedia makes a bold statement, that "there is no scientific evidence that Noah's ark existed as it is described in the Bible nor is there evidence in the geologic record for the Biblical global flood."¹ However, in defiance of this statement, almost every culture has a "flood" story, and there is a mountain of scientific evidence favoring a global flood. Creation scientists are raising great questions.² Do you believe what God said about Noah... or a skeptics' interpretation of evidence? This is the same tension Noah felt! He chose to believe God, and lived.
- 3** There was one ark, and one door to the ark. God made one way for the children of Adam and Eve to be rescued. God doesn't need to make many ways to be rescued. Just one way. Noah and his family entered through the one door. Everyone else followed their own heart, and died in their sin.
- 4** God followed up His judgment with a covenant. God promised that He would not repeat this kind of global destruction again. In response, Noah and His family descended from the ark and shed the blood of innocent animals. The Scriptures say that "the Lord smelled the soothing aroma" of the blood sacrifice... the "aroma" of Noah's open admission of sin, and his obedient confidence in the atoning blood of the sacrifice.

The Bible boldly declares the global flood story as fact. It is a vivid portrait of unsaved humanity, God's judgement, and God's tender heart of redemption. And that story isn't over... Jesus declares in Matthew 24:37-39 that mankind will be like the people of Noah's time as time draws to a close.



POINT TO PONDER

You either trust God's heart or your own. Your choice has eternal implications.

"Dear Gracious God of Judgement, thank you for providing the one way for Noah and his family to be saved. You own us, you pursue us in our fallenness, and you provide our only way of escape."



After the flood, God commanded Noah to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Genesis 9:1). The people of Babel chose to follow their heart instead. They disobeyed God by settling in one place, and by creating a new religion to reach God. Here we see another story of man’s sin, and of God’s gracious pursuit to judge and restore man to right standing. Underline where man ignored God and imposed their own will in the following verses:

“**1** Now the whole earth used the same language and the same words. **2** It came about as they journeyed east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. **3** They said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly.” And they used brick for stone, and they used tar for mortar. **4** They said, “Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name, otherwise we will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.” **5** The Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. **6** The Lord said, “Behold, they

are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them. **7** Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” **8** So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. **9** Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of the whole earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of the whole earth. **GENESIS 11:1-9**

Noah's family left the ark restored to fellowship with God... and with a clear command to fill the entire earth with people to worship God. They chose to rebel by gathering in one place. Consider the following:

- 1** Man has a serious heart issue. "The first person pronouns (cf. vv 3-4) make clear that the tower project was motivated by pride and human self-will. Francis Shaeffer once described verse 4 as the 'first public declaration of humanism.'" ¹ The tower represented a misguided, man-made religion. The people of Babel were trying to please a god they made up. In a way, they were like Cain. They were sincere... but they were sincerely wrong, and God judged them.
- 2** God confused their languages. Those of us who have learned a second language know that it can be difficult and embarrassing. (A missionary once mistakenly asked for two kilos of pillowed pork chops! The shop owner was not impressed.) "Over 3000 languages have disappeared in the last 500 years, most of them vanishing without a trace. Fewer than 7000 remain."²
- 3** Language shapes our view of reality. For example, the Yanomami language of South America has no word that conveys the concept of one all-powerful God. Nor is there any word that communicates the idea of selfless love. So how would you translate, "For God so loved the World..." (John 3:16) into the Yanomami tongue? A Yanomami tribal person would read this as something like: "gods I barely know and can't trust use the world for their selfish pleasure..." And even in our world, an untaught American might understand John 3:16 from his worldview like this: "God, who is like a distracted Santa Claus, affirms my sincere desires by showering creature comforts on me so I can live struggle free and follow my heart anywhere it takes me. I deserved what Christ did because I'm number one." Our language can influence how we see God. And consider this: over 2000 languages still need a Bible translated into their language!

Fortunately, God gifted us with stories about Himself. We see His attitude toward sin - but also His selfless, kind-hearted love toward Adam and Eve. Toward Noah, the people of Babel, and the rest of humanity throughout the Biblical history. We would do well to know and communicate God's character through history (His-Story) to avoid confusion.

God chose the very best way for humankind to understand Him, and His love, by explaining these to us in storybook form. We may not have a word in our language that can define God's love, but we get to know Him by the narratives that describe Him. Stories that speak to God's character like creation, the fall, and the flood. God communicates clearly, but man prefers to follow his own ideas about God.



POINT TO PONDER

You can be completely sincere... and still be completely wrong.

"God, may we resist the urge to follow our own hearts like the people of Babel. Thank you for communicating your character to us through your stories. We know love because Love Himself wrote us His-Stories."



Adam and Eve failed to maintain their innocence... and they were judged. Noah's people became hopelessly corrupt... and they were judged. Then the people of Babel rebelled against God's commands... and they were judged. Now, God decided to initiate His redemptive program with one individual.

His name was Abraham, and his family were idol worshippers (Joshua 24:2) from Ur [modern Iraq]. God chose Him to be the father of a great nation, one that would be a light to the nations. **Underline the promises God made to Abraham:**

“1 Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go forth from your country, And from your relatives. And from your father’s house, To the land which I will show you; 2 and I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; 3 and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”

GENESIS 12:1-3

1 Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before Me and be blameless. 2 “I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will multiply you exceedingly.” 3 Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him,

saying, 4 “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you will be the father of a multitude of nations. 5 “No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. 6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings will come forth from you. 7 I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. 8 I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.” **GENESIS 17:1-8**

Abraham was told to leave his whole life behind him in order to follow God. He was instructed to abandon everything that was critical for survival in the ancient world. He was told to leave his family, his nation and his countrymen. The twist in the story is that he wasn't told *anything* about the country he was heading to. "His departure required an unparalleled act of faith."¹ In the ancient world, Abraham's departure could have been considered a hate crime against His family. In the mind of the ancients, Abraham would now be lending his strength to strangers, and their gods. Even so, he didn't argue or hesitate. The Bible records that Abraham simply obeyed. Consider the following:

- 1 The Everlasting, Triune God entered a covenant agreement with a human. He promised to give Abraham an enduring seed, to make him the father of a great nation, and that he would be a blessing to all nations. "Based on this obedience were God's three promises to (a) bless those who blessed him, (b) curse anyone who would treat him lightly, and (c) bless the families of the earth through him (v. 3)."² It is important to note that theologians consider this an *unconditional* promise by God. The promises God made were not conditioned on Abraham's obedience. "While enjoyment of the blessings of the covenant may be conditioned upon obedience, the fulfillment of the promises is not."³ This means that God will make the children of Abraham a great nation of God worshippers... even if that is delayed by their disobedience.
- 2 Israel was to be a national redemptive analogy for all to experience. Moving forward from this point in history, they will occupy the most strategic piece of land in the ancient world. They will be given a law that will distinguish them as worshippers of one God (not many gods). God will gift them a sacrificial system that is free of immorality.
- 3 When Abraham died, his sole possession in the land that God had promised to him was a cave, in which to bury his dead relatives. Abraham lived like a foreigner on his own land, sold his wife into captivity twice to avoid persecution (Genesis 12:10-20 and 20:1-18), and the Canaanites pushed him into the desert while they enjoyed the fertile land God promised. While this doesn't sound like much of a blessed life, think about this... God declares an *eternal identity* and *forever blessings* for His people. Walking by faith means placing our trust in the truth of what God has declared about reality, rather than merely trusting our own senses. Abraham enjoyed a position in God's eternal program, but it didn't always *feel* like that was true based on his living conditions. Ask yourself this question: what truths has God declared about me that are only able to be experienced if I believe in the truth of His promises over my own feelings?

Abraham is called the father of faith. God made declarations that gave Abraham an eternal identity and forever blessings. Abraham had the opportunity to believe God and enjoy the blessings. His other option was to look at his circumstances, and think it all a lie.



POINT TO PONDER

Am I thriving by faith in God's declared promises, or walking by my own sight and striving?

"God, you are a promise keeper. Thank you for my declared identity (Romans 8:1) and 'forever blessings' (Ephesians 1-3). May I walk by faith believing that what I can't see is true of me."



Abraham celebrated his 86th Birthday, and he still had no son. God had sworn an oath to Abraham to provide an enduring legacy, a land and blessings for His descendants. But none of this would be possible without a descendant. In desperation for an heir, Abraham took Hagar, a slave girl, and had Ishmael with her. Underline all that God commanded Abraham to do in the verses:

“**18** And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before You!” **19** But God said, “No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. **GENESIS 17:18-19**

1 Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” **2** He said, “Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.” **3** So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. **4** On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance. **5** Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and return to you.” **6** Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. **7** Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” And he said, “Behold, the fire and

the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” **8** Abraham said, “God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son. So the two of them walked on together.

9 Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. **10** Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. **GENESIS 22:1-10**

11 But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.”

12 He said, “Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.” **13** Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son. **14** Abraham called the name of that place The Lord Will Provide, as it is said to this day, “In the mount of the Lord it will be provided.”

GENESIS 22:11-14

Pastor Mark Kring continually encourages us that “God is always at work around us and invites us to join Him in His work.” His plan is to glorify Himself, grow His people, and redeem the world back to Himself. Abraham had a glorious opportunity to wait patiently on God. Instead, He chose his own plan and committed adultery with a vulnerable slave girl. Consider the following...

- 1** Soon after Hagar became pregnant with Abraham’s son, negative drama began with Sarah. Sarah’s jealousy eventually drove Hagar into the desert to die with her unborn son. In a tender scene, God appears to Hagar and sends her back with promises of blessing and protection (Genesis 16). As Ishmael matured to a teenager, there would have been mounting tension caused by Abraham’s age, God’s “silence”, and Ishmael as Abraham’s only visible heir.
- 2** Thirteen years after the birth of Ishmael, when Abraham had reached the ripe old age of 99, God appeared to him, accompanied by two other angelic visitors. They promised that he and Sarah would have a son. “These tidings came upon Abraham in such joyous surprise that, as in humble worship, he fell on his face, he laughed as he considered within himself the circumstances of the case...To perpetuate the remembrance of the wonder, the promised seed was to bear the name Isaac, or ‘laughter.’”¹ Don’t be surprised if God’s activity in your life involves this kind of waiting and inspires similar “laughter.”
- 3** Eventually Isaac had two sons, Jacob and Esau. The older son, Esau, was the rightful heir to the covenant promises. Then, in a strange twist, he sells this spiritual birthright to Jacob for a bowl of soup. His disdain for the spiritual blessings of God’s covenant reveals Esau’s true heart. As Isaac nears death, Jacob pretends to be Esau and appears for Isaac’s blessing. So, Isaac mistakenly gave Jacob the physical blessings also reserved for the oldest son. We see God’s people making a mess of their lives, all while God is sovereignly pursuing His purpose to redeem mankind in the background. Sound familiar?
- 4** As a foreshadowing allusion to Jesus, Abraham is told to take Isaac to the top of a mountain and prepare to sacrifice him on an altar. Obediently, he tied his son Isaac to the altar, and raised his knife to kill him. God providentially intervened and provided a ram for sacrifice. The ram substituted for Isaac. Then God praised Abraham’s faith, and reiterated his covenant promises to Him. (Genesis 22:15-17)

God is always up to something. We can live restfully knowing that God has a plan, one that is always operating in the background of our drama-filled lives. The lesson of Abraham and Isaac is to keep trusting God... long after it becomes uncomfortable. We need to trust His plan, and not try to insert our own, which often simply creates more drama for ourselves and others.



POINT TO PONDER

How long does God seem to make us wait? A little longer.

“God, may we believe your words. May we participate with you in your plan to redeem unsaved mankind back to yourself. May we ‘see the unseen’ like Abraham and be ‘sons’ of childlike faith.”



Have you ever struggled to trust God in excruciating circumstances? Joseph's effectiveness was heightened by his willingness to continue trusting during God's training process. God used favoritism, bias, treachery, and unjust imprisonment to train Joseph's soul. Joseph's role in this process of spiritual formation was to simply trust God like a child. Consider all the opportunities for Joseph to trust God in the following verses:

6 **22** Then God remembered Rachel, and God gave heed to her and opened her womb. **23** So she conceived and bore a son and said, "God has taken away my reproach." **24** She named him Joseph, saying, "May the Lord give me another son." **GENESIS 30:22-24**

5 Then Joseph had a dream, [the dream was about ruling over his brothers] and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. [Later, Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt. They dipped his clothes in goat's blood and made their father Jacob believe Joseph was dead!] **GENESIS 37:5**

1 Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an Egyptian officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the bodyguard, bought him from the Ishmaelites, who had taken him down there. **2** The Lord was with Joseph, so he became a successful man. And he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian. **3** Now his master saw that the Lord was with him and *how* the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hand. **GENESIS 39:1-3**

7 It came about after these events that his master's wife looked with desire at Joseph, and she said, "Lie with me." **8** But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, with me here, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house, and he has put all that he owns

in my charge. **9** There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?" **17** Then she spoke to him with these words, "The Hebrew slave, whom you brought to us, came in to me to make sport of me; **18** and as I raised my voice and screamed, he left his garment beside me and fled outside." **19** Now when his master heard the words of his wife, which she spoke to him, saying, "This is what your slave did to me," his anger burned. **20** So Joseph's master took him and put him into the jail, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; and he was there in the jail. **21** But the Lord was with Joseph and extended kindness to him, and gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. **GENESIS 39:7-9, 17-21**

[Joseph interpreted a dream for Pharaoh, was released from prison and became a ruler in Egypt.]

1 Now Jacob saw that there was grain in Egypt, and Jacob said to his sons, "Why are you staring at one another?" **2** He said, "Behold, I have heard that there is grain in Egypt; go down there and buy some for us from that place, so that we may live and not die." **3** Then ten brothers of Joseph went down to buy grain from Egypt. [Joseph revealed himself to them in Egypt. Huge surprise!] **GENESIS 42:1-3**

God continues to be faithful to His promises. The declared redeemer will descend through Abraham's line. God had made promises to Abraham... promises that his great-grandsons were now competing for. Joseph had a dream of prominence over his brothers, a dream that so infuriated them, it prompted them to sell Joseph into slavery. Jacob believed Joseph was dead, but God's promises were still at work. Consider the following:

- 1** In a patriarchal, clan-dominated culture, the betrayal of Joseph and the deception of Jacob were both acts of unbelievable treachery. The original readers of these stories would have been horrified at the dishonorable cruelty of Joseph's brothers. This is intensified by the fact that Jacob's sons had to guard the truth about Joseph from their father for 22 years!¹ The famine in Canaan forced Jacob's sons to humble themselves before the ruler Joseph had become, and to bring Jacob to Egypt to reunite with Joseph. This interaction of God's will with man's sinful behavior has been described as "God being providentially permissive."
- 2** God is always following through on promises, but it is our choice to trust. Charles Spurgeon says, "*God is too good to be unkind and He is too wise to be mistaken. And when we cannot trace His hand, we must trust His heart.*" Joseph was a man who trusted God's heart, even when he couldn't see the plan. Joseph is a great character, in contrast to his brothers. They continually created their own reality, based on human presumption. *Reality is not what we feel* (Joseph's brothers), *reality is what we should be feeling* (Joseph). God's hand is moving, and His heart is beating to redeem lost souls. Joseph trusted God's heart. Do you trust God's heart or yours?
- 3** The bloodline of the coming Redeemer is now set to come through the line of Jacob, as opposed to Esau. The question now is this: which of Jacob's sons will be privileged with producing the messiah that was promised in Genesis 3:15? At the end of his life, Jacob called all his sons to give them a final blessing from his deathbed in Egypt. One by one, they each heard shadowy predictions of their standing in the future promised land. As Judah knelt and felt the weight of his aged father's outstretched hand, Jacob said, "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples." (Genesis 49:10) This verse can be understood as saying that Judah will be the royal messianic family until "Shiloh" (the one to whom it belongs, i.e. King Jesus) appears.

The key to understanding the character of God and the true nature of man is in the historical narrative. God has a "providentially permissive" program of redemption, one that weaves a scarlet thread of redemption through the tapestry of time. God's flawless character is continually highlighted against the backdrop of man's doubt-filled, callous heart. Joseph's story is our story.



POINT TO PONDER

We choose each moment to create our own reality, like Joseph's brothers, or be a child of God, innocently trusting Father God's heart.

"God, may I live convinced of your overarching plan to bring salvation to all mankind. May I be sobered by my stubborn unwillingness to trust your heart and hold your hand, while you train my soul for your glory."



Have you ever felt alienated from God? The descendants of Jacob stayed in Egypt, and drifted far from God. God still kept His promise. He blessed His people, and their numbers grew dramatically. So much so that Egypt eventually enslaved the Jewish people. They were beaten down, abused and punished for four hundred years. Moses was chosen to be the human instrument through which God punished the Egyptians and freed His people. He would leave no doubt as to who was the true God, and who wasn't. God's people forgot Him, but He didn't forget His people. Read the verses below:

8 Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. **9** He said to his people, "Behold, the people of the sons of Israel are more and mightier than we. **10** Come, let us deal wisely with them, or else they will multiply and in the event of war, they will also join themselves to those who hate us, and fight against us and depart from the land." **11** So they appointed taskmasters over them to afflict them with hard labor. **EXODUS 1:8-11**

[The Pharaoh began killing Hebrew babies and Moses was miraculously adopted by Pharaoh's daughter].

11 Now it came about in those days, when Moses had grown up, that he went out to his brethren and looked on their hard labors; and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brethren. **12** So he looked this way and that, and when he saw there was no one around, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. **15** When Pharaoh heard of this matter, he tried to kill Moses. But Moses fled from the presence of Pharaoh and settled in the land of Midian, and he sat down by a well. **EXODUS 2:11-12,15**

[After spending 40 years hiding from Pharaoh, Moses received a personal message from God. He was told to go to Pharaoh and insist that he let God's people go].

13 Then Moses said to God, "Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' Now they may say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?" **14** God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" **15** God, furthermore, said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations." **EXODUS 3:13-15**

20 So Moses and Aaron did even as the Lord had commanded. And he lifted up the staff and struck the water that was in the Nile, in the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants, and all the water that was in the Nile was turned to blood. **21** The fish that were in the Nile died, and the Nile became foul, so that the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile. And the blood was through all the land of Egypt. **22** But the magicians of Egypt did the same with their secret arts; and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had said. **EXODUS 7:20-22**

In the previous verses, we see God caring for His people - while preparing them to be His witnesses to the world. This involves difficulty and faith-stretching circumstances for them. Satan deceives Pharaoh with false gods and wrong thinking. He also incites Him to go to battle against Jehovah. Moses is the leader God chose to represent Him to the world. Consider the following:

- 1** Each of the plagues was designed to humiliate a god in Egypt's pantheon of gods. For example, turning the Nile into blood was an affront to Hapi, the god of the Nile. God continued to punish the Egyptians with other plagues... of frogs, biting insects, wild animals, livestock disease, boils, hail, locusts, and darkness. These plagues made life miserable for the Egyptians, and illustrated once and for all that their gods were false. It is important to note that *nowhere* in scripture does God echo the sentiment that there are many ways to God. God's way is the only way. He insists that we approach Him *His* way.
- 2** God never asked for Moses's permission to use Him as His representative. God made Moses, He owned Moses. He could command Moses and expect Moses to obey Him without question. By calling the Hebrews out of Egypt, we see God initiating something new for His people. In the unbelief of Pharaoh and the Egyptian establishment, we see Satan viciously opposing God's will. Moses, and the rest of God's people, are now faced with the choice of following God in obedience based on his promises, or to remain slaves based on the perception of their circumstances. Sound familiar?
- 3** Our Unlimited God hinges the effectiveness of His program on the willingness of His people to obey Him. Moses ran ahead of God, he committed murder, he spent 40 extra years in the wilderness, and he delayed the rescue of Israel. God seems "providentially permissive" at times, but His timing is perfect. Our struggle is to trust, to obey, and to wait patiently for Him to act .
- 4** God is the great I AM WHO I AM! "What is God like?' If by that question we mean 'What is God like in Himself?' there is no answer. If we mean 'What has God disclosed about Himself that the reverent reason can comprehend?' There is, I believe, an answer both full and satisfying. For while the name of God is secret and His nature incomprehensible, He in condescending love has by revelation declared certain things to be true of Himself. These we call His attributes."¹

God is always at work, and He is active in human history. Moses is a great character study. God called him to things that were uncomfortable and scary and Moses owned it. God doesn't ask our permission to use us in His redemptive program. Instead, He assigns us an identity... and insists that we tie our activities and our thinking to that.



POINT TO PONDER

I exist by the same power God does. His power.

"Dear I AM WHO I AM. You kept your promise to bless Abraham's descendants. You rule over the natural world, over Satan and over false systems of worship. You are all powerful.

I worship you."



Are you ever amazed at the way people resist the reality of God’s spiritual work around them? Pharaoh’s Egypt (a picture of unsaved mankind) stubbornly refused the lessons of God’s punishing plagues. With each plague, Pharaoh’s magicians would try to replicate the work of God by turning water into blood, or dust into lice, to try to prove that they could determine their own reality. But the true reality was this: mankind was plagued with sin, and were following false gods. In this, God’s people and the Egyptians were equally guilty. But God would provide a way for his chosen people to escape the final plague... by applying the blood of an innocent lamb. Underline the instructions God gave to His people:

6 **1** Now the Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, **2** “This month shall be the beginning of months for you; it is to be the first month of the year to you. **3** Speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying, ‘On the tenth of this month they are each one to take a lamb for themselves, according to their fathers’ households, a lamb for each household.’” **EXODUS 12:1-3**

5 “Your lamb shall be an unblemished male a year old; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. **6** You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month, then the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel is to kill it at twilight. **7** Moreover, they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. **8** They shall eat the flesh that same night, roasted with fire, and they shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. **9** Do not eat any of it raw or boiled at all with water, but rather roasted with fire, both its head and its legs along with its entrails.”

EXODUS 12:5-9

11 “Now you shall eat it in this manner: with your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in

your hand; and you shall eat it in haste—it is the Lord’s Passover. **12** For I will go through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments—I am the Lord. **13** The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live; and when I see the blood I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.” **EXODUS 12:11-13**

29 Now it came about at midnight that the Lord struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of cattle. **30** Pharaoh arose in the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians, and there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was no home where there was not someone dead. **31** Then he called for Moses and Aaron at night and said, “Rise up, get out from among my people, both you and the sons of Israel; and go, worship the Lord, as you have said. **32** Take both your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and go, and bless me also.” **EXODUS 12:29-32**

As we proceed through Biblical history, we see that God is both the God of love and a God of judgment. God chose to kill all the firstborn children living in Egypt as a final plague. Consider the following:

- 1** God created mankind, therefore He owns mankind. God can judge and give mercy at His discretion. *God does not answer to man...* rather, man answers to Him. The plague on the firstborn must be understood from a God-centered view of reality. He demands death as the just penalty for sin.
- 2** From the stories of Noah, Babel, and Abraham, we can see that God is a God of new beginnings. God doesn't seem to dwell in the past. Instead, He is always patiently moving His plan forward. It is our personal faith choice to get with His program. The day of Passover was another new beginning for the Hebrew people, and it became the first day in the Jewish religious calendar. Even though Passover occurred in their seventh month (September-October), the day of Passover became the first day in the Jewish religious calendar. This was the moment in Israel's history where they would be recognized worldwide as a nation who is the favored people of the true God.¹
- 3** Passover prefigures Christ.² God is wonderfully consistent with His redemptive plan throughout Biblical history. God communicated His Law to Adam and Eve. (And the Egyptians.) However, they chose to disobey. God, as a God of justice, hands down a sentence of condemnation as a related consequence. Guilty man is unable to redeem himself, but God lovingly intervenes with a plan to satisfy His Righteous demands. An innocent blood victim is brought forward to shed its blood as a substitute for the guilty. Adam and Eve suffered the earthly consequences of disobedience, but left the place of blood with forgiveness, a new identity, and eternal promises. Passover reiterates God's heart for the world... to save it, and not condemn it. He is both a Creator and Redeemer.

Egypt was ruined. Their gods were exposed as false. The country was destroyed, and all the firstborn not covered by blood were dead. Egypt begged Israel to leave. The Israelites hastily prepared to leave, while the Egyptians blessed them with material gifts for their journey. God had a plan. He had promised Abraham a land, an enduring seed, and a blessing. He followed through on all of them. God is a covenant keeper.



POINT TO PONDER

In the same way the Passover lamb was a new beginning for Israel, God memorialized a new beginning for you in the shed blood of His son. You left the cross with complete forgiveness, a new identity and a chance to renew your thinking about all things.

"Dear Covenant Keeper, thank you for moving your redemptive plan ever forward. I pray I will make the right faith choices and move it forward with you."



Have you ever crested a hill, going way over the speed limit, and found an officer of the law pointing a radar gun right at your car? God calls that sinking feeling what it truly is - guilt. God's people needed The Law to establish practical norms, and to point to sinful behavior like a radar gun detects excessive speed. The Law was designed to drive the chosen people to God, and to lean into the sacrificial system for forgiveness. Underline the commandments God gave to Israel in these verses:

6 **1** In the third month after the sons of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. **2** When they set out from Rephidim, they came to the wilderness of Sinai and camped in the wilderness; and there Israel camped in front of the mountain. **3** Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel: **4** 'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself. **5** Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; **6** and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel." **EXODUS 19:1-6**

1 Then God spoke all these words, saying, **2** "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. **3** You shall have no other gods before Me. **4** You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. **5** You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of

the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, **6** but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. **7** You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain. **8** Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. **9** Six days you shall labor and do all your work, **10** but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. **11** For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and made it holy. **12** Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you. **13** You shall not murder. **14** You shall not commit adultery. **15** You shall not steal. **16** You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. **17** You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor." **EXODUS 20:1-17**

God's people, who had been enslaved for 400 years, had just fled Egypt. They crossed the Red Sea and entered a 23,000 square mile wilderness. They faced Isolation, hunger and war. God patiently led them through these bewildering circumstances for more than 40 years. These conditions helped Israel realize their need, it exposed their sinful behavior, and it ultimately prepared them to enter His Promised Land of rest. Consider the following:

- 1** If Egypt is a picture of unsaved mankind enslaved by sin, the wilderness is a picture of the time of spiritual conditioning following salvation. Israel, who had been an ethnic group in captivity, was now a conquering nation led by God Himself. The wilderness experience was critical to transform Israel from spiritual infancy to adulthood. To be a walking, living, breathing redemptive analogy for all the world to better understand the character of God. If you are saved (freed from slavery) but feel like you are wandering in a spiritual wilderness, you should be encouraged to know that God is at work within you, maturing you to be effective on His behalf.
- 2** God eventually gave Israel a grand total of 613 laws! These involved civil, ceremonial and moral laws. Civil laws forbade things like kidnapping, moving property markers and murder. Ceremonial law dealt with proper sacrificial procedures. The moral laws were based on God's character. These prohibited lying, stealing, cheating... acts that were violations of God's nature. (It is important to note at this point that while we do not live with 613 "radar guns" pointed at our lives, God's character is still the standard of right and wrong behavior for everyone.)
- 3** Law is good. God's laws positioned Israel to be different from the surrounding nations God would use them to reach out to. One example of this: ceremonial law prohibited Israel from touching dead bodies. In contrast, Egypt had elaborate funeral ceremonies and burial rituals. God's Law separated His people from Egypt by giving them a more appropriate view of death and the afterlife. God's sacrificial system was completely free of immoral rituals. "Among ancient nations, only Israel coupled civil and moral law with God's requirements. Israel's Law was completely free of capricious human whim, for it was based on God's own person: 'I am the LORD your God.'"¹

What a privilege for Israel to be the people of God! God took them to a wilderness, and there He led them to obedience, dependence and partnership with Him in His redemptive program. They received God's laws, which created separation with the sinful nations around them. On good days in the wilderness, Israel leaned into their new identity, and their forever blessings. On the bad days, they forgot who God declared them to be... and the "radar gun" of the Law caught them red-handed.

POINT TO PONDER

We can't tie who we are to what we do, or fail to do. We are who God declares us to be.

"Father, may Your holy character expose Your real truth in all I think, feel, say, and do."



What is that sin you continually run to? Does it seem to run in a cycle? We want the sin so bad, we act in disobedience, we suffer hurtful consequences (which we attempt to explain away), we finally confess, and God graciously forgives and forgets. Israel no sooner crosses the Jordan when they gave themselves away to the gods of Canaan, starting a sinful cycle of their own. Read the following verses prayerfully:

6 **1** Now when all the nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the Lord spoke to Joshua, saying, **2** "Take for yourselves twelve men from the people, one man from each tribe, **3** and command them, saying, 'Take up for yourselves twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests' feet are standing firm, and carry them over with you and lay them down in the lodging place where you will lodge tonight.'" **4** So Joshua called the twelve men whom he had appointed from the sons of Israel, one man from each tribe; **5** and Joshua said to them, "Cross again to the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan, and each of you take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Israel. **6** Let this be a sign among you, so that when your children ask later, saying, 'What do these stones mean to you?' **7** then you shall say to them, 'Because the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord; when it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off.' So these stones shall become a memorial to the sons of Israel forever." **JOSHUA 4:1-7**

1 The angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bokim [Place of Tears] and said, "I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land I swore to give to your ancestors. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you, **2** and you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars.' Yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this? **3** And I have also said, 'I will not drive them out before you; they will become traps for you, and their gods will become snares to you.'" **4** When the angel of the Lord had spoken these things to all the Israelites, the people wept aloud, **5** and they called that place Bokim. There they offered sacrifices to the Lord. **JUDGES 2:1-5**

5 The Israelites lived among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. **6** They took their daughters in marriage and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods. **JUDGES 3:5-6**

25 In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes. **JUDGES 21:25**

It is easy to be critical of the children of Israel. After all, the God of Heaven chose them to be His special people. He rescued them from Egypt and patiently prepared them in the wilderness. He miraculously brought them to the most strategic piece of land in the ancient world. They were to be a light to the other nations by representing His character in all they said and did. Instead, they bowed down to the same idols that incurred God's wrath on the Canaanites. Consider the following:

- 1** Canaan was a wealthy trade route between Egypt and the surrounding countries. As the Israelites conquered wealthy city after wealthy city, it would have been like you and I conquering affluent Las Vegas...and then denying ourselves the fleshly delights we found there. And, initially, the Israelites did! They kept themselves pure from idols at first... but over the next 400 years, they descended into a bottomless abyss of idolatry and compromise. They had the same challenge we do now... saying no to our sinful hearts.
- 2** There are seven sin cycles through the book of Judges, that total 410 years.¹ The sin cycles of Judges are generally described as sin, suffering, supplication and salvation. Israel would fall into the national sin of idolatry. Conquerors would then oppress Israel. Each time they tired of the oppression, the people would cry out... and God would raise up a Judge to save the nation. There was continual tension between obeying God or indulging in the forbidden things they could feel and see. In that way, it's the same as our own sin cycles we face every day. How is this going for you?
- 3** Finally, the children of Israel cried out for a king. This request was a rejection of God's original plan for them. "...He intended the nation to be a theocracy that He ruled through the person of the high priest."² God complied with their request for a king, and Samuel anointed Saul to rule over Israel. Kings ruled over Israel until God's people were carried off into captivity by the Babylonians in three deportations, beginning in 606 B.C. Again, we're given an insight into God's character: an unlimited God, hinging the effectiveness of His plan on the obedience of His people. This makes God's people fully responsible for their actions, while God remains completely sovereign.
- 4** Egypt is a picture of man lost in sin, the wilderness is representative of a fleshly immature believer... and the Promised Land is a vision of how to live in productive partnership with the God of redemption, where we can be thriving and not striving.

Israel broke God's Law, and they were carried into captivity beginning in 606 B.C. God keeps both the negative and positive aspects of the covenants He makes. He promised Israel that if they compromised with the Canaanite culture, He would send them away into captivity. God does not play favorites. Sin has devastating consequences. God always keeps His promises.



POINT TO PONDER

During the book of Judges, God's people tied what they did, felt and said to their natural impulses.

"Almighty Judge, my natural inclinations take me far from your purposes for me. May my life with you be a place of restful cooperation with you, and not a place of guilty tears."



When was the last time you were forced to wander through the wasteland of your own destructive behavior? Think back to a time when you chose to hurt yourself or others by indulging in your sinful impulses. Did you cringe? Did you enjoy the consequences? Did you wish you could take it all back? Israel had abandoned all that God promised them, and embraced other gods. God did as He warned, and punished Israel in captivity for 70 years. Underline the indications of Israel's repentance in the following verses:

“**1** Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying: **2** “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, ‘The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. **3** Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! Let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel; He is the God who is in Jerusalem. **4** Every survivor, at whatever place he may live, let the men of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, together with a freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.” **EZRA 1:1-4**

1 Now when the seventh month came, and the sons of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem. **2** Then Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brothers the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and his brothers arose and built the altar of the God of Israel to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God. **3** So they set up the altar on its foundation, for they were terrified because of the peoples of the lands; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the Lord, burnt offerings morning and evening. **4** They celebrated the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the fixed number of burnt offerings daily, according to the ordinance,

as each day required; **5** and afterward there was a continual burnt offering, also for the new moons and for all the fixed festivals of the Lord that were consecrated, and from everyone who offered a freewill offering to the Lord. **6** From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the Lord, but the foundation of the temple of the Lord had not been laid. **7** Then they gave money to the masons and carpenters, and food, drink and oil to the Sidonians and to the Tyrians, to bring cedar wood from Lebanon to the sea at Joppa, according to the permission they had from Cyrus king of Persia. **EZRA 3:1-7**

10 Now when the builders had laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the Lord according to the directions of King David of Israel. **11** They sang, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, saying, “For He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever.” And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. **12** Yet many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' households, the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, while many shouted aloud for joy, **13** so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the shout of joy from the sound of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard far away. **EZRA 3:10-13**

Israel began to rebuild their lives on the remnants of death and destruction that was left by the armies of Babylon 70 years before. All the promises of God, including His promise to make Israel a great nation, had been hampered by Israel's sin of unbelief. They remained God's people in the spiritual sense, but their sinful behavior had rendered them ineffective for God on earth. Israel continued to rebuild spiritually until Jesus appeared 400 years later. (However, Israel wasn't a recognized nation until 1948.) Consider the following:

- 1 Jeremiah predicted that the Jews would be in captivity for 70 years.¹ Isaiah prophesied that a king named Cyrus would order the temple rebuilt...and Isaiah's prophecy was spoken around 250 years before Cyrus was born.² Cyrus recorded his decree of religious freedom on the famed Cyrus Cylinder, which was a cylindrical clay tablet used to record official government business. (The Cyrus Cylinder is on display today in The British Museum.) The decree of religious freedom by Cyrus, and the restoration of Israel from captivity, are unparalleled events in human history. They show that God is steady at the helm of His redemptive purposes in human history. Our problem lies in trusting Him.
- 2 At the time of King David, there were approximately 1,300,000 fighting men... not counting their wives and children.³ There were also others, such as those who were too old to fight. The population of Israel numbered in the *millions* before captivity. Sadly, the returning refugees that were mentioned in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah numbered only 49,897. Priests made up 10% of that number, and 14% of the group was listed as servants. The large number of priests speaks to the command of Cyrus to re-establish temple worship. The high percentage of servants indicates that many of the returnees were wealthy enough to own servants.⁴ This shows that they loved what they shared with God more than comfort.
- 3 Ezra led a return to the promised land in 458 B.C. He remained there and served in the temple as a priest. Fourteen years later, Nehemiah heard of the broken-down condition of the walls of Jerusalem and approached King Artaxerxes to release him to help rebuild the city.

"One writer calculated the date of Artaxerxes decree to rebuild Jerusalem as March 5, 444 B.C. This date marks the beginning of Daniel's seventy weeks (Dan 9:24-27). Sixty nine of those seventy weeks (173,880 days) were literally fulfilled when Jesus entered Jerusalem, presented Himself at His 'royal entry' as Israel's messiah, March 3, A.D. 33. The prophecy of Daniel was fulfilled to the very day (cf. Luke 19:40-42). The seventieth week of Daniel, the tribulation...will find its' fulfillment in the future."⁵ This exact fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy speaks to the accuracy and trustworthiness of the Word of God.
- 4 During the rebuilding years of Ezra and Nehemiah; Socrates, Plato, and Buddha were alive in their respective countries. Each of them offered popular, competing truth claims. (Some things never change.)

POINT TO PONDER

God had healed Israel's rebellious wound, but sin left a devastating scar.

*"God, may your trustworthy Word be a lamp for my feet, and a light for my path."
Psalm 119:105*



God promised a redeemer in Genesis 3:15. He said that the Redeemer would crush Satan's head but suffer a wounded heel in the process. Jesus is the lamb whose innocence would substitute for our guilt. He is our Passover lamb. He was broken so we could be healed. Prayerfully read the following:

“26 Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. 28 And coming in, he said to her, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” 29 But she was very perplexed at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this was. 30 The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; 33 and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.” **LUKE 1:26-33**

29 The next day he [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming to him and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is He on behalf of whom I said, ‘After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.’ 31 I did not recognize Him, but so that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water.” 32 John testified saying, “I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him. 33 I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, ‘He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.’ 34 I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God.” **JOHN 1:29-34**

1 When Jesus had spoken these words, He went forth with His disciples over the ravine of the Kidron, where there was a garden, in which He entered with His disciples. 2 Now Judas also, who was betraying Him, knew the place, for Jesus had often met there with His disciples. 3 Judas then, having received the Roman cohort and officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. 4 So Jesus, knowing all the things that were coming upon Him, went forth and said to them, “Whom do you seek?” 5 They answered Him, “Jesus the Nazarene.” He said to them, “I am He.” And Judas also, who was betraying Him, was standing with them. 6 So when He said to them, “I am He,” they drew back and fell to the ground. 7 Therefore He again asked them, “Whom do you seek?” And they said, “Jesus the Nazarene.” 8 Jesus answered, “I told you that I am He; so if you seek Me, let these go their way,” 9 to fulfill the word which He spoke, “Of those whom You have given Me I lost not one.” 10 Simon Peter then, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear; and the slave's name was Malchus. 11 So Jesus said to Peter, “Put the sword into the sheath; the cup which the Father has given Me, shall I not drink it?” **JOHN 18:1-11**

The timeline of human history began in eternity with the transcendent triune being, Jehovah God. He spoke our perfect universe into existence from a place outside of time, yet encompassing it. Yet Satan, a created angelic being, introduced evil into the universe. After taking one-third of the angels with him in rebellion, Satan made a very alluring offer to Adam and Eve... he gave them the chance to live independently from God. In his book *Systematic Theology*, Lewis Sperry Chafer writes, "Sin is self-centered living and action on the part of a creature who is by creation designed to be wholly centered in God." Sin demands death as a penalty. But God, in His great mercy, stepped fully into time to die for the sins of the world. Consider the following:

- 1 Approximately 400 years passed between the time of Ezra and the time of Christ. These are often referred to as the "400 silent years". But here's something interesting: the Old Testament canon of scripture was complete before these "silent" years began. Miraculous prophetic utterances and miraculous signs ceased during this time. Were they really "silent years," or did humans have all the information God wanted them to have in His written word? If so, they missed it. Are you "true to yourself," or is God's Word all that is true to you?
- 2 Religious leaders hated Jesus. After all, religion creates human-centered ways to "find" God. Religion is always man seeking after God on his own terms. Christianity, on the other hand, is God seeking man with His only final solution to the problem of sin. Grace, God's unearned favor, is what separates the truth about salvation from all self-centered religious lies.
- 3 As a human, Jesus fulfilled hundreds of Old Testament prophecies and allusions to His appearance and Kingdom. For example, Isaiah 7:14 foretells of Jesus's virgin birth, and when Jesus fed the five thousand, this was reminiscent of Elijah feeding hungry people in 2 Kings 4:42-44. These convincing proofs are further bolstered by the fact that Jesus also performed miracles specific to prevailing expectations of the messiah. "The sages of Israel believed God's messiah would perform three specific miracles to validate His identity...healing a leper, casting out a dumb [mute] demon and healing a man born blind."¹ Do not think that unbelief comes from a lack of miraculous evidence. Self-confident unbelief is already in our hearts.
- 4 Eternal banishment in Hell is the consequence of rejecting God's offer of salvation in Jesus's blood. There is no plan B. There is only one way to be reconciled to God. In Matthew 23:33, Jesus said of the religious leaders. "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?" The drowning unbelievers who clawed away at the outside of Noah's ark understood this well.

All eyes are on Jesus. Born in humble circumstances as a Jewish boy, Jesus had to experience life as a human to act as our empathetic kinsman and redeemer. Jesus was both fully man and fully God. (Theologians call this the "hypostatic union.") This was necessary for human Jesus to be the perfect blood offering, to satisfy God's demand for absolute righteousness.



POINT TO PONDER

Human Jesus was tested in every way, like us... but unlike us, he never sinned. (Hebrews 4:15)

"Father God, our eyes are on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith."



The Jewish leaders had worked themselves into a murderous frenzy. The love they had for their own preconceived ideas about a Jewish messiah made Jesus appear weak and lame. They wanted a political leader to free them from Rome, even more than they felt a need for a savior to deliver them from sin.

Underline the injustices Jesus suffered as He prepared to die on the cross:

28 Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas into the Praetorium, and it was early; and they themselves did not enter into the Praetorium so that they would not be defiled, but might eat the Passover. **29** Therefore Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this Man?" **30** They answered and said to him, "If this Man were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him to you." **31** So Pilate said to them, "Take Him yourselves, and judge Him according to your law." The Jews said to him, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death," **32** to fulfill the word of Jesus which He spoke, signifying by what kind of death He was about to die. **JOHN 18:28-32**

1 Pilate then took Jesus and scourged Him. **2** And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on His head and put a purple robe on Him; **3** and they began to come up to Him and say, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and to give Him slaps in the face. **4** Pilate came out again and said to them, "Behold, I am bringing Him out to you so that you may know that I find no guilt in Him." **5** Jesus then came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Behold, the Man!" **6** So when the chief priests and the officers saw Him, they cried out saying, "Crucify, crucify!" Pilate said to them, "Take Him yourselves and crucify Him, for I find no guilt in Him." **7** The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and by that law He ought to die because He made Himself out to be the Son of God." **JOHN 19:1-7**

16 So he then handed Him over to them to

be crucified. **17** They took Jesus, therefore, and He went out, bearing His own cross, to the place called the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha. **18** There they crucified Him, and with Him two other men, one on either side, and Jesus in between. **19** Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It was written, "JESUS THE NAZARENE, THE KING OF THE JEWS." **20** Therefore many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Latin and in Greek. **21** So the chief priests of the Jews were saying to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews'; but that He said, 'I am King of the Jews.'" **22** Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written." **JOHN 19:16-22**

28 After this, Jesus, knowing that all things had already been accomplished, to fulfill the Scripture, said, "I am thirsty." **29** A jar full of sour wine was standing there; so they put a sponge full of the sour wine upon a branch of hyssop and brought it up to His mouth. **30** Therefore when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit. **JOHN 19:28-30**

5 As the women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living One among the dead? **6** He is not here, but He has risen. Remember how He spoke to you while He was still in Galilee, **7** saying that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again." **LUKE 24:5-7**

God is the sole author of our redemptive story. He always does things the best way... and Jesus dying on the cross was His best. The impulse to think “Could there have been a better way?” reveals the self-centered unbelief that dwells in human hearts, not a flaw in God’s plan. Consider the following:

1 The blood of the Lord Jesus completely satisfied God’s demand for righteousness. In His final moments Jesus cried, “It is finished.” The word that was used in this case for “finished” is a term used to transact business in the ancient world. When a client erased his debt with a complete payment, they would agree, “It is finished.” Jesus declared, “I’ve paid the sin debt in full.” Christ completed payment for the sin-debt of mankind and said, “It is finished.”¹ In the same way we no longer feel guilty or responsible for cancelled debts, our sin-debt is no longer our concern. 1 John 4:18 reads, “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear...”

2 Now that my sin-debt is paid, how does God see me now? The Bible teaches that we are *in* Christ. That means that we died with Christ (Romans 6:8), we were buried with Christ (Romans 6:4), we ascended with Christ and now we’re seated with Christ in the Heavenly realm (Ephesians 2:6). Therefore, we can stop telling believers to *keep looking up* to find God. Now we can tell fellow believers to *keep looking down*, since we are securely seated in Heaven with Christ.² This gives us an unexplainable objectivity... since now we can begin to see the negative drama around us through Heaven’s eyes. Middletown Bible Church did two fascinating studies called “61 Things That Were True of Me Before I Was Saved” and “215 Things That Are True of Me Now That I Am Saved.”³ Remember: you are who God declared you to be.

3 The caveat from the previous paragraphs is that God’s gifts must be appropriated by faith. Hebrews 11:6 says, “But without faith it is impossible to please Him...” Faith is believing that what God has declared beyond my ability to sense is really real. Unbelievers must accept the fact of their lostness and appropriate Christ’s salvation by simply believing that it’s all true. “Appropriation does not necessarily mean we gain something new, but in this case, we set aside for our practical possession something that already belongs to us.”⁴

4 Christ also has *unfinished* work. Christ has a high priestly role in Heaven, where He intercedes for us. “It was the function of priests to offer gifts from the people and sacrifices on behalf of them...As a priest Christ must present to the Father the gifts of those whom He represents and present the benefits of His sacrifice on their behalf in any time of need.”⁵ How comforting to know that Jesus didn’t give and forget. He advocates for us in the presence of God!



POINT TO PONDER

Have I admitted my hopeless, sinful condition and appropriated the forgiveness found only in Jesus, my substitute?

“God, thank you for being the sacrifice that satisfied your demand for righteousness. Thank you for being my Passover lamb. You canceled my sin-debt. Your story is now my story.”

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