

A PROMISE THAT WILL NEVER BE BROKEN

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It hurts when people break a promise. Some people make promises they have no intention of honoring. Others sincerely mean well, but circumstances interfere and they're unable to do what they said they promised they'd do.

God is not like us. When He makes a promise, He keeps it. Period. He is always faithful to His word. For example, He promises an abundant and eternal life to those who trust in His Son, Jesus Christ.

"If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.... For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom. 10:9,13).

But we don't automatically enjoy the benefits of this wonderful promise. We must understand and believe Jesus died on the cross, taking our sin upon Himself, and then rose from the dead, making a new, eternal life possible for us. As we believe, we also acknowledge His lordship, turning from sin and surrendering our lives to Him.

God's promise is for you. If you would like a new life in Christ, repent of your sins and put your faith in Him. Admit to God you are a sinner and ask Him to forgive you. Turn from the sin that has kept you from God and accept Jesus' gift of forgiveness. Confess your faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Express your repentance and faith by praying something like this:

"Dear God, I know I am a sinner. I believe Jesus died on the cross to forgive me of my sins. I ask You to forgive me. I now accept Your gift of eternal life. Thank You for Your love, forgiveness, and a new life in Jesus Christ. From this day forward, I choose to follow You. In Jesus' name, Amen."

Share your decision to follow Jesus with a pastor or those in your Bible study group. Get involved in a church that will help you grow in faith. Be baptized as an expression of your faith.

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A BIBLE STUDY ABOUT THE PROPHECIES OF CHRIST

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The world is constantly searching for answers to the purpose and meaning of life. When people hope in the things of this world, they are left with broken promises and unmet expectations. What this world needs is a hope and promises that are irrefutable. When something is irrefutable it is impossible to prove it wrong. It cannot be denied, and it can be completely trusted.

Of course Jesus is our hope. And the prophecies that point to Him are irrefutable.

Each Christmas, we celebrate the coming of Jesus Christ. But hundreds of years before He was born of the virgin Mary, God revealed through His prophets that Jesus would come, live, and pay the price for our salvation. Our Father in heaven who cannot lie made many promises through prophets about Christ. These prophecies were proven to be true, and they strengthen our faith in our Savior.

In this study we will consider some of the prophecies about Christ. Without a doubt, Jesus was prophesied to be:

- God with us.
- The Light in the darkness.
- The Savior who came to us.
- The King who reigns forever.
- The Light and Glory of God.
- The Ruler who cares for His people.

This world is filled with unmet expectations and broken promises. But we have a heavenly Father who always keeps His promises. He made and fulfilled many prophecies that reveal the genuineness and authenticity of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

GOD WITH US

Leader pages on pp. 102-105

THE POINT:
JESUS IS IMMANUEL—
GOD WITH US.

ISAIAH 7:14; MATTHEW 1:18-25

MEMORY VERSE

Isa. 7:14 Therefore, the LORD himself will give you a sign: See, the virgin will conceive, have a son, and name him Immanuel.

.....
Matt. 1:18 The birth of Jesus Christ came about this way: After his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, it was discovered before they came together that she was pregnant from the Holy Spirit.

¹⁹ So her husband, Joseph, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her publicly, decided to divorce her secretly.

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²⁰ But after he had considered these things, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what has been conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

²² Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ See, the virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will name him Immanuel, which is translated “God is with us.”

²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did as the Lord’s angel had commanded him. He married her

²⁵ but did not have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. And he named him Jesus.

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KEYWORDS

Immanuel (Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:23)—(God with us) implies Jesus’ deity. Mary’s virgin-born Son would be God Himself, living among His people.

Engaged (Matt. 1:18)—Though Joseph and Mary were not yet married, the Jewish custom considered the engagement stage as

a relationship that would require a divorce in order to be ended.

Jesus (v. 21)—This name is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua which means “Yahweh saves.” Jesus’ name revealed His purpose: He would rescue sinners from deserved punishment.

WHY IS THE PROMISE OF THE VIRGIN BIRTH SO IMPORTANT?

It was the biggest night of my senior basketball season. Our team wasn't great, but somehow we made the state semi-finals. Because this was unexpected, my dad had booked an event out of town that meant he would miss the game. I was crushed! I'll never forget my dad's words after he heard my pleas: "Son, I promise I'll be there."

The gym that night was filled with incredible anticipation. The place was packed with fans, but I was only concerned about one person. Would my dad be able to keep his promise? As I led my team onto the floor with our fight song filling the arena, I looked up into the stands, and there he was, cheering me on. My dad kept his promise!

In a world that is filled with broken promises, I am thankful for an earthly father who kept his. I am most thankful for our heavenly Father who always keeps His promises. In this God's grace and mercy abounds. Because God kept His promise given through the prophet Isaiah, we can celebrate Immanuel—God with us.

A Foretold Prophecy // Isaiah 7:14

The Bible is full of promises from God. He promised to send a Messiah who would save the world, and the fulfillment of this promise through the birth of Jesus Christ demonstrates the trustworthiness of our Lord. The specific details in this verse about a coming Messiah are what makes this prophecy a miracle of God.

Isaiah 7:14 is an exciting announcement. The Messiah would be born of a virgin and His name would be called Immanuel. Before we consider the importance of these two details, let's understand the context of this prophecy.

God called the prophet Isaiah, whose name means "Yahweh is salvation" during a time of struggle for God's people. Isaiah's words to the people pointed to the meaning of his name, which pointed to God as their salvation. In Isaiah 7, Ahaz was the king of Judah, the country was under attack, and his people were terrified (vv. 1-2). God offered to give Ahaz a sign that He was powerful enough to take care



THE POINT: JESUS IS IMMANUEL—GOD WITH US.

of their enemies, but Ahaz already may have been planning to ask Assyria for help and didn't think he needed God's help.

When King Ahaz refused to ask for a sign, Isaiah the prophet told the faithless house of David that God would give a sign anyway! The house of David's wickedness had tested God's patience, but God had a sign for them: "See, the virgin will conceive, have a son, and name him Immanuel" (v. 14).

WHY IS IT SIGNIFICANT THAT JESUS' BIRTH WAS FORETOLD HUNDREDS OF YEARS BEFORE IT HAPPENED?

The fulfillment in the Messiah, was a miraculous virgin birth. As Matthew was inspired to recount the birth of Jesus, he used this translation of Isaiah 7:14, wanting us to see the miraculous virgin birth of Christ. The virgin birth of Christ is an important truth; Jesus had to be one of us—human—to die in our place. He couldn't be the perfect sacrifice if He were like every other human with a sin nature. The virgin birth means Jesus had no human father—God is His Father—therefore, Jesus was born without a sin nature. Jesus is fully man, and He is fully God. God is with us!

WHAT ARE SOME THINGS YOU APPRECIATE ABOUT THIS BIBLICAL PROPHECY?

A Fulfilled Sign // Matthew 1:18-19

The Messiah would be born of a virgin. From a human perspective, a virgin birth is impossible. Over the centuries, people have laughed at this idea. It's quite possible that Joseph and Mary's own people laughed when they explained the situation. But God makes the impossible possible!

WHAT ARE OTHER EXAMPLES OF THE IMPOSSIBLE WORK OF GOD IN THE BIBLE?

While Joseph and Mary were engaged, Mary became pregnant from the Holy Spirit. At that time, an engagement was a waiting season to prove faithfulness to God and each other in purity. The couple would be committed to each other as husband and wife although not yet living together. The marriage wouldn't be consummated until after this season. This engagement season was also the season of the miracle from God.



DIGGING DEEPER GOD'S SIGN

In Isaiah 7:10-11, God told Ahaz to ask for a sign because He wanted to strengthen Ahaz's faith in Him. Since Ahaz refused to ask for a sign (v. 12), the entire house of David was under the threat of destruction because of Ahaz's lack of faith. Therefore God gave the sign through Isaiah. God promised the house of David that "the" virgin would conceive (v. 14). Isaiah's use of the word "the" indicates that God had shown him a particular virgin (Mary) who would conceive. The word "virgin" is translated *almah* in Hebrew and *parthenos* in Greek. *Almah* usually means "a young woman who is not sexually active" (Gen. 24:43; Ex. 2:8). *Parthenos* means "a young woman," usually one who is sexually inexperienced. Isaiah 7 is referring to a young woman with no sexual experience. God gave a sign that only He could've done.

How does this sign from God continue to impact the lives of believers today?

Mary's divine pregnancy changed Joseph's plans, but Joseph's actions were commendable. He planned a respectful, secret divorce, thinking she has been unfaithful. Surely Joseph's heart was broken. But his love for Mary and his righteousness drove his actions (even though the Old Testament law allowed for a public stoning for adultery [Deut. 22:22-24]). Joseph chose not to create a public scandal by taking news of Mary's condition to the judges.

The situation had changed Joseph's plans, but didn't change his love for Mary or his desire to live righteously. Joseph took the righteous path and sought to quietly move on from this painful chapter of his life. Joseph thought that divorcing Mary quietly would be the most loving action he could take in this circumstance. But as we shall see, God intervened with a far greater and more righteous approach.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO KNOW THAT GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISES?

Our Certainty of a Savior //

Matthew 1:20-25

As Joseph considered what he thought to be the best option—divorce—God sent an angel to give him a change in plans. Sometimes God tells us to adjust our plans, not because they are bad, but because they aren't the best. God often has a better plan that is known to Him, but not to us. That was the case for Joseph, "an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream" (v. 20) to reveal the truth of Mary's situation: "What has been conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (v. 20).

As Joseph listened to the description of the Messiah as the One who would "save his people from their sins" (v. 21), he must have realized that this was God's plan. As a faithful man from the house of David (Matt. 1:16), he knew and likely recalled the prophecy Matthew

now quoted from Isaiah 7:14: "See, the virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will name him Immanuel," which is translated "God is with us."

The last words of verse 23 stand out: "God is with us." While "Jesus" is the earthly name that was given to Christ (Luke 1:31), Immanuel is a better description. Immanuel describes what God did in sending Jesus. God's presence was intimately with His people. This name of Christ reminds us of the unfailing promise of God in Hebrews 13:5: "I will never leave you or abandon you."

WHAT FEELINGS DO YOU GET WHEN YOU READ THE MEANING OF THE NAME "IMMANUEL"?

By the time of Jesus' birth, the Jewish people had been longing for the Messiah. The coming Messiah would fulfill the promises made throughout the Scriptures: promises of a kingdom filled with victory, joy, prosperity, deliverance from enemies, hatred, and pain. God's promise embedded in the name Immanuel would take them—and us—far beyond things we would receive from His hand. It promises the gift of His presence. When Jesus is with us, He is all we need. Nothing is more powerful in our lives than the presence of God.



THE POINT: JESUS IS IMMANUEL—GOD WITH US.

“God with us” means that we will receive incredible blessings from God, but none will be greater than the blessing of God’s presence. In our trouble-filled world and trial-filled days, it’s a blessing to know that the One true God is right here with us. Sometimes, because of our circumstances, we may feel like God is not with us. That’s when we must take God at His word and trust His presence. Jesus’ birth proves that God is with us.

Joseph was probably concerned about the opinions of those around him and confused about how this pregnancy happened. He must’ve been overwhelmed by the responsibility that the Lord had given to him and Mary. Joseph was reassured that the Lord was with him, and more importantly, the long-awaited Messiah at last was now coming into the world. God kept His promise from centuries earlier, and Jesus was born of a virgin. When we place our faith in Jesus who came to us, God is with us—and He will be with us forever.

HOW DOES THE WAY GOD DEALT WITH JOSEPH MAKE YOU APPRECIATE THE FACT THAT GOD IS WITH YOU?

DID YOU KNOW?

The coming Messiah was mentioned in the Old Testament. These Old Testament prophecies point to Jesus. “I see him, but not now; I perceive him, but not near. A star will come from Jacob, and a scepter will arise from Israel” (Num. 24:17). Genesis 22:18 tells us that through Abraham’s offspring “all nations on earth will be blessed.” Jesus is the fulfillment of this promise. He is from the line of King David. “The days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land ... This is the name by which he will be called: the LORD our righteous savior” (Jer. 23:5-6). The New Testament revealed the fulfillment of the Deliverer. Despite all we endure, we are sure that God loves us because He provided His promised Messiah, and He will keep all of His promises.

What difference does it make knowing that the birth, life, and ministry of Jesus was foretold in the Old Testament?

LIVE IT

How has “God with us” changed your life?

The world’s religions attempt to explain God and how we can reach Him. But these religions fall short because humanity falls short; we can’t reach God on our own. Christianity reveals a wholly different approach: God reached out to us. In Jesus Christ, God came to earth to show us who God is and to provide a way back to our Creator. Because of Jesus, we’re confident that God is with us.

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- **Ask for strength.** This week, pray and reflect on your faith in God. When He tells you something, do you believe Him? If not, ask God to forgive you and to help you to have a stronger faith in Him.
- **Talk about God.** Share with others who are struggling with their faith what God’s presence in your life means to you.
- **Share the birth of Christ.** This week, pray that the Holy Spirit will reveal to you someone who needs to know that God is with them and then share the miracle of the birth of Jesus with them.

DAILY READINGS

1. READ THE SIGN // ISAIAH 7:14

My daughter is turning 16 and has to take her driver's license test. The test is going to include a road sign examination. She will have to look at various signs and tell the examiner what the signs mean. God offered Ahaz, the king of Judah, a sign of deliverance. Ahaz refused to accept the sign God was offering to him. God, as promised, gave a sign anyway that the Messiah (Jesus) would be born. As Christians, we are to recognize that Jesus was born of a virgin, was crucified, died, and was resurrected to save us from our sins and give us eternal life. God gave us a sign—Jesus—just as He promised.

Thanks to Jesus we have victory over sin.

2. BABY BLESSING // MATTHEW 1:18

The birth of a baby is one of the greatest blessings parents can have. The doctor told my husband and me that I was a high risk pregnancy due to being over 35. He explained that women are born with all the eggs they will ever need and as we get older so do the eggs. He asked me if I wanted to have a special test called an amniocentesis to see if our baby had any chromosomal abnormalities. We decided against the test because our baby was a blessing from God and her chromosomes were perfect in His sight. I give God praise for our daughter. Mary gave God praise for choosing her to be the mother of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

Praise God today for blessing us with Christ.

3. STONE SURVIVOR // DEUTERONOMY 22:23-24

According to the law of Moses, if a young virgin woman is engaged and has a sexual encounter with another man, both are guilty. The two of them must be taken out of the gate of the city and stoned to death. Thus according to the law, Joseph could have had Mary stoned to death. But even before the angel spoke to Joseph he did not choose the law over love. He chose the righteous and compassionate

route of a secret divorce. Most people would have wanted revenge against Mary because of what they perceived as betrayal. However, Mary did not betray Joseph. She was part of God's salvation plan for us.

We can trust God who did not allow the law to uproot His plan of salvation.

4. BLIND SIGHT // ISAIAH 9:1-3

Stevie Wonder was born six weeks premature with an eye disorder called retinopathy of prematurity caused by abnormal blood vessels throughout the retina. It worsened when he was overexposed to oxygen while in an incubator leaving him blind. Despite his blindness he had hope that he could be successful. As a child, he told his mother not to worry about his blindness because he was happy. Stevie taught himself to play multiple instruments before age ten. His blindness didn't cause him to lose hope. Judah was distressed in darkness. Isaiah prophesied about the light of Jesus that God promised Judah. God offered them hope in the darkness. Jesus is our hope, and no darkness can cause us to lose that hope.

When we see lights, let us remember Christ.

5. FOLLOW THE LIGHT // NUMBERS 9:15-23

During an eye exam the eye doctor tells his patients to follow the light to make sure their eyes can track the light properly and do not have any dysfunction in the eye muscles. God guided the Israelites by a cloud during their wilderness journey. It was a visual representation of God's presence. This is often referred to as the "Shekinah glory" (Ex. 40:35). The glory of God led the Israelites. The cloud continuously covered the tabernacle and had the appearance of fire. It lifted when the Israelites journeyed to a new location. It's movement was a visual sign of God's guidance. The Israelites moved in response to God's instruction. Jesus is the light of the world, and He desires that we follow Him.

Follow Jesus where He leads.

THE LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

THE POINT:
JESUS SHINES HIS LIGHT INTO A DARK WORLD.

Leader pages on pp. 106-109

ISAIAH 9:1-3; JOHN 1:1-9

Isa. ^{9:1} Nevertheless, the gloom of the distressed land will not be like that of the former times when he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali. But in the future he will bring honor to the way of the sea, to the land east of the Jordan, and to Galilee of the nations.

² The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; a light has dawned on those living in the land of darkness.

³ You have enlarged the nation and increased its joy. The people have rejoiced before you as they rejoice at harvest time and as they rejoice when dividing spoils.

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MEMORY VERSE

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John ^{1:1} In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

² He was with God in the beginning.

³ All things were created through him, and apart from him not one thing was created that has been created.

⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of men.

.....
⁵ That light shines in the darkness, and yet the darkness did not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John.

⁷ He came as a witness to testify about the light, so that all might believe through him.

⁸ He was not the light, but he came to testify about the light.

⁹ The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

KEYWORDS

Have seen (Isa. 9:2)—Though the literal translation is “have seen,” Isaiah was prophesying a future time after God had punished and purified His people.

The Word (John 1:1)—The Greek word *logos* conveys the notion of divine self-expression or speech (Ps. 19:1-4). God’s word

is effective. He speaks and things come to being (Gen. 1:3.9).

Overcome (v. 5)—Throughout John’s Gospel darkness represents the power of evil. Though the word translated overcome can have other meanings, this word best reflects the hostility between “light” and “darkness.”

HOW DOES JESUS SHINE HIS LIGHT INTO THE WORLD?

Have you ever tried to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night with no light on? A couple of mornings each week, I have to get up earlier than usual for a meeting. In the winter, that means getting up before the sun does. My spouse, on the other hand, does not need to get up as early as I do. Being the good person that I am, I don't turn on a light, and I try to be quiet and careful not to wake anyone.

One morning as I tried to leave the dark bedroom for my early morning meeting, my big toe collided with the edge of our big dresser—hard. Has this ever happened to you? By some miracle, I was able to cry quietly with tears in my eyes and successfully limp out of the room without waking my loved ones. I sure could have used a light in that dark room.

Even more importantly, we need a light in the dark culture in which we live. Thankfully, we have that in Jesus. We should be encouraged. The light of Christ will always break through our sin-filled world. Jesus is the light that Isaiah promised us centuries before His birth.

He Dawns in Our Darkness

// Isaiah 9:1-3

Physical darkness can be a dangerous thing but not as dangerous as spiritual darkness. The nation of Judah was living in spiritual darkness because of their rebellion against God. Isaiah had described how the people would “see only distress, darkness, and the gloom of affliction” (Isa. 8:22). They would face defeat, but though the destruction and darkness would be great for the people of Judah, they still had hope. Isaiah contrasted the coming “gloom of the distressed

land” of Judah with what God did to the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali.

Israel split into two kingdoms after Solomon's death. The tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, along with eight other tribes, became the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Because the kingdom of Israel had rebelled against God, He allowed the Assyrians to take over the nation around 732 BC. The Assyrians exiled the people, and people from other nations settled the land.



THE POINT: JESUS SHINES HIS LIGHT INTO A DARK WORLD.

This area included Nazareth, where Jesus was raised. The prophet's statement that "in the future" God would "bring honor" to this area points to the fact that this was Jesus' hometown. Even though the people had been rebellious and had been "walking in darkness," that darkness would be swept away by "a great light." This prophecy was fulfilled in Jesus. The Gospel of Matthew describes how Jesus fulfilled this prophecy: "He left Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah" (Matt. 4:13-14).

People would no longer walk in darkness when the Messiah—the light of the world (John 8:12), was born. Satan wants us in darkness. When we're stuck in darkness, we can become callous to our sin and pain. We can become blind to the dangers of this world. Worst of all, we can lose sight of God's direction and purpose for our lives.

The light of Jesus exposes our sin and points to a life that is greater than a life lived in darkness. Too many people have allowed the darkness of this world to limit their perspectives in life. They have either given up all hope of freedom from their sin, or they simply have chosen to settle for life in the darkness.

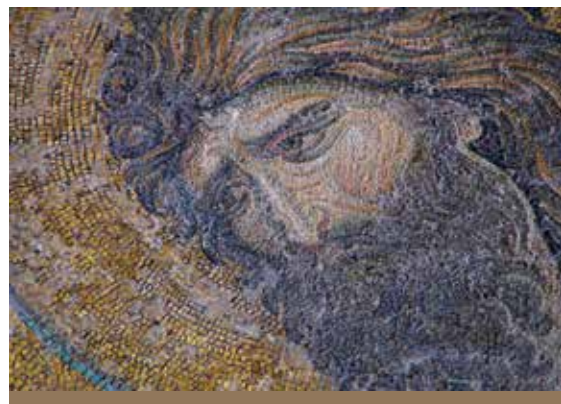
WHAT ARE SOME WAYS OUR WORLD WALKS IN DARKNESS?

Isaiah's prophecy promised a great light that would shine on the land of darkness and in our individual lives. We see this truth in Jesus; His ways are far greater and more joyful than the ways of darkness. God's ways aren't to kill the joy in our lives! His ways are the key to joy.

WHAT WORDS WOULD YOU USE TO DESCRIBE THE HOPE THAT GOD'S LIGHT BRINGS?

Light Shines Through His Life // John 1:1-4

The opening verses of the Gospel of John declare that the bright glory of Jesus has overcome the darkness in this world. John announced who Jesus is! Jesus is God; "He was with God in the beginning" (v. 2) and all creation came through Him. Although Jesus came into the world through the virgin birth; God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have always



DIGGING DEEPER JOHN THE BAPTIST

An angel told Zacharias, John the Baptist's father, that John would be great, wouldn't drink wine, and would be filled with the Holy Spirit. He would be devoted to the powerful ministry of the Lord. His ministry would turn many back to the Lord, leading them to repentance. He would be the forerunner before Christ (Luke 1:17a). His ministry would be preparation for the Messiah. He would serve in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17b). His ministry would be powerful and prophetic. John would "turn the hearts of the fathers ... and the disobedient" (Luke 1:17, Mal. 4:6). John would make ready the people, preparing them for the Lord (Luke 1:17). John's ministry would be God empowered, focused on Christ, and for the benefit of others—exactly the way our service for God should look like.

What part of this description of John the Baptist motivates you to seek and fulfill your calling?

existed, and have always been in relationship with each other.

John described Jesus as “the Word” (v. 1). We often refer to the Bible as “God’s Word”—God’s revelation of Himself to us—but Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God. He is the Word who most fully reveals God because He is God! Because Jesus is “the Word,” Gentile believers would see that Jesus is the One who came to enable them to see what is real and true. Elsewhere in John’s Gospel, Jesus is referred to as “the true light” (1:9), “the true bread” (6:32), and “the true vine” (15:1).



WHAT ARE THE PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF JESUS BEING THE LIGHT OF MEN?

In the Book of Genesis, Adam and Eve enjoyed the light and privilege of walking with God. Unfortunately, they sinned against God, and that sin brought separation—a separation that was passed down to all humanity. With that separation comes ignorance, darkness, and even death. Isaiah had prophesied that light was coming into this world, and John now proclaimed that the Word—Jesus—is that light. The life of Christ is the light of men. Without Christ there is no life or light. In Christ, we have

the privilege and joy of being “the light of the world” (Matt. 5:14-16)—reflecting the light of Christ to those around us.

Only the gospel of Jesus can truly shine light in this dark world. Even as we feed and clothe the poor, we talk about Jesus. He is the light of the world, and He alone offers true life change. When you surrender your life to Christ, you receive His light and join with His Church in being the light of the world. Let’s shine the light of Christ by sharing the light of Christ.

WHEN DID YOU FIRST ENCOUNTER THE LIGHT OF JESUS?

He Lights Every Life // John 1:5-9

It is impossible to know what we’re looking at without light! Remember when as kids we played blind man’s bluff? The person who was “it” wore a blindfold and stumbled around trying to find us, even though we were in plain sight. With the blindfold that person was in the dark.

Taking off the blindfold would have turned on the light for that player. We all need light and truth to live. Thankfully, Jesus is that light shining in darkness. His light exposes how things really are: the sin in our lives, the evil in the world, and the way out of that darkness. Once things become visible, the ways of God are easier to understand. It’s impossible for us to truly understand the ways of God and the abundant life He has for us without the light of Christ in our lives. We can’t understand or live for Jesus without being able to see the light of Jesus.

WHICH DESCRIPTION OF JESUS IN VERSES 1-9 ENCOURAGES YOU TODAY?

God raised up John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus and to point people to the light of Christ. John’s message was about the light of the Messiah. After John’s birth, his father Zechariah prophesied that his son

THE POINT: JESUS SHINES HIS LIGHT INTO A DARK WORLD.

would “go before the Lord to prepare his ways,” proclaiming the light and salvation of Christ (Luke 1:76-77).

When God sent Jesus into this world, He was showing us that He heard our cries in the darkness and loved us enough to save us from that darkness. In Jesus, we can live in the light. Those who believe in Jesus are commanded to walk in His light. As we walk in the light, we declare Christ to the world. John the Baptist had a mission to shine the light of Christ, and so do we. God loves the world and desires for everyone to enjoy His salvation and light; He works through us to reflect that salvation and light to others. May we commit our lives to proclaim the light of Christ to all who are still in darkness. The Lord has saved us to shine!

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9).

IN WHAT WAYS CAN YOU SHINE THE LIGHT OF JESUS IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

DID YOU KNOW?

The electric grid in America is made up of 450,000 miles of high voltage transmission wire. This source of light and energy makes our lifestyles comfortable. Our food is preserved, our houses are heated and cooled, and our lights allow us to enjoy sights and scenes around us. But we often take lights for granted, thinking they will always work and be there. This attitude changes during blackouts. Many people in various parts of the country have experienced a lack of lights due to this interruption. One significant blackout occurred on a cold Tuesday, November 9, 1965, in the Northeastern U.S. When people were cooking their food and heating their homes, the lights went out. Families were without the convenience of light and electricity for more than 13 hours.¹ The cause was human error.

How is a blackout a metaphor for what our lives would be like without Christ who is our light?

LIVE IT

How can the light of Jesus shine through you?

There's a lot wrong in our world, because the world is evil. Humankind left to its own is full of darkness and sin (Jer. 17:9). Thankfully God does not leave us in darkness; He sent Jesus into the world to dispel the darkness of sin. And because His light shines through His followers, we too can be the light that someone else needs. Let your light shine this week by doing the following:

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- **Repent of sin.** Pray that God will reveal any sin you are holding on to. Then ask the Holy Spirit to destroy that part of your sin nature so you can represent Him well.
- **Share hope.** Reflect on the hope that you have in Jesus. Then share the hope of Jesus with people you may encounter who have lost their hope.
- **Obey the Spirit.** Pray for God's guidance in all areas of your life so you can be ready to meet a need, pray for someone, share the gospel, or other spiritual work when the Spirit prompts you.

DAILY READINGS

1. LET THERE BE LIGHT // MATTHEW 4:13-16

Isaiah prophesied about the region of Capernaum. Capernaum included Naphtali and Zebulun (two of the original tribes of Israel). John the Baptist was the messenger God sent to prepare the way for the Lord. After John the Baptist was arrested, Jesus relocated His ministry to the region of Galilee where Capernaum was located, which fulfilled the prophecy in Isaiah. "But in the future he will bring honor to the way of the sea, to the land east of the Jordan, and to Galilee of the nations" (Isa. 9:1-2). The prophecy foretold that all who live in darkness and who are experiencing the darkness of death can receive the light of Jesus.

Whether in darkness or the shadow of death, look to the light of Jesus for hope.

2. JESUS THE LIGHT // JOHN 8:12

Have you noticed that people who are visually impaired typically have a stronger sense of hearing and touch? When the sense of sight is lost, the brain compensates by making the other senses stronger. The loss of sight causes dramatic functional changes in the brain's visual cortex. These adaptive functions are sustained, reinforced, and eventually lead to permanent structural changes. We were spiritually blind and in need of functional changes so that we could see. Jesus came to bring us His Light so that we can experience sustained, reinforced, and permanent spiritual changes. Jesus brings life and light to humankind.

Let Jesus be your light, and you will no longer be spiritually blind.

3. SAFE LIGHT // JOHN 1:4-5

Growing up we had to be in the house when the street lights came on. Street lights came on when it turned dark. If you weren't in the house there were consequences. My mother knew it was dangerous for us to be outside and not in the safety of our home when it was dark. Our heavenly Father knows

the world is filled with darkness, and He devised a plan for the light of Christ to overcome the darkness. He desires that we live in the safety of His light. John tells us, "In him was life, and that life was the light of men. That light shines in the darkness, and yet the darkness did not overcome it" (vv. 4-5).

Find safety and life in the light of Jesus.

4. GUARANTEED RESCUE // MICAH 5:2

Hundreds of years before the birth of Christ, Micah prophesied that Jesus' birth would take place in the small town of Bethlehem. Micah said, "His origin is from antiquity, from ancient times" (v 2). Indicating that the promised eternal King would be a descendant of David. Moreover, the coming Messiah would live as a man but be fully God. He would rule eternally, and He would be endowed with the power and majesty of God. Micah continued, "They will live securely, for then his greatness will extend to the ends of the earth" (v 4). God's love for us was declared hundreds of years before Jesus was born. He was and is the promised Savior.

Jesus came to save us from our sins. Let us respond with awe and worship.

5. SOVEREIGN DECREE // LUKE 2:1-5

Caesar called for a census: "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole empire should be registered" (v 1). He likely wanted an accurate count of the region's population for taxation purposes. Joseph was from the house and family of David, so he and Mary were required to travel to the city of his heritage. "Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem" (v. 4). God is sovereign. And in His sovereignty He presides over events great and small. He used a pagan emperor's decree to fulfill biblical prophecy and accomplish His perfect plan. What power; what love that our God would go to that length to save us.

His perfect plan for our salvation should be celebrated with joy.

THE SAVIOR WHO CAME TO US

THE POINT:
JESUS CAME FOR OUR SALVATION.

Leader pages on pp. 110-113

LUKE 2:4-12,16-20

⁴ Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family line of David, ⁵ to be registered along with Mary, who was engaged to him and was pregnant. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ Then she gave birth to her firstborn son, and she wrapped him tightly in cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

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⁸ In the same region, shepherds were staying out in the fields and keeping watch at night over their flock. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Don't be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people: ¹¹ **Today in the city of David a Savior was born for you, who is the Messiah, the Lord.** ¹² This will be the sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped tightly in cloth and lying in a manger."

MEMORY VERSE

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¹⁶ They hurried off and found both Mary and Joseph, and the baby who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ After seeing them, they reported the message they were told about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary was treasuring up all these things in her heart and meditating on them. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had seen and heard, which were just as they had been told.

KEYWORDS

Engaged (v. 5)—Because they had not yet consummated their marriage via intercourse, Mary and Joseph were still only engaged as months before in 1:27.

Manger (v. 7)—That Jesus was laid in a manger indicates that the family was forced to stay in a stable, or perhaps a cave that

served as a stable, because there was no other room available in Bethlehem.

Lord (v. 11)—The Greek word for Lord *kurios* was used of secular rulers, but it is also the standard translation of the primary name of God in Hebrew, *Yahweh*.

HOW WAS THE PROMISE OF SALVATION FULFILLED?

Life is filled with decisions that can impact the rest of our lives, such as a job change or a move to another city. After serving one church for many years, my family and I answered God's call on our lives to plant a church in another city. We struggled leaving a place where God had blessed our lives with an incredible church family, friends, ministry, and life. Leaving all this was hard.

Even as we answered God's call, a pastor friend reached out to me. The Lord had called him years before to leave his hometown to plant a church. He told me how he had battled with the decision to move, but then he also shared an amazing perspective. God called his entire family, not just him. Years later, all his kids know Jesus and are now serving Jesus in that city. I, too, can now say I have also seen my kids come to faith in Christ in our new city.

Jesus made a move too. He moved from heaven to earth, coming to us as a baby. His decision impacts all of us—for eternity!

Through Divine Circumstances

// Luke 2:4-7

The oppressive rule of the Romans fueled the expectation of the coming Messiah. God promised King David that “your house and kingdom will endure before me forever, and your throne will be established forever” (2 Sam. 7:16). God fulfilled His promise to David when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, although it was not the royal event most people would have expected.

We're given few details about this important birth. Luke was inspired to tell us exactly what we need to know: “She gave birth to her firstborn son, and she wrapped him tightly in cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them” (v. 7). Jesus was born in humble circumstances. There was no ceremonial fanfare.

WHAT DETAILS ABOUT JESUS' BIRTH STORY ARE DIFFERENT THAN WHAT YOU WOULD HAVE EXPECTED FOR A KING?



THE POINT: JESUS CAME FOR OUR SALVATION.

Mary and Joseph knew this was a miraculous birth because of the angels' words to both of them (Matt. 1:20-21; Luke 1:26-37). We should recognize the powerful picture of humility that surrounded the birth of God's Son. It's humbling for God to leave the majesty and glory of heaven to become like one of us. Yet in coming to earth, Jesus came to the most humbling of circumstances for any birth. Jesus was of royal lineage, but He came for all people, everywhere—the least to the greatest. No person will be denied access to the Messiah.

Jesus grew up in humble circumstances. His ministry was among the common people. He came to serve and became the ultimate Servant. No wonder so many didn't recognize Him as the Messiah. Even though Jesus was a direct descendant of King David, He was not the conquering warrior Messiah so many were expecting.

It's important for us to reflect on the birth of Christ and how He came into this world. We need to surrender our expectations to what God orchestrates in our lives. His ways are always greater than our ways, and we can trust that He has a perfect purpose for everything He does.

Proclaimed by Angels // Luke 2:8-12

An angel of the Lord appeared and told the shepherds, "Today in the city of David a Savior was born for you, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (v. 11). As he made this announcement, the angel was joined by more angels: "a multitude of the heavenly host" (v. 13). What an incredible experience for these shepherds to see and hear the skies filled with the praise of angels.

HOW HAS JESUS' BIRTH BEEN GOOD NEWS IN YOUR LIFE?

A few things stand out about this angelic announcement:

- **The announcement was terrifying.** As the angel spoke "and the glory of the Lord shone around them" (v. 9), Luke described them as "terrified." The word literally means they feared a great fear! However, the angel's first words to the shepherds were, "Don't be afraid" (v. 10). Their fear turned into amazement. To see and hear the angels proclaim the glory of God must have filled the shepherds' hearts with an awe and wonder of the Lord.



DIGGING DEEPER BIRTH ANNOUNCEMENT

The first to hear the "good news" of the birth of Jesus were the shepherds. They weren't the expected recipients of the announcement of the birth of King Jesus. Traditionally, shepherds were among the lowest social classes, so the announcement going to them first wasn't likely. They were considered unclean and of poor reputation—representing the sinners and outcasts for whom Jesus came (Matt. 9:9-13). The angel announced "Today in the city of David a Savior was born for you, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (Luke 2:11). Jesus would come to save even those considered the lowest in society. Jesus was given three titles in this verse: Savior, Christ, and Lord. These titles highlight His mission as Savior, His royalty as Christ, and His authority as Lord.

What do you think is the significance of the angels announcing the birth of Jesus to the shepherds first?

- **The announcement was comforting.** Comfort would come in the angel's call to not be afraid. The shepherds would receive even greater comfort as they heard "good news of great joy that will be for all the people" (v. 10). These shepherds surely carried in their hearts the same longing and hope for God's deliverance that all the people had been yearning for, and now that longing was fulfilled: "Today in the city of David a Savior was born for you, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (v. 11).

It's possible the shepherds had a specific picture in their minds of what the Messiah's arrival would be like. However, the angel painted a different picture: "You will find a baby wrapped tightly in cloth and lying in a manger" (v. 12). This humble description would have brought comfort to the shepherds, for they were also simple men. Jesus had come just like them.

- **The announcement was inspiring.** What started with one angel now multiplied to "a multitude of the heavenly host" (v. 13). In his vision of God's throne, Daniel said, "Thousands upon thousands served him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him" (Dan. 7:10). God's angels were now declaring the glory of God and peace on earth.

The angelic announcement was both amazing and terrifying ... so simple, yet so comforting ... so powerful, yet so inspiring.

WHAT SPECIFIC PROMISES DID GOD MAKE THROUGH THESE ANGELIC MESSENGERS?

Praised by the People

// Luke 2:16-20

After such an awesome experience, no wonder the shepherds exclaimed, "Let's go straight to Bethlehem and see what has happened, which

the Lord has made known to us" (Luke 2:15). It's no surprise that "they hurried off" to see the very thing the angel proclaimed. The shepherds found all things just as the angel had told them. It must not have been long after Jesus' birth, for they found "the baby who was lying in the manger" (v. 16). The shepherds "reported the message they were told about this" (v. 17), adding to the wonder of all the events since Gabriel first appeared to Mary (1:26-38).



HOW HAS SALVATION BROUGHT JOY TO YOUR LIFE?

After they told Joseph and Mary of the angelic announcement, the shepherds shared what they had witnessed and heard from the angel, and "all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them" (v. 18). The story and announcement of Jesus' birth inspired a deep level of amazement.

God was doing something new—something that brought hope for a people longing for deliverance. It wouldn't be hard to connect the birth of this baby with the angels' declaration of "peace on earth to people he favors!" (v. 14). This child, Jesus, would bring to us that which we could never give ourselves: peace. God's peace would come through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Therein lies our hope.

THE POINT: JESUS CAME FOR OUR SALVATION.

Peace grounded in faith. This peace is by grace, through faith, in Jesus Christ alone. It cannot be earned (Eph. 2:8-9). Instead, we receive this peace as we trust in the death and resurrection of Christ. His work of salvation for humanity was the reason He came to earth as a baby!

Peace that frees us from the past. “While we were still sinners Christ, died for us” (Rom. 5:8) and He alone is faithful and just to forgive us of our sin and cleanse us of our unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). In Christ we are forgiven of our sin and set free from the shackles of pain and guilt.

Peace that fills our present. We can experience His peace today. The peace that Christ gives us in salvation surpasses all our understanding (Phil. 4:7) and overcomes all circumstances in our lives (John 16:33).

Peace that points to our future. This peace sets us free from our past and fulfills our present and propels us toward a guaranteed future. Nothing can separate us from the love and presence of Christ, we can rest in His peace for eternity (Rom. 8:38-39).

DID YOU KNOW?

Sarah Parker Remond was born free to affluent parents in 1826. Remond was a voice against racial hierarchy, gender inequality, and a woman of science and medicine. In 1856, Remond joined the American Anti-Slavery Society and lectured for a couple of years. She was an effective abolitionist campaigner and the first woman to lecture publicly against slavery in this country. While slavery in Britain was abolished in 1838, large manufacturers in Britain depended on cotton imported from Southern U.S. states, and thus upon slavery. Remond worked to influence British public opinion to support the Union cause. After slavery was abolished, she attended to the many newly freed slaves. After the Civil War, Remond worked with her brother and Frederick Douglass in the American Equal Rights Association.² Remond could've lived a life of affluence; but chose the life of a servant.

How can life as a servant honor and bring glory to Christ our Lord?

LIVE IT

How will you live out your hope in Jesus?

The path of our lives is shaped by personal decisions we control and world events over which we have no control, such as the economy, wars, and pandemics. However, the greatest impact on our lives comes from two events that happened long ago: the birth of Jesus and His resurrection. When God came to earth as an infant, He made our salvation possible. Jesus gives us hope for a future filled with peace.

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- **Reflect on your life.** Reflect on how God's plans for you turned out to be better than what you expected. Share your reflections with someone who is currently disappointed about his or her life.
- **Share Jesus' birth.** Follow the example set by the shepherds. Commit to sharing the news of Christ's birth with someone at work, at the store, or in your community.
- **Aim for peace.** Do an honest evaluation of the things that you are currently struggling with. Ask God to direct you in those areas so you can experience His peace.

DAILY READINGS

1. HUMBLE BEGINNINGS // LUKE 2:6-7

Swaddling your newborn infant is not unusual. It helps the baby sleep by making them feel like you are holding them. It helps them to be calm while resting. It also helps them not to scratch themselves during the night. It was customary for Mary to wrap her newborn infant in cloths; in biblical times it was to straighten and strengthen their limbs, so it was not unusual that Mary wrapped Jesus in cloths. However, Jesus being placed in a manger is not what we would expect for the Messiah. The humility of Jesus began at the beginning of His life. He gave up His divinity to live a humble life so we could receive salvation.

Jesus' birth makes Him approachable and reveals God's love.

2. AMAZING DECLARATION // LUKE 2:16-20

The gospel of Luke highlights unique things about the birth of Jesus. Although Jesus is the promised Messiah, His birth, life, and ministry were not like what would be expected of a King. His birth announcement came to shepherds who immediately sought out the Messiah (v. 16). Jesus caused amazement at birth and later by His teaching and ministry. "After seeing them, they reported the message they were told about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them" (vv. 17-18). While others were amazed, Mary held these things about Jesus in her heart and continued to think about them (v. 19). The shepherds left rejoicing about Jesus.

We, too, should rejoice over the amazing declaration—our Savior Jesus was born!

3. PEACE OFFERING // LUKE 2:13-14

The peace lily is a popular plant often given to bereaved families at funerals. The white flower looks like a flag of surrender seeking peace. The plant thrives and grows better in light. A peace lily may

have a calming effect, but it can't give true peace. We can seek peace in various places, but the true Source of peace is Jesus. When the angel of the Lord announced the birth of Jesus, heavenly beings joined the angel to praise God (v. 13). They were worshiping God because of Jesus who brought peace. "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to people he favors" (v. 14). Through Christ we have peace with God.

Praise God for the peace that Jesus gives.

4. WISE COUNSEL // LUKE 9:6

These days there are a lot of TV shows featuring counselors who claim to be able to fix your problems. Iyanla Vanzant has a popular show on the OWN network called "Iyanla Fix My Life." Iyanla has a Juris Doctor degree and a master's degree in spiritual psychology. She is also an ordained New Thought minister. Her show focuses on self-help and forgiveness in dealing with crises, trauma, and broken relationships. But Iyanla falls woefully short when compared to the true Counselor. In Christ is indescribable wisdom. His amazing teaching, knowledge, and wisdom fills us with wonder. In Jesus, we have the only Counselor we need. If it's counsel you need, seek Jesus.

He is the answer for any problem in the world.

5. REAL PEACE // JOHN 14:27

Over the past several years racial incited violence and discrimination has been a topic in and across the U.S. Historically, racial violence and discrimination against African-Americans had been blatant and tolerated by people who had the ability to change it. African-Americans and others participate in demonstrations and organizations that stand against racial discrimination. People are looking for peace, but that kind of peace can't compare to the peace we have in Jesus. Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Don't let your heart be troubled or fearful" (John 14:27).

The Prince of Peace restores our hope.



You've Got Jesus All Wrong

JUSTIN LESTER

Some say Jesus quoted the Old Testament because all of the prophecies had already come true before Jesus came. For example, Isaiah's prophecy about the coming of a baby (Isa. 7-9) was about Josiah or Hezekiah and the hope for the kingdom of Israel more than it was about Jesus ... right?

The words of an old song by Marvin Gaye, "I heard it through the grapevine," details how a simple story can become so much more than its original intention. Often, the story is false. In today's society, the same applies to the story of Jesus. The beauty within the story of faith, salvation, redemption, reconciliation, and restoration through Jesus has been studied so much that, at times, Jesus has been written out.

He did not gift us His life for us to question it. He gifted us His life for us to share it.

As you study these lessons on the prophecies of Jesus, you will learn that the entirety of the Old Testament points candidly to Jesus. Along with the Father and Holy Spirit, Jesus is intricately intertwined in the narrative of the Old Testament. It can be challenging to navigate all of that information, especially in our Google world.

A considerable amount of people are falling away from the faith and from attending a local church. Churches have turned to technology to assist in sharing Jesus' story, but so has the enemy. In that process, so many questions about what is or is not true about the gospel are placed on

the table. Couple that with conspiracy theories, fallen leaders, the questionable character of historical writers, and new scrolls and gospels found yearly, which present several ways for us to question the infallible Word of God. In the same manner, though, there are more reasons to trust the infallible Word of God.

Let's place a few questions on the table.

1 – Did Jesus ride two animals on Palm Sunday with a colt and foal of a donkey? (Matt. 21:1-3) Does that affirm Zechariah (Zech. 9:9) or Jacob (Gen. 49:9-11) or both?

2 – Was Jesus a black man? How tall was he? Did he have locs? (Rev. 1:9-18)

3 – Was Joseph really in his elderly years and Mary a teenager?

4 – Did Jesus die or faint? Is that why the tomb was empty?

5 – Insert your question here:

Consider the common thread in our questions: engaging with myths is a desire to know Jesus fully. The mistake is such a desire can cause more questions. It can distance us from the redemptive nature of the cross (1 Pet. 1:3-9), the power of a relationship with Christ (John 15:9-17), and the goal for us as Christians to go! (Matt. 28:16-20). How powerful would it be for you to end this study on the prophetic nature of Jesus with a more engaged life in Scripture and Jesus, instead of seeking ways to impress someone with new knowledge. Here are three suggestions on how to approach Scripture as a means to build a relationship with Jesus instead of offensively trying to show how much we know.

Be honest about why you are reading Scripture (Col. 3:17)

Anything without an intention is wasted time. What is your intention when you approach Scripture? Paul challenges the believer to do all things in Jesus' name, and in the process, you will be giving thanks to the Father. Time with Jesus has a goal for us to leave with a greater understanding and practice of thanksgiving.

Read Scripture, seeking to hear from God, not to affirm your voice (Rom. 10:17)

Along with approaching the gospel with an honest intention, we are also challenged to ensure that we understand Jesus through God's voice, not our own. Paul challenged the people in Rome that, "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the message about Christ" (Rom. 10:17). The message of Christ spoken by Christ, the Father, and the Holy Spirit is what gives flesh to our faith. An easy way to be distracted from a relationship with Jesus is looking for Jesus' story to affirm your story, instead of trying to be a part of Jesus' story.

Let Jesus unveil Himself (John 6:63)

The myths and stories about Jesus often leave Jesus out. Jesus told his disciples and tells you, "The Spirit is the one who gives life. The flesh doesn't help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life" (John 6:63). Jesus knows how much of Himself we can handle as we continue to understand what He is calling each of us to do to build his kingdom. Walk-in step with Jesus and allow His pace to be your pace.

Allow me to let you in on a secret. Easter for preachers is our Super Bowl. We love searching for new information to strengthen how we preach on Holy Week and Easter. One year in conversation with some colleagues, we discussed our Good Friday sermons. Each of us had found a new piece of information about a biblical character, and we were excited to shock the system of the congregation. An older sage preacher looked at us and said, "Preachers, the people need to see Jesus, not you." As simple as that is, I want you to apply that to your engagement of God's Word. When you read and study the Word of God, remember you are seated at the table with the Author. He knows the story! Let Him tell you the truth. Let God invite you to reflect. Let God challenge you to become.

Justin Lester serves as the Pastor of Congdon Street Baptist Church in Providence, RI. Justin has an extreme love for coffee, fitness, and all things Marquette Basketball and Green Bay Packers. Most importantly, Justin is married to the most beautiful woman in the world, Courtney Lester, and is the father to his "little man," Camden.

THE KING WHO REIGNS FOREVER

Leader pages on pp. 114-117

THE POINT:
JESUS RULES HIS KINGDOM NOW AND FOREVER.

ISAIAH 9:6-7; LUKE 1:26-33

MEMORY VERSE

Isa. ^{9:6} For a child will be born for us, a son will be given to us, and the government will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ The dominion will be vast, and its prosperity will never end. He will reign on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish and sustain it with justice and righteousness from now on and forever. The zeal of the LORD of Armies will accomplish this.

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Luke ^{1:26} In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And the angel came to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ But she was deeply troubled by this statement, wondering what kind of greeting this could be. ³⁰ Then the angel told her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ Now listen: You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus.

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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 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will have no end."

KEYWORDS

House of David (Luke 1:27)— One of the clans in the tribe of Judah, from which prophecies said the Messiah would come (Gen. 49:9-10).

Favored (v. 28)—Mary was favored because the Lord set His undeserved grace upon her, not because she had earned good standing.

Jesus (v. 30)—This name (Greek *-Iesous*) is equivalent to the Hebrew *Yehoshua* (Joshua), meaning "the Lord is salvation."

Son of the Most High (v. 32)— This title means Jesus was the Son of God Himself (v. 35) because God created the life in Mary's womb without the aid of a human father.

HOW DO WE KNOW JESUS RULES BOTH NOW AND FOREVER?

Sidney Poitier botched his lines when he first started out as an actor. He was told he should work as a dishwasher, because his Caribbean accent was so thick. It must've been a surprise when he won an Academy Award in 1963.³

Abraham Lincoln was another man most people didn't expect to succeed. After all, he failed in several business ventures, and during his service in the military, Lincoln went from being a captain to a private!⁴

The work of Jesus far exceeded anything people were expecting from the Messiah; although they had expected a warrior, Jesus came to do far more than they could've imagined. Those who watched Jesus grow up like any other Jewish child and become a carpenter were likely surprised by His work as an itinerant rabbi. Even to those who knew the angelic announcement of His arrival, His ministry and work on our behalf far exceeded anything they expected. Jesus became King of kings and Lord of lords—titles He holds now and forever.

Prophecy Declares It // Isaiah 9:6-7

Jesus came to earth to bring us into God's eternal kingdom. Jesus would show us how to love God and people. He would be obedient unto death on a cross and rise from the grave, giving us new life.

Isaiah 9:6-7 is a prophecy that reflects the full picture of Jesus. Isaiah 9:1-3 tells us "a great light" one day would appear in the region of Galilee. Isaiah described how God would bless the people with joy and freedom from their oppressors and establish a new kingdom that would be ruled by a new kind of king. Verses 6-7 describe that King.

- **The government will be on his shoulders.** This is the image of a King putting on His royal robes, that represents who He is and the authority He has.
- **Wonderful.** The Hebrew word refers to that which is supernatural and miraculous. This is the same root word for the miracles that occurred in Egypt (Ex. 3:20).



THE POINT: JESUS RULES HIS KINGDOM NOW AND FOREVER.

- **Counselor.** This Counselor would give wise counsel. Putting “Wonderful” alongside “Counselor” pointed to a Ruler who would express God’s wisdom in all His words and actions.
- **Mighty God.** This is a common title for God (Deut. 10:17; Ps. 24:8; Jer. 32:18). It points to the deity of Jesus. This prophecy points to Jesus, the mighty, divine Warrior who fights for His people.
- **Eternal Father.** We associate this term with God the Father. We acknowledge the deity of Jesus, but the term refers to the King’s fatherly style of leadership. Jesus will wisely lead us forever.
- **Prince of Peace.** Jesus will establish a kingdom of peace. He brought us peace through His death on the cross. “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile everything to himself, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Col. 1:19-20).

WHICH OF THESE TITLES AND DESCRIPTIONS OF JESUS STANDS OUT TO YOU THE MOST?

The qualities of the One prophesied in these verses far outshine the greatest human leader. His righteous, benevolent, and peace-filled reign will never end.

This describes the character of Jesus and how He will rule and reign over the people of God. Jesus’ birth prepares us to hope for the day when He will come again. At His second coming, Jesus will come as the resurrected King who will bring justice, gather His faithful followers unto Himself, and establish forever the new heaven and new earth. God was faithful to send us a Savior. He will be faithful to send us a King!

IN WHAT WAYS DOES CHRIST’S ETERNAL REIGN OFFER HOPE?

Uniquely Designed for It

// Luke 1:26-31

Centuries after Isaiah prophesied about the coming Messiah, events unfolded regarding the promised child. Luke records the angelic announcement regarding the birth of John the



DIGGING DEEPER DAVIDIC COVENANT

Jesus’ birth fulfilled God’s promised Davidic covenant prophesied by Nathan to David. “When your time comes and you rest ... I will raise up after you your descendant ... and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son ... Your house and kingdom will endure before me forever, and your throne will be established forever” (2 Sam. 7:12-16). God promised David a descendant (Seed) who would be given a secure (eternal) kingdom (v. 12). He would build a temple for the Lord (v. 13). He would have a Father/Son relationship with God (v. 14). God’s promise is unconditional (v. 15). The Lord granted David an eternal house (dynasty), kingdom (nation), and throne (sovereignty) forever (v. 16).

What is the significance of this Davidic covenant for us today?

Baptist (Luke 1:5-25), followed six months later by the angelic announcement to a virgin in Nazareth named Mary. Gabriel, the same angel who announced the birth of John, now came to Mary with another announcement.

The word “angel” means messenger. Gabriel’s initial message wasn’t complex, but it was confusing. “Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you” (v. 28). Luke reported, “she was deeply troubled by this statement” (v. 29). But “then the angel told her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary’” (v. 30).

Mary “found favor with God” (v. 30). To find favor with God means to be “full of grace.” Mary received God’s grace. All who have accepted Christ by faith are full of grace. Paul used this Greek word when he wrote, because we are adopted into God’s family through Christ, we have received “his glorious grace that he lavished on us in the Beloved One” (Eph. 1:6).

For many, knowing God is present is comforting; for others, however, the presence of God causes them to be afraid. Mary, though, was troubled because she didn’t know why she was blessed with the presence of God.

Twice in verse 27, Luke used the word “virgin.” Luke emphasized God’s role in this event. This was no ordinary conception. Gabriel gave more detail in verse 35: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” This angelic statement is clear: Mary’s son would “be called the Son of God.”

WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS BEING FULLY GOD?

Mary’s role emphasized that this child also would be fully human. Jesus became one of us. He was born, lived, and died as a human being. Hebrews 4:15 assures us, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with

our weaknesses, but one who has been tested in every way as we are, yet without sin.” Jesus knows what it’s like to face tests, trials, and temptations—yet He never sinned. Jesus is the only true Savior because He lived the perfect life we should live before God. “He made the One who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21).

WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS BEING FULLY MAN?



Destiny Demands It // Luke 1:32-33

Gabriel announced the role and character of Jesus. Jesus’ mission was unlike any other mission the world has ever seen because of who Jesus is, what He will do, and where He will be for all eternity.

WHAT ARE SOME WAYS JESUS RULES IN YOUR LIFE?

- **He will be great.** Gabriel’s announcement pointed to someone infinitely greater. “Great” was a word used frequently to describe God in the Old Testament (Deut. 10:17; Ps. 145:3; 147:5). No one is greater

THE POINT: JESUS RULES HIS KINGDOM NOW AND FOREVER.

than Jesus—and no one ever will be than our all-powerful Savior and Lord.

- **He will be called the Son of the Most High.** “Most High” was an Old Testament term reserved for God. Not only is Jesus great, but He is God’s Son. As Mary’s son, Jesus is fully human. As the Son of the Most High, Jesus is fully God.
- **He will be given the throne of His Father David and will rule over the house of Jacob.** God promised King David, “Your house and kingdom will endure before me forever, and your throne will be established forever” (2 Sam. 7:16). Jesus spoke creation into existence (Col. 1:16), and as the resurrected Lord, Jesus would sit at the right hand of God “far above every ruler and authority, power and dominion, and every title given” (Eph. 1:21).

Jesus, Son of the Most High, will rule and reign above all forever. When we surrender our lives to Jesus, we receive the privilege of joining Him in this rule and reign for all eternity. He will be our King forever and ever.

WHAT DIFFERENCE SHOULD IT MAKE THAT WE ARE PART OF THE ETERNAL KINGDOM?

DID YOU KNOW?

In the U.S., Christmas is generally celebrated without fear. In Bethlehem, there are political complications around Christmas. In 2002, Israeli Defense Forces occupied Bethlehem as part of Operation Defensive Shield.⁵ At this time, Palestinian militants took refuge in the Church of the Nativity. The same year, the Israeli West Bank barrier was erected, extending over 80 kilometers and surrounding Bethlehem on three sides. Consequently, checkpoints and roadblocks separate the church marking the place where Christ was born from the church marking the place of His crucifixion. As a result, it is more difficult for Palestinian Christians to visit Bethlehem and move between the two holy sites. However, Christians in the Middle East continue to celebrate Christmas.

What do you think the impact would be if Christians in the U.S. had opposition to celebrating Christmas freely?

LIVE IT

How will your life reflect the fact that Jesus reigns?

After Christmas, people pack up the decorations and don’t give Jesus much thought until next Christmas. They leave Jesus in the manger, but the events of His nativity are only part of the story. We must remember that Jesus grew into adulthood, lived a perfect life, and died on our behalf. He is the King who reigns as Lord over all creation forever. How will He reign in your life after Christmas?

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- **Be creative.** Think of some creative ways you can celebrate the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ beyond the Christmas season.
- **Seek Christ.** Make a list of weaknesses you struggle to conquer. Submit to Christ’s lordship over those struggles through prayer. Remember Christ is with you now and always.
- **Partner with Christ.** Begin each day in complete surrender to Christ. Then acknowledge His presence throughout day. Trust Christ to provide a solution to every problem you face.

DAILY READINGS

1. BORN LEADER // ISAIAH 9:7

We elect government officials according to our personal preferences, their popularity, and their ability to fund campaigns. They make campaign promises that may or may not be kept. Different political parties cater to particular views and people. This can lead to division, hatred, and sometimes violence. And even if they win, their rule is limited to a particular region, and there will be an end to their reign. In contrast, Jesus' reign is peaceable and prosperous. He rules the entire world. His reign is without judgment or broken promises. He rules with justice and righteousness. Jesus reigns forever. No matter who is elected to the worldly governments, we serve the King who reigns forever. We can be confident that His promise of peace, justice, and righteousness will never end.

Thank God for His uninterrupted reign.

2. NO FAILURE // LUKE 1:32-33

Celebrities are honored and often worshiped for the gifts (talents and skills) that God has blessed them with. Their fans will spend small fortunes and stand outside for over 24 hours for their concert or game tickets. Celebrities are idolized and put on pedestals and when they fail, their fans are devastated. They are treated as mini gods, but they are not the One true God. Only our heavenly Father deserves the glory. God sent His Son to die for us. Jesus never fails because He is the Son of the Most High God. All the glory and honor belongs to Him. Jesus reigns and His kingdom will never end.

Use your time, talents, and treasure to bless God. He alone should receive our praise.

3. SUPER POWER // EPHESIANS 1:21

The United States, China, and Russia rank as the most powerful countries in the world. The U.S. is ranked first because it's the most dominant economic and military power in the world.⁶ Many

people believe there is great power in this, but they are deceived. Jesus is more powerful than any earthly super power. He sits at the right hand of God, above all the earth. His position and power exceeds all that has ever been created. His excellence is beyond every being; more superior than all principalities and powers, all rulers and princes, all nations and dominions, all that is visible and invisible. He alone is transcendent.

Our response should be to give Him glory.

4. RIGHT LIVING // LUKE 2:25-27

Being righteous has nothing to do with being right with man. Righteousness is conforming yourself entirely to be right with God. It means your character, attitude, conduct, and words are right in the eyes of God and is based on God's standard alone. Simeon was described as a righteous and devout man who was filled with the Holy Spirit. He had favor with God because he was in a right relationship with God. God promised Simeon that he would see the Messiah before he died. His righteousness and obedience allowed him to receive the promise of God.

A righteous life honors God and results in the favor of God.

5. FIXED FIGHT // ROMANS 8:8-9

Pregnant women often have food cravings. When those cravings are not satisfied they can become irritable. Sin has the same effect. Sin is the flesh craving for desires that oppose the Spirit of God. The flesh wants what the Spirit doesn't and the Spirit desires what is against the flesh. Our flesh is constantly warring against the Spirit (Gal. 5:17). Catering to our flesh is sinning against God and is not pleasing to Him. We were created by God in His image. We belong to Him and the Spirit of God lives in us. His Spirit leads us to righteousness.

When the Spirit of God leads, the fight against the flesh is won.

THE LIGHT AND GLORY OF GOD

THE POINT:
JESUS REVEALS GOD'S
GLORY AND LOVE.

Leader pages on pp. 118-121

LUKE 2:25-35

²⁵ There was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, looking forward to Israel's consolation, and the Holy Spirit was on him.

²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he saw the Lord's Messiah.

²⁷ Guided by the Spirit, he entered the temple. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to perform for him what was customary under the law,

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²⁸ Simeon took him up in his arms, praised God, and said,

²⁹ Now, Master,
you can dismiss your servant in peace,
as you promised.

³⁰ For my eyes have seen your salvation.

³¹ You have prepared it
in the presence of all peoples—

³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and glory to your people Israel.

.....

³³ His father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.

³⁴ **Then Simeon blessed them and told his mother Mary, "Indeed, this child is destined to cause the fall and rise of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed—**

³⁵ **and a sword will pierce your own soul—that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."**

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MEMORY VERSE

KEYWORDS

Israel's Consolation (v. 25)–

The comfort and hope the people had in regard to God's plan for His people, but, more specifically, it referred to the Messiah's role in that plan.

Gentiles (v. 32)–A Latin term used by Jews to refer to non-Jews whom they considered to be

inferior since they worshiped many gods and denied the true God.

A Sign that Will be Opposed (v. 35)– Jesus as a spiritual divider of society.

HOW DOES JESUS REVEAL GOD'S GLORY?

One of my favorite parts of Christmas is all the lights. Lights on the tree. Lights on the house. Christmas lights throughout the city. My family loves checking out lights in parks and neighborhoods all over our city. Something about lights adds to the celebration of the Christmas season.

But then January arrives, and the lights come down. In my part of the country, that leaves us with the cold, dreary climate of winter. It may be a new year, but we drift back to our old ways and habits. We are reminded that darkness defines the world in which we live.

We may have taken down all the Christmas lights, but the light of Christ is not gone. Christ came into the world to be the light we need. Light shines brightest in the darkness, and Christ shines brilliantly into our lives, revealing God's glory and love for us. To whatever you may be anticipating in 2022, add this: let the love of God and the light of Christ shine in your life. And may that light be what others see so they will want to shine too.

Revealed Through the Holy Spirit // Luke 2:25-27

We know little about Simeon, but what we know is significant.

- **He was righteous and devout.** Simeon isn't identified as a priest, a scribe, a Pharisee, or any other type of religious leader. However, he took his faith and belief in God seriously and lived them out. His love and fear of God were evident.
- **He looked forward to the consolation of Israel.** "Consolation" is tied to the same Greek word for comfort; Isaiah frequently prophesied a time of comfort, renewal, and hope for God's people. This consolation is tied to the arrival of the Messiah who would comfort the people by bringing deliverance.
- **He was guided by the Holy Spirit.** The Holy Spirit came to all followers of Christ (Rom. 8:8-9), but before the events in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit only came to select



THE POINT: JESUS REVEALS GOD'S GLORY AND LOVE.

people, such as leaders and prophets. For this reason, some think Simeon may have been a prophet.

IN WHAT WAYS IS SIMEON AN EXAMPLE FOR US?

The Holy Spirit revealed to Simeon that he would live to see the Messiah—the consolation and deliverer of Israel he longed for. It wasn't clear whether Simeon knew he would encounter the Messiah that day when he came to the temple, but he was obedient to the Holy Spirit's guidance. Simeon's divine appointment was about to happen.

When we seek to live lives of righteousness and devotion, looking to Christ and letting Him fill us with His Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18), we will become more sensitive to the leading and nudging of His Spirit. We rarely know what “divine appointments” are before us, but we should consider every interruption and interaction we have with another person as having the potential to be a divine appointment from God.

HOW DOES GOD'S PROMISE TO SIMEON REINFORCE THE TRUTH THAT JESUS IS THE MESSIAH?

Revealed Through Prophetic Praise

// Luke 2:28-32

Jewish law required Mary and Joseph to circumcise Jesus eight days after His birth; thirty-three days after that, Mary was required to return to the temple when her days of purification were complete (Lev. 12:2-4). At that time, she was to bring an offering to the priest at the temple (vv. 6-9). That's what Mary and Joseph did (Luke 2:21-24), but they also brought Jesus to the temple. Because Jesus was their firstborn son, the law also required them to dedicate Him to the Lord and pay the required “redemption price” (Ex. 34:19-20; Num. 3:40-48).

When Jesus and His family entered the temple, they encountered Simeon. God promised that Simeon would encounter the Messiah before he died (Luke 2:26). Simeon was “guided by the Spirit” (v. 27) to approach Mary and Joseph.

When he met them, Simeon burst into praise. He could die a blessed man because he had seen God's promise fulfilled. Simeon lived to further God's purposes. He carried out



DIGGING DEEPER JESUS' REDEMPTION

Jesus was the firstborn son of Joseph and Mary. The law required firstborn males to be dedicated to the LORD and a redemption price paid. “The LORD told Moses: ‘Register every firstborn male of the Israelites’ one month old or more, and list their names. You are to take the Levites for Me—I am the LORD—in place of every firstborn among the Israelites” (Num. 3:40-41). For each firstborn male that outnumber the Levites a redemption price had to be paid because the Levites belong to the Lord (Num. 3:45). “As the redemption price for the 273 firstborn Israelites who outnumber the Levites ... Give the money to Aaron and his sons as the redemption price” (Num. 3:46-48). As established by God's law, Jesus was redeemed.

How does the obedience of Joseph and Mary motivate you to be obedient to God?



that purpose as he held the infant Jesus and proclaimed God's salvation.

WHAT DOES SIMEON'S STATEMENT OF PRAISE TEACH US ABOUT GOD'S MISSION?

Simeon's praise pointed to the Messiah as God's "salvation" (v. 30). He held in his arms the deliverance he and many other Jews longed for. But Jesus wouldn't grow up to be the Messiah who would only deliver the Jews. Simeon announced, "You have prepared it in the presence of all peoples" (v. 31). God sent His Son, Jesus, to be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory to your people Israel" (v. 32). Jews and Gentiles alike would benefit from the Messiah!

Salvation had come to all the world. Jesus is the Messiah and the source of salvation to all who would believe and trust in Him. Jesus would provide a way for people of "every nation, tribe, people, and language" (Rev. 7:9), not just Israel, to receive salvation.

Jesus came to be the light of the world. Followers of Jesus are called to shine His light around the world. Simeon's joy wasn't just because he had met the Messiah. His joy was because that Messiah would be salvation for all the world.

Revealed Through Life and Death // Luke 2:33-35

Mary and Joseph knew their child was the Son of God, but they were struck by the role and mission their infant son would carry out.

Even as Simeon offered his blessing on the family, he delivered a troubling prophecy.

- **Jesus would cause the fall of many.** Not everyone would accept the truth that Jesus is the Messiah prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures. The apostle Peter later quoted Psalm 118:22 to indicate what happens to those who reject Jesus as the Messiah.

"So honor will come to you who believe; but for the unbelieving, The stone that the builders rejected—this one has become the cornerstone, and a stone to stumble over, and a rock to trip over. They stumble because they disobey the word; they were destined for this" (1 Pet. 2:7-8; see also Acts 4:11).

- **Jesus would cause the rise of many.** Those who trust in the work of Christ—His death and resurrection—are freed from their sin and resurrected to a new life.
- **Jesus would be a sign that will be opposed.** Simeon referred to Jesus as "a sign." This likely refers to the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14: "Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: See, the virgin will conceive, have a son, and name him Immanuel." Regardless of the miracles, teachings, and evidence of His deity, many will do more than reject Jesus; they will oppose Him. That opposition would lead to Jesus' crucifixion and death.

Jesus would be the Savior and Deliverer of Israel and all the world! But now Mary was hearing her son would walk a road that would include hardship, rejection, and opposition.

THE POINT: JESUS REVEALS GOD'S GLORY AND LOVE.

It would be a hard road for Jesus—and it would be hard for Mary, too. Simeon told Mary that “a sword will pierce your own soul” (v. 35). Mary would experience great grief and sorrow as she watched her son suffer a horrible death on the cross (John 19:25).

The truth Jesus proclaimed is often comforting and also often convicting. The writer of Hebrews said, “For the word of God is living and effective and sharper than any double-edged sword, penetrating as far as the separation of soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12).

The Word from God is Jesus Himself (John 1:1). As God, Jesus knows who we really are. When we accept the truth about Jesus, it reveals a heart that will trust Him. With that trust comes the salvation and deliverance Jesus came to earth to give us. We must decide whether we will trust in the truth of Jesus as Savior and Messiah or walk away from Christ and fall.

HOW DOES JESUS BRING BOTH PEACE AND DIVISION ON EARTH?

DID YOU KNOW?

Born a free person of color in Virginia, Elijah Anderson was forced from his native state by restrictive black laws passed after the 1831 Nat Turner Rebellion. Elijah relocated to Cincinnati, Ohio. He had been trained as a blacksmith. He forged strong friendships with other free blacks. Elijah attained leadership in the Madison Underground railroad. He excelled at opening and developing secure routes for fugitive slaves. Elijah brought 200 runaway slaves through before 1850. As an experienced conductor, Elijah realized that bringing fugitives across by ones and twos was inefficient and likely to alert the runaway-slave patrollers. Elijah soon was able to bring large groups of fugitives out through Boone County, Kentucky. Elijah and the Madison Underground Railroad delivered many fugitive slaves to freedom.⁷

How is the deliverance of slaves a metaphor for the deliverance of humankind by the Messiah?

LIVE IT

How will your life as a believer glorify God?

Jesus shows us what God is like because He is the Son of God. Even as Simeon prophesied when Jesus was an infant, not everyone would like what Jesus reveals. That truth would lead to His death. Perhaps you have had the experience of reading Scripture, and it feels like God is speaking directly to you. God's Word reveals His message to us. And Jesus ultimately reveals the light and glory of God through us.

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- **Write it down.** Start a journal to record what Jesus reveals to you as you read His Word and pray. Meditate on the things God has revealed and live out what He has told you.
- **Pray about it.** God knows the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. Pray that God reveals to you any area in your life that you have not trusted Him with.
- **Talk about it.** This week, evangelize by talking to someone who does not know Jesus. Tell them the truth of Jesus so they too can experience His love and peace.

DAILY READINGS

1. FAITHFUL SIGHT // LUKE 2:27

Faith means believing God before the outcome no matter how long it takes; it's believing and hoping in God before it's seen (Heb 11:1); it's believing God even when there is a delay. Simeon waited his entire life for the manifestation of God's promise to him. He didn't waver in his hope and faith in God. When he had baby Jesus in his arms, he praised God for the promised Messiah. Simeon had peace in God and peace in his death because God showed him his salvation in the Messiah—just like He promised. God's promises are true. We must have faith to wait on all He has promised.

The Lord of our salvation is faithful to perform all He promised.

2. NO MEDIATOR NEEDED // HEBREWS 1:2-3

Sometimes when opponents can't communicate well amongst themselves, a mediator is needed to help them come to an agreement. Old Testament prophets were the mediators between the people and God. They would present God's message. Thankfully, Jesus became our connection to God. He possesses God's glory and nature. He sustains the earth and all those in it through His Word. He saved us from the penalty of our sins and now we are in a right relationship with God. Now Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father making intercession for us. Give Him glory.

No mediator needed, we are connected to God through Jesus.

3. TOGETHER FOREVER // JOHN 17:24

You've probably heard someone say, "I wish you were here." That's usually said when they're somewhere pleasurable. They want those they love to experience the same pleasure they're experiencing. Jesus counted believers as a gift given to Him by God. Before He ascended to heaven to be with God, He asked God to allow all of His

believing, loving, obedient, and faithful disciples to be with Him in heaven. He wanted us to see the everlasting glory He received through God. That means we would experience God's love for Jesus which is revealed through the glory He gave Him.

Believers, be faithful, obedient, loving followers of Christ and receive the joy of being with a loving God forever.

4. HEAVENLY DEFENSE // MICAH 2:2-5

Gentrification is a major concern for many African Americans. It's a process involving changing the character of a poor urban neighborhood. This process involves displacing the current residents by either purchasing their homes at below market rates and/or preventing low income families from being able to afford previously affordable neighborhoods. This is not in line with God's Word. God said to care for the poor and needy (Deut. 15:11). Micah warned that God had enough of evil people coveting the fields and homes of His people, leaving them without an inheritance for their children. God planned "a disaster" for them that was inescapable.

When mistreated, don't be dismayed. God is our Defense.

5. THE PROPHECY // NUMBERS 24:17-19

Balaam was a diviner (one who claimed to have special power to predict the future) who was hired by Balak (king of Moab), to put a curse on the children of Israel (Num. 22:4-6). However, God made him bless them instead (Num. 22:20). Balaam's fourth message prophesied the birth of Jesus. He described the star that would later lead the wise men to Jesus. The prophesy further described Jesus as a descendant of David. The Moabites would be crushed and the Moabite tribe of Sheth would be destroyed. Israel would have the victory. God used a non-Israelite to prophesy the birth of Jesus and His victory over all of His enemies.

Allow God to use you to proclaim Christ.

THE RULER WHO CARES FOR HIS PEOPLE

Leader pages on pp. 122-125

THE POINT:
JESUS LEADS AND CARES FOR HIS PEOPLE.

MICAH 5:2-5A; MATTHEW 2:1-6,9-11

MEMORY VERSE

Mic. 5.2 Bethlehem Ephrathah, you are small among the clans of Judah; one will come from you to be ruler over Israel for me. His origin is from antiquity, from ancient times. ³ Therefore, Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of the ruler’s brothers will return to the people of Israel. ⁴ He will stand and shepherd them in the strength of the LORD, in the majestic name of the LORD his God. They will live securely, or then his greatness will extend to the ends of the earth. ^{5a} He will be their peace.

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Matt. 2:1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, wise men from the east arrived in Jerusalem, ² saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star at its rising and have come to worship him.” ³ When King Herod heard this, he was deeply disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ So he assembled all the chief priests and scribes of the people and asked them where the Messiah would be born. ⁵ “In Bethlehem of Judea,” they told him, “because this is what was written by the prophet: ⁶ And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah: Because out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.”

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⁹ After hearing the king, they went on their way. And there it was—the star they had seen at its rising. It led them until it came and stopped above the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and falling to their knees, they worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

KEYWORDS

From antiquity (*miqedem*), from ancient times (*miymey olam*) (v. 2)—Both terms can refer just to a very long time ago, perhaps the beginnings of messianic prophecy (Gen. 3:15; 12:3; 49:10) or to eternity (Ps. 74:12; Prov. 8:23; Hab. 1:12).

Wise men (Matt. 2:1)—A term for men from the ancient Middle East who studied the stars to predict the future and who claimed to interpret dreams.

HOW DO WE KNOW JESUS TO BE A GREAT LEADER?

Long before everyone had a camera on their phone, we had to buy film then pay someone to develop that film. The man who brought cameras into every household was George Eastman. The New York Times said of him, “He should be the most thanked man in the world,”⁸ not because of his camera and film, but because of his business practices.

Eastman reduced the work hours of his employees. His company had a medical department and a medical disability fund. He established a retirement plan and life insurance for his employees. He instituted a profit-sharing plan for employees. He hired women and the disabled.

Many companies offer benefits today, but when Eastman did it, it had never been done before. He cared for his employees.

George Eastman’s attitude toward others is commendable, but it pales in comparison to the care of Jesus. As our loving Shepherd, Jesus loves, leads, and cares for us.

Strength of the Lord // Micah 5:2-5a

Prophets are often associated with messages of warning and condemnation. Micah delivered his share of such messages, but he also proclaimed hope to both Judah and Israel. The people of God had been led by a string of weak leaders, and the people longed for hope and peace. Micah pointed to their hope and peace, and it would come through a wholly different and unique Ruler.

This Ruler would come from Bethlehem Ephrathah. While Bethlehem was the birthplace of King David (1 Sam. 16:1), it now seemed to be an insignificant place for a ruler to be born, especially when compared to the great city of Jerusalem only five miles away. The greatest king of the Old Testament was born there, and the King of kings would be born there as well.

For Micah’s contemporaries, their hope and deliverance would not be immediate. In fact, over 700 years would pass before this prophecy was fulfilled. The Jews would undergo



THE POINT: JESUS LEADS AND CARES FOR HIS PEOPLE.

a season when they would “be abandoned” (v. 3) for their rebellion and sinfulness. This abandonment, though, would not be permanent. From among them would be born a Ruler who would rise and shepherd the people of God. The “rest of the ruler’s brothers” would “return to the people of Israel” (v. 3) through His ministry. Though this could refer to the end of the exile, it more likely refers to the salvation Jesus would bring to the Jews through a relationship with Him.

Micah’s prophecy about the birthplace of Jesus tells us a lot about the kind of ruler He would be. “He will stand and shepherd them in the strength of the LORD” (v. 4). To “stand” means He would assume the role of King. Even the best of rulers with the best intentions can fail, but this King would rule “in the strength of the LORD” (v. 4). He will also rule “in the majestic name of the LORD his God” (v. 4). The King would have a special relationship with God, and His power and majesty would come from God.

The king would not only rule powerfully and perfectly, but He would also rule as a Shepherd. Other passages refer to God as a Shepherd (Ezek. 34:11-16), but the most well-known is Psalm 23. In this psalm, David painted a picture of God as a shepherd who perfectly provides, protects, and guides.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN THAT A KING IS A SHEPHERD?

Sought as King // Matthew 2:1-6

The birth of Jesus in an obscure Jewish village was only known by a small group of people: Mary, Joseph, their families, the residents of Bethlehem, and some shepherds. The news of Jesus’ birth might have spread as the citizens of the village passed on the unusual report from the shepherds. All that changed when strangers arrived in Jerusalem, announcing they were looking for “he who has been born king of the Jews.” This got the attention of King Herod and the whole city.

The first questions I would think anyone would ask of these strangers is, “Who are you and how do you know about this king?” Matthew only told us they were “wise men from the east” (v. 1). “Wise men” is a generic term for men with special training, but it specifically referred to a priestly class in Babylon who advised the kings. Ancient records mention such groups



DIGGING DEEPER THE PROPHET MICAH

Micah is the abbreviated form of the personal name Micaiah, meaning “Who is like Yahweh?” Jeremiah said Micah prophesied during the reign of Hezekiah (Jer. 27:17-18). Micah addressed the political and national crises of his time. He also denounced the religious practices of Judah. Micah warned of impending judgment on God’s people for their disobedience. At the same time he proclaimed messages of hope. Judgment would come, but afterwards God would restore a remnant of the people devoted to Him (Mic. 4:1–13; 7:14–20). Unlike the unjust kings, God would bring a Ruler who would allow the people to live in peace (5:1–5). Ultimately Judah was destroyed in 586 b.c. by the Babylonians, but a remnant returned. Matthew saw in Micah’s hope for a new ruler a description of Christ (Matt. 2:6).

What can the hope of Christ change in today’s world?

in Babylon and Persia. Our word “magic” comes from the Greek word translated “wise men.” They were known for their knowledge and skills in astronomy, government, and religion.



HOW DOES THE SEARCH FOR JESUS BY WISE MEN DEMONSTRATE JESUS' GREATNESS?

These men knew to look for the infant king because they “saw his star at its rising” (v. 2). No one can say with any assurance and finality what exactly they saw. Was it a phenomenon like a supernova? Whatever these men saw, these well-versed men likely connected this unusual sign in the night sky to Balaam’s prophecy in Numbers 24:17: “A star will come from Jacob, and a scepter will arise from Israel.” When they “saw his star at its rising,” they traveled to the place where they thought any Jewish king would be born: Jerusalem.

As word began to spread, King Herod and all who were with him in Jerusalem were deeply disturbed. Herod carried the title of king, but he was not truly a king. He was only half-Jewish, and he would never be the legitimate heir to David’s throne. He carried a great insecurity about his position, so the idea of another king threatened him. Nevertheless, he checked into it and learned of Micah’s prophecy.

Herod was not the only one obsessed with power and status. Many of the Pharisees and religious leaders were also focused on their own power and status. This threat to their self-importance would more greatly play out when Jesus began His ministry. The king of the Jews had come into the world. All who heard the report needed to make a choice: do we accept this child as the long-awaited Messiah and King of the Jews, or do we reject Him? His position as King of kings demands a respond from us too. We either acknowledge His lordship and surrender to Him or we reject Him.

Honored Through Worship

// Matthew 2:9-11

As the wise men traveled the five miles to Bethlehem, they saw a familiar sight. They saw the star they had initially seen at its rising. Stars naturally turned from east to west across God’s heavens, but this unique manifestation apparently traveled south.

We can assume the star at this point was moving since “it came and stopped above the place where the child was” (v. 9).

The men knew their journey was completed. Matthew was generous with the superlatives in capturing their strong feelings; “they were overwhelmed with joy” (v. 10). The Greek phrase is literally translated “overjoyed beyond measure.”

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE TO WORSHIP JESUS SIMPLY BECAUSE OF WHO HE IS?

Modern portrayals of the Nativity almost always show the wise men visiting Jesus on the night of His birth. However, Herod had all male babies two years old and under in Bethlehem killed (Matt. 2:16), indicating that up to two years had passed since the wise men saw the star—and possibly since Jesus’ birth.

THE POINT: JESUS LEADS AND CARES FOR HIS PEOPLE.

Joseph and Mary almost surely stayed in Bethlehem until Mary could travel again. In fact, they probably stayed there for the forty days necessary to complete Mary's purification. From Bethlehem, they could easily make the five-mile trip to Jerusalem to offer the sacrifice for Mary's purification (Luke 2:22).

The wise men "presented" their gifts to Jesus. Bringing gifts was particularly important in the ancient Near East when approaching a superior.

- **A gift for His royalty.** Gold is the finest and most precious metal, and it showed great value from the giver to the recipient.
- **A gift for His Deity.** Frankincense is a glittering, odorous gum obtained by making incisions in the bark of several trees. It was essentially used in sacrificial offerings.
- **A gift for His humanity.** Myrrh was a much-valued spice and perfume, used in embalming and perfuming ointments.

These gifts certainly reflect the wise men's worship and devotion. Worship must be our response to the Messiah as well. Jesus came to give us salvation and eternal life with Him.

DID YOU KNOW?

Polaris, commonly called the North Star, is the most important star in earth's sky. Most people believe it's also the brightest, but it ranks 48 on the list of brightest stars. Polaris is important because the axis of the earth is pointed almost directly at the star. Also during the night, it stays in the same spot above the horizon with other stars circling around it. Amazingly, it can help travelers find their way and is more accurate than a compass. The best way to find Polaris is to first find the Little Dipper. Polaris is located at the end of the Little Dipper's handle in the constellation of Ursa Minor. As the centuries go by Polaris will not be our North Star. Because of the gravitational forces of the sun and moon, there will be a gravitational change in the axis. Over time different stars become the North Star. In 400 B.C. during the time of Plato, Kochab was the North Star.⁹

Why do you think God used a star to guide the wise men?

LIVE IT

How should we follow Jesus as our Leader and Shepherd?

As our loving Shepherd, Jesus shows His love in how He leads and cares for us. He is truly all we need. When we rest in Him and surrender to His authority in our lives, we shall not want. Our ultimate leader is Jesus. When we choose to follow Him, we discover He leads us with love, care, and grace. In what ways can you live this out?

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- **Trust the Shepherd.** Trust Jesus to guide you with care. Is there an area in your life where He is calling you to obedience but you're resisting? Spend time acknowledging Him as your Shepherd.
- **Study the Shepherd.** Find occurrences of the word "shepherd" in your Bible. How does this increase your understanding of the ways Jesus cares for His people? Journal your thoughts.
- **Worship the Shepherd.** True worship pours out into every other part of our lives. Spend time this week listing the attributes of God. Carve out time to be alone and worship Him for who He is.

DAILY READINGS

1. JESUS OUR LEADER // MICAH 5:1-2

Many corrupt leaders dot the pages of world history. People have suffered gravely at the hands of Hitler, Stalin, Hussein, Idi Amin, and others. These men ruled with hearts of stone and no consideration for the people. Good leaders are men and women of integrity. Unlike corrupt leaders, they exhibit compassion and kindness toward followers. Even so, they fall short of the leadership of Christ. The word that defines Jesus as a leader is *servant*. He humbled Himself and gave His life for us on a cruel cross. This was an unselfish display of servant leadership. He died for our sins so we would not have to. No human leader would die for someone else. Only a Savior. Only Christ.

Jesus as our Leader deserves our devotion. Let us earnestly seek to obey Him in every way.

2. JESUS OUR HOPE // MICAH 5:2

Stories of crime, sickness, catastrophes, hunger, evil, and other life traumas are reported on daily newscasts. This hopelessness seeps into our daily lives, creating an atmosphere of mental illness, anger, and fear. What's the world to do? What can we do? Don't ignore the Truth. Many years ago, Micah predicted Jesus would come. He was born to bring hope into the world. The hope of Jesus does not dissipate because of the events of our fallen world. So when the walls of hopelessness begin to crowd you in, look to Jesus. He is our Hope for today and for tomorrow. Nothing can destroy this Hope because it's stored for us in heaven.

Celebrate! We have received a real hope that is alive and with us. Our Hope's name is Jesus.

3. JESUS OUR PEACE // MICAH 5:5

Micah predicted Jesus would be our peace. Jesus even described Himself that way. He said, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Don't let your heart be

troubled or fearful" (John 14:27). Unlike the world's peace, which is defined as the absence of conflict, the peace that Christ gives is the assurance that in any situation, we will be okay. Therefore, with Christ's peace, we have no need to fear the present or the future. We can easily receive this peace if we belong to Christ and He is our Lord and Savior. All we have to do is ask, and the peace of God will move into our hearts.

When forces of turmoil war within you, ask Christ for peace. He will honor your request.

4. AN UNJUST WORLD // PROVERBS 21:15

The word *justice* is popular in today's culture. Many people tout racial justice, gun violence, and voting rights among others as they rally for justice. But people face many injustices that threaten or bar them from living as productive and healthy citizens in their communities. And who is the author of injustice—Satan. We live in a fallen world filled with sin, sickness, evil, and injustice. But all is not lost. John reminds us, "The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). We live in an evil and unjust world, but God is stronger. He can and will conquer all evil.

The Spirit of God and His Word lives in our hearts. That means we are greater, too.

5. LET JUSTICE ROLL // AMOS 5:24

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. quoted the words of Amos in a speech. He said, "Let justice flow like water, and righteousness, like an unfailing stream."¹⁰ Dr. King lived during a time when injustices to African-Americans were upheld by the laws of the land. Today many of those laws have changed, but in many cases, injustices persist. Just like Amos, Dr. King recognized that God is our defense. He will not tolerate the mistreatment of people. The justice that God establishes will keep rolling like a mighty stream that never dries up.

Trust God to make things right in the land.

THE PITFALL OF BETRAYAL

THE POINT:
GOD IS AT WORK,
EVEN WHEN IT'S NOT
OBSVIOUS.

Leader pages on pp. 134-137

GENESIS 37:1-5,19-24,26-27

¹ Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan. ² These are the family records of Jacob. At seventeen years of age, Joseph tended sheep with his brothers. The young man was working with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought a bad report about them to their father. ³ Now Israel loved Joseph more than his other sons because Joseph was a son born to him in his old age, and he made a long-sleeved robe for him. ⁴ When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not bring themselves to speak peaceably to him. ⁵ Then Joseph had a dream. When he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more.

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¹⁹ They said to one another, "Oh, look, here comes that dream expert! ²⁰ So now, come on, let's kill him and throw him into one of the pits. We can say that a vicious animal ate him. Then we'll see what becomes of his dreams!" ²¹ When Reuben heard this, he tried to save him from them. He said, "Let's not take his life." ²² Reuben also said to them, "Don't shed blood. Throw him into this pit in the wilderness, but don't lay a hand on him"—intending to rescue him from them and return him to his father.²³ When Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped off Joseph's robe, the robe of many colors that he had on. ²⁴ Then they took him and threw him into the pit. The pit was empty, without water.

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²⁶ Judah said to his brothers, "What do we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? ²⁷ Come on, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay a hand on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh," and his brothers agree.

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MEMORY VERSE

Philippians 1:6—I am sure of this, that he who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

KEYWORDS

Long-sleeved robe (v. 3)—In Old Testament days, a long-sleeved robe made of brightly colored cloth signified the distinguished status of the person privileged to wear it.

Pits (v. 20)—Shepherds dug deep pits in the wilderness that served as buckets in the ground to catch rainwater they then would draw out for their flocks.

HOW DOES GOD WORK DURING THE BETRAYALS IN OUR LIVES?

Trust is a priceless treasure, and it really hits hard when trust is deceived. Have you ever had a close friend turn on you? A brother or sister file a lawsuit against you? A parent disown you? The pain of betrayal can be soul crushing.

Kevin was a church planter. At age 25, he felt called to start a new church. He gathered a launch team and hosted meetings to determine interest. Knowing he wasn't strong in organizational skills, Kevin wisely surrounded himself with a solid team of strategists. The church took off like a rocket.

But then the unthinkable happened. Behind the scenes, Kevin's launch team he put in place held a series of secret meetings. They chose to search for a fresh leader with stronger administrative skills, and they fired Kevin from the church he was led to start.

Maybe you have a story like Kevin's. Betrayal can be devastating and bitterness can consume us. We don't have to face betrayal alone. God still works as we'll see in the life of Joseph.

Even God's Favor Can Cause Betrayal // Genesis 37:1-5

We've all had family problems that have impacted our families with much suffering for generations. Joseph's father Jacob made huge mistakes impacting his kids and deeply affecting the whole family. Jacob's two most obvious flaws were accepting a cultural view of marriage over God's and favoritism. Let's take a look at those.

- **The widespread acceptance of polygamy.** Jacob's acceptance of cultural polygamy was the root of his family dysfunction. From the beginning, God intended for marriage to be between one man and one woman for life. "This is why a man leaves his father and mother and bonds with his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). Nowhere in Scripture did God approve of multiple marriages. Unfortunately, many in the Old Testament ignored God's plan established in the garden of Eden, causing rivalries and



THE POINT: GOD IS AT WORK, EVEN WHEN IT'S NOT OBVIOUS.

tension. Jacob's life is evidence of this with multiple wives and jealousy throughout his family.

- **Obvious favoritism.** Joseph was born into this dysfunctional mess, placing a target on his back from birth. Because he was the son of his father's favorite wife, Rachel, born in Jacob's older years, he was a more favored child.

Jacob's gift to Joseph of "a long-sleeved robe," a custom-made coat, pushed his brothers over the edge with jealousy. In ancient culture, to reject a gift was to reject the giver, so Joseph was expected to wear the coat.

While Joseph's difficulty was mostly his father's fault, it's also important to notice God's supreme will in the story. While God cannot be blamed for evil (Jas. 1:13), He does allow His children to walk through difficulty purposefully (2 Cor. 1:3-7).

WHAT ROLE DID JOSEPH PLAY IN DIGGING HIS OWN PITFALL?

How do we know this? Joseph had a dream where he caught a glimpse of what God was going to do. God sent the dream, and Joseph shared with his brothers that they eventually would bow down to him. By revealing this dream, Joseph set the course of his life and deepened his brother's hatred.

Joseph's story reveals how we can all trust the Lord to help us through our everyday family problems. We all have brokenness in our family histories. As you read Joseph's story, be aware of your unique family story, and how it's shaped you. God wants to use it ALL for His grand purpose.

God Works Despite Betrayal

// Genesis 37:19-24

The brothers may not have been looking for payback, but when opportunity came, they plotted to toss Joseph into a pit and leave him for dead.

The root of bitterness harvested the fruit of bitterness. Jesus said: "A good person produces good out of the good stored up in his heart. An evil person produces evil out of the evil stored up in his heart, for his mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart" (Luke 6:45). Our speech reveals what's inside.



DIGGING DEEPER JOSEPH'S DREAMS

Symbolic dreams in the story of Joseph are the means by which God's will for the future is unveiled. The dreams of Joseph and those he interprets are potentially ambiguous, since they do not possess a revelation of God, whereas the four previous dreams in chapters 12–36 are direct revelations (20:3; 28:12-13; 31:11; 31:24). When understood in the larger framework of the story, Joseph's dreams must be taken as coming from God, although in chapter 37 by itself it is not so certain. It is left later to Joseph's speech, which declares that dreams are from God (40:8; 41:16, 25, 28). Thus the reader should interpret 37:5-11 as of divine source. The divine origin is confirmed by the fulfillment of the dreams when the brothers bow before Joseph the Egyptian ruler (e.g., 42:6; 43:26, 28).

How can we know that some dreams are from God?



Joseph's brothers were full of bitterness toward him, and those feelings produced murderous action. Scripture warns against this,

- "Jealousy is rottenness to the bones" (Prov. 14:30).
- "Make sure that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no root of bitterness springs up, causing trouble and defiling many" (Heb. 12:15).
- "For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and every evil practice" (Jas. 3:16).

Jealousy poisoned Joseph's toxic brothers. We must check our hearts considering who we may be tempted to envy. Envy happens world-wide, even within Christ's Body.

Just as it's important to consider if envy is in our hearts, we must also check if we've caused envy in others. Maybe they compare themselves with you and feel God has given you more. Has God given you success in areas of your life? If the Lord has blessed you in obvious ways, a good chance exists others may be jealous.

WHAT HARMFUL CONSEQUENCES HAVE YOU SEEN COME FROM JEALOUSY AND ANGER?

The struggle with envy is real! We may give in to temptation and secretly resent God for giving others what we want for ourselves. Putting on the mind of Christ guards us,

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others. Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:3-5).

God Can Bless Us Through Betrayal // Genesis 37:26-27

Though Joseph's story seemed to dead end in a pit, God had other plans. The brothers changed their minds, making a last-minute decision to sell him into slavery instead of leaving him in the pit to die. Their decision impacted not only their family, but the entire nation of Israel. Years later, Joseph dropped one of the greatest lines in ancient literature. He looked his guilt-weary brothers in the eyes and said, "You planned evil against me; God planned it for good to bring about the present result—the survival of many people" (Gen. 50:20).

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THIS PASSAGE ABOUT GOD'S PERFECT PLAN FOR OUR LIVES?

While Joseph must have felt like God forgot him, God was actually planning to raise him up to a high seat of power. God is always up to something bigger than we see.

Joseph was betrayed by his own brothers and sold "for twenty pieces of silver" (v. 28) like Jesus was. Many scholars think Joseph's story is a prediction of the greatest story. Throughout the Old Testament, God points to what He would do through Jesus to save the lost.

Joseph experienced much suffering through life. Being sold as a slave was bad enough, but Joseph faced more setbacks. God was still

THE POINT: GOD IS AT WORK, EVEN WHEN IT'S NOT OBVIOUS.

working for him as He does for us. And God will continue to work in our lives until we go to be with Him in glory.

Booker T. Washington was a leading African-American educator who founded the great academic institution, Tuskegee University in 1881. Amazingly, Washington was born into slavery, but God turned Washington's life around.

Rather than suffering the cruel fate of slavery, God set Washington on a path of freedom, school, and teaching. He was a former slave who impacted the education of thousands of African-Americans, and that influence continues to be felt today. Just like Joseph, Washington was raised up to help others.

Washington humbly said, "I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed."¹⁸ In moments when life seems to dead end, remember Joseph's life. God's hand might not be obvious at first, but He is at work. Life will deal us disappointments, but the key is to keep moving forward and trusting Christ.

DID YOU KNOW?

The coat Jacob gave Joseph was not only custom-made, but it was also a garment designated for the firstborn child. The robe was a sign of the privileges afforded to the oldest child. Not only was Joseph not Jacob's firstborn, but he was also given honor traditionally that should have been for his oldest brother, Reuben. Jacob broke the inheritance tradition for a few reasons which help us understand his actions beyond Joseph being the son of his beloved wife, Rachel. Jacob took the privilege of the oldest child when his mother Rebekah convinced him to steal his older brother Esau's birthright and blessing after God told her at their birth the oldest would serve the younger (Gen. 25:23;27). Jacob's father Isaac was also given the privilege of the oldest child because he was the chosen son God had promised to Abram and Sarai in their old age over his older brother Ishmael (Gen. 21).

How does this family show God's plan still comes to pass although people choose their own way?

LIVE IT

What are godly ways we can prepare ourselves to deal with potential betrayal?

As we are learning through this study, the ones closest to us can hurt us the most. One reason this is true is because they have intimate, up-close access to us and know how to hurt us most deeply. While we should not fear betrayal or avoid close relationships, we should be prepared for people who are imperfect to fail us. Here are three ways to prepare for betrayal:

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- **Keep God's Word first.** God promises are truth that sustain us. Know He'll never leave or forsake us regardless of what others do. We can always depend on God (Deut. 31:6).
- **Trust God's Plan.** Even though we may not understand what's happening in our lives, understand God has allowed it for His divine purposes, which work out for our good (Rom. 8:28).
- **Think of a time when you betrayed.** Prayerfully you regretted hurting them. Use your experience and feelings along with wisdom from the Holy Spirit to extend forgiveness (Col. 3:12-13).

DAILY READINGS

1. HATERS GONNA HATE // GENESIS 37:4

Have you ever been the “chosen” one and others hated you for it? Or maybe you found yourself hating on someone who had something you felt you deserved. Most of us have probably experienced one or the other. Both expose feelings of hate, whether we’re the giver or receiver. Neither situation feels good. We should remember that if we believe God controls all, He allows these circumstances for a reason. He may allow them to humble us or to increase our compassion for others. Either way, we need to check our hearts and attitudes for seeds of hate that produce harvests of hurt.

Invite God to expose any root of hate within you and replace it with the fruit of His Spirit.

2. HUMILITY BEFORE HONOR // PHILIPPIANS 2:3

Displaying humility can be challenging, especially when others take advantage or confuse it for weakness. The reality is that it takes more strength to humbly lift others over ourselves than it does to prop ourselves up over others. Even though Reuben was offended like his brothers as Joseph shared his dreams, he still wanted to protect Joseph’s life for the sake of honoring his father, and ultimately honoring Joseph. In times where we must choose humility over our own honor, we can trust God will honor us as we follow the model Jesus lived as a humble servant.

Trust God to be the One who lifts you in honor. And follow His example so that others will choose to follow Him.

3. BLESSINGS OVER CURSES // GENESIS 37:26-27

Sometimes things don’t go how we think they should, especially when we feel we have been mistreated or overlooked. Our initial response can be to curse, consumed with thoughts of payback in our attempts to get back at those who hurt or offend us. When we flip the script with God as Author,

He enables us to avoid being trapped in pitfalls of cursing and provides opportunities to bless. For those who know God and strive to live lives pleasing to Him, revenge is not ours to deal out. Instead, we believe God already knows our circumstances, good or bad, and will use them to bless us.

Ask the Holy Spirit to give you godly wisdom so you can choose blessings over curses regardless of your circumstances.

4. RESPONDING TO BETRAYAL’S KISS // MATTHEW 26:47-50; LUKE 22:47-48

Did you know even Jesus experienced betrayal from those closest to Him? He was handed over to His accusers by one who had spent intimate time with Him for three years. The beauty of our relationship with Jesus is He understands anything we experience and provides an example of how we should respond in ways pleasing to God. In the middle of betrayal, He still called Judas, the betrayer, “friend.” Mind-blowing, right? Yet Jesus showed us this godly response to help us understand how we can respond to others—choose love over hate.

Focus on the example Christ set when He was betrayed so you can respond in a way that honors Him.

5. BUT GOD // ACTS 7:9-10

There may be times in life when people fail us. Mostly these times will catch us off guard and cause confusion, disappointment, and hurt. “BUT God” is a truth we can stand on to get us through. Use this acronym to encourage you. **B**elieve God has everything in His control. **U**nderstand God has a good and perfect will which will come to pass as we walk with Him. **T**rust God with all your heart, mind, and spirit that His Word is true, He’s with you, and will rescue you in or out of your circumstances.

Even though you may feel like you’re alone when you’re going through trials and hurt, draw close to God. He is sufficient to meet your every need.

THE PITFALL OF TEMPTATION

Leader pages on pp. 138-141

THE POINT:
REMEMBERING
WHAT IS AT STAKE
HELPS US OVERCOME
TEMPTATION.

GENESIS 39:1-12

MEMORY VERSE

¹ Joseph had been taken to Egypt. An Egyptian named Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh and the captain of the guards, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him there. ² **The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, serving in the household of his Egyptian master.** ³ When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD made everything he did successful, ⁴ Joseph found favor with his master and became his personal attendant. Potiphar also put him in charge of his household and placed all that he owned under his authority. ⁵ From the time that he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house because of Joseph. The LORD's blessing was on all that he owned, in his house and in his fields. ⁶ He left all that he owned under Joseph's authority; he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate. Now Joseph was well-built and handsome. ⁷ After some time his master's wife looked longingly at Joseph and said, "Sleep with me."

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⁸ But he refused. "Look," he said to his master's wife, "with me here my master does not concern himself with anything in his house, and he has put all that he owns under my authority. ⁹ No one in this house is greater than I am. He has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. So how could I do this immense evil, and how could I sin against God?" ¹⁰ Although she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her.

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¹¹ Now one day he went into the house to do his work, and none of the household servants were there. ¹² She grabbed him by his garment and said, "Sleep with me!" But leaving his garment in her hand, he escaped and ran outside.

KEYWORDS

Blessed (v. 5)—To be favored with resources or granted good fortune because the Lord takes the initiative to make a person successful in keeping with His plan.

Garment (v. 12)—The Hebrew word served as a general term to describe any article of clothing a person would wear, but here apparently an outer garment.

WHAT HELPS US MOVE PAST TEMPTATION?

We see enticing objects, and we feel the urge to respond. A second helping of chocolate cake. An ad for an item we don't need and can't afford. A "click here to see more" online. Temptation lies around every corner.

We often resist temptation as long as someone is looking over our shoulder and says, "Don't eat that" or "You really don't need that." Someone is watching over our shoulder at all times: God!

In today's study, Joseph modeled what it means to live with that truth in mind: God is watching our every move. Joseph's aim was to keep himself clean in the midst of a dirty culture. That is our challenge as well.

You may not be tempted in the same way Joseph was, but you will face temptation. We all do. Many of us are tempted to love money; pursue a relationship that could destroy a marriage; envy a co-worker who is experiencing great success; seek the "likes" of other people more than the approval of God. Joseph's approach to temptation can help all of us.

Success Can Lead to a Slippery Slope // Genesis 39:1-7

At the last session's end, broken-hearted Joseph was being taken to Egypt. Disowned and enslaved by his own brothers, there was little hope the dreams he shared would ever come true. Instead of anger and revenge, he trusted God to see him through. With great success also came new temptations and new challenges.

Despite Joseph's circumstances, God was working out His divine plan. Joseph couldn't take credit for his continued success because God was with him.

- "The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man" (v. 2).
- "His master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD made everything he did successful" (v. 3).
- "The LORD blessed the Egyptian's house because of Joseph" (v. 5).



THE POINT: REMEMBERING WHAT IS AT STAKE HELPS US OVERCOME TEMPTATION.

Joseph was also blessed with good looks. “Joseph was well-built and handsome” (v. 6). So, why is this detail about Joseph’s advantages in life included? The answer lies in the pitfalls that come with success. Joseph had God’s hand on him, and he had looks that caused all eyes to be on him! Yet these “blessings” also presented challenges and temptation.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO STAY ON GUARD AGAINST TEMPTATION WHEN THINGS ARE GOING WELL?

One temptation came through Potiphar’s wife. She wanted Joseph and was probably used to getting whatever she wanted. Would Joseph sacrifice his integrity for whatever momentary pleasure she offered? This moment of decision would define his life forever.

Today cheating is not an uncommon thing. There’s even a television show about people betraying relationships and trading honoring their mate over temporary pleasures. Joseph was being offered everything in Potiphar’s house, including his wife! Could this be his payback for all he had been through? What would you have done?

Joseph could have justified giving into the offer from Potiphar’s wife; after all, he had been taken from his family and country; now he was a slave whom many might think deserved getting something back for all that had happened to him. We’ll see he chose a different path.

Make Up Your Mind in Advance

// Genesis 39:8-10

Adam and Eve faced forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden, and now Joseph faced his own forbidden fruit: the wife of a powerful man! Joseph didn’t submit and tried to talk sense to the corrupt woman by reminding her of how her husband blessed him. “My master does not concern himself with anything in his house, and he has put all that he owns under my authority. No one in this house is greater than I am. He has withheld nothing from me except you” (v. 9). Joseph knew she was off limits!

How did Joseph stand firm when many people fall into sexual temptation? He “pre-decided” before that day to pursue God



DIGGING DEEPER DEFINING “GRABBED”

Potiphar’s wife had her sights on Joseph. Despite repeated attempts to lure him into her bed, he resisted. Finally, she resorted to a more direct method. She created a situation where they were all alone, and she “grabbed” him. The Hebrew word rendered *grabbed* (Gen. 39:12) would bring to mind the idea of clutching or grasping with a cruel or evil purpose in mind. For instance, Moses used the word when he described the criminal act of sexually assaulting a young woman: “If a man encounters a young woman, a virgin who is not engaged, takes hold of her and rapes her ... “ (Deut. 22:28). The word also describes Moses’ taking hold of the stone tablets to smash them to the ground (9:17) and the capturing of a city after laying siege to it (20:19).

In hindsight what should Joseph have done to prevent being grabbed by Potiphar’s wife?



above all things. He was more concerned about how God would react than Potiphar. “How could I sin against God?”

Have you already decided what you’ll do WHEN, not if, temptation comes?

- If you’re unmarried, have you decided you won’t have sex until your wedding day?
- If you’re married, have you decided you won’t cheat on your spouse?
- In pursuit of success, have you decided to always be honest and to treat others kindly?
- When seasons of trial and temptation come, have you decided to trust God?

It’s been said, “Temptation will always follow you as long as you keep leaving a forwarding address.” It’s impossible to avoid every image of sexual temptation the world provides. But the godly person should refuse to allow such things to take root in his heart. Joseph was committed to keeping his life and his conscience pure before God which is critical to life.

Many Christians live like temptation and trials won’t come. Unrealistically, they think they’re immune to the enemy’s attacks and the world’s traps. Sadly, King David let his guard down

during a successful season and sinned against God. David gave in to temptation with another man’s wife, destroying numerous lives in the process (2 Sam. 11).

Though many have committed the same mistake, there’s grace for our failures; yet the consequences can be very painful and costly. Before temptation comes, “pre-decide” what you’ll do based on God’s Word which guides us (Psalm 119:9-11).

HOW HAS GOD’S WORD HELPED YOU RESIST TEMPTATION?

When Nothing Else Works, Run

// Genesis 39:11-12

Joseph may have been a slave, but he lived and worked in a privileged position. Yet, as Potiphar’s wife grabbed hold of Joseph, he knew his situation was over if he didn’t run. She had made advances before—in fact, “day after day” (v. 10)—but others were around. It appeared this time was different, so Joseph sensed only one option: run! In an aggressive moment, she ripped his cloak off, and he escaped to safety, “leaving his garment in her hand” (v. 12). Joseph was running from sin.

The apostle Paul probably had this story in mind centuries later as he challenged the church in Corinth: “Flee sexual immorality! Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the person who is sexually immoral sins against his own body” (1 Cor. 6:18). Paul warned the Corinthian Christians that all sin brings pain upon a person, but sexual sin carries an extra burden. Joseph provides a clear picture of the Christian response to pornography, adultery, and all forms of lusts. Little sins lead to bigger sins, so run from the first hint of it.

Running from temptation is key to our survival when facing spiritual warfare. More important

THE POINT: REMEMBERING WHAT IS AT STAKE HELPS US OVERCOME TEMPTATION.

than running away from sin is the daily decision to walk closely with Jesus. Emmanuel came to earth to be with us. As He prepared to leave earth, He assured His disciples the Spirit would come—and this would prove to be far better (John 16:7). God is always with us, and His Holy Spirit always leads us into truth (16:13).

In *The Pursuit of God*, A.W. Tozer emphasized the importance of running to the presence of God. “For it is not mere words that nourish the soul, but God Himself, and unless and until the hearers find God in personal experience, they are not the better for having heard the truth. The Bible is not an end in itself, but a means to bring an intimate and satisfying knowledge of God, that they may enter into Him, and they may delight in His Presence, may taste and know the inner sweetness of the very God Himself in the core and center of their hearts.”¹⁹

In other words, we shouldn't simply focus on what we're running from, but on what we're running toward.

WHAT STRATEGIES HAVE YOU FOUND HELPFUL IN OVERCOMING TEMPTATION?

DID YOU KNOW?

The word “temptation” didn't always have the meaning it has today. According to *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*,²⁰ the actual Hebrew words for temptation meant the following: *macah*—a trial, test; or *nacah*—to prove or try. With these meanings in mind, we can view temptation from the perspective of putting to proof who or what you say you really are. The testing in temptations is a test of our character. Temptation itself is not a sin, it's the acting on the temptation in a way that is ungodly that makes it sin. We know this because:

- Joseph chose to run from the temptation of sin with Potiphar's wife and didn't sin (Gen. 39:10-12).
- Though Jesus was tempted, He was without sin (Heb. 4:15).
- We have the power to overcome temptation because God promises He will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear (1 Cor. 10:13).

Since God promises to enable us to overcome temptation, what are reasons we fall into it?

LIVE IT

How can we win the fight against yielding to temptation?

Temptation is constantly present in our lives. Media is full of it with even household cleaner and fast food commercials having sexual overtones. If not media, we also experience temptation in the trends of our society that encourage YDY (You Do You) or YOLO (You Only Live Once), so do what feels good. How can we resist temptation, pass the test, and ultimately honor God?

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- **Fight.** Realizing we are not immune to temptation prepares us to fight with the Word of God because we aren't caught off guard and are ready to defend our character as Jesus did when tempted.
- **Flight.** Choose to remove yourself from the situation that causes spiritual harm. Don't wait around to see if you can make it through temptation. Run like Joseph did and remove yourself from it.
- **Fright.** Honor your relationship with God by making your first concern about how it will impact Him if you, His ambassador, fall into temptation. Fear defaming God's name!

DAILY READINGS

1. GOD'S ALWAYS THERE // GENESIS 39:2

God is with us whenever and wherever we are. Sometimes we feel forsaken and forgotten when things go wrong in life. When faced with temptation, it's easy to forget that God is there with us. We should be mindful that God is omnipresent. He is everywhere; there is no place where He is not. If we keep our minds and hearts focused on His promise to never leave or forsake us, we might find our strength to resist temptation by inviting Him into our circumstance. He's already there, just acknowledge His presence and press into Him to help you be victorious through it.

Let us draw strength from this reality so we can resist temptation.

2. COUNT THE COST // GENESIS 39:9B

Due to the fallen nature of humankind, there's no one who can honestly say they haven't been tempted by sin. Because temptation to sin is a part of the Christian walk, it's something every believer faces. With this in mind, we should also consider the consequences of sin. Considering the consequences of giving in to temptation can be one of the most powerful ways to avoid it. Count the cost, keeping in mind that Romans 6:23 warns "the wages of sin is death"—death of relationships, trust, or favor with God.

Because our heart's desire is to honor God, let us invite Him to remind us of what sin costs.

3. INTEGRITY IN ACTION // GENESIS 39:10

Integrity is considered an honorable characteristic. Merriam-Webster defines it as a trustworthiness and incorruptibility to a degree that one is incapable of being false to a trust. Though Joseph had numerous opportunities to be untrustworthy, even when no one was apparently watching, he maintained his integrity. He didn't immediately receive a reward for his honorable character, but God saw it and

remembered him. As we are consistent in displaying godly character regardless of whether others see it, God will honor us because in doing so we honor Him.

Be intentional in your consistency to be a person of integrity regardless of who may be watching.

4. WAGES OR GIFT // ROMANS 6:23

We have a choice not only daily, but throughout the day to choose to submit or to resist sin. Have you considered each time you reject sin, you're rejecting the wages of death being applied to your life? Think about it like this, a wage is payment received for something done, but a gift is given voluntarily and freely. Sin, which is what the enemy tempts us with, actually costs us. Rejecting sin, which is what God wants, results in the free gift of eternal life that provides everything we could never earn. Which will you choose?

Pray this prayer: "Gracious God, remind me today of the gift only You can provide. Deliver me from evil. I will always be grateful for Your gift of eternal life."

5. FROM HONOR TO JOY // PSALM 105:1-3

Just as we choose to avoid giving in to temptation, we are given the choice to honor God which leads to joy. How so? These verses guide us through how honoring God brings joy. Honoring God begins with being thankful we can call on Him and know He hears us. He hears us because we belong to Him; He loves us. Therefore we should fall on our knees in thanksgiving. It should include declarations of all the things God has done as we reflect on His faithfulness to us. Then the psalmist reminds us to set our minds on seeking God and all He is, has done, and will do to experience a heart full of joy over and over again. So rejoice!

Reflect on this: God is worthy of all honor and all praise. Let your heart find joy in this!



Overcoming Common Problems

BY DARCHELLE M. GARNER

“Why?” This is often the first question that comes to mind when we encounter problems in life. Things were going great and then ... financial distress, a relationship issue, illness or injury, an injustice, a job lost, a friend’s betrayal, even boredom with life. Or maybe there has been an ongoing struggle and now a new issue unfolds. Such problems may be common across humanity, but the associated pain and disruption are personal and can trigger a host of negative reactions.

Anxiety. Worry. Sleeplessness. Fear. Guilt. Anger. Confusion. Withdrawal. Frustration. All can erode life’s peace and hope. The impact can be so great that we may wonder if overcoming storms and difficulties is even possible, if

deliverance can ever be ours. Such suffering and uncertainty can easily beg the question, “Why?”

All of our problems stem from the fallen nature of the world. Since Adam and Eve sinned in the garden of Eden, humankind has been under the curse of, well, problems. So, if, as Christians, we think we can avoid them, think again. Yes, it’s true that our choices can help insulate us from certain challenges. For example, choosing to not engage in criminal activity can greatly increase our chances of avoiding prison. Nevertheless, we most likely won’t make it to heaven without first encountering some troubles here on earth. Jesus Christ Himself assured us that we would face difficulties in life (John 16:33), so problems are guaranteed.

“How?” This may be a better question to ask when contending with life’s problems. How should we, as believers, handle problems? How do we maintain or reclaim our peace and hope in the midst of our suffering? How can we experience victory? How can we overcome?

When confronted by life’s problems—and to answer the “How?” questions—there are two things to remember and five actions to take.

Always remember:

God loves you. Let that sink in. The Creator of the universe—and everyone and everything in it from the beginning of time—loves you with a forever love (Jer. 31:3), a love so deep and so wide you cannot comprehend it (Eph. 3:18), and a love from which you can never be separated (Rom. 8:38-39). God sees what you are going through and cares that you are suffering. However, God uses your problems to help shape you, mature you, and prepare you to receive the blessings He has in store. He will work out your problems for your good (Rom. 8:28).

God is in control. Your situation might seem out of control to you, but not to God. As the sovereign Ruler of the universe (Ps. 93:1), God is omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. That means He is with you always, He knows everything that you are experiencing, and He has all power to preserve you in the midst of your troubles and keep you from destruction (2 Cor. 4:8). God has allowed problems to enter your life for a good purpose. He will deliver you once that purpose has been achieved according to His plan (Eph. 1:11).

So, when problems arise, take these actions:

Trust God. Make the choice to trust God, for He will see you through your crisis. Hold on to your faith in Him no matter the problem or how unsolvable it might appear to be. As believers, we walk by faith and not by what we see (2 Cor. 5:7). Trust that God is fighting on your behalf (Exod. 14:14) and that He is making a way for you in the midst of your storm (Gen. 41:53-54).

Pray to God. Prayer strengthens your relationship with God. Talk to Him about your problems (1 Pet. 5:7) and request His help in

overcoming them. Seek His peace and strength, and ask for wisdom and direction for dealing with your troubles. Despite your difficulties, be sure to express gratitude for your blessings. After you pray, listen. God will tell you things He wants you to know (Jer. 33:3). God may even make personal promises to you, ones you would never know without spending time with Him.

Believe God’s promises. The Bible records countless promises from God, and they are all for those who believe: God will never leave or forsake you (Deut. 31:6b; 13:5). He hears your prayers (1 Pet. 3:12). He will meet your every need (Phil. 4:19) and will give you strength (Isa. 41:10). These are just a few of God’s promises as found in the Bible. There are many more, all assuring you that God will take care of you in the midst of your storms.

Apply God’s Word. The Bible is not just a book filled with words on pages. It is God’s love letter to the world. Scripture is not only God-breathed (2 Tim. 3:16), it is God Himself (John 1:1)! These words have power to change circumstances and transform people. So, it is not enough to just read the Word; it must be absorbed in our hearts and lived (1 John 2:6). As you apply biblical principles in your life, you will begin to experience a positive shift in your thoughts, actions, and perspective on your problems.

Seek God’s ambassadors. Humans are made for fellowship and sharing with one another. So, when dealing with life’s problems, seek out your pastor or a trusted Christian friend or counselor with whom you can share what you are experiencing. Encouragement and support from a caring confidant can help you process your feelings and provide some relief (Pro. 17:17).

You will discover greater peace and hope for your future as God guides you through your storm, and you will come out better than you can ever imagine. So hold on and don’t give up. You will overcome (1 Pet. 5:10)!

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THE PITFALL OF INJUSTICE

THE POINT:
PRESS FORWARD IN
SPITE OF INJUSTICE.

Leader pages on pp. 144-147

GENESIS 39:21-23; 40:4-8,20-23

MEMORY VERSE

^{39:21} But the LORD was with Joseph and extended kindness to him. He granted him favor with the prison warden. ²² The warden put all the prisoners who were in the prison under Joseph’s authority, and he was responsible for everything that was done there. ²³ **The warden did not bother with anything under Joseph’s authority, because the LORD was with him, and the LORD made everything that he did successful.**

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^{40:4} The captain of the guards assigned Joseph to them as their personal attendant, and they were in custody for some time. ⁵ The king of Egypt’s cupbearer and baker, who were confined in the prison, each had a dream. Both had a dream on the same night, and each dream had its own meaning. ⁶ When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they looked distraught. ⁷ So he asked Pharaoh’s officers who were in custody with him in his master’s house, “Why do you look so sad today?” ⁸ “We had dreams,” they said to him, “but there is no one to interpret them.” Then Joseph said to them, “Don’t interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams.”

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^{40:20} On the third day, which was Pharaoh’s birthday, he gave a feast for all his servants. He elevated the chief cupbearer and the chief baker among his servants. ²¹ Pharaoh restored the chief cupbearer to his position as cupbearer, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh’s hand. ²² But Pharaoh hanged the chief baker, just as Joseph had explained to them. ²³ Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.

KEYWORDS

Cupbearer (40:5)—A cupbearer brought Pharaoh’s wine to him personally, but he also attended to him like a trustworthy butler and a loyal confidant.

Dream (40:5,8)—This word is a translation of a Hebrew verb (*chalam*). In the Bible dreams were used as an avenue of com-

munication between God and humans.

Elevated (40:20)—Numerous interpretations for this word include: raising to a greater height for visibility, summoning to appear before a superior, and showing favor to. More than one meaning might apply here.

HOW CAN WE PRESS FORWARD IN THE FACE OF INJUSTICE?

Ralph J. Bunche, an advocate for Civil Rights in the 1960s, said, “To make his way, the Negro must have firm resolve, persistence, tenacity. He must gear himself to hard work all the way. He can never let up.”²¹ While Joseph never met Dr. Bunche, there’s a good chance he would have agreed with and felt that line. In today’s session, we will see how Joseph chose to press on, even through continued disappointment.

Have you walked through a season when you couldn’t seem to catch a break? Did you ever wonder if good days would be a reality for you? Maybe you lost a job around the same time a loved one died during a global pandemic. Or you went through a painful divorce just as you received devastating news from the doctor. Life can throw many hard punches at us. We may even be tempted to let our hope in God fade.

As you read this part of Joseph’s story, be encouraged that the Lord will always see His children through. As Jesus said: “You will have suffering in this world. Be courageous! I have conquered the world” (John 16:33).

Keep Doing Good

// Genesis 39:21-23

Joseph didn’t deserve being jailed because he was falsely accused. We wouldn’t be surprised if Joseph was tempted to be bitter toward God and others. Instead, Joseph appeared to live by the same principle that the apostle Paul did: “I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I find myself” (Phil. 4:11).

It’s striking how similar verses 21-23 are to earlier verses 3-6, when Potiphar promoted Joseph. The biblical writer wants us to understand the secret to Joseph’s success was God’s sovereign favor. It wasn’t Joseph’s good looks or skillset that pushed him to the top. It was God going before him and opening doors.

We see more hints of Jesus’ own life as we follow Joseph’s story. This passage is often connected to Isaiah’s prophecy stating the Messiah “was counted among the rebels” (Isa. 53:12). Just as Jesus was crucified with prisoners, Joseph also suffered with the



THE POINT: PRESS FORWARD IN SPITE OF INJUSTICE.

accused. In both Joseph's and Jesus' journeys, God provided strength to help them endure, as He does all who trust Him.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN ABOUT PERSEVERANCE DURING TRIALS FROM JOSEPH'S CHARACTER IN THESE VERSES?

Suffering is unwanted in life. No one looks forward to days of suffering, but Scripture is full of verses challenging God's children to remain true no matter what trials come. Consider Joseph's life—and your own—within these following passages:

- “One who is righteous has many adversities, but the Lord rescues him from them all” (Ps. 34:19).
- “We also boast in our afflictions, because we know that affliction produces endurance, endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope. This hope will not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Rom. 5:3-5).
- “Consider it a great joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you experience various trials, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing” (Jas. 1:2-4).

Though these passages were written long after Joseph's death, his life modeled their truth. Joseph was repeatedly wronged, even enslaved and imprisoned, but he chose to make the most of his circumstances by always rising up.

Circumstances can get us down, but remember: just as the Lord fought for Joseph, He fights for those who trust Him. Even when God allows disappointment, we must choose to trust Him and persevere.

Don't Take It Out on Others // Genesis 40:4-8

Joseph may have received a good position, but he was still in prison. He had some authority over the prisoners but worked in complete insignificance. Yet the Lord was working behind the scenes in ways Joseph wouldn't see for years. Two other prisoners' fates would change the course of his life, though he didn't know what God was doing.



DIGGING DEEPER PHARAOH'S COURT

Why were a cupbearer and a baker considered members of the royal court? A person who wished the ruler dead could attempt to accomplish the task directly (violent attack on the person of the ruler) or indirectly (sabotage through poisoning the ruler's wine or food). What did a cupbearer do? A cupbearer worked very closely with the king. He protected the king from being poisoned by first tasting the wine himself before placing it before the king. Similarly, Pharaoh trusted the baker to prevent indirect attempts on his life by assuring no poisons entered his food supply. The title “chief” on both of them indicated they managed other workers who helped to serve Pharaoh. The king trusted them because they were willing to risk their lives for him.²²

Why is trust sometimes so easily destroyed?



The two men were “the king of Egypt’s cupbearer and baker” (v. 5). They cooked for and served Pharaoh which were significant roles. Someone with access to a leader’s food and drink could easily poison him; therefore, the cupbearer and baker were highly trusted.

We don’t know exactly why these two men were imprisoned; we just know they “offended their master, the king of Egypt” (v. 1). Perhaps Pharaoh became ill after a meal, which would’ve made these two men suspects. For all they knew, their days of status were over.

Dreams once again play an important role in Joseph’s life. It was young Joseph’s dreams that caused his brothers’ jealousy (Gen. 37:5-11). In ancient times, dreams were believed to provide divine revelations, and the Egyptians thought a tribe of magicians could reveal their meanings.

Joseph went against the culture when he proposed “interpretations belong to God” (v. 8). He immediately pointed these men to God, the only One with power to rightly explain dreams. With faith in God, Joseph requested to hear the dreams and believed the Lord would help him.

HOW CAN TIMES OF INJUSTICE BE AN OPPORTUNITY TO POINT OTHERS TO GOD?

As we experience great trials in life, we must follow Joseph’s example and trust God. One of the strongest temptations in suffering is to have pity parties. We become self-focused and lose sight of others around us who are also suffering. In loss, we should take cues from Joseph and refuse to play the role of victim; instead, we should continue to point others to God.

Don’t Be Discouraged

// Genesis 40:20-23

In verses 9-19, Joseph heard the dreams of the chief cupbearer and the baker—and he precisely interpreted the dreams. Joseph surely expected his time in the dungeon was about to end—but not so. Even though Joseph kept his promise to interpret the dreams, the chief cupbearer let him down. The baker was executed as Joseph predicted, but the cupbearer was restored to his position in Pharaoh’s inner circle. The cupbearer could’ve easily spoken up for Joseph, but he didn’t. He simply forgot.

People often disappoint us. It hurts to be overlooked, dismissed, or outright forgotten. Joseph may have been forgotten by people including the cupbearer, but God never forgot him. Yet, two more years would pass before his season of suffering ended.

Delays like this can cause discouragement. Joseph’s extended stay in prison was a major setback, but he patiently endured. We might think he didn’t have a choice, but patience has to do with attitude. All we know of Joseph points to a character of calmly enduring and waiting on God to act.

We recognize patience as a good quality, even though we want what we want now. Praying for God to give us patience is a courageous prayer. As an answer, the Lord might make us wait for something we want now. In the process, we learn to walk through seasons of difficulties with

THE POINT: PRESS FORWARD IN SPITE OF INJUSTICE.

a sense of calm that God is in control and will deliver us.

WHAT CAN HELP US WAIT ON THE LORD DURING PERIODS OF INJUSTICE?

It's depressing when our plans are delayed, but the Lord's plans are always perfect and always on time, His time!

- "Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart be courageous. Wait for the LORD" (Ps. 27:14).
- "But those who trust in the LORD will renew their strength; they will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not become weary, they will walk and not faint" (Isa. 40:31).

Joseph eventually discovered what Langston Hughes declared in his poem "Dreams": "Hold fast to dreams / For if dreams die / Life is a broken-winged bird / That cannot fly. / Hold fast to dreams / For when dreams go / Life is a barren field / Frozen with snow."²³ Joseph had to continue being patient and trust that God was with him. May we learn the same. Let's keep our eyes looking up even when life brings us down.

DID YOU KNOW?

Joseph was barely a teen when God gave him dreams about his future rule over his older brothers. By the time his brothers' jealousy became unbearable and resulted in their angry attempt to get rid of him, he was 17 years old. As a teenager and a slave, God set Joseph on a path to power that many wouldn't expect for someone in his position. Though our lives may be peppered with hardship and injustice, they don't keep God's plans from happening. We see God's power and plans override difficult circumstances throughout Scripture.

- Joseph's brothers changed their minds and didn't kill him though they despised him (Gen. 37:26-27).
- Though Joseph was a slave and accused of a crime that usually resulted in death, Potiphar only jailed him because the Lord was with him (Genesis 39:19-21).
- Jesus is a consistent example of not growing weary and not giving up even when we face hostility and injustice (Heb. 12:1-3).

What other events within Joseph's life display God's plans in action?

LIVE IT

What choices should we make when faced with injustice?

Injustice is a common occurrence in today's culture. Unfortunately, it can be experienced due to race, religion, gender, class, and more. Human kindness is often lacking, and our world grows cold and harsh at times when compassion and empathy are most needed. Because of this we may not be able to avoid injustice. Here are ways we can prepare ourselves to address and rise above injustice when it comes:

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- **Choose good.** Instead of seeking revenge for injustice, overcome evil with good. Choose to respond in ways that display godly character like kindness, peace, patience, gentleness, or self-control.
- **Choose forgiveness.** As Jesus Christ forgives us, we should follow His example by forgiving those responsible for injustice in our lives. Jesus helps those who are His when we face injustice.
- **Choose joy.** Use injustice as an opportunity to experience and display joy received from the deepening and strengthening of your faith in God. Give God all the glory by displaying His joy.

DAILY READINGS

1. STEADFAST LOVE // GENESIS 39:21

Have you ever felt alone and misunderstood during a period of undeserved trials? You, like many others, may have experienced feelings of isolation, loneliness, and being misunderstood, especially if falsely accused. The beauty of the living Word is that it speaks to any situation we might ever experience and provides not only answers, but comfort in reminding us of the love God has for His people. The Bible tells consistently of the love of the Lord that never changes. Joseph experienced more trials in his lifetime than most people, but God showed His steadfast love for Him through it all.

Though we may face disappointments in this world, let our minds be secure and our hearts always fixed firmly in God's immovable love.

2. SUFFERING SERVICE // GENESIS 40:7

As we've seen in this study, there are many verses related to the suffering of Christians. Suffering is even heavier when our thoughts are consumed with it and burdened by longing for it to end. We can overcome suffering by taking our minds off what we are going through and placing it on helping others. Think about when you suffered an injury and were told not to focus on the pain. It's the same principle with any kind of suffering. Joseph models this, and Jesus modeled it for all mankind through His suffering. Serving while suffering brings blessings to others and ourselves.

Let us follow Jesus as a suffering servant who is focused on serving others.

3. WORKING WHILE YOU WAIT // GENESIS 40:23

Waiting can be incredibly challenging especially when we really want something right now. It's even more difficult when we are counting on others to provide something based upon what we've done for them. Disappointment and despair can set in due to injustices if we're not careful to trust God

in our waiting. I once heard a church planter say, "While we're waiting, God is working!" Waiting on God to work things out for our good strengthens our dependency on Him and deepens our trust in Him. God is our Jehovah Jireh, our faithful Provider! **Though we may have to wait for vindication through God's perfect will, let us stand assured in His timing and His way. He is always working things out for our good.**

4. POWER DOWN TO POWER UP // ISAIAH 40:29

How many times have you not noticed your phone or computer needing updates and began experiencing glitches, losing information, or completely shutting down because of needed downloads? It can be frustrating when you're not prepared for the powering down required to load updates that make your device perform better. We can apply this scenario to our spiritual lives as well. When we fail to take time to "update" ourselves in God's Word, we may lose access to His power. We will feel powerless; therefore we should see our weakness as a "notification" to be powered up in God.

Don't wait until weakness or powerlessness sets in. Take time today to power up in God's Word so you can press forward.

5. THE POWER OF ENDURANCE // JAMES 1:2-3

Did you know that God uses trials and difficulty to bring us joy? Say what? Yes! He uses our struggles and challenges which test our faith to reveal the power of endurance. Would you ever know how strong your faith was if it were never tested? Most times you would not. James encourages us to find joy in the testing of our faith because of the endurance it produces. Since God allows hardship and trials to come, let us choose to be joyful as we develop endurance.

Trust God and find joy in every circumstance, especially during trials. Be mindful that God is using your trial to develop endurance.

THE PITFALL OF HARD TIMES

THE POINT:
TRUST GOD TO SEE YOU THROUGH ANY CRISIS.

Leader pages on pp. 148-151

GENESIS 41:28-32,47-54

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²⁸ “It is just as I told Pharaoh: God has shown Pharaoh what he is about to do. ²⁹ Seven years of great abundance are coming throughout the land of Egypt. ³⁰ After them, seven years of famine will take place, and all the abundance in the land of Egypt will be forgotten. The famine will devastate the land.

³¹ The abundance in the land will not be remembered because of the famine that follows it, for the famine will be very severe.

MEMORY VERSE

³² Since the dream was given twice to Pharaoh, it means that the matter has been determined by God, and he will carry it out soon.

.....
⁴⁷ During the seven years of abundance the land produced outstanding harvests. ⁴⁸ Joseph gathered all the excess food in the land of Egypt during the seven years and put it in the cities. He put the food in every city from the fields around it. ⁴⁹ So Joseph stored up grain in such abundance—like the sand of the sea—that he stopped measuring it because it was beyond measure.

.....
⁵⁰ Two sons were born to Joseph before the years of famine arrived. Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest at On, bore them to him.

⁵¹ Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh and said, “God has made me forget all my hardship and my whole family.” ⁵² And the second son he named Ephraim and said, “God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.” ⁵³ Then the seven years of abundance in the land of Egypt came to an end, ⁵⁴ and the seven years of famine began, just as Joseph had said. There was famine in every land, but in the whole land of Egypt there was food.

KEYWORDS

Manasseh (v. 51)—This name reflected the fact that God had helped Joseph forget his hardship both in Egypt and in his whole family, with its sordid background of rape (34:2), murder (34:25-26), incest (35:22), deception (34:13, and betrayal (37:28).

Ephraim (v. 52)—This name confessed that God had made Joseph fruitful in the land where he had once been treated as a despised felon.

WHAT STEPS CAN WE TAKE TO TRUST GOD THROUGH A CRISIS?

Life is full of ups and downs. A basketball star shoots a game-winning three-pointer, and his name is all over the media. The following week, however, an injury brings his career to a shocking end. He goes from hero to zero. The opposite can also happen. A teenage girl living in poverty creates a YouTube® video, and it goes viral. Within days, she's offered multiple opportunities to sing. Her sudden success inspires young musicians everywhere.

Sudden reversals can flip the script for all of us, creating a test of our faith and character. For many of us, the arrival of the pandemic in 2020 caused just such a sudden reversal.

In today's study, we'll see Joseph travel from the prison to the palace in a single day. His many years of suffering were finally repaid with a huge personal reward. Notice the way Joseph kept his eyes on God through the good times and the bad. While success can cause some to grow self-sufficient and self-absorbed, Joseph modeled for us what it means to remain faithful no matter how high or low life takes us.

Seek God's Wisdom

// Genesis 41:28-32

As seen previously in Joseph's life, dreams created a domino effect for him. This was the third time this had happened. He first told his brothers about a dream, and it landed him in Egyptian slavery (Gen. 39:5-11). Later, the dreams of a baker and a cupbearer could have freed him from prison but didn't (40:8-23). Now, two years later, the powerful Egyptian pharaoh awoke with a troubled soul, desperately looking for an interpretation of his dreams. This third dream sequence of Joseph's life would lead to incredible success.

The last domino was related to the cupbearer's earlier dream. Joseph had asked the cupbearer to remember him before Pharaoh when he was released from prison (v. 14). The cupbearer did, but two years later! It was all in God's timing.

Pharaoh's dreams were visually vivid: healthy grain, thin grain, fat cows, and skinny cows. Only one Person could interpret those dreams,



THE POINT: TRUST GOD TO SEE YOU THROUGH ANY CRISIS.

the One to whom Joseph looked when Pharaoh gave him the opportunity. “It is God who will give Pharaoh a favorable answer” (v. 16). The meaning of Pharaoh’s two dreams was: for seven years, Egypt would have great abundance, but the following seven years would bring devastating famine. Joseph ended the interpretation saying, “The matter has been determined by God, and he will carry it out soon” (v. 32).

The way Joseph boldly spoke for God should inspire us all. While Pharaoh believed himself to be divine, Joseph unapologetically represented the One and only true God. Rather than taking credit, he gave all glory to God. Joseph was thoroughly God-centered in the lowest and highest moments of his journey. Nothing took his eyes off the Lord.

HOW DO WE GAIN CONFIDENCE LIKE JOSEPH’S WHEN GOD REVEALS HIS PLAN?

Experiencing the test of sudden reversals moving from a good situation to a terrible one can cause disappointment. We might assume God has abandoned us and become bitter. On the other hand, when our lives take a turn for the better, we can be tempted to become big-headed. Instead of thinking God has forsaken us, we can be the ones who forsake God, walking away from God in our thoughts and actions.

Unfortunately, this is the story of far too many people, but not Joseph. Through thick and thin, he kept his eyes on the Lord.

Follow God’s Plan // Genesis 41:47-49

Joseph’s initiative and confidence is admirable. Boldly, Joseph offered a brilliant “business plan” to get through rough years ahead (41:33-36). Pharaoh recognized Joseph’s unique talent, so he promoted Joseph to second in command.

For the first seven years, the rains came down and the crops came up—just as the Lord had said! The economy was booming, and throughout the ancient Middle East, people celebrated the riches of the land. Through those wealthy years, Joseph didn’t become overconfident. He took advantage of the rich season and “put the food in every city” (v. 48).

Joseph took in all the wealth of the land, but he never allowed power or wealth to hypnotize him. He kept his eyes on the



DIGGING DEEPER JOSEPH’S LEADERSHIP

Consider the task given to Joseph. First he had to learn about Egypt and its agriculture. The skills God had given Joseph plus learned knowledge allowed him to fulfill Pharaoh’s decree. Joseph was able to collect one-fifth of the grain harvested in each of the seven years of plentiful produce. Collecting the food required him to establish and supervise an organization composed of workers with a wide array of work skills. They would need to know how to construct buildings, collect and transport the harvest, and account for, as well as protect, what had been gathered. Supervisors to work under Joseph’s leadership would be needed as he carried out the God-given plan, managing the project closely for a span of seven long years.

What role does strong leadership play in a crisis?



Lord and remembered what God told him. The season of prosperity was a blessing, but the tide would roll out just as it had rolled in.

WHEN IS IT EASIEST OR MOST CHALLENGING FOR YOU TO FOLLOW GOD'S PLAN?

Over the past two decades, tragedy has hit the U.S. in unimagined ways. With a new millennium, hijackers attacked the twin towers of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and an unprecedented era of terrorism began. A “new normal” became our reality. Then, eighteen years later, while the economy was soaring, a small news story leaked out telling of a strange virus spreading from China to other countries. Within weeks, a global pandemic shut down church services, restaurants, sporting events, and concerts. Social distancing, mask wearing, and video calling became normal everyday practices.

As we read Joseph's story, we encounter a man who was prepared to deal with plenty and with poverty. He didn't allow seasons of wealth to catch him off guard; instead, He followed God's plans, storing for the future. There's wisdom for us here. As the apostle Paul said, we should learn to embrace the joys that come with all financial situations:

“I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I find myself. I know how to make do with little, and I know how to make do with a lot. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being content—whether well fed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need. I am able to do all things through him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:11-13).

Be Fruitful Even in Famine

// Genesis 41:50-54

While Egypt's economy was thriving, Joseph experienced other blessings. The Lord gave him the gift of family. In those first seven years as prime minister, Joseph fathered two sons, and their names had significant meaning.

- **Manasseh.** Manasseh means “he who causes to forget.” His birth helped Joseph put the past behind him. For thirteen years, he may have mentally replayed his brothers' betrayal. As a prisoner, he wrestled with painful memories of disloyalty. But Manasseh enabled him to realize he had his own family to build and release any remaining toxic emotions.

Consider how much time most of us spend second-guessing previous decisions. Those painful moments, however, become essential to our growth as believers. James says, “Consider it a great joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you experience various trials, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance” (Jas. 1:2-3). The pain of the past can make us productive in the future.

- **Ephraim.** Ephraim means “fertile” and describes the season of life Joseph was enjoying. Not only was his family growing, but so were his influence and leadership. The Lord allows each of us to experience unexpected seasons of blessing, filled with gratitude, hope, and joy. Joseph knew hard

THE POINT: TRUST GOD TO SEE YOU THROUGH ANY CRISIS.

times were ahead, but he named his second son “fertile” so he wouldn’t forget the bright seasons, which balanced out the dark ones.

The names Manasseh and Ephraim were meaningful names because of their significance, but they were also special because they were Hebrew names. It’s easy to overlook this critical decision Joseph made to keep his commitment to God. Surrounded by Egyptian culture and gods, he didn’t waiver from his faith in the Lord.

The surprising aspect of Joseph’s life wasn’t that he praised God in times of plenty, but that he remained faithful in seasons of suffering. He learned that the Lord could be trusted. We must do the same. As the world becomes more secular, Christians will be increasingly disregarded, and believers will need to count the cost of following Jesus. We’ll find hard times can be moments of great spiritual growth.

HOW CAN JOSEPH’S STORY HELP US HOPE IN GOD DURING THE HARDEST TIMES?

DID YOU KNOW?

Today’s researchers believe dreams have health benefits. They have discovered dreams help us to process emotions and other things in our lives.²⁴ Through Joseph’s life, God used dreams to impact his and others’ futures greatly. We know dreams were important because of how deeply troubled Pharaoh was about his dreams and the number of “experts” he called upon for interpretation. Joseph was born to provide the interpretation Pharaoh needed because God had influenced him through sets of dreams since childhood. Each set of dreams was a reminder God was in control and orchestrating the events of Joseph’s life as he affirmed in Genesis 41:32, “Since the dream was given twice to Pharaoh, it means that the matter has been determined by God, and he will carry it out soon.”

Since today Christ-followers shouldn’t rely on dream interpretation for God’s guidance, how does God reveal He has determined matters in our lives?

LIVE IT

What helps us to overcome the crisis we face?

The coronavirus took hard times to an unimaginable level for the entire world. Most people had never experienced a global pandemic in their lifetime and had little knowledge of how to navigate it. Quarantine, social distancing, masks, and vaccines became realities no one could avoid in attempts to get the crisis under control. What lessons through this pandemic and other crises help us to trust God?

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- **Be mindful.** Realize most people experience crisis, so it’s usually inevitable. Though God allows crisis in our lives, remember you’re not alone. Take time to meditate on Bible verses about facing trials.
- **Be faithful.** Consider God uses crisis to build our spiritual immunity through endurance and perseverance. Spend consistent time in prayer asking Him to strengthen your faith and trust in Him.
- **Be fruitful.** Though some became sedentary through shelter-in-place, others found creative ways to connect, serve, and develop new skills. Discover ways to serve God more during crisis.

DAILY READINGS

1. DOUBLE DOWN // GENESIS 41:32

Though I'm not a card player, I've heard the phrase "double down" on game shows when the contestant is taking a risk that their decided course of action in the game is correct. Merriam Webster defines the phrase as "becoming more tenacious, zealous, or resolute in a position or undertaking."²⁵ In this verse, Joseph declares we're not taking a risk when God tells us to do something twice. Instead, we can be confident that "the matter has been determined by God, and He will carry it out." When God repeats something, we can "double down" and be confident He will do it.

Ask God to give you discernment and confidence in His reassurances in His Word.

2. BEYOND MEASURE // GENESIS 41:49

When was the last time you expected God to bless you beyond measure? Some people wonder why we don't see more modern-day miracles in Western Christianity. Yet there are many miracles witnessed in Third World countries. Could it be that we have become so comfortable in our self-sufficiency we don't expect God to move on our behalf? Or is it that we feel so distanced from God we dare not ask Him to bless us with His limitless favor? Without our expectations or desire for His miraculous power to be manifested in our lives, we may be missing out on God's blessings beyond what we can measure.

Let's stretch our faith so that through prayer we will experience God's presence and power beyond measure.

3. WHAT'S IN A NAME // GENESIS 41:51-52

It was common practice during biblical times for children to be given names because of specific events occurring in their parents' lives or associated with their birth. It was believed the children personified the name given and would live out the meaning of their names. When Joseph named his

two sons, he acknowledged the Lord's faithfulness to him and his family through their Hebrew names. His father and mother had named him and his brother Benjamin specifically to honor God.

Those who follow Christ have been called by His name. We should live a life that always makes His name great and brings Him glory.

4. TRIAL OFFER // JAMES 1:2-3

Usually when we hear the term "trial offer" it means a temporary period for receiving benefits for free or at a lesser price. One of the main factors about the trial is that it is temporary. Yet it's meant to encourage the patron to want the full benefit with a willingness to pay the full price. Let's look at the trials of life from this perspective. They are temporary, but they are meant to produce a desire in us for their full benefit. Though trials may be difficult, God allows them to strengthen our faith, draw us closer to Him, and produce endurance in us according to James. Endurance means we will be able to withstand future trials.

Ask God to change your perspective on the trials He allows in our lives to see them as a test of our faith to develop endurance.

5. TRIUMPH IN TROUBLE // PSALM 71:19-21

When trouble comes, one of the last things we might think of is triumph. Most times our minds focus on why we're experiencing trouble, when it'll end, who's to blame for it, or whether we'll make it through. As we mature as believers, we must come to understand the benefits of trouble are directly connected to testing and proving the depth and strength of our faith. For Christ's followers, trouble enables God to place us in difficult circumstances, so He can provide comfort, the ability to stand, or a way out. Whatever the result, God's goal is for our triumph in Him through our trouble.

In the midst of trouble, turn to God. He will help you to triumph through.

THE PITFALL OF BITTERNESS

THE POINT:
RELATIONSHIPS CAN ONLY MOVE FORWARD WITH FORGIVENESS.

Leader pages on pp. 152-155

GENESIS 45:1-5,9-11

¹ Joseph could no longer keep his composure in front of all his attendants, so he called out, "Send everyone away from me!" No one was with him when he revealed his identity to his brothers. ² But he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and also Pharaoh's household heard it. ³ Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But they could not answer him because they were terrified in his presence.

.....
⁴ Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Please, come near me," and they came near. "I am Joseph, your brother," he said, "the one you sold into Egypt. ⁵ And now don't be grieved or angry with yourselves for selling me here, because God sent me ahead of you to preserve life.

.....
⁹ "Return quickly to my father and say to him, 'This is what your son Joseph says: "God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me without delay. ¹⁰ You can settle in the land of Goshen and be near me—you, your children, and your grandchildren, your flocks, your herds, and all you have. ¹¹ There I will sustain you, for there will be five more years of famine. Otherwise, you, your household, and everything you have will become destitute.'"

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MEMORY VERSE

Hebrews 12:15—Make sure that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no root of bitterness springs up, causing trouble and defiling many.

KEYWORDS

God sent me ahead (v. 5)—This is one of the most eloquent affirmations in the Bible regarding God's sovereignty in human events.
Preserve life (v. 5)—One of the two vital things God accomplished through Joseph's leadership leading up to and during

the seven year famine. The other thing was to establish "a remnant within the land" (v. 7).
Goshen (v. 10)—This region was located in the eastern portion of Egypt's Nile Delta and also known as "the land of Rameses" (47:11).

HOW CAN WE PREVENT BITTERNESS IN A RELATIONSHIP?

As kids, we could look at certain foods and be convinced it would taste bad. And some foods can surprise us. Take, for example, an apple. Nothing tastes better than biting into a pretty red apple—and nothing tastes worse than discovering that apple is quite bitter! You don't want someone snapping your picture at that moment because a twisted up face isn't the best for a photo opportunity.

The face of bitterness is not attractive, yet many people wear that face today. Their bitter expressions are not because of unpleasant food, but because of painful moments in their past. We can wash away the bitter taste of bad food, but the bitterness that comes from the betrayal of others or our own bad decisions can rob us of our joy and prevent us from moving forward with God and others.

Joseph displayed a different face. Joseph provides a pattern for us to follow, as he refused to be bitter. He chose to forgive and let his brothers “off the hook” for what they did to him. We, too, can choose to be bitter or better.

Embrace Your Pain // Genesis 45:1-3

Many of us have moments when our emotions overwhelm us, sometimes at the most unexpected times. A song comes on the radio and sparks memories. Tears stream down your face. Emotions are part of God's gift to humanity. Healthy people share their emotions and feelings with God and loved ones.

Joseph experienced such a wave of emotion. He had been “playing” his brothers since their first visit to Egypt, but the peak of the events finally caused him to lose his composure. As Judah pleaded for Benjamin, his brothers' love and compassion for both Benjamin and their father touched Joseph deeply (Gen. 44:18-34). “Joseph could no longer keep his composure in front of all his attendants” (v. 1). It was time to “come clean” and share what was in his heart.

Joseph certainly had faith in God, but he may have struggled with bitterness at the injustices he suffered. His brothers' disloyalty and cruelty probably came to mind over the thirteen years,



THE POINT: RELATIONSHIPS CAN ONLY MOVE FORWARD WITH FORGIVENESS.

but experiencing their changed behavior was emotionally overwhelming for Joseph, such that he wept loudly and was moved to respond.

Overpowering fear plowed into Joseph's brothers, as this powerful man revealed his identity. Joseph's brothers were still "terrified in his presence" (v. 3). Moments before he had been a harsh ruler and they were strangers; now he suddenly spoke with warmth and tenderness and called them brothers.

The brothers' dismay was probably from fear of punishment. Joseph had displayed his power and authority in their presence; now they knew he was also their brother and feared he would use his power to get revenge against them. Joseph's brothers' fear reveals that their hearts weren't right with God. Guilt had weighed them down for years.

It wasn't yet clear to the brothers that Joseph's tears were reflecting his joy and not bitterness. As Joseph's story continues, we see his love, concern, and forgiveness toward his brothers. At that moment, the brothers were likely too shocked to sense Joseph's love. They are an example of the biblical truth in 1 John 4:18: "There is no fear in love; instead, perfect love drives out fear, because fear involves punishment. So, the one who fears is not complete in love."

WHAT ARE OTHER WAYS JOSEPH COULD'VE RESPONDED TO HIS BROTHERS?

Joseph didn't act like the past never happened, but he didn't hold it against his brothers. He chose to move on.

Forgive Freely // Genesis 45:4-5

A person will hide a gift behind his back, waiting for the perfect moment to surprise the recipient. God puts something behind His back, but it's not a gift; it's our sin. "Indeed, it was for my own well-being that I had such intense bitterness; but your love has delivered me from the Pit of destruction, for you have thrown all my sins behind your back" (Isa. 38:17). Isn't this a powerful picture of forgiveness? God chooses to put our past behind Him!

Joseph revealed the heart of our heavenly Father and chose to forgive his brothers. Notice the affection he showed them:



DIGGING DEEPER COME NEAR

Why did Joseph ask his brothers to "come near" to him (Gen. 45:4)? Of course, his invitation allowed them to get a better look at him to confirm his identity. However, Joseph's invitation also nudged them to diminish the distance in their relationship with him. Joseph wanted to speak to them more intimately, this time explicitly identifying himself. The last time they remembered seeing Joseph, he had begged them not to sell him to traders (42:21). This time he held their fate. With his invitation, Joseph tried to remove the fear that prompted them to misunderstand his intention. By taking the initiative to nourish their relationship, Joseph attempted to demonstrate his forgiveness.

What are the benefits of seeking to restore broken relationships?



“Please, come near me.” Any hard feelings were removed by the power of grace.

Joseph extended forgiveness to his brothers, and we can do the same with those who hurt us. We all need to be forgiven, accepted, and loved. We long to receive forgiveness and yet struggle to give it. Grace is the only way to live in close relationship with others. Joseph expressed grace to his brothers. “Then Joseph threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin wept on his shoulder. Joseph kissed each of his brothers as he wept, and afterward his brothers talked with him” (Gen. 45:14-15). His outward affection was a sign of his inward forgiveness.

As he forgave, Joseph called on his brothers to forgive themselves. “And now don’t be grieved or angry with yourselves for selling me here” (v. 5). In our humanity, we may want those who hurt us to “beat themselves up” over what they did. Forgiveness doesn’t require that. We might wait for years for an apology before deciding to forgive. This is unbiblical and unhealthy. We forgive because it’s the right thing to do, regardless of their response.

WHAT CAUSES US TO SOMETIMES HOLD ON TO GRUDGES AND WITHHOLD FORGIVENESS?

Joseph saw what God was doing, “God sent me ahead of you to preserve life” (v. 5). Joseph wasn’t excusing their sinful behavior, but he saw God had been and was still working to redeem a bad situation for His glory. Since God uses even painful things that happen to us, why should we be unforgiving? Even more so, how can we be unforgiving when God has forgiven us of so much more? “And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ” (Eph. 4:32).

Seek the Other’s Best

// Genesis 45:9-11

As God’s people, we’re blessed to be a blessing. Sharing our lives and our gifts with others is central to who we are as Christ-followers. It was the Lord Jesus who said, “Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). Following Jesus means we serve God while serving others.

In Genesis 45:7, Joseph explained his great promotion in Egypt: “God sent me ahead of you to establish you as a remnant within the land and to keep you alive by a great deliverance.” Joseph didn’t view his story as that of a self-made man. God exalted him to serve others.

In our social media world, self-glorification is more tempting than ever. We can enhance photos of ourselves with filters and other tools that can make it seem like we’re much better than we truly are. While sitting at a stoplight, I read the bumper sticker on the car ahead of me: “If only my life could be as great as yours appears on Facebook.” God hasn’t put us on this earth to build up ourselves. He placed us here to build up the kingdom, and His kingdom consists of people. Therefore our focus should be on the ones closest to us.

THE POINT: RELATIONSHIPS CAN ONLY MOVE FORWARD WITH FORGIVENESS.

Because Joseph had seen the prolonged famine coming, he commanded his brothers to go home and return quickly with their father, their families, and all their belongings. He followed up his forgiveness by seeking what was best for them. With their brother Joseph's promise of provision, they headed home with joy and hope. Not only had Joseph forgiven the past, but he was committed to caring for them in the future.

Joseph's actions reflect the power of the gospel. As a person comes to faith in Christ, not only is his record of sin erased, but his eternal future in heaven is secured. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8). The same One who sought our best by securing our salvation continues to seek our best through His daily care and provision. The future is bright for all who love Christ and have made Him Lord of their lives.

That means we trust Jesus, and we have nothing to fear in the future when our trust is in Christ. Praise God that we live under His banner of love—and with even greater riches in His storehouses.

DID YOU KNOW?

Joseph's story reveals he was only a teenager when he was sold into Egyptian slavery (Gen. 37:2, 27). Another two decades passed before he was raised to power in Egypt (Gen. 41:46). Almost another decade passed before he was reunited with his brothers who had betrayed him (Gen. 45:3). Many years were lost with his family due to his brothers' cruelty which could've created bitterness and a desire for revenge. Though Joseph's circumstances looked miserable and were undeserved, God used them to raise him to second in command of the strong Egyptian nation. God enabled a former slave and prisoner to control the nation that would impact the world. Joseph's faith and trust in God was displayed as he used his power to provide salvation for his family and the multitudes.

What can we learn from Joseph's life that enables us to reflect faith and forgiveness as Christ-followers instead of bitterness and revenge?

LIVE IT

What can help us seek to forgive those who have wrongfully hurt us?

Bitterness is often caused by deep hurts or suffering. Its root word *bitter* is defined in two ways according to Merriam Webster: accompanied by severe pain or suffering, or being relentlessly determined.²⁶ The same word has two different meanings. Here are ways we can transform bitterness in our lives from causing suffering to motivating our determination.

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- **Carry on.** Take your eyes off the source of your suffering to avoid bitterness and turn them to Jesus and the example He set in seeking the joy that comes beyond suffering (Heb. 12:2).
- **Carry over.** When we struggle to shift our focus away from sources of hurt, turn to God's Word and carry over or apply His truth to your situation to extend forgiveness (Heb. 12:14-15).
- **Carry through.** Share with someone who does not know God how He has empowered you to carry through with forgiveness. Because He forgives us, He expects us to forgive others (Matt. 6:14-15).

DAILY READINGS

1. FACING PAIN // GENESIS 45:1-2

Have you ever experienced deep hurt that cut you to your core? Joseph did and came face-to-face with it when he was reunited with his brothers who betrayed him. Seeing their concern for their younger brother and their father, Joseph finally released the pain he'd carried for so long. When we face deep pain, we might hold onto it for revenge, fear of deeper hurt, or denial that it even exists, which can cause bondage. While facing the pain may be difficult, with God as our comfort and peace, we can be freed of it and find the strength to heal.

Purposefully, give your hurts to God in exchange for the comfort only He can provide.

2. SOVEREIGN GRACE // GENESIS 45:5

One of God's most beautiful characteristics is His grace. Though we're undeserving of His favor, He showers us with it. Jesus modeled God's grace when facing death. He prayed, "Father forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Like Jesus, Joseph, who is considered possibly one of the closest people in character to Jesus, modeled the same. He showed his understanding and acceptance of the power of God's sovereign grace that kept him through hardships. When we're offered an opportunity to extend grace to others, by doing so, we put God on center stage to be witnessed through our lives.

Even though it may be challenging, let the character of Christ shine through you. Extend grace to others like He would.

3. A PRESENT HELP // GENESIS 45:9,11

Jacob's family was facing destitution due to famine. As they became desperate after two years in this plight, he sent his sons to a neighboring land to find help. He may have reflected on what happened when he sent out his most beloved son, Joseph, years ago and was concerned for their safety.

Jacob sent his sons hoping to find grain to sustain their family, but what they found was much more. He probably never imagined the answer to their current situation would come from the heartbreaking loss he had experienced decades before. Yet God had already destined Joseph to be the present help for Jacob's family.

Invite God to teach you to rely on Him to be a present help in your time of need.

4. SELFLESS AMBITION // PHILIPPIANS 2:3

Through the story of Joseph's life, there is an overarching theme related to his character. He displayed the Christ-like attribute of humility consistently regardless of the circumstances he was in. Joseph modeled what we as Jesus' followers should strive for, the humble heart of a servant.

We can cultivate humility by being selfless instead of selfish. By giving others value above self and seeking their good, we represent Christ well and personify His goodness. Be more concerned about lifting others, and trust God to lift you.

Ambitiously seek to be more like God. Allow Him to search your heart, reveal and remove any traits that are not like Him. Invite God to replace them with everything like Him.

5. FOR GREATER GOOD // ROMANS 8:28

We never know how God may use delightful or difficult situations in our lives. If we as Christ-lovers trust God is in control, we can be assured He allows all things for a reason. A good discipline to develop, instead of being disappointed with God or upset with others who may have caused us difficulty, is to acknowledge God is always good and He ensures our good. From creation's beginning, we know all God orchestrated was good, so we can trust that He will continue to provide good for us daily.

Ask God to teach you to trust Him as you seek to see His greater good in all things. Your trust should always be in God.

THE PITFALL OF GUILT AND GRUDGES

Leader pages on pp. 156-159

THE POINT:
WE CAN ONLY MOVE FORWARD WHEN WE EMBRACE GOD'S FORGIVENESS.

GENESIS 50:15-21

¹⁵ When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said to one another, "If Joseph is holding a grudge against us, he will certainly repay us for all the suffering we caused him."

¹⁶ So they sent this message to Joseph, "Before he died your father gave a command:

¹⁷ 'Say this to Joseph: Please forgive your brothers' transgression and their sin—the suffering they caused you.' Therefore, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when their message came to him.

¹⁸ His brothers also came to him, bowed down before him, and said, "We are your slaves!"

.....
¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God?"

²⁰ **You planned evil against me; God planned it for good to bring about the present result—the survival of many people.**

.....
²¹ Therefore don't be afraid. I will take care of you and your children." And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

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MEMORY VERSE

KEYWORDS

Transgression ... sin (v. 17)—Transgression refers to rebellious action, behavior, or lifestyle against God—revolt. It's a more general term that signifies any offense against God that breaks His law and His heart.

Servants of God of your Father (v. 17)—Joseph's brothers worshiped the same God that he did.

God planned it for good (v. 20)—God had transformed the soot of human sin into a diamond of divine blessing (Rom. 8:28; 1 Pet. 2:24).

WHAT HELPS US MOVE FORWARD IN GOD'S FORGIVENESS?

Many men love to show off their driving skills. They often brag about being able to maneuver roads during the worst conditions. Driving in snow is one example. Snow will stick quickly to the windshield and make the pavement slick. And despite the cries and warnings of spouses and family, these snow drivers will roll their eyes and keep driving. However, some will lose control of the vehicle, and with tires spinning, the family car will end up in a ditch. The family will be stuck because of the snow driver's ego.

It's one thing to be momentarily stuck in the snow, but many people live their lives stuck. It's not the snow that causes the problem, but the unforgiveness that surrounds them. Nothing prevents a person from moving forward like the holding of grudges.

In this final session, Joseph had seen the plan of God in the decisions of his brothers that caused so much pain in his life. Let's take one more look at Joseph and see what he can teach us about looking at our own struggles in light of the grace of God.

Reexamine Your Guilt

// Genesis 50:15-18

When the brothers traveled to Egypt seeking food, and Joseph revealed himself, they had reason to fear. They were now in the hands of a powerful Egyptian leader, and their guilt was undeniable. They thought the brother they had wronged would get revenge. Instead, they found Joseph to be compassionate, willingly forgetting their crimes. Joseph didn't want revenge; he wanted his family back. Consequently, the brothers brought their father and families and lived in Egypt under Joseph's protection for nearly twenty years.

All was good until Jacob's death. The family went through the stages of mourning and burial arrangements were made in Canaan. But after their father's passing, the brothers wondered if Joseph's love would turn to hate. "If Joseph is holding a grudge against us, he will certainly repay us for all the suffering we caused him" (v. 15) Should they expect payback?



THE POINT: WE CAN ONLY MOVE FORWARD WHEN WE EMBRACE GOD'S FORGIVENESS.

The brothers had reason to feel paranoid. What they did to Joseph years ago was unpardonable. They left him for dead and then sold him into slavery. But in Joseph's mind, their fears were unproven. Still, they sent a message to Joseph, explaining that before he died, their father had requested, "Please forgive your brothers' transgression and their sin—the suffering they caused you" (v. 17) We don't know if Jacob actually said that, but the brothers used it to regain Joseph's grace. They humbled themselves before him, saying, "We are your slaves!" (v.18). Again, Joseph was full of grace.

WHAT ARE SOME CONSEQUENCES OF CARRYING GUILT?

Wouldn't it be great if we could all put the past behind us? So much of our present pain relates to old wounds that never healed. By the grace of God and with His help, we can let go of grudges.

Matthew 6:15 is a difficult verse. Jesus didn't sugarcoat His call for forgiveness: "But if you don't forgive others, your Father will not forgive your offenses." To be Christ-followers is imitating His ways. Just as the Lord forgives, so should we. Following Jesus means trusting God with all hurts and believing, as He loves and forgives us, He empowers us to do likewise.

Most people struggle through unresolved pain, but in Joseph's story, the happy ending came! While Joseph's brothers thought they had reason to fear, he had no plans for revenge. His only plans were to care for them. It was time to release their guilt and move on.

Refocus on God's Providence

// Genesis 50:19-20

Joseph's story, comprising the largest portion of the Book of Genesis, comes to this climactic finale in verses 19-20. Coming together is God's sovereignty and the humility of humankind.

Notice the question Joseph asked his brothers: "Am I in the place of God?" (v. 19) We should often ask that same question! In our sinful nature, we make frequent attempts to enthrone ourselves and rule, even though Scriptures continually remind us of God's sovereign lordship.



DIGGING DEEPER FORGIVENESS

Forgiving does not suggest someone's action wasn't wrong or didn't hurt. When God offers us His forgiveness, He is not claiming our sin was not wrong, for our sin rightfully separates us from God (6:23). Forgiving releases our right to punish someone. The message Joseph's brothers delivered to him after their father died called for Joseph to "forgive" his brothers (Gen. 50:17). The brothers used the same word in their own plea to Joseph. The word rendered forgive means "to send away," "to lift up," or "to carry or bear." Cain used it to express that God's punishment was too great for him to bear (4:13). It occurs in 13:6, saying the land could not support both Abraham and Lot with their flocks. The message directed Joseph to put the brothers' sin in the past, to send it away, to lift their accountability for it.

What are some characteristics of a Christian who has fully embraced forgiveness?



- “A person’s heart plans his way, but the LORD determines his steps” (Prov. 16:9).
- “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will travel to such and such a city and spend a year there and do business and make a profit.’ Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring—what your life will be! For you are like vapor that appears for a little while, then vanishes. Instead, you should say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.’ But as it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil” (Jas. 4:13-16).

What made Joseph exceptional was his view of God affecting how he saw himself. It wasn’t as simple as “his brothers did him wrong.” Far more was involved. God used the pain of Joseph’s past for a much higher purpose in the future. What others meant for evil, God intended for good. This is a mature believer’s mindset.

Paul reinforced this truth while reflecting on his past and the pain he brought himself. “But everything that was a gain to me, I have considered to be a loss because of Christ. More than that, I also consider everything to be a loss in view of the surpassing value of

knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of him I have suffered the loss of all things and consider them as dung, so that I may gain Christ and be found in him” (Phil. 3:7-9).

HOW CAN JOSEPH’S STORY HELP US WHEN WE DON’T UNDERSTAND GOD’S PLANS?

What brought Joseph to the healthy place in Genesis 50 was his hope in the Ultimate Planner. “God planned it for good to bring about the present result—the survival of many people.” God knows the end from the beginning. We should remind ourselves the Lord is in control.

Receive God’s Comfort

// Genesis 50:21

It is God’s kindness that leads us to repentance (Rom. 2:4). Throughout the Bible, God’s great love for His people is on display. From Genesis to Revelation, God’s most attractive quality is His love for the broken.

Joseph’s brothers had lived broken lives, and Joseph desired to bring healing and reconciliation by displaying love and compassion. Trembling in fear, they heard Joseph say: “Therefore don’t be afraid. I will take care of you and your children” (v. 21).

While Christians wholeheartedly agree God’s grace saved them, many focus on lives driven by works. “You don’t read your Bible enough.” “You don’t pray enough.” “You don’t give or serve enough.” Legalism causes feelings of inadequacy. This isn’t the message of the gospel at all. Jesus said, “So if the Son sets you free, you really will be free” (John 8:36).

Just as we’re saved by God’s grace, we’re also daily sustained by God’s grace. Catch that connection in Paul’s word: “So then, just as you have received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to walk in him” (Col. 2:6). Joseph’s words in

THE POINT: WE CAN ONLY MOVE FORWARD WHEN WE EMBRACE GOD'S FORGIVENESS.

verse 21 reflect God's infinitely greater love and concern for us. Don't be afraid. The God who saves us also takes care of us.

WHAT ARE SOME PRINCIPLES FROM JOSEPH'S LIFE THAT HELP US EMBRACE FORGIVENESS?

We see this in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). This parable captures our attention because the father's love and forgiveness are amazing. After the younger son took his father's money and ruined the family name, he returned home. Fully expecting to be treated as a servant at best, he was embraced by his father. "Let's celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" (vv. 23-24).

The greatest need of the human heart is to feel the Father's full pardon, knowing we're accepted no matter what crimes we've committed. He looks for us, finds us, runs to us, throws his arms around us, kisses us, and rejoices. When we come to Him, He responds to us as Joseph did his brothers: "Don't be afraid. I will take care of you." Salvation, grace, and new life in Christ are wrapped in His love.

DID YOU KNOW?

Through Joseph's life, God's sovereignty is on full display. Joseph was an alien of Egypt yet became a ruler with all authority and power. While God had raised him to prominence, showered him with favor, and gave him the trust of the Egyptians, Joseph maintained his devotion and faith to God and his people. Upon death, the Egyptian tradition was to carry out burial rites and a forty-day embalming process. Joseph ensured his father Jacob was honored in death in the same manner as Egyptian royalty and the whole country mourned for seventy days. With Pharaoh's permission, Joseph buried Jacob in their homeland, Canaan, and was accompanied by a procession of Pharaoh's servants and elders, along with his brothers and his father's family all with horses and chariots. This impressive procession was witnessed by the Canaanites who thought it was all for Egyptian royalty.

What does Joseph's life teach us about God's sovereignty over every aspect of our lives?

LIVE IT

How can we move forward in the life God has for us after we've been hampered by guilt?

Joseph's life closes out the Book of Genesis with reminders of God's promises to His people and Joseph requesting his own promises. Be reminded of the theme of forgiveness and grace that runs like a river through the plains, valleys, and mountains of Joseph's life. Examine your life and ask God to identify key truths He wants to flow through your life so you can move forward. Use these tips to guide your trek.

+ + +

- **See it.** Take time to evaluate your life for sources of bitterness, unforgiveness, trials, and challenges. Record what you learned about yourself and God's grace through them.
- **Profess it.** Once you've discovered these areas that have actually been opportunities for testing and deepening your faith, share them with someone as a testament of God maturing you spiritually.
- **Offer it.** After acknowledgment of needed or experienced areas of growth, boldly pray for God to provide an opportunity to share about His forgiveness and grace, extending an invitation for salvation to someone He places within your path who has not confessed Jesus as Savior.

DAILY READINGS

1. GRACE OVER GUILT // GENESIS 50:15

Do you remember when you received grace though you were guilty? Maybe it was a traffic stop, and the officer let you off with a warning. Or you falsely accused someone and never apologized, yet they still treated you respectfully. Though we're totally undeserving, God offers deliverance from the guilt of sin through salvation in Him. Our salvation first requires acknowledgment of our guilt. When we acknowledge guilt, God doesn't hold us hostage to it. Instead, He offers us complete freedom. Since God's forgiveness releases us from guilt, we shouldn't minimize that by being trapped in condemnation, when we have been freed by His grace which overrides our guilt completely.

Thank God that though you are undeserving, His grace frees you from condemnation.

2. FLIP THE SCRIPT // GENESIS 50:20

Sometimes it's very difficult to see God at work when everything seems to be going wrong. One setback after another can make us feel overwhelmed and unable to move forward. It may feel like at every turn, the enemy is sending fiery darts, and everything is working against us. Though times may be challenging nothing or no one can negate the power of God. As the Great Author who has already scripted our story for His glory, we need not be concerned when it looks as if things are out of His control. God always flips the script and orchestrates all things according to His plans for us.

Ask God to help you to confidently trust the plans He has divinely scripted for your life.

3. GOT YOU COVERED // GENESIS 50:21

Insurance is an especially important commodity because it's a means of guaranteeing protection or safety. Whether it's insurance for your car, health, life, or belongings, it's coverage that provides you with the security of knowing, if you need care or

suffer a loss, there's a way to receive or recover it. In the story of Joseph, God's insurance for him and his family was his time. If God did it for Joseph and so many others in the Bible, why would He not do the same for us today? God assures us through the promises in His Word He's got us covered.

Trust that God is the Source of all you need so you can count on His protection.

4. PURPOSES AND PROMISES // NUMBERS 23:19

We're assured by God's Word that He is not a man so He cannot lie nor change His mind. Throughout Scripture, God makes promises that are according to the plans He has already preordained. In our world today, people often refer to "their" truth as a standard for decision-making. The problem is, anything but God's truth is biased and impacted by our earthly nature. God's truth never changes and is based upon His divine purposes by His sovereign will. When we need direction regarding being freed from strongholds that hinder us from being fully who God has purposed us to be, we can rely upon His promises to guide our way.

Surrender all your decisions and will to God's divine purposes and truth every day.

5. GOD CAN DO IT // ROMANS 8:1-4

Being a Christ-follower is not easy in this world we are in but not part of. Often, we're looked down upon or criticized for making mistakes and falling short as believers. In Romans, we're assured of two impacting truths. Romans 3:23 clarifies all have fallen short of the glory of God, which means none should be without condemnation. But later in Romans 8, Paul reveals God's standards. He said all who are found in Jesus and walk in His Holy Spirit are freed from condemnation because God can do what the law could not do.

Even though we fall short of God's glory, we should thank Him for His faithfulness. God's will shall be done in our lives.



JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS

BY ROBERTA JONES

- + Although Joseph was born about 3,900 years ago,¹ human emotions remain the same.
- + Joseph's relatives often chose hatred and deceit. Guilt plagued his brothers. Favoritism, fear, and jealousy appeared. Conflict in Joseph's life sent him to a Canaanite pit, an Ishmaelite spice caravan, an Egyptian prison, and to the glories of Egypt. God guided him through every adventure.

Joseph's Family

Family history affected Joseph and his brothers. Using craftiness and deceit, Jacob received Esau's inheritance and the blessing of their father, Isaac (Gen. 25:27-34; 27:33-36).² Later, God spoke to Jacob in a dream, and he worshiped Him at Bethel (28:11-22). Laban deceived Jacob into marrying Leah; afterward Jacob had to work seven more years before he could marry his beloved Rachel. Leah produced Jacob's children in a loveless marriage. The sisters, Rachel and Leah, bickered. Rachel remained childless and blamed Jacob as she watched Leah and two slaves give sons to Jacob (29:16-30:21).

Rachel finally gave birth to Joseph, who met ten half-brothers and three stepmothers (30:22-24). Confusion reigned. Rachel and Leah disliked their father. Jacob felt cheated by

his father-in-law. Rachel stole her father's gods and used a lie to cover her actions (31:4-7,14-15,34-35).

Yet, Jacob led his household in spiritual markers, events that honored God and showed His work. Jacob wrestled with an angel all night; as a result, the Lord changed his name to Israel (32:24-32). Another time, Jacob's kinfolk worshiped at Bethel. He encouraged everyone to forsake foreign gods. These spiritual markers offered opportunities to worship God.³

Sold into Slavery

Family dysfunction continued. A gift encouraged hatred. Jacob gave Joseph a garment, often described as many-colored (37:3-4). Some scholars, however, emphasize the robe's long sleeves and long length. The style definitely resembled royal clothing.⁴ The brothers felt unloved by their father; they hated Joseph. The brothers felt unloved by their father; they hated Joseph. The young man shared two dreams, each suggesting his family would bow to him. The brothers demanded, "Are you really going to reign over us?" (v. 8). Tension and hatred increased.

As 17-year-old Joseph checked on his brothers and their flock, they discussed "that dreamer" (37:19). Except for Reuben, the envious group stripped off Joseph's robe, threw the boy in an empty pit, and sold him to an Ishmaelite spice

caravan. Joseph journeyed toward Egypt. The schemers dipped the hated coat in goat blood. Naturally, Jacob believed a vicious animal devoured his cherished child. Guilty sons and innocent daughters fervently tried to comfort their father. The grieving man refused any comfort (vv. 19-35). A sign of extreme mourning, Jacob put on sackcloth, coarse cloth made from goat's hair.⁵

Joseph in Egypt

God accompanied Joseph to Egypt—land of pharaohs and idols (39:1-2). The Nile River provided fish, waterfowl, fertile cropland, and reed pastures for cattle.⁶ Though innocent and a slave, Joseph landed in an Egyptian prison. There, he heard two dreams and predicted the release of Pharaoh's cupbearer. The cupbearer left prison but forgot Joseph (39:7-20; 40:12-15).

Two dreams troubled Pharaoh. Seven well-fed cows walked from the Nile River and grazed among the reeds. Seven ugly, thin cows ate the healthy cows. Then, he dreamed about plump and anemic stalks of grain. Pharaoh's cupbearer remembered Joseph, still in the dungeon. The hastily summoned prisoner predicted seven plenteous years, followed by seven lean years. The pleased Pharaoh promoted Joseph over grain storage and gave him a wife. Joseph supervised crops during seven bountiful years and welcomed two sons. Famine arrived. The man who hungered and thirsted in a pit, now sold grain to starving people (37:23-24; 41:37-57).

Family Reunion

One day, ten Israelite brothers bowed before the powerful Egyptian. Joseph recognized these men but decided to test their character. He spoke harshly through an interpreter and accused the travelers of spying. After the brothers endured a brief imprisonment, Joseph listened to their conversation. They feared God and regretted selling their little brother. Joseph requested to see their "youngest brother" on the next trip (42:1-22). Nine puzzled brothers returned home with food and agreed to leave Simeon with the demanding Egyptian grain supervisor.

(Continued on page 132)

