

TUNE MY HEART



*a devotional companion to the
5 Day Bible Narrative Reading Plan*

January—March 2026

INTRODUCTION

Jesus taught in John 15 that his disciples will abide in Christ by having Christ's words abide in them. Someone who abides in Christ will produce much spiritual fruit for our Lord. Psalm 1 describes the blessed man as one who delights in the Word of God. The blessed person is rooted in the Scriptures and will flourish like a tree with deep roots near planted near abundant water.

From cover to cover the Bible teaches that growing, mature Christians will be deeply anchored in the Word of God. That is our prayer for you, dear reader.

Many Christians desire to be better students of the Bible, yet don't know the general story of Scripture. From Genesis to Revelation, God is telling one big story. The 5 Day Bible Narrative Reading Plan, created by our brother Scott Aniol at G3 Ministries, is designed to take readers through the major narratives of Scripture as well as the Psalms and Proverbs over the course of one year. The plan is designed for only five readings a week, with the weekend set apart for catching up on missed days and preparing your heart for corporate worship. This devotional is designed to accompany this particular Bible reading plan.

Whether you've read the Bible many times before or are reading it for the first time, we trust this resource will be helpful to you. As you grow in seeing God at work in his big story, we pray you will grow in your love and knowledge of Christ. May you abide in Jesus as his words abide in you.



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To understand God's big story, we begin at the beginning. This isn't, of course, the beginning of God, for he has no beginning and no end. This is simply where our Creator chose to begin telling us the story. The story begins with the simple declaration that God is the Creator.

Notice the glory of creation. God creates light. He creates the skies. He creates the oceans. He creates the plants. He creates the animals. And he creates humanity. He creates with great variety but with great order, as he gives form and filling to what was once formless and void. We rightly praise God for he has created all things well. But if God displays this much glory in creation, how much greater is the glory of our salvation?

Notice the climax of creation. On the final day of creation as a final act of creation, God created humanity. He created our first father and mother, Adam and Eve, in his image. Therefore, every person ever born has been made in the image of God. We are not little gods as some teach, but we are like God. We have the ability to think and reason and create and love in a way that is unlike any animal or other part of creation. God created the gift of gender—male and female—which desperately needs to be recovered in our day. The image of God is certainly distorted and deformed in us today because of sin, but it is not destroyed.

Notice the word of creation. Did you catch how many times the Bible tells us “God said”? God speaks and creation is formed. God speaks and creation obeys. God creates and orders by the power of his words. We see this in the beginning of the story, but we also see this throughout God's story. God orders his people according to his word. We will see this in the lives of Abraham, Moses, and David. We see this in our own lives as well, do we not? Just like in creation, we as new creations in Christ are ordered and shaped by his word.

As we begin a new journey through Scripture with a renewed commitment to knowing God through his word, let us continue to marvel at his creation. Let us praise him for his kindness to us in making us in his image. Let us pray that the Spirit of God—the same Spirit that hovered over the waters and brought order to the chaos—will continue to conform us to the image of the Son of God and continue to order the chaos of our lives.

Tuesday, January 6

Read: Genesis 2:4–24

Genesis 1 gives us a wide-angle panoramic view of creation. Genesis 2 zooms in on a particular part of creation: humankind. From this vantage point on day six of creation, we are given more information about the creation of the first man. We noticed in chapter one how God spoke everything into existence. He created everything out of nothing. But when we come to the creation of man, God did not merely speak Adam into existence. He formed Adam using dust as the material or chief ingredient in his human recipe. After planting Adam in the garden of Eden, God gives Adam work to do—keep and tend the garden. These two words are later used together to refer to the work of priests. So, not only do we see the special care God took in making Adam, but we're also given the image of Adam as the first priest, worshipping and communing with God in the sanctuary of Eden. Adam is given clear instructions about how God is to be worshipped, with a blessing to eat from every tree except one—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. All the way back at the beginning of the story, we're introduced to the ideas that God cares about how he is worshiped and that his word is sufficient for us to know how to worship him.

In spite of the blessings and privileges Adam has while alone in the garden, he is incomplete. God helps Adam see how incomplete he is by parading every living creature in front of him for Adam to name. Every creature has its mate, a helper fit for it. Except Adam. Adam has no complementary partner in the same way that the lion has the lioness and the bull has the cow. Adam realizes what so many want to deny today: it is not good for man to be alone. With God as the first surgeon and Adam the first patient, man's rib is removed for the building of woman. She is bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. She is like him. Now Adam too has a helper fit for him. As Adam sees his bride for the first time, he bursts out in a love song recognizing the good gift God has given in marriage. In verse 24, Moses reflected back on this first union of man and woman as the reason all marriages are to be between one man and one woman, exclusive, and permanent. Identity, work, marriage, and worship—all of these foundational components of our lives are built upon the foundation of Genesis 1–2.

All of the problems you face find their origins back in Genesis 3. Ultimately all the problems the human family faces goes back to our father and mother, Adam and Eve. Verse 25 of chapter two gives us the last family snapshot of innocence and holiness before God. Things quickly change with the introduction of Satan, the serpent of old. We're not told where Satan came from, but the first action we see from Satan is to question the Word of God. Thousands of years later and that hasn't changed. The Devil's standard mode of operation is to cast doubt and questions upon the Word of God. He deliberately misquotes and twists God's Word to Eve, and he will often do that to you. Are you prepared? Do you know God's Word well enough to recognize misrepresentations, distortions, and almost-right interpretations?

Watch the progress in the temptation of our mother Eve: she saw, she desired, she took, and she ate. We see this progress of sin in our own lives so often. What will be the consequences of this sin? God had promised Adam and Eve that disobedience deserves death, and their spiritual death certainly began that day. But God graciously postponed physical death while still describing the consequences of their sin. Marriage will be marred from the design of the Creator. Husbands will too often dominate their wives rather than lovingly lead them. Wives will be tempted to rule over and dominate their husbands rather than lovingly submitting to them. Childbearing, the expression of the one-flesh union between a husband and a wife, will now be increasingly painful. Work, which was given as a good gift, will now be difficult and painful. What was a very good beginning in chapters one and two is now horribly corrupted in chapter three. Is there any hope?

In verse 15 of chapter three comes a shining promise of hope. Speaking to the serpent, God promises there will be an ongoing war between the offspring of the serpent and the offspring of the woman. That war will climax with what seems like a death blow by the serpent against the seed of the woman. But the Promised Seed Jesus Christ will crush the head of the serpent. He will defeat sin, death, and Satan, and we get a preview in verse 21. God takes an innocent animal and it dies in the place of Adam and Eve. The robes of this animal become the robes of humanity, just as Jesus's sacrifice on the cross will cover our shame and nakedness from sin and clothe us in the righteousness of Christ. The good news is first proclaimed from the garden.

Thursday, January 8

Read: Genesis 4:1–16; Proverbs 1

Eve believed the promises of God. She knew God had promised that one of her offspring would crush the head of the serpent and all the evil that resulted from sin. Eve naturally assumed her first child Cain would be the promised seed, so she praised God at his birth in verse 1. The family multiplies and it quickly becomes apparent that the struggle between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman will be on display within Eve's own family. We may wonder at first about the difference between Cain's offering and Abel's offering. We might think the difference is in the content of the offering, but the biggest difference seems to be in the character of the one making the offering. Cain is marked by anger and pride. However, Abel's more acceptable sacrifice results from his righteousness in faith (Heb. 11:4).

Cain certainly deserves death for his sin, yet God is exceedingly patient. He is patient in questioning and he is patient in judgment. Even the unclear "mark of Cain" is a sign of God's mercy in sovereignly protecting Cain's life while he deserves death. God is graciously patient with us. He graciously gives us the story of Cain and Abel to serve as a warning to us. Cain's sin quickly multiplied. Quickly progressing from an angry heart to murder, Cain pictures for us Jesus's teaching that out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. In Cain's case, from the abundance of his heart, his hands murdered. The sins we think we are hiding in our hearts so that no one sees or knows about them are actually crouching at the door like Cain's sins. Our sins will soon multiply and devour us. May the story of Cain remind us to cry out to God for mercy in leading us not into temptation and delivering us from the evil one.

Our journey through the big story of the Bible also takes us through a complete reading of Psalms and Proverbs. The Proverbs were given to nurture wisdom in us, to take Biblical knowledge and apply it to our daily lives. Proverbs are not personalized contracts guaranteeing the desired result, but they are general principles for godly living. The starting point of knowledge is fearing the Lord. Someone has simply explained fearing God as treating God as if he really were God. If we say we believe biblical truth about God, we should live our lives as if we actually believe these things are true. Cain knew about God and spoke to God, but did not truly know God because he did not fear him. He did not live as if God's word is true. May that never be said of us.

Today's reading contains one of the most familiar Bible stories known throughout the world. Yet, it is often misunderstood. The text begins with hard-to-understand and controversial verses. Who are the "sons of God" and "the Nephilim"? We cannot say with certainty. Whatever is happening in verses 6:1–8, the text clearly presents the wickedness on earth at that time. The sin was so wicked and severe that God is said to be filled with sorrow and grief over the sins of his people. God is not surprised by the sin of humanity. This is not new information to him. Yet, God speaks to us in language we can relate to, so the Bible says God regretted that he made humanity. His position towards his creation is changing from one of patience and mercy to one of well-deserved judgment. There's one bright spot in this dark sea of people: Noah. Noah is known as a righteous and blameless man. He is not perfect and he has not saved himself. Instead, God's grace or favor rests upon Noah, and Noah's daily life—his "walk"—reflects the grace of God in his life. Noah patiently obeys God's instructions by faith.

Noah's ark paints us a vivid picture of God's salvation through Jesus Christ. Just as salvation through Christ alone is exclusive, so is salvation through the ark. All those who are in Christ will live eternally, while those apart from Christ will face judgment eternally. Those eight people inside the ark lived while everyone outside the ark died. This pictures the truly exclusive claims of Jesus Christ as Lord. You are either in Christ or you are not. The flood is but one image the Bible offers to show us the wrath and judgment that will come upon all sin and sinners. The wrath we deserve is far greater than a worldwide flood. Have you entered the ark of Christ, dear reader? There you will be saved.

Chapter 8 begins with an interesting phrase: "God remembered Noah." God had not forgotten Noah, even though Noah may have felt forgotten. God was with Noah throughout every raindrop of the storm. But now because of the covenant (the promise) that God made with Noah, God is about to act on Noah's behalf. We, too, stand upon the promises of God through Christ. Jesus has satisfied the flood of God's wrath upon the cross. Jesus has brought all who believe in Christ into full covenant with God—we have his promises to us in the Scriptures. Because of the ark of Christ, we can rest assured that God has not forgotten us, and he remembers us.

Monday, January 12

Read: Genesis 8:20–9:29; 11:1–9

What would you have done when you got off of the ark? After more than a year of living on a boat, the first thing we're told that Noah does is worship God. This is the right response, of course. Our first response to God's salvation should always be to worship him.

Noah and his family are now a second chance for the human family. God blesses them in a similar way to how he blessed Adam and Eve. Noah and his sons are told to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. God flooded the earth because of human sinfulness and violence, but now he institutes human government to serve as his human agents in punishing those who take human life. While we do not practice capital punishment perfectly, God has given humanity this responsibility. God also promises to never destroy the earth by flood again, and he gives the rainbow as a sign of this promise. In our culture today, many sinful groups seem to want ownership of the rainbow, but we need to be reminded of the salvation story God pictures through the ark and the flood. God has given us the rainbow as a reminder.

If we're hoping that this fresh start for the human family is going to go better than it did in the garden, we soon realize that it's not looking good. Noah gets drunk and his son Ham adds to the family shame. We fast forward through the expanding family tree in Genesis 10 and we get to the infamous tower of Babel at the beginning of chapter eleven. The prideful, sinful human heart is at work again. God had told everyone to fill the earth, but the generation of Babel decided to stay put in one place. Just in case we're not sure about their rebellion, they tell us at the end of 11:4 that they do not want to fill the earth as God had instructed them. Instead, they decide to build a city with a monument to their rebellion. They proudly declare they will build a tower that will reach all the way to heaven, but he who sits in the heavens laughs. As high as they think they are, God must come down from his throne to see their feeble work. And he divides the people and confuses the languages and scatters them over the face of the earth. God's will will be done.

God will soon tell Abram that God will make a great name for him. But this generation wanted to make a name for themselves. Let us resist the pride so common to us all. Let us trust him to make a name for us as he sees fit.

We first meet Abram with his family in a prosperous, large ancient city called Ur. God makes an astounding demand upon the life of Abram: leave everything behind and go where I tell you. When God tells Abram to leave behind everything he's ever known, God doesn't tell him where he will end up. Abram must walk by faith, and indeed he does. It has always stood out to me that we're only told that Abram obeyed. He doesn't go back home and discuss it with his father or his wife. He doesn't check his bank account. He doesn't check the weather, and he doesn't check the housing market. This seventy-five year old man immediately obeys God. We will often see that Abram's faith is not flawless and his obedience is not perfect. All that being said, Abram believes God. And he obeys.

God promises to make Abram into a great nation with great blessing and his name will be great. From this man Abram, all the nations of the earth will be blessed! What an amazing thought. As Abram journeys on with his Sarai and his nephew Lot, they arrive at the land of Canaan. God makes another promise to Abram: "To your seed I will give this land." But how will this be? There are other people already there! Again, Abram isn't given the full plan. He's simply given the word of God, and Abram believes and Abram worships God.

Abram is walking in sincere but imperfect faith. When Abram and Sarai go to Egypt, this man cowardly lies about his wife in order to save his own skin. Yet, even this story illustrates the principle God gave: "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse." Do you see how the blessing of God is not rooted in the goodness of the person but in the goodness of God? Thanks be to God.

So far in the story, everyone has failed. Adam failed. Noah failed. We have high hopes for this man Abram, but we see that he too fails. Our hope is not in any human man or woman. They all fail. Except one. Even now, we're looking for the promised seed of Genesis 3:15. So far, no one fits the bill, but the options are narrowing in. We're looking for the seed of Abram, for through Abram will all the nations of the earth be blessed. We know through the New Testament that the promised seed of Abraham is Jesus. In Jesus, all the nations of the earth are blessed. Salvation comes through the seed of Abraham. Praise be to God!

Wednesday, January 14

Read: Genesis 13:1–14:16

God has kept his word to bless Abram and we see that Abram is very rich. His nephew Lot has also become prosperous, so much so that the land can't support both men and their herds. Reflecting Abram's wisdom and character, he seeks a peaceful separation between the two groups and gives Lot the choice of land. Lot chooses the land that is well-watered and luxurious like the garden of Eden, but there's already a hint in the text that this won't go well. Lot is living near Sodom, where the people are exceedingly sinful against God. As you follow Lot's story, he lives in the valley near the area of Sodom, then he pitches his tent near Sodom, then we find Lot actually living in Sodom in 14:12. Lot's example serves as a warning to all of us. Sin so often pulls us closer and closer until, before we realize it, we are smack dab in the middle of sin city.

When Lot finds himself a prisoner of war caught in the middle of the war described at the beginning of chapter fourteen, faithful Uncle Abram comes to the rescue. Somewhere along the way, Abram has become a skilled military leader and seems to have his own personal army. The various kings listed in the text and their warriors are no match for faithful Abram. After all, God has promised to bless Abram and those who bless Abram, while also promising to curse those who curse Abram. The other armies didn't stand a chance!

It seems that much of Lot's problems could have been avoided before he and Abram ever separated. Lot lifted his eyes and saw the well-water Jordan valley and it pleased him. Doesn't that sound like Eve in the garden? Eve saw, she desired, she took, and she ate. The fruit didn't fall far from the family tree. Whereas we see Abram calling upon the name of the Lord in this passage, we're not told that Lot prayed to God at all. What seemed like an obvious decision when choosing the land eventually leads to great sin and sorrow in Lot's life. May we learn the lesson of Lot.

Lot continues to separate himself from the blessing of his uncle Abram and the blessing of God. Abram, on the other hand, continues to be blessed by God. The promise of 12:1–3 is clarified and expanded here, with God promising that Abram's offspring won't be able to be counted. Abram is also told that the land in the region of Canaan would belong to him and his offspring forever. What is Abram's response to the promises of God? Worship. May that be our response to God's Word also.

The blessings of God continue to be poured out on Abram, even through a mysterious king named Melchizedek. The name means “king of righteousness” and he is identified as both a king of Salem (apparently an ancient name for Jerusalem) and a priest of God Most High. Psalm 110 and Hebrews 7 pick up on this image of Melchizedek in pointing to Christ. After Melchizedek blesses Abram, Abram tithes to this mysterious king. In contrast, Abram wants nothing to do with the wicked king of Sodom. He rejects the reward of this earthly king, but God promises in 15:1 that Abram’s reward will indeed be great.

In 15:2–5, Abram offers questions to God. How can the promises of God come true when Abram has no offspring? Perhaps Abram should designate his closest servant as his heir? God promises explicitly that Abram will indeed have a son, his own biological heir. God’s promise to Abram concerning his offspring expands from them being as numerous as the grains of sand on the seashore to now being as numerous as the stars in the sky. As astounding as those words are, don’t miss verse 6: Abram believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness! The Bible uses a bookkeeping term, meaning Abraham’s spiritual books balanced. How can this be? Here we have the heart of our salvation: justification by faith alone.

To be justified is to be declared righteous by God. Abram is not justified by his works. We will see Abram do righteous acts, but those do not save him. God declares Abram to be righteous—justified—because of Abram’s faith in the promises of God. The New Testament quotes this verse four times and points to Abram as a model for our salvation. As we trust the promises of God—namely by trusting in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the atonement for our sins—God credits the righteousness of Jesus to us just like he did for Abram.

Chapter sixteen finds Sarai attempting to seize the promises of God by human planning. She is convinced she will never have children, therefore she gives Abram permission to take Sarai’s servant Hagar and conceive a child with her. Just as Adam listened to the voice of Eve and followed her into sin, Abram listens to the voice of Sarai rather than God. In spite of their sin, God hears Hagar’s affliction and blesses her son Ishmael (“God hears”), even though he will not be the promised heir of Abraham. God sees and hears and is merciful to sinners like Abram, Hagar, you, and me.

Friday, January 16

Read: Genesis 17:1–18–15; 21:1–7

Thirteen years have passed since the birth of Ishmael when Yahweh appears to Abram once again. As we've seen before, God clarifies and expounds the covenant with Abram. In recognition that he will father many nations, God gives Abram (meaning “exalted father”) the new name of Abraham (“father of a multitude”). Yahweh also gives Abraham the physical sign of circumcision to accompany the covenant. Abraham's wife Sarai's name is also modified to Sarah because she will be the mother of many nations. The Lord promises that Abraham and Sarah will conceive and have a son, even in their advanced age. While Abraham's human logic pleads that the blessings of God might come through Ishmael, Yahweh makes plain that the heir of Abraham will be Isaac.

The hospitality of Abraham in Genesis 18:1–15 is a strong contrast with the wickedness of Sodom in chapter nineteen. Abraham is still living in a tent in Mamre and recognizes these unusually important visitors approaching during the heat of the day. A man of Abraham's wealth and status would never run in that culture and time, but Abraham runs to greet and bow before these visitors. Abraham and Sarah show hospitality to their guests, but they also receive notice that their promised son Isaac will be born within a year. Just as Abraham laughed when he heard this promise of God, so too does Sarah laugh. While the promises of God may sometimes seem impossible, is there anything impossible for God?

We fast forward in the story, and we find that Yahweh perfectly keeps his word. Nothing is impossible for God. Abraham and Sarah obey concerning the name of their son, and they obey concerning the sign of the covenant. The name Isaac means “he laughs” and reflects the circumstances of his birth. His parents laughed at the possibility of a child in their old age, and Sarah knows that everyone will laugh at the unlikely birth of this son. A few years pass by to a feast day celebrating Isaac's weaning, and the text tells us that Sarah finds Hagar's son Ishmael laughing, too. However, this laughter is no longer marked by joy and wonder at the promises of God, and instead Ishmael seems to be laughing in scorn and mockery towards Isaac. Paul uses this story as a backdrop in Galatians 4 for his comparison of the Old and New Covenants.

Many times throughout Scripture the promises of God seem too good to be true. They sometimes seem impossible to believe. Are there any portions of God's word that you struggle to believe? Are there promises that seem too good to be true? May the birth of Isaac remind us that nothing is impossible for God.

Following Abraham's hospitality towards his three heavenly visitors, the Lord tells Abraham about the judgment about to be poured out on Sodom. Now that Abraham is aware of what is about to take place, he is compelled to plead with God. Abraham models for us intercessory prayer in the way he pleads with God to spare Sodom—the great, wicked city—for the sake of just a few people. Abraham doesn't deny Sodom's wickedness nor does he deny that Sodom rightly deserves judgment. Instead, Abraham pleads for God's mercy upon the righteous people of the city. The problem is that there aren't many righteous people in the city. When first reading the text, we're not sure if there is a single righteous person in Sodom. It takes the whole Bible for us to begin to sort out this sinful story.

When the two angels reach Sodom, Lot begins to show them hospitality just like Uncle Abraham. However, the city's male population shows up at Lot's doorstep demanding to do unspeakable harm to these visitors. It becomes painfully clear that God is absolutely right and just to judge the city of Sodom. God's judgments are always right and good.

When we read the story of Lot we see the danger of backsliding in our faith. If it were not for the Apostle Peter, we would probably conclude that Lot doesn't really know God at all. 2 Peter 2:6–7 tells us that Lot was a righteous man, even as he was tormented and greatly distressed by the actions of his neighbors in Sodom. Lot's inexcusable action in offering his daughters to the mob in order to protect his guests begins to make some sense when we consider Peter's words that Lot was greatly distressed in his soul while living in Sodom. His worldview and convictions have become twisted and distorted because of his constant exposure to the immorality of Sodom. What a vivid warning! We must be exceedingly careful about the influences we place in our lives and not pitch our proverbial tents toward Sodom.

Joel Beeke says of Lot, "In the end, he lost his wealth, his wife, the purity of his children, his mental health, and his own dignity—and he nearly lost his life." If Lot were given the choice a second time of where to go after separating from Abraham, do you think he would have gone toward Sodom again? This seemingly small decision that seemed so obvious that it didn't even require prayer actually altered Lot's entire family forever. Our sins often have consequences far greater than we could ever predict. Shouldn't we strive to stand firm and resist temptation? Let us pray for ourselves, but also others.

¹ Family Worship Bible Guide, p.14

Tuesday, January 20

Read: Genesis 20; Psalm 1

Genesis 20 reads like a repeat performance of Genesis 12:10–20. Here we go again with Abraham cowardly lying concerning his wife in order to protect his own skin. This time the stakes seem even higher because God has promised to give Abraham and Sarah a son, but now Sarah is given to Abimelech as a wife. We see once again that Abraham's faith can be weak, even though it is sincere. Abraham claims he doesn't think there is any fear of God in that place, and yet Abimelech seems to fear God more than Abraham! God's sovereign hand protects Sarah as well as Abimelech from sin. God is faithful even when Abraham's faith fumbles. God graciously continues to use Abraham to bless others in spite of Abraham's actions.

The Psalms in particular were given to us to shape us and form us into truly righteous, truly blessed people. The first two psalms serve as a bookend or a preview of what we will see throughout the entire psalter.

Psalm 1 introduces us to the blessed man. Rather than just giving us a checklist or a theological lesson of what characterizes a righteous person, David paints us a picture. Here are images of what the blessed person looks like. The blessed man is not like the wicked man. He does not walk with the wicked, stand with the wicked, or sit with the wicked. He shuns this progression of temptation to sin (unlike Eve and Lot). Like the lush trees of Eden, the righteous man is pictured like a flourishing tree bearing healthy fruit.

The contrast between the wicked and the righteous continues with their future destinies. The path of the wicked leads to destruction, while the path of the righteous leads to life with God himself. When we consider these two outcomes, we wonder what makes the difference between these two kinds of people. Surely the wicked person desires to be blessed. The problem is the wicked person imagines the blessed life without God. They assume they can live the good life apart from God. Yahweh is not in the equation.

What leads the wicked and the blessed to imagine the good life in two very different ways? It all comes back to what they meditate on in verse 2. The righteous man delights in the law of the Lord. He meditates on the word of God both day and night. I trust every reader wants to be blessed by God, yet how many of us could say we truly delight in the word of God? May God help us to rightly meditate on his words so that we might truly flourish in and be blessed by God.

Now that Isaac has been born and Abraham's heir has arrived, we might think that Hagar and Ishmael can just be cut out of the story. After all, they're only in the story because of Abraham and Sarah's sins, right? Shouldn't God just remove them altogether? In a dramatic story, we see that Ishmael and Hagar are removed from the household of Abraham, but they are not removed from God's story altogether. God sees the distress of Abraham over his son who is not his heir and can't be part of his family. God hears the voice of Ishmael crying in the wilderness. God provides for Hagar and Ishmael in a gracious manner even though they are outside of God's covenant with Abraham. Let this challenge and encourage us. Learn from the boy Ishmael and never mock even the smallest of God's people. Learn from Abraham's distress. He would never have been in this situation had he obeyed God's promises in the first place. Let us learn from Hagar's tears. God is good and merciful. He graciously cares for them even in the midst of the consequences from sin.

Psalm 4 shows us the proper response when we are distressed and tormented: prayer and trust. Even though we do not know David's exact situation when he penned this song of prayer, we all know the feeling of desperation that leads us to cry out to God in prayer. David begins in verse 1 begging God to hear and answer his prayer. Why does David have confidence that God will hear his prayers? Because God has been faithful in the past, David is confident that the Lord will be faithful in the present and the future. Can you rest easy tonight knowing that whatever difficulties you face, God is your refuge? Can you remember how God has answered your prayers in the past and trust that he will be faithful in the future as well?

Psalm 5 is the first example of a psalm of lament. Remember how Psalm 1 showed us the blessed life of the righteous person. That's what we want to be, yet we find ourselves surrounded by ungodly people all of the time. The psalms speak often of the wicked. They're everywhere in the psalms just like they're everywhere in life. Psalms of lament plead for God to do what he has promised to do. It's more than just asking for God to help us. It's asking God to bring the righteous judgment that only he can bring. Therefore, even these hard psalms are building trust in us as we acknowledge that God can and will rule and reign and judge rightly.

Thursday, January 22

Read: Psalms 6–7

Psalms 6 and 7 are the first of what is called the “penitential psalms” or the psalms of repentance. David is expressing genuine sorrow and repentance over sin, and he finds forgiveness from God. Whatever sin David has committed, either the consequences of that sin or the conviction over that sin is affecting him in a physical way. He is crying all of the time and he can’t sleep. He feels his sin right down to his bones. Have you ever felt such regret and sadness over your sin? Not mere embarrassment or anger over being caught in sin, but sincere sorrow because of how you’ve sinned against God?

How can this psalm apply to the lives of Christians? Aren’t our sins forgiven on the cross? Yes, and amen! But we still sin. Even after the Lord graciously saves us, we still find sinning. We trust that it will become less and less frequent and severe with time and that the power of sin in our lives will grow weaker and weaker, but Christians do sin. When we sin as a Christian, how should we respond? We repent. We ask Jesus to forgive us. We’re not asking to be saved again because Christ doesn’t disown us when we sin. Our sin does hurt our fellowship with God in a similar way to how our sins can harm our fellowship with our spouse or child. David’s prayer models the sincere repentance that should mark the life of a believer. David’s prayer also points us to the forgiveness given by God. His prayer began asking for grace and grace has been given.

Psalms 7 and 8 give us a bit of historical context in the superscription (title). We’re not told of the exact incident anywhere else in the Bible, but someone from the tribe of Saul slandered David. We see David once again going to God for refuge and safety. The psalmist writes, “If a man does not repent...” Repentance is possible even for David’s enemies, even for the enemies of God. If they will repent as David did in Psalm 6, they can know the same grace. Then they’ll be able to join in thanks and praise to God as David does at the end of verse 17.

When you sin, do you turn away from your sin and to God in repentance? The psalms teach us how to do that. When enemies sin against you, do you pray that God would bring them to repentance? The psalms teach us how to do that. When overwhelmed with the wickedness of the world, do you trust that God is the righteous judge who will most certainly correctly judge every evil? The psalms teach us how to do that.

Genesis 23 gives simple but direct attention to the death of Sarah. 37 years after God fulfilled his promise that she would give birth to a son named Isaac, Sarah dies. Like a loving husband Abraham mourns and weeps over the death of his wife, but Abraham still has work to do. He must find an appropriate place to bury his wife. In spite of the promise of God to possess a great land, Abraham and Sarah have lived as sojourners and pilgrims on earth. At the time of Sarah's death, Abraham is living as a foreigner in the land later known as Hebron. He seeks to purchase a plot of land to bury his wife which will allow him to truly own a piece of the earth. God has promised Abraham much more, but Abraham must walk by faith and not by sight. He secures the possession of a burial plot that will later serve multiple generations of his family.

The author of Hebrews helps us better understand the faith of Abraham even in the determined and tender care of his deceased wife.

⁹ By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise, ¹⁰ for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God..

¹³ All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. ¹⁴ For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. ¹⁵ And indeed if they had been remembering that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But now, they aspire to a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He prepared a city for them.

Hebrews 11:9–10; 13–16

Psalm 8 begins and ends declaring the majesty of Yahweh God. Creation declares the glory of God. When we consider all of God's handiwork, isn't it astounding that he also made us? David marvels at God's creation of humanity. The New Testament picks up on the language of verses 4–6 and points us to Christ. The writer of Hebrews recognizes that we don't fully see everything under the feet of Jesus today (see Heb. 2:5–10). That day is coming. One day all enemies, all sin, all sadness, all things will be crushed under the feet of Jesus. Indeed, Yahweh, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Monday, January 26

Read: Genesis 22:1–19; Romans 4

After many encounters with God, Abraham's story climaxes with the testing of Genesis 22. Testing is not to be confused with temptation (see James 1:13), nor should we think that God was unsure of what the outcome would be. Even so, the Lord makes a shocking demand of the patriarch: sacrifice your son. The long-awaited heir is now in jeopardy. To obey God would mean the death of his son, his only son, the son he loves, but to disobey God would be to demonstrate complete lack of faith in the God who has provided time and time again. We wonder what must have gone through this father's mind, yet the Bible doesn't tell us. Instead, we see Abraham simply obey. He makes preparations to slay his own son upon the altar.

Abraham's instructions to the young men in verse 5 hints that Abraham expects to return with Isaac. The preacher of Hebrews gives further insight:

¹⁷ *By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only son, 18 to whom it was said, "In Isaac your seed shall be called."*
¹⁹ *He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he also received him back.*

Hebrews 11:17–19

Romans 4 provides the necessary commentary on Abraham's faith to help us wrestle with the matter of faith versus works. Did Abraham's actions on the mountain earn his salvation or were they an outworking of his faith? Romans 4 explains that Abraham's actions were not what saved him. Neither circumcision nor sacrifice would save Abraham. Faith in the promises of God were counted to Abraham as righteousness. Abraham could not have known what would later happen on Mount Moriah, but he did take God at his word. By his faith, he was justified, and this faith was demonstrated upon the altar.

God had already covenanted with Abraham multiple times, but now God swears unconditionally by himself that the nations of the earth will be blessed by the seed (offspring) of Abraham. Through time and teaching, it becomes clear that the promised seed of Abraham is ultimately Jesus Christ. About two thousand years later, Mount Moriah would be known as Jerusalem. The God who provides for himself the lamb took his Son, his only Son, the Son he loves, and laid him upon the altar of the cross. This time the sacrifice would not be halted. Just as the ram was substituted for Isaac, Jesus Christ was substituted for sinners. He was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. For all who believe this promise of God, it is counted to them as righteousness.

How do we trust God when enemies attack us? Is it ok to ask God “Why?” in the midst of difficult circumstances? Psalms 9–10 answer these questions.

David begins Psalm 9 with four “I will” phrases declaring his intention to praise God. Verses 3–6 give specific reasons David is praising God: the defeat of his enemies. David has particular events in his own lifetime in mind, but we also hear a preview in these verses of God’s future ultimate defeat of all of his enemies. God’s victory is so certain and sure that we can speak of it in the past tense as if it’s already happened. How can we have this confidence? Because of verse 7: Yahweh sits enthroned forever, and he who sits in the heavens laughs. No matter how wicked and vile our world becomes, God is on his throne and not one tiny sin goes unnoticed. He will rule and judge and vindicate his saints with righteousness and uprightness. Because these things are true, we can look to God as the stronghold in whom we trust (verses 9–10). Because these things are true, we can sing his praises (verses 11–12). Because these things are true, we can pray to God for his grace (verses 13–14).

Psalm 10 begins with the honest but painful question, “Why?” Often when we don’t see evil immediately dealt with in this life, we ask God, “Why?” Why do bad things happen to seemingly good people? Why do bad people seem to get away with doing evil things? Why does the earthly justice system seem to take so long and sometimes fail altogether? And where is God when we’re asking these questions?

The psalmist notices that the wicked seem to prosper rather than face punishment for their sins. He paints a dark portrait of the actions of these wicked men, but their chief offense is the arrogance of the wicked pretending “there is no God” (verse 4). In reality, the wicked know that God exists, but hope God will forget and overlook sin (verse 11). With the same confidence of Psalm 9, the psalmist calls out to God in prayer: Arise! Do something about all of this!

Sometimes we’re not sure if it’s ok to ask God “why?”. The Psalms show us how we can rightly ask God why. When we ask God why in prayer, we should affirm that he is able to deal with these sins and we know that one day he will. Our real question is “How long until you come fix this mess, Jesus? I know that you can, but I’m not sure when you will.” We demonstrate our trust in prayer and ask our King to return quickly.

Wednesday, January 28

Read: Genesis 24

As Abraham advances in years, one of his final responsibilities is to see that his son marries well. Abraham intimately knows the joys of a marriage that honors God as well the consequences of disobeying God's design for matrimony. He doesn't want his son to marry anyone from the pagan Canaanites for she would certainly draw his heart away from God. Isaac is the child of promise and the offspring of Abraham. Through Isaac all the nations of the earth will be blessed. Isaac's marriage matters, so Abraham sends a chief servant on a mission to find a wife for Isaac. The servant must travel to Abraham's homeland and bring back a wife for Isaac to the promised land.

This is a lengthy narrative that may appear to simply be an ancient tale of romance, when in fact this episode demonstrates the providence and sovereignty of God. The God of heaven and the God of earth is orchestrating every detail of the story. Abraham's servant also trusts Yahweh and prays about his mission. In an almost comical fashion, this young woman enters the story before the servant has finished praying! Rebekah quickly proves to be a literal answer to prayer. She seems to be just the kind of woman that Isaac needs.

In the middle of the story the servant begins to rehearse everything that has happened, and we are tempted to grow bored of the repetition. It's true that a few minor details are added, but that doesn't seem to be the point. The point seems to be that God has been at work through every detail of this single marriage. God has been faithful and provided all that Abraham needed. God is faithful and provides the wife that Isaac needs. Imagine being an Israelite slave in Egypt and hearing Moses recount God's faithfulness to your forefathers 500 years earlier. If God was involved in the details of Isaac and Rebekah's marriage, certainly he must be involved and at work even through Pharaoh's bondage. And if God was sovereign over Isaac and Rebekah's lives, don't you think he's sovereign over yours? If God providentially worked out the details of their marriage, don't you think he's providentially at work in the details of your life?

Not only does this story teach us about the sovereignty and providence of the God of heaven and earth, it also teaches us how to follow after him. Like Abraham before her, Rebekah is willing to leave her family and her homeland and go to the land the Lord shows her. Like Rebekah, may we follow God without reservation.

Read: Proverbs 2; Genesis 25:19–34

Proverbs 2 praises the value of wisdom. King Solomon speaks to his son and directs him to treasure knowledge and understanding. Wisdom is knowledge that has been applied, and that comes from the Lord. God graciously gives wisdom to his saints who ask for it (James 1:5). Solomon explains both the benefits and the protection of wisdom. Those who want to be righteous would do well to hear the king's teaching. Solomon models well for us how a father should take responsibility for the spiritual education of his children, even though Solomon certainly did not live up to these words in his own life.

The second half of Genesis 25 introduces the sons of Isaac and Rebekah who will quickly take the spotlight of the story. Even as Sarah before her struggled with infertility, Rebekah is barren for twenty years. God has covenanted with Abraham and now Isaac, so there must be a child born to Isaac and Rebekah. Isaac prays fervently, and in this situation, God hears and answers the prayer for a child. Actually, God gives the couple two sons who fight in their mother's womb. Rebekah prays during this difficult pregnancy and the Lord reveals that the struggle in her womb is just a preview of what will take place for the rest of time. These brothers Jacob and Esau will face great conflict just like Cain and Abel before them. From the moment they are delivered from their mother's womb, it is clear that these two boys are different.

By this point in God's story in Genesis, it should be clear that having an heir matters. The family birthright matters. To Esau, it doesn't matter. Jacob, whose name means "deceiver," lives up to his name in tricking Esau out of his birthright. Jacob's reputation as a deceiver and the consequences of his deceit will come up again in the story. For now, notice how little Esau cared for his birthright. Don't think that the birthright simply means enjoying some of your family's heirlooms or having a place of prominence among your siblings. These things are part of the equation, but the biggest significance of the birthright is the promises of God. Yahweh has made many promises to the offspring of Abraham which includes Isaac and now Esau, but Esau does not care about the birthright which means he doesn't care about the promises of God.

The conflict that unfolds over the coming chapters is a conflict as old as the garden. The seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent will continue to war. Jacob and Esau are just another version of what we have already seen, and they are a preview of what is to come.

Friday, January 30

Read: Genesis 26

While we have less narrative about son than father, the promises of Abraham are clearly passed on to Isaac. Through Isaac all the nations of the earth will be blessed, and the first nation will be Gerar, the land of the Philistines. Just like during the days of Abraham, the land experiences a famine during the days of Isaac. However, God forbids Isaac from going to Egypt and instead he must settle in the land of the Philistines. Like father, like son. Isaac sinfully fears man more than he fears God and he lies about the identity of his wife. But just like with Abraham, God providentially prevents any harm from coming to the wife while the husband is proven less righteous than a pagan. Will Isaac's weakness hinder God's promises? Absolutely not.

Isaac's harvest is so bountiful that his wealth increases to the point of envy by the Philistines. God promised that Isaac would be a blessing to the nations, and in a strange way he blesses the Philistines as they seize the wells Isaac's men have dug. Isaac prospers under the blessings of God so much that the Philistines can no longer ignore it. Abimelech, who seems to be the king of the Philistines (and that may be his title rather than his name), goes to Isaac to make a peace treaty with him. The hand of God is clearly upon Isaac to the point that even lost people recognize God's faithfulness.

Joel Beeke wisely applies this passage:

“Christians must be wise in their relationships with the world. We must not flee to worldly powers when trials come but trust God's promises and obey His moral law. Do not be surprised when the world is hostile, but do not let the fear of man lead you into lies and sin. Beware of relationships that entangle you with unbelievers.”¹

The chapter ends by simply checking in on Esau's life. Esau has taken not one but two wives, a direct contradiction of God's word. The text emphasizes that they are Hittites and not of the covenant family of God, hinting that Esau should not have married either of these women anyway. The fear of a lost wife leading the husband into false worship is commonly taught in the Old Testament and validated in the life of Solomon and others. It is expressly forbidden in the New Testament (see 2 Corinthians 6:14). In Esau's case, the sad result is they make life bitter for his parents. How many lives have been made bitter by disobeying God's design? God's rules are a blessing not a burden. Exchange your bitterness for a blessing by obeying God's word today.

¹ Joel Beeke, *Family Worship Bible Guide*, 18.

We may feel that the book of Proverbs just tells us over and over how wonderful is God's wisdom. Perhaps we need repeated reminders until it begins to sink in.

Verses 1–12 are bookended by Solomon's address to his son. The wise king's fatherly counsel is just as important for us as it was for his child. There is a certain rhythm to these verses. You can divide these verses into pairs with each couplet beginning with a command and ending with a promise. As an example, consider the most famous two verses in this section:

*⁵ Trust in Yahweh with all your heart
And do not lean on your own understanding.
⁶ In all your ways acknowledge Him,
And He will make your paths straight.*

Proverbs 3:5–6

We are commanded to trust Yahweh, which is closely connected with fearing God in Proverbs. It's not just that we have head knowledge about the Lord; instead, we rely on him with the full confidence of our heart and soul. We demonstrate our trust in God by leaning on his understanding when our own understanding would take us elsewhere. We might have every earthly reason to take one course of action, but God's word clearly points a different direction. The way we choose to go will prove who we really trust: ourselves or God. This is true not only in the big decisions of life but even the smallest decisions—in all our ways we should include and acknowledge him. We should trust in the Lord with all our heart. This is the command of God, but what about the promise? When we trust him and lean on him and acknowledge him, he promises to direct our paths—to make them straight. When we disobey, like a loving father God disciplines us. Rather than being upset that we're undergoing discipline, the wise Christian will recognize this as a sign of God's love in our lives.

Verses 13–18 praise the value of wisdom once more; more valuable than silver and gold and more precious than jewels is silver. Indeed wisdom is like a source of life (v.18). Verses 21–27 show us the security and assurance that God's wisdom brings. We walk surely and sleep well with God's wisdom. The chapter ends with more practical application of God's wisdom.

The question for us today is do we live as if these words are true? Remember that to fear God is to live our lives as if we really believe what we say we believe about God. If you believe his words are this valuable and life-giving, how will this impact your day today?

Tuesday, February 3

Read: Genesis 27

Isaac's story has quickly advanced with his years. Even though he has a few more decades to live, we are told that Isaac is old and blind. These details play important roles in the story. Because Isaac is old, he seeks to bless his oldest son. This is not the double portion of Isaac's estate that Esau forfeited, but the blessing as heir who will receive the promises of God given to Abraham and Isaac.

The Bible has already told us that Isaac and Rebekah play favorites when it comes to their sons. Rebekah favors Jacob and despises Esau's wives, so she initiates the grand deception. This doesn't let Jacob off the hook, but it does ease his guilt to some extent. Jacob even voices his concern over the plan but Rebekah says she is willing to take that punishment upon herself. Just as Adam listened to the voice of Eve and Abraham listened to the voice of Sarah (remember those weren't good situations), Jacob listens to the voice of Mother Rebekah. If you're keeping score, the wife is conspiring against the husband, the son is conspiring against the father, and the brother is conspiring against his brother. As far-fetched as their plan might seem, it works!

Isaac is not immediately convinced but becomes persuaded that Esau is with him and the father blesses the son. Only in this case the father blesses the second-born son, a reversal of how things were expected to take place. Reading Isaac's blessing helps us to see the significance of his words. This father isn't just seeking physical blessings for his son. Verse 29 states that the blessing of Isaac includes all the nations of the earth serving and worshiping at the blessed son's feet. God had promised Abraham that those who bless him would be blessed, and those who curse him would be cursed. The promise has extended to three generations at this point. Jacob receives the blessing and has successfully deceived his brother, living up to his name. Almost immediately Esau appears and realizes what has happened. Like an irrevocable contract today, Isaac cannot change his blessing to Jacob but also gives a blessing to Esau. Filled with hate over the trickery, Esau vows to kill his brother Jacob. The brotherly conflict will continue.

As we read this chapter we may wonder why Rebekah and Jacob are not disciplined by God for their scheme. Without approving of what they do, God certainly gives us an illustration of what Joseph will learn later in Genesis 50:20: "you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." For that first audience in the exodus, what an encouragement God's goodness must have been.

*He who finds a wife finds a good thing
And obtains favor from Yahweh.*

Proverbs 18:22

Abraham gave great attention to Isaac finding a good wife, and now Isaac takes great care in finding Jacob a wife. Rebekah has already voiced her disapproval of Esau's wives. The desire for Jacob to not repeat the same mistakes plus the need for him to flee from Esau's wrath presented the perfect opportunity for Jacob to go visit family and seek a wife. Interestingly enough, Esau takes a third wife with the latest one being from his Uncle Ishmael's family. Perhaps he is attempting to regain his parents' approval, but the fact remains that he is violating God's design for marriage.

On his journey to Uncle Laban's land, Jacob has a wild dream picturing a ladder connecting heaven and earth, signifying full access to God. The Lord speaks a word of assurance to Jacob in the dream, but he awakens in a fright. Jacob speaks of the place as being the dwelling place of God, but isn't it interesting that he doesn't worship God there? He doesn't build an altar there which suggests that Jacob still doesn't fully understand or trust God yet. Even Jacob's vow in 29:20 seems half-hearted. We know that Jesus Christ bridges the gap between heaven and earth and provides full access to heaven. Because this is true, we must worship him.

In 29:1–14 Jacob arrives in the region where his extended family lives. The scene has echoes of when his father's servant came to find him a wife. God's providence is at work again in the details. After meeting his uncle's herdsmen, he is first introduced to his future wife Rachel and they embrace in an emotional family reunion. The text soon reveals that Jacob loves Rachel and wants to marry her. While his mother quickly agreed to marry his father all those years ago, Jacob's journey into marriage will not be as swift. He is about to enter into seven years of labor in order to win his bride.

The rich irony of this passage is how the deceiver is deceived. Jacob is tricked by Uncle Laban into marrying the older, uglier daughter Leah. Due to the darkness of their wedding night, Jacob doesn't discover the deceit until the following morning. How ironic that Laban lectures Jacob on the younger daughter not getting married before the older when Jacob deceived his father and older brother. Laban is scheming to get his daughters married off. Jacob agrees to work longer for the opportunity to marry the sister he loves, but the stage is set for chaos in Jacob's love life. How will this impact the promises of God for the family of Abraham?

Thursday, February 5

Read: Genesis 29:31–31:3

The drama of Jacob and his wives and their children rivals any modern-day soap opera. It may be easy to get overwhelmed with all of the names and miss the significance of the narrative, but we are helped by paying attention to everyone's names. Jacob naturally has difficulty loving the wife he was tricked into marrying, but God blesses Leah with children while closing the womb of Rachel. Leah seems to hope that her first son, Reuben (lit. "See, a son"), will bring her closer to her Jacob. She believes her second son is given to her because God has heard that she is still hated by Jacob (and likely her sister Rachel). Simeon's name sounds like the Hebrew word for "heard." Thinking that a third son will certainly cause Jacob to be attached to her at last, she names this baby Levi, which sounds like the Hebrew word for "attached." With the fourth son, it seems that Leah is resolved to her fate and chooses to simply praise the Lord for the birth of Judah, whose name sounds like the Hebrew word for "praise."

Rachel is jealous of her sister's fertility and complains to her husband. Jacob recognizes that God is the giver of life, but he grows angry instead of praying for his wife like his father had prayed for his mother. Repeating the mistakes of Grandma Sarah, Rachel gives her servant Bilhah to Jacob as another wife and they conceive. This intensifies the birthing war between the sisters and Leah gives her servant Zilpah to bear children for Jacob. Finally the Lord acts on Rachel's behalf ("remembered") and opens her womb, resulting in the birth of Joseph. The entire story can be understood by paying attention to what each mother says upon the birth of the child and also consulting your Bible's footnotes concerning the Hebrew meaning of each name. To put it mildly, Jacob's family is dysfunctional. His wives involve their children's fruit harvest in a battle over who gets to sleep with Jacob at night! This clearly is not God's design for the home. Yet, God extends mercy in the middle of this mess. He promised to give many offspring to Jacob and is doing just that in spite of Jacob's sins.

Laban understands that God is blessing him through Jacob, but Laban doesn't know that God will only bless those who bless Jacob. Laban attempts to trick the trickster Jacob, but Jacob uses selective breeding to outsmart Laban and the Lord continues to bless Jacob. God continues to work evil for good in the life of Jacob. Do you believe that God can do the same for you?

Jacob has already expressed a desire to take his family back to his homeland, and now the time seems right. Laban's disposition towards Jacob has changed, but more than that, God has told him to go back. Jacob begins to explain to his wives why it is necessary for him to take them away from their father. He presents a strong contrast between Laban and God. Over twenty years after God promised at Bethel to be with him, Jacob testifies that it has been true. Leah and Rachel recognize this truth, noting that Laban has essentially disowned them while God has met their needs and given them children. United in the decision to leave, Jacob leads his family to leave while Laban is away.

The theme of theft and trickery runs throughout the narrative. Rachel steals Laban's household gods, and Laban seems to accuse Jacob of stealing his daughters and grandchildren. Jacob, whose name means "trickster," has tricked his father-in-law, but more than that, Laban's own daughter Rachel is tricking in how she hides his household gods. In a remarkable act of mercy, God warns Laban to not say anything good or bad to Jacob. For Laban's part, he makes clear that Jacob's God is not his god and seeks the return of his impotent household gods. Jacob pleads his integrity towards Laban and points out how God is defending him against Laban. Joel Beeke summarizes Laban:

"Laban is an example of a bully, oppressor, and tyrant. He robs the righteous, envies their prosperity, breaks his promises, alienates his family, worships idols, accuses other falsely, puts on a show of kindness, uses force to take what deceit will not get him, cheats honest employees, constantly changes his words, sees everything he takes as his right, and uses religion to protect his interests. But God will rebuke and judge him. Believers may face and overcome such people with truth, justice, and faith in the Lord."¹

Perhaps there's a Laban in your life. His characteristics remind you of someone close to you. Perhaps you find yourself acting like Laban more often than you'd like to admit. Jacob trusted in the Lord when dealing with difficult Laban. Even when Laban seems to try and save face by making a treaty with Jacob, Laban piles up a heap of rocks seemingly to represent his multitude of false gods. Jacob simply takes one stone and sets it up as a pillar to the Lord. He swears by the God of his father Isaac and sacrifices in worship. Despite his mistreatment by Laban, Jacob trusts in the God who spoke to him at Bethel, the God of his father Isaac. Does God's past faithfulness strengthen you for present difficulties?

¹ Joel Beeke, *Family Worship Bible Guide*, 20.

Monday, February 9

Read: Genesis 32–33

Jacob has successfully departed in peace from his father-in-law, and he is headed home after twenty years! There's one more difficult family meeting Jacob must face: his brother Esau. Remember that the last time we saw Jacob and Esau together, Esau was threatening to kill Jacob for his deceit. Time heals many wounds, but Jacob wonders if his brother will still be intent on revenge.

After sending a peace offering ahead of his caravan, Jacob is terrified to hear that Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men. That can only mean one thing: revenge! Remember how grandfather Abraham rescued Lot with an army of 318 men. Esau's forces spell disaster. Jacob splits his camp into two separate parties for better safety, but ultimately Jacob prays. He thanks Yahweh for prospering him and for his lovingkindness. Jacob claims the promises of God by praying them back to God. Again, Jacob sends multiple peace offerings hoping to soften his brother's heart towards him.

The night before the meeting with Esau, 97 year old Jacob has a unique one-of-a-kind experience with the living God. God in a pre-incarnate appearance wrestles with Jacob all night. Jacob has come to realize that a blessing from God is far more important than the blessing of his earthly father that he stole from his brother with the help of his mother. The blessing of God is far more important than the blessing of his father-in-law or even the two camps the Lord has blessed him with these last twenty years. In spite of all of Jacob's flaws, and they are many, and in spite of all of the strivings Jacob has endured these years, he has learned that the true source of blessing is God alone. God blesses him and gives him a new name. Jacob the deceiver is now Israel, the one who strives with God.

The time for facing Esau has come. Jacob organizes his wives and children while saving his favorites for the last. What kind of reunion will this be? Hear how John MacArthur summarized the scene:

“Fearfully and deferentially, Jacob approached his brother as an inferior would a highly honored patron, while gladly and eagerly, Esau ran to greet his brother without restraint of emotion. “They wept” because, after 21 years of troubling separation, old memories were wiped away and murderous threats belonged to the distant past; hearts had been changed, brothers reconciled!”¹

We will never have the experience of Jacob, but do we have the same attitude as Jacob? Would we rather have the blessing of God more than anything the world offers? Are we willing to pay the price of reconciliation and forgiveness? By God's grace, may it be so.

¹ John MacArthur Jr., ed., *The MacArthur Study Bible*, electronic ed. (Nashville, TN: Word Pub., 1997), 64.

Today's reading sees many transitions and the focus of the Bible's narrative shifts to a new generation. First we see Jacob return to Bethel where God had first revealed himself to Jacob. He builds an altar at Bethel and worships the Lord. God reaffirms that the blessings given to Abraham and Isaac will pass to Jacob. His name change to Israel is permanent. God Almighty is faithful. His promises are sure.

Even as God graciously reaffirms these promises, Jacob experiences much sorrow in this season. Jacob's mother Rebekah is presumably already dead and now her nurse Deborah dies. Rachel gives birth to one more son, but tragically dies during childbirth. Jacob's dearly beloved wife is now dead, and his oldest son Reuben is challenging him as leader of the family. After a summary statement of Jacob's family, we are simply told of the death of his father Isaac.

*Time, like an ever-rolling stream bears all its sons away;
they fly forgotten, as a dream dies at the op'ning day.¹*

Chapter 37 solidifies the narrative shift from Jacob to his favorite son Joseph. What was hinted at in 33:2 is now on full display: Jacob loves Joseph more than the rest of his sons. Of all people, Jacob should understand what happens when parents play favorites. After all, much of the last few decades of his life are a result of his mother pitting him against his brother Esau. In spite of what Jacob should have realized, his favoritism is evident to all. The brothers all hate Joseph. First it was the coat of many colors. This was proof positive of Jacob's feelings, but then comes the dreams! Oh, how they hated this dream of them all bowing down to little brother Joseph. At the right opportunity, Joseph's brothers plot to kill him. The schemers betray the dreamer! The reading ends with Joseph far from home in Egypt as a slave of the king's bodyguard. How much injustice this young man has already suffered, but his story is only beginning.

As we begin the Joseph story, we would do well to keep the ending in mind. God has not forgotten Joseph or the family of Abraham. He has not forsaken them. God is busy keeping his promises. Joseph recognizes this near the end of his life when he says to his brothers:

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to do what has happened on this day, to keep many people alive.

Genesis 50:20

¹ Isaac Watts, "O God, Our Help in Ages Past," 1719.

Wednesday, February 11

Read: Genesis 39–41

In spite of all the injustice towards Joseph by his brothers and those who bought him, Joseph is successful in Egypt. The recipe for his success is simple: God was with him. The Lord has not abandoned Joseph in Egypt. It is so clear that Yahweh is with Joseph that even Potiphar recognizes this to be true. As Joseph is entrusted with more and more responsibilities, the blessings upon this son of Abraham begin to bless the nations, picture in this case by the blessings upon the house of the Egyptian Potiphar. God's providential work may be unusual, but it cannot be denied.

Joseph proves to be a man of integrity and purity, and all that gets him is jail. Perhaps this means that now God has finally abandoned him? Perhaps now the blessings have run out for Joseph? Not hardly. Yahweh is with Joseph even in jail! God's lovingkindness still extends to Joseph, and the Lord gives Joseph favor in the sight of the chief jailer. God is at work in the life of Joseph. The narrator tips the reader off in 40:3 that something providential is about to happen because here come two new prisoners from Pharaoh in the same prison as Joseph. Joseph's ability to interpret the dreams of the baker and the cupbearer set the stage for Joseph to also be able to interpret the dreams of Pharaoh. Chapter 40 ends leaving the reader wondering once again, has God finally forgotten Joseph? The chief cupbearer certainly did.

Two years down the road, perhaps Joseph is wondering the same thing. But in God's perfect timing, Joseph is brought from the pit to the palace. God reveals the meaning of Pharaoh's dreams to Joseph, and Joseph's explanation of the matter makes quite the impression on Pharaoh. This prisoner who has no reason to desire the survival of the kingdom that has captured him actually lays out a fantastic plan to preserve Egypt. Pharaoh recognizes the hand of God upon Joseph's life and appoints him as second in command of all of the land. God is still blessing Joseph even this far from home and his family. Joseph receives a wife and two sons, with their names indicating the work of God in Joseph's heart. Like us, it would be tempting for Joseph to try and interpret God by his circumstances. Instead, let us trust the providence of God that is vividly pictured in the life of Joseph.

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him for His grace;
behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.
Blind unbelief is sure to err, and scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter, and He will make it plain.¹*

¹ "God Moves in A Mysterious Way," William Cowper, 1774.

The last several chapters have focused on Joseph in Egypt, but today's reading reminds us that Jacob and family are still back in Canaan where the famine is having a devastating impact. The last time we saw Jacob's sons off with a son of Rachel, Joseph was sold into slavery, Jacob was deceived, and this whole story began. With these events likely in mind, and certainly clinging to him as the new favorite since he believes Joseph to be dead, Jacob keeps Benjamin at home.

About twenty years have passed since Joseph last saw his brothers, and they do not recognize him as the Egyptian ruler they must buy food from. They do not realize they are fulfilling the dreams they hated so much all those years earlier. But Joseph remembers and Joseph understands what is happening. He tests his brothers over three days. He never reveals that he is their brother or that he understands their language. Joseph hears their guilty consciences troubling them as they discuss the matter among themselves. He tests them further by keeping Simeon with him in Egypt while they return home with food and as well as the money they came with. Will the brothers abandon another of their own in order to save their own skin? Where did the money in their sacks come from anyway? Their beating drum of their guilt pounds louder and louder. When they face their father, Jacob is heartbroken and convinced that the whole matter is going to kill him. Eventually he relents and allows the brothers to return to Egypt with Benjamin. Heart filled with agony, Jacob ultimately trusts God and prays that God Almighty will be with them.

The brothers return to Joseph in Egypt, and Joseph recognizes his brother Benjamin. He is overwhelmed with emotion and hides his response from the rest. Eventually, the banquet is prepared and Joseph surprises everyone with their seating arrangements and their portions. If there's still any jealousy or rivalry among the brothers, surely it will show itself over this meal. Joseph must know if his brothers have truly changed. The reading for today pauses before the story is resolved. Before we continue further tomorrow, consider God's grace in convicting these brothers over their sin. Too often we fail to see conviction as a blessing from God. Like a loving father, he disciplines us. He chastens us. He convicts us. We may not realize how loving that is, but God convicts in order to move us to repentance and restored fellowship with him. Is God convicting you of a sin today, dear Christian? Thank him, repent, and enjoy restored fellowship with him today.

Friday, February 13

Read: Genesis 44–46

We continue with Joseph's testing of his brothers. He sets them up for a potential conflict by sending them away with a silver cup planted in the sack of Benjamin. Perhaps an accusation of theft will cause them to show their character. Perhaps the threat of enslaving Benjamin and letting the rest go free will show if they are still the same selfish sinners who hated Joseph all those years ago.

Finally Joseph can no longer restrain his emotions. Everyone hears his violent weeping, so when Joseph reveals his true identity, his brothers are understandably terrified. They've acknowledged already that they are sinners, but surely they fear that judgment day has arrived. Gathering himself, Joseph reveals God's hand in all of these last years. God is using Joseph to preserve the family of Jacob. The promises of God have not been forgotten or neglected for a moment. What a glorious reunion between Joseph and his brothers, a reunion that would have been impossible but for the work of God in all of them.

Everyone takes notice of what is happening, and Pharaoh blessed Joseph with everything he needed to bring his family to Egypt.. The nations are blessing the family of Abraham. God's promises are being fulfilled. But what about their location? God is preserving his remnant, but he's not preserving them in Canaan. He's taking them to Egypt. For now the location of the story has shifted. We will soon see God's mighty acts to redeem his people out of Egypt. For now we see this major book of the Bible coming to a conclusion with Jacob and his family joyfully reunited together.

So much of this part of the story has been about Joseph that we might accidentally miss the actions of Judah. In earlier portions of Genesis, Judah was marked by wicked sin. He is the one who suggested that Joseph be sold rather than killed. Perhaps it was compassion. Or perhaps it was greed. Judah commits sexual sin with his daughter-in-law Tamar, a sharp contrast with the purity of Joseph. But when Benjamin's life was on the line, up steps Judah, who makes an impassioned plea to substitute himself in the place of his sinful brother. Judah is changed, but moreover, Judah points us to Jesus:

"How precious is Jesus Christ, the Son of Judah, who intercedes for the condemned on the basis of His office as their Surety! He died as a substitute for sins He did not commit so that the guilty may go free. Is Christ your surety? Have you confessed that God has found out your iniquity? Have you cried out for mercy to the Savior? He is full of mercy."¹

¹ Joel Beeke, *Family Worship Bible Guide*, 26.

Proverbs 4–5 continue the appeal from a father to a son to seek wisdom. What were you taught to value when you were growing up? Perhaps you looked forward to a good job making a lot of money one day. Maybe you were looking forward to having a big family with a joy-filled home. Were you ever taught to value and seek after wisdom? The Proverbs prioritize seeking wisdom above all else.

4:1–9 form an appeal from the father to his sons. This quest for wisdom didn't begin in dad's day. His father passed down what had been handed down to him. The pursuit of wisdom is a family tradition. Wisdom is worth the work. The pursuit of wisdom will bring the prize; it will crown the head of every son who seeks her.

The appeal of 4:10–19 presents the choice so common in Psalms and Proverbs: there are only two ways to live. The blessed one of Psalm 1 does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the way of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers. We remember how the blessed path is different from the wicked path. So it is in Proverbs. The way of wisdom is not the way of wickedness. The path of the righteous is bright and growing brighter as the sun shines from sunrise till its brightest at high noon. The way of the wicked is dark and growing darker.

The chapter's final appeal in 4:20–27 makes clear that wisdom is not mere head knowledge, but a pursuit of the heart. The father's words are to be stored in the heart. The heart is to be protected above all else, for from it flows the springs of life. The wisdom stored in the heart impacts the words we say, the things we look at, and the ways we act (24–27). If the heart is that important, are you guarding yours today? What changes do you need to make in your life in order to protect your heart and fill it with wisdom?

Proverbs 5 presents a pointed appeal from father to son. Wisdom is exalted once again, but then it is applied in one specific area. Perhaps the warning from the father shocks you. He speaks so plainly of the dangers of the forbidden woman. He pleads with his son to stay away from her. The father straightforwardly explains sexual pleasure as God designed it, but the Creator confines this pleasure to marriage. The son would do well to listen to the father and experience the blessings of the Creator. May we, too, gain this wisdom and guard our hearts.

Tuesday, February 17

Read: Exodus 1:1–2:10

We begin the second book in the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible with each being humanly penned by Moses); we call it Exodus. The story continues right where we left off in Genesis: God's people are in Egypt. The family of Jacob is safe and fruitful. Even as Joseph and his generation have died, the sons of Israel are increasing and flourishing. However a problem arises in verse 8. There's a new king on the throne of Egypt, and he doesn't care about who Joseph was or who Joseph's God is. This new king looks at the family of Israel and only sees a threat. He oppresses and even murders the people of God, yet God is faithful. He continues to bless and multiply, just as he promised Abraham.

This passage encourages us through the providence of God. This new king of Egypt sought to destroy the sons of Israel. This is yet another episode in the ongoing series of Satan's attacks against the seed of the woman (remember Genesis 3). Pharaoh thinks he is safe from the daughters of Israel, but it was two daughters of Israel—the honored midwives Shiphrah and Puah—that God providentially used to preserve the sons of Israel. It was Pharaoh's own daughter that God providentially used to preserve one particular son, the baby Moses. God is faithful to provide for himself a deliverer, in this case the child Moses. As we watch this child grow, we will see many episodes that will point us to the greater deliverer, the greater Moses—Jesus, the baby also providentially and miraculously preserved from a wicked king's hand. And as we watch this man Moses, we will be reminded quite often of how much more we need the better Moses, the one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus (1 Tim 2:5).

This passage also reminds us to fear God rather than man. The Hebrew midwives had every reason to fear man. The king of Egypt had enslaved their people. His oppression was only growing more fierce and bitter by the day. If this wicked king commanded the death of innocent baby boys, what would he do to the women who failed to obey his commands? Yet, the Bible tells us these women feared God rather than man. The same Bible tells in a variety of places that human government is ordained by God and ought to be obeyed under many circumstances. But there are times when even the government oversteps its authority and seeks to play the role of God. When those times come, we ought always to obey God rather than man.

In yesterday's reading we saw God protecting Moses as an infant; today we see God's protection of Moses as a young man. In Acts 7:23 Stephen speaks of Moses as being 40 years old at the time of this incident. Raised in the privilege of the Egyptian palace, Moses still identifies with his Hebrew family all these years later. Seeing the violence against his own kinsmen, Moses wrongly commits violence. He soon finds himself on the run as a fugitive because of his impulsive response to sin. The soon-to-be deliverer finds himself rightly using force to protect the daughters of the priest of Midian. Through all of this, God is still preserving and protecting the deliverer of his people from bondage in Egypt.

Remembering the providence of God in the life of Moses helps us to understand a potentially difficult phrase in verse 24: "God remembered." The sons of Jacob are still in slavery and they cry out to the God of Jacob for deliverance. Their cry for help rises to the (figurative) ears of God. In four crisp verbs, we are strongly encouraged by the faithfulness of God. God heard. God remembered. God saw. God knew. We understand God hearing the prayers of his people. We understand God seeing and knowing all things. But God remembering? It sounds like it's possible for him to forget us! Perhaps the children of Israel even felt forgotten in Egypt, but we've already seen in the text that God hasn't forgotten his people. *God has been faithfully preserving the life of the deliverer for his people.* Several times in Scripture we see the phrase "God remembered" and it never means that God has forgotten. Speaking to us in language we can understand, the writer is tipping us off that even if it's been a long wait, God is about to act on behalf of his people. He hears. He remembers. He sees. He knows.

Psalm 90 is given to us as a prayer of Moses. We're not told the exact circumstances when it was written, but some have suggested that it could have been written during his wilderness years in Midian. Moses begins in verses 1–2 with a reminder of God's eternal nature. From everlasting to everlasting, there is only one God. Contrasted with God's permanence, humanity is temporary. Verses 3–6 offers multiple illustrations of how fleeting our lives are. At the end of our quickly fading lives will most certainly come judgment. Verses 7–12 reflect on our sinfulness and our hopelessness apart from God's grace. We must live our lives with eternity in mind. Moses concludes by looking to Yahweh and trusting in his lovingkindness and favor. Let this be our prayer.

Thursday, February 19

Read: Exodus 3:1–4:18

We've seen how God has faithfully preserved the life of Moses to this point, but now we see God clearly call Moses. As Moses is shepherding the flock of his father-in-law near Mount Horeb (later called Mount Sinai), the angel of Yahweh appears. As we have noticed before, this is no ordinary angel but an appearance of God himself. Moses is first drawn by the marvelous sight of the burning bush that is not consumed, but he quickly is confronted by the holiness of God. God declares his identity as the same God of Israel. He sees. He hears. He knows. He has come to deliver his people, and he has come to send Moses to do it.

Moses rightly recognizes his insignificance in verse 11, but God declares that he will be with Moses just as God was with the patriarchs. Moses's commissioning to deliver God's people from slavery would be impossible without the empowering presence of the Lord. Did you notice that freedom from oppression is not the end goal for God's people? Yahweh promises that they will be saved to serve him. The day will come when God's people, fresh from the bondage of Pharaoh, will worship the Lord at Mount Sinai. In 3:18 the idea is reinforced: the purpose of the Exodus is to worship the one, true, and living God. Before we go any further in this momentous scene from the life of Moses, may we be reminded that the same is true for all believers today: *we are saved to worship and serve Yahweh.*

God declares his personal name to Moses in 3:14: "I AM WHO I AM." God uses a simple Hebrew verb that means "to be." He has no beginning or end. He simply is. To aid you in your Bible reading, let us note that many English Bible translations take the Hebrew name given in this verse and render it as "the LORD" in all caps. Anytime you see "the LORD" written that way instead of "the Lord," you can know this is a translation of God's personal name revealed here in Exodus 3:14.

Moses continues to ask questions, but it's not entirely clear when the questions shift from sincerity to stalling. By 4:14 Moses' slow obedience is clearly no obedience, and God answers firmly and finally. Moses offers no more questions or objections. God's call upon Moses' life is clear and convincing. Despite his weakness and possible limitations, Yahweh will use Moses to deliver his people. He will validate Moses by mighty signs. God will provide for his people, even by the hands of the Egyptians. And God will protect his people, even from a hard-hearted king.

Our Exodus reading is short but packed with difficult questions. Yahweh had already told Moses at the burning bush that Pharaoh would not let the people of Israel leave Egypt. Now that Moses is on mission, God plainly says in verse 21, “I will harden his heart with strength so that he will not let the people go.” Something within us recoils at the idea of God hardening anyone’s heart, yet not once, not twice, but ten times throughout the next several chapters will we see God involved in hardening Pharaoh’s heart. However, we will also see Pharaoh hardening his own heart. Not once. Not twice. Ten times will Pharaoh harden his heart. How can we reconcile this tension between God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility? We would do well to affirm the biblical teaching on both. Pharaoh is clearly guilty; he has hardened his heart against God time and time again. But God is clearly sovereign over all things, even the human heart. The Lord be praised.

If we can handle the difficulty of verse 21, what do we do with the shocking statement of verse 24?! “. . . Yahweh encountered [Moses] and sought to put him to death.” God has called and commissioned Moses only to kill him? What is his chief sin? Moses’ wife Zipporah somehow understands that the problem is the sign of the covenant—circumcision. God has remembered his covenant with his people, but his people have not remembered the sign. At least Moses hasn’t. He’s neglected his responsibility towards his son, but his wife quickly resolves the situation, even as she seems revulsed by the whole thing. Remember that God’s covenant with Abraham and his offspring was to be marked by the act of circumcision, and failure to comply could result in death. Exodus 12:15 uses the language of being “cut off” from the people of God. Moses’ failure to remember the sign of the covenant could have led to his death. This isn’t the first time that Moses’s life has been saved by another. Previously it was the daughter of Pharaoh. This time it is by the daughter of Jethro, his own wife Zipporah.

Psalm 77, while written by Asaph, is clearly connected to the Exodus story and the ministry of Moses and Aaron (see verse 20). The psalmist laments his condition, but it’s not merely his situation alone that matters. His condition is bound up with the situation of the people of God. As he remembers and meditates on the work of God in the past, he is confident in the present and ready to face the future.

Monday, February 23

Read: Exodus 5:1–6:13

Perhaps you've heard it said that the safest place for a Christian is the center of God's will. Understood correctly, that is true. We sometimes have a tendency to interpret that saying as if safe means healthy and prosperous without any difficulty or suffering. Today's reading corrects that misunderstanding.

Just as God instructed, Moses and Aaron go to Pharaoh declaring the word of the Lord. The king of Egypt is royally unimpressed. "Who is this Yahweh? I do not know him, and I do not want to know him." Moses and Aaron persist, so Pharaoh makes the conditions of slavery even worse. He instructs the taskmasters to not provide straw, a key ingredient in making bricks during that day. Pharaoh seeks to punish the people of Israel with increased difficulty in their labor, and he hopes they won't have any more time to hear from this Yahweh and make plans to worship him. Worshipping God is the clearly revealed will of the Lord, yet seeking to obey Yahweh isn't bringing Israel peace and prosperity.

First, the foremen of the sons of Israel go to Pharaoh to plead their case. After their cries are only met by Pharaoh's accusation of laziness, the leaders turn on Moses. This will not be the last time the people of Israel complain and grumble against Moses. Moses has nowhere to go but to the Lord, praying, "Why? Why? You haven't delivered your people yet." It's at this moment that God replies, "I've got you where I want you." God says in 6:1, "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh." God reminds Moses of who he is and what he has done. Yahweh has revealed himself to Moses in a way unlike he revealed himself even to the patriarchs. God has remembered his covenant and he is about to act. Moses is directly in the center of God's will.

Moses relays the message to the sons of Israel, but they refuse to listen. Notice how the text specifies that they fail to listen because they are weak or anguished in spirit and they are undergoing hard slavery. The Bible doesn't say (at this point) that they are hard-hearted, rather they are living in hard times. Because his own people refused to listen to him, Moses can't imagine that Pharaoh will listen this time either. Yet, God commands Moses and Aaron to continue to be his spokesmen. Moses, the deliverer chosen by God, faces the rejection of Pharaoh and the complaints of the people. Yet, he is exactly in the center of God's will. Let us not judge our circumstances by our comfort level, but rather by the words of God.

Read: Exodus 7–9

Throughout Genesis and the beginning of Exodus, we saw God often working providentially in the background. Now Yahweh will work mightily front and center in the story. God has graciously given Aaron to serve his brother Moses as spokesman. He's given them instructions about what to do and what to expect on their next visit to the palace. Yahweh promises that when he is through, the Egyptians will know who he is, even if Pharaoh does not.

Moses and Aaron are armed with confidence in the Lord who confirms their mission by signs and wonders. Pharaoh is armed with a false sense of security from his royal magicians, sorcerers, and wise men who have their own staffs that turn into serpents. Just as God promised, Pharaoh's heart is hardened. Now the Lord begins ten mighty signs that prove who is God and who is not.

The ten plagues can be organized into three rounds of three plagues each, with a final climactic tenth plague that breaks down Pharaoh's resistance. Notice that three times Moses meets Pharaoh early in the morning (7:15, 8:20, 9:13) to demand the release of Israel ("let my people go") or face the punishment of Yahweh. Round one brings the plagues of water turned to blood, frogs, and gnats. Because the magicians can also turn water to blood, Pharaoh's heart was hardened. Because the frogs did not last forever, he hardened his heart with firmness. Even as the magicians fail to mimic the plague of gnats and credit the God of Aaron and Moses with this sign, Pharaoh's heart is hardened and he will not listen.

In the second round of plagues, Yahweh distinguishes between his people and the people of Egypt. The flies swarm and ruin Egypt but aren't found in Goshen among God's people. Pharaoh attempts to negotiate, but he continues to harden his heart and not let the people go. The fifth plague again distinguishes between Israel and Egypt, but this time the consequences are not merely disruption or destruction but now death. The livestock of Egypt dies but the livestock of Israel lives. The health of the Egyptians is targeted in the sixth plague, with the powerful magicians unable to even stand before Moses because of the boils.

As the third round of plagues begin, the seventh plague stands out. It is longer in description, but don't miss Yahweh explaining the power and purpose of the plagues to Pharaoh in 9:14–17. God even tells Pharaoh how to avoid the impact of this plague of hail. After a momentary emotional response, Pharaoh continues to harden his heart. What about you? Do you know and fear Yahweh God?

Wednesday, February 25

Read: Exodus 10–12

Our reading today begins with a reminder of the hardened condition of Pharaoh's heart. We also see again God's commitment to preserving a people who will know him, worship him, and tell future generations about him. The eighth plague, locusts, finishes destroying what the seventh plague, hail, left behind. The locusts also "covered the surface of the whole land, so that the land was darkened" (10:15), which points us to the ninth plague where the land is covered for three days in complete and total darkness. During the eighth plague, Pharaoh's servants warn him that Moses is a snare to Egypt and destroying their nation. By the end of the ninth plague, Pharaoh is offering death threats to Moses. How deep is the darkness!

God's instructions concerning the final plague not only warns Pharaoh of the judgment that is quickly coming, but it also prepares the children of Israel for their quickly approaching exodus. There's a ring of finality to this plague as Moses begins once again with, "Thus says the LORD" but he doesn't give the command "let my people go." By the time God is done, Pharaoh will be begging Moses to take God's people out of Egypt. Way back in 4:22–23, God spoke of Israel as "my firstborn son" and warned that if Pharaoh refused to let God's people go, the consequences would be the death of Pharaoh's firstborn son. Here Moses announces that these consequences will extend to all the people because of the hardheartedness of their leader.

In the previous plagues, God automatically distinguished between Egypt and Israel. In the instructions for the Passover, God gives them the process by which the Lord will make this distinction and pass over them during this final plague. These instructions also point forward to life after Egypt. Even after God delivers them into the promised land, Israel is supposed to commemorate this occasion and tell the next generation of this mighty act of God. At midnight, God does exactly what he promised. God passes over every home with a blood-stained door post and visits every home not covered by the blood. Everything God promised comes to pass.

The death of the passover lamb holds significance for more than just the children of Israel. 1 Corinthians 5:7 calls Jesus Christ our Passover lamb. John 1:29 speaks of Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Without the shedding of the Lamb's blood, there would be no forgiveness of sins. God has not merely overlooked our sins; he has placed them on the Lamb in our place. Dear reader, do you know your sins are covered by the blood of the Lamb? Praise the Lord!

How would your life be different if the Lord delivered you from death? Even as God gave instructions to Israel in chapter 12 concerning the Passover meal to remember his deliverance, he also gives instructions in 13:1–16 concerning setting apart (or consecrating) the firstborn. The weeklong feast of unleavened bread will fortify the Israelites to fear God and not the Canaanites when God brings them into the land. It is the mighty hand of God that delivered them out of Egypt and the strong hand of God will continue to protect them. In all the riches of today's reading, don't miss the gem in 13:19. In earlier times, Joseph told his family with confidence that one day God would deliver them from Egypt. Trusting in the promises of God, Joseph told his family they should take his bones with them when they left Egypt. In life and in death, Joseph is different because of the Lord's deliverance.

Knowing their fearful hearts, God did not take Israel on the most direct route to the Promised Land. Instead, he redirects them on a wandering path that is exactly according to God's plan. God goes before them and does not depart from them. God has announced he will get glory over hard-hearted Pharaoh, but did you notice that he doesn't tell Moses how it will happen? We know the story of the Red Sea, but Moses must walk by faith and trust the word of the Lord. His words to the people in 14:13–14 stand out to us as a wonderful testimony of confidence in the Lord.

Just as Pharaoh promised to never again see Moses except in bringing him death, Moses promises that Israel is never going to see the Egyptians again because God is bringing about their death. Yahweh will fight for his people. Time has passed and our circumstances have changed, but we take confidence today knowing God still fights for his people. In the most vivid illustration of God's salvation in the Old Testament, we see the waters of the Red Sea dramatically part and provide safe passage for Israel's crossing. Just as they parted at God's command through Moses, the waters returned to their natural position flooding the Egyptian army unto death. Thus Yahweh saved Israel.

Chapter 15 contains a song of Moses and a song of his sister Miriam celebrating the great salvation of Yahweh. When God's people reflect on their deliverance, shouldn't they sing? As much as we want to quickly condemn them, too often our singing is replaced by grumbling against God just like the children of Israel. How does your life look different because Christ has delivered you?

Friday, February 27

Read: Exodus 16

Do you get “hangry”? To be “hangry” is to be so hungry that it causes you to be angry. Fresh off deliverance from death at the Red Sea, God’s people are hangry. They begin to grumble against Moses and Aaron, but it becomes clear they are really grumbling against Yahweh. He hears their grumbling and knows that it is ultimately not against the leaders but against himself. This isn’t the first time Israel has grumbled against God, and it won’t be their last.

God tells Moses that he is going to continue to meet Israel’s needs. He didn’t bring them from Egypt just to let them die in the wilderness. God promises to rain bread down from heaven, this special bread called manna. But not only is Yahweh providing for his people, but he is also testing them. Will they trust and obey the word of the Lord? Israel’s lives would be sustained by the word of God. Yahweh would meet their needs. Their lives would be governed and regulated by the word of God. Yahweh will tell them what to do in every situation, but will they obey? Our circumstances have changed today, and yet the question remains the same for us. God has spoken in his word. We do not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Will we govern our lives according to his word?

Even before God gives the law at Mount Sinai, he is already preparing Israel for their distinctive lifestyles. He tells them that the manna will be miraculously preserved over the Sabbath, which they are to observe as a solemn day of rest. Some have tried to give a natural explanation of the manna rather than accepting its clearly supernatural characteristics as described in the Bible. The manna comes with the morning dew, yet melts in the sun. It will decompose if there’s an attempt to use it too long, except, of course, on the Sabbath. God is clearly providing for his people. He doesn’t use the manna method in our lives today, and yet we can still trust God to provide for his people.

Another generation of Jews would grumble one day, this time against Jesus. In John 6, Jesus makes many connections between the manna in Exodus and his sustaining life. He truly is the bread of heaven.

⁴⁸ *I am the bread of life.* ⁴⁹ *Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.*

⁵⁰ *This is the bread which comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.*

⁵¹ *I am the living bread that came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and also the bread which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh.”*

If you thought that the only hard-hearted people in the Book of Exodus were Egyptian, you'd be wrong. The people of Israel shock us with how hard-hearted they can be in the pages of Scripture. After all they've seen (the plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, the provision of water and food just a few chapters ago), the people still quarrel with Moses. They still put the Lord to the test. God graciously provided yet again, but we should learn from their example and not harden our hearts against God (see Psalm 95:7–9).

Not only does God provide for their physical needs, but he also protects them. The battle against the Amalekites makes clear that God has chosen Moses as the leader of Israel, no matter how much they complain. The battle goes well only when it fares well with Moses. But it also becomes clear that Moses is nothing apart from God. Moses holding a staff in the air would do nothing apart from the power of God. Israel would do well to remember these two lessons. As Israel has already faced challenges and enemies, the interlude with Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, the priest of Midian is a welcome interlude. Jethro blesses Moses, worships God, and offers Moses wise counsel.

The sons of Israel arrive at Mount Sinai where they will remain throughout the rest of the book of Exodus. Yahweh promised Moses that he would bring them out of Egypt to Mount Sinai to worship him there. God always keeps his promises. Now God is about to appear before all the people on Mount Sinai, so the people must prepare. They must get ready, but above all they must not touch the mountain. Why is that? God is holy, and everything he touches is holy. Even mountains. To approach a holy God in our sinful state would certainly result in death. God even sets boundaries around the mountain to protect the people. Yet God tells them how to prepare and he tells them what he will do for them. He will make them a treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. Peter applies this language in the New Testament to the church—Jew and Gentile alike, both in the one body of Christ.

When Yahweh descends on Mount Sinai, he comes in a mighty display of power and authority. He comes in dramatic signs of lightning and clouds, smoke and fire, thunder and trumpets. His holiness is vividly pictured as the people prepare to hear from the Lord. Do you see God as holy? How does the picture of Yahweh in Exodus 19 shape your understanding of who God is?

Tuesday, March 3

Read: Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 6

God has redeemed, and he has spoken. God speaks from Mount Sinai, and he offers these ten “words” to govern the lives of his people. Yahweh first reminds his people of his identity—“I’m the one who brought you out of Egypt and out of slavery.” The exodus will be foundational for the people of Israel for many generations to come. Now he has brought them out to worship him and to give them instructions on how to live.

The first four commandments concern the relationship with God. The last six commandments concern relationships with others. The first four commandments look heavenward, while the last six commandments look outward. The Ten Commandments are the fountainhead for the rest of the laws to come. When God restates the Ten Commandments forty years later in Deuteronomy 5, he offers an even more concise version of the greatest commandment in Deuteronomy 6. God says the greatest commandment is to love Yahweh with all your heart, soul, and might. The heavenly father explains how diligently and thoroughly earthly fathers should teach their children about God. Because the Lord saved them out of slavery in Egypt, they are to love him and serve him and obey him. Out of love and devotion, we too should eagerly obey the word of the Lord. Discussing the Word, teaching the Word, and learning the Word should be normal (and frequent) parts of life. How often we fail in this area. May this passage renew our commitment to prioritize the Word in our lives.

Have you ever noticed the order between law and grace? God delivered the children of Israel out of Egypt, then he told them how they were supposed to live. God has saved us, not of our own works, but then he tells us how to live. Sometimes we think and live as if our actions (keeping the commandments) is what leads us to God’s grace. Actually the opposite is true. It’s only because of the grace of God in our lives that we can live lives pleasing to God. Joel Beeke helps us to think carefully on this subject:

“Significantly, God gave the law after the exodus and not before. Law followed grace, defining how the redeemed people were to live before God. You become part of God’s people by faith in Christ alone. Yet obedience to God’s Word is still a vital part of the covenant relationship (John 14:23; 15:5) . . . So pursue holiness, but never try to keep God’s covenant by your own strength. Rely on the work of Christ and God’s grace will enable you to live in holiness.”¹

¹ Joel Beeke, *Family Worship Bible Guide*, 41.

Exodus 24 describes the covenant with Yahweh being confirmed. The people reaffirm their commitment to the covenant. Moses, Aaron and his sons, and the elders worship and feast before Yahweh. Finally, Moses enters the cloud on the mountain and remains there forty days and forty nights. This timeframe is significant for the rest of our reading, but perhaps the most striking statement is found in verse 3 when the people answered with one voice and said, “All the words which Yahweh has spoken we will do!” These words will soon haunt the sons of Israel, for as Moses stays on the mountain in the presence of Yahweh, the people quickly break their word.

In Exodus 32 the people shockingly give up on Moses and direct Aaron to make them a visible representation of Yahweh. Even more shockingly, Aaron agrees! Collecting gold from the people, he fashions into a golden calf. We might at first think that the people wanted to revert to Egyptian ways and worship false gods, but Aaron clearly refers to this calf as Yahweh in verse 5. The people are breaking the second commandment they had so recently received and even more recently promised to obey.

Up on the mountain, God is outraged by this heinous sin, and Moses intercedes on behalf of the people. He descends the mountain and, burning with anger, Moses forces the people to literally drink their sin. Moses questions brother Aaron who gives an outlandish response: “I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!” Sin really does make us stupid! Moses, acting as God’s executioner, enlists the Levites to punish 3,000 men that day. The following day Moses returns up the mountain, hoping to make atonement for the sin of the people. Moses’ intercession continues in the next chapter, while this chapter ends on a note of judgment.

What do we make of all of this? It’s tempting to think that we would never be as foolish as the Israelites. We would never so quickly forget God. We would never do something like breaking a clear commandment of God in such a blatantly visible way. We would never. Or would we?

In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul references this very incident along with others in Israel’s history and then says, “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall.” (1 Cor. 10:12). Unfortunately, we are all prone to worship God contrary to his word. We all become fearful and foolish. We all attempt to cover our sins. May we learn from the slippery slope of the golden calf. If we don’t heed their example, we may just as easily fall.

Thursday, March 5

Read: Exodus 40

As we come to the end of the Book of Exodus, we find Yahweh giving Moses clear instructions on how to build the tabernacle of the tent of meeting. With meticulous precision, Moses does exactly what God tells him to do. At least eight times the text emphasizes the obedience of Moses, who, of course, doesn't do all of the building himself. The people of Israel are involved in the whole process. This means that just as they strongly promised to obey in chapter 24 and as they strongly failed in chapter 32, their strong repentance seems to be genuine here in Exodus 40.

Now that the people have obeyed and built the tabernacle, the glory of Yahweh fills the tabernacle. God is dwelling with his people. For now. As we wrap up the Book of Exodus, we're reminded of how far we've come and how much the Lord has done for his people. He's redeemed them out of slavery and out of Egypt. He's provided for them and protected them every step of the journey. He's led them by a cloud by day and fire by night since crossing the Red Sea, and he is still doing so at the end of this book. Everywhere Israel goes, they take the tabernacle with them for there the presence of God dwells.

If you've read the Bible before, you may know that the traveling tabernacle is eventually replaced by a permanent temple. The glory of the Lord fills the temple at its dedication in the same way that the glory of the Lord fills the tabernacle. But one day centuries down the road, the prophet Ezekiel has a startling vision of the glory of the Lord departing the temple, never to return. This would sound like bad news until we keep reading to the Gospel of John and hear the good news: the word became flesh and dwelt among us. You may know that the Greek word used there in John 1:14 is essentially the word for "tabernacled." The God-man has come to earth to ransom and redeem us out of the bondage of sin. He gives us instructions which we strive to obey. But when we fast forward to the end of the book, we hear the announcement of John from heaven:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them."

Revelation 21:3

Moses' tabernacle is many things, but it is certainly a picture of what is to come. It points us to Jesus and ultimately to our future hope.

Read: Leviticus 10:1–11; Psalm 11

The book of Leviticus is where many Bible reading plans go to die. With even the best of intentions, most of us simply struggle to know what to do with all of the laws and ceremonies. While getting a grasp on Leviticus is outside the scope of this devotional, we do want to take a moment and consider one shocking narrative in Leviticus 10. Aaron as the first high priest has just offered a sacrifice at the end of chapter 9, and God has accepted the sacrifice by sending fire to consume the offering. As the story continues, Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu place their offering before the Lord, but instead of sending fire to consume the offering God sends fire to consume them! What went wrong and what can we learn from it?

The key to their fate is found in verse one. What kind of offering did they offer? The Bible says Nadab and Abihu offered “strange fire.” After all of the instructions God had given them, they decided to just do whatever they wanted to do. They offered an unauthorized fire to the Lord, and it cost them their lives. God's holiness is so great and severe that disobedience deserves immediate death. Did you know God was this holy?

Some might object to God's response and suggest that as long as Nadab and Abihu were being sincere in their sacrifice, then God should have accepted it even if it wasn't strictly according to the rules. After all, isn't that how we often think about modern worship today? If someone is sincere, does it really matter if they are following the Word of God? Does it really matter if someone offers strange worship to the Lord if they're being sincere? God says it matters. It mattered then, and it matters today.

God is God. He is holy, and we are not. God sets the rules for how he must be worshipped. We dare not think we can do whatever we want and call it worship. We must search the Scriptures and study to understand how God demands to be worshipped. God may not consume us immediately like he did Nadab and Abihu, but God's character has not changed. His holiness has not weakened. He demands pure worship according to his Word.

28 Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe;

29 for OUR GOD IS A CONSUMING FIRE.

Hebrews 12:28–29

Monday, March 9

Read: Numbers 11–12

Complaining is a contagious plague in the people of God. Numbers 11–12 offer three scenes of increasing complaining against the plan and purposes of God. May we heed the warning of these examples and be encouraged by the mercy of our Mediator Jesus Christ.

The first scene of complaining in 11:1–3 is brief. The people probably thought they were fine because they weren't grumbling to anyone; they were simply complaining to themselves—but God heard every word. Only the prayers of Moses caused the consuming fire of God's punishment to die down. The second scene of grumbling seems familiar, for the people again complain about the food they have just as they did in Exodus 16. At that time God graciously provided manna from heaven, but the miracle of manna has become mundane. The people lie to themselves and conveniently forget that the food wasn't that great in Egypt, and it wasn't free. It came at the cost of slavery. The people complained so intensely and so constantly that Moses himself complains to the Lord. He would rather die than continue to lead the people of Israel alone. God does provide help for Moses and meat for the people, but the greedy ringleaders die from a plague.

The third episode of complaining certainly had to be the most painful for Moses, for it came from the lips of his brother and sister. As we so often see in our own lives, the complaint we voice with our lips is not always the true complaint of our heart. Miriam and Aaron speak against Moses's wife, but their real complaint is the unique relationship Moses has with God. They challenge his authority as the supreme spokesman for Yahweh. In a dramatic scene, the Lord deals with Miriam and Aaron and reaffirms the unique relationship he has with Moses. Apparently the chief complainer, Miriam is struck with leprosy. Moses the mediator cries out in prayer for his sister and the Lord heals her, but this doesn't mean she is free of the consequences of her sin. What a reminder for us that our sins often still have earthly consequences even if there will be no eternal consequences thanks to the forgiveness provided through Christ.

The Lord graciously gave Moses assistance by putting his Spirit on seventy elders of Israel. This was a special endowment of the Holy Spirit for an act of service, but Moses longed for all of God's people to have the Spirit of God. Since Pentecost in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit has come upon believers at the moment of salvation, not just for a season of service but permanently. This is due to the work of our greater Moses and greater Mediator Jesus Christ. Praise God!

The Psalms were given to us by God to shape our image of the blessed life. The good life. The prosperous life. One reality that frequently smacks us in the face, both in the Psalms and in life, is that sometimes it seems like the wicked are prospering. It seems like the ungodly are enjoying the benefits of a godly life without actually being godly. We know this can't be right. The Psalms help us clean the lens of our spiritual glasses and see the situation rightly.

Psalms 12–13 are examples of laments, passionate expressions of grief and sorrow. David voices our concerns at the beginning of both psalms when says that it seems like the faithful have completely disappeared. Where have all the godly people gone, David wonders. David himself even feels forgotten by God, asking at the beginning of Psalm 13, “How long, O Yahweh? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?” We're not given any insight into what was going on in David's life when he penned these psalms, which actually helps us apply this more directly to our lives. No matter how different we are from David or the children of Israel, we've all wondered where the godly people have gone. We've all wondered at times, “Lord, how long will I have to endure this situation?”

David not only asks the common questions, but he knows where to go to get the answers. His prayer in Psalm 12 begins, “Save, O Yahweh.” In Psalm 13 his questions are directed to God and he knows that his answers will only come from God (13:3). David's confidence in the dark situations does not come from a change in circumstances. His attitude is not, “Things will get better; therefore, I can trust the Lord.” In fact, at the end of Psalm 12, the wicked are still strutting and prowling. Vileness is still being exalted. The wicked may seem to be prospering with their flattering lips and boasting tongues, but God's words are true. He will keep his word. Therefore, trust God no matter the circumstances.

David's path from despair to dependence on God should be our path, too. It's the path of the righteous man in Psalm 1, the one who is blessed. We should take our concerns (Where are all the godly people?) and our questions (How long, O Lord?) to God. We take our requests and needs to God. The psalms model that for us. When we do that, God is steadily increasing our dependence on him, and the Spirit is busy conforming us to the image of Christ. May the Lord continue to grow our trust in him. This is the blessed life.

Wednesday, March 11

Read: Numbers 13–14

Obedience brings blessings. Disobedience brings consequences. The message is clearly portrayed as spies are sent into the promised land of Canaan. Yahweh instructs Moses to send out twelve spies into the land that God has promised to give them. The spies are successful in surveying much of the land and learning a great deal about the rich land God is giving them. Yet when the spies announce their survey to the congregation of Israel, the majority focus on the enemy and not the promise of God. It seems that the men are even exaggerating how difficult the conquest would be by invoking the imagery of the giants from the days before the flood. Caleb and Joshua stand alone among the twelve in their trust of God to deliver Canaan into Israel's hand.

The whole congregation of Israel listens to the voice of the majority spies and fear their prospects of taking the land of Canaan. They wish they had already died rather than face the possibility of actually conquering the land that God had promised them. They go so far as to murmur about the possibility of replacing Moses and undoing the exodus. Moses and Aaron fall on their faces while Joshua and Caleb attempt to rally the troops—"Yahweh is with us; do not fear them" (14:9). The congregation is threatening to stone them when God shows up to meet with his people. Just like he did after the horrendous sin of the golden calf, Moses begins to pray for the people. He pleads for Israel, but not based on their righteousness. No, he pleads based on the glory and character of God. No matter how weak the people are, never let it be said that God isn't powerful enough to bring them into the land he promised. No matter how faithless the people are, never let it be said that God isn't faithful.

God does indeed pardon Israel—he doesn't destroy them right then and there as they justly deserve. But there will be consequences. Just as Miriam could not escape the fruit of her sin, neither can the entire nation. After ten separate occasions of testing and grumbling against God, this faithless generation will not enter the promised land. They will indeed wander back towards Egypt. Their children they seemed to care so much about will be the ones to actually enter the land. The people foolishly try to undo their disobedience by attacking the enemy in their own strength, but absent the power of the Lord they are defeated. How many times must we be reminded that disobedience brings consequences? How many times must we be reminded of the mercy of God before trusting him? Let us trust him and obey.

Reading this portion of Numbers might cause us to ask, “When will the complaining and grumbling end? When will the rebellion against God end?” Of course, when we look at our own lives, are we not forced to ask the same questions?

Korah leads a rebellion of over 250 leaders of Israel against Moses. They accuse Moses of wrongly exalting himself over everyone else. They mistake their call to holy living (a constant refrain in Leviticus) as being equivalent to the holiness required of priests. Korah was a Levite with religious responsibilities, but that wasn’t enough. Korah wanted more. He wanted different plans than the ones the Lord had made for him. How often is this true of us? We grow discontent with God’s plans for us and we rebel.

Two other rebels attack Moses’s leadership with the same old “Why could we have died in Egypt?” argument, with a new twist. They actually consider Egypt to be of the same quality as the promised land—a land flowing with milk and honey. Will these rebels ever learn? Yahweh vindicates his servant Moses in a dramatic way with the earth opening up and swallowing Korah and these men and their entire households. Fire from heaven consumed the 250 leaders who joined in the rebellion. Like with Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10, God sends a fiery reminder that he is to be worshipped according to his commands.

We might expect Israel to understand and obey this warning from God, but the very next day they continue grumbling against Moses and Aaron, blaming them for the death of the rebels. Yahweh prepares to execute righteous judgment upon them all, but Aaron stands between the dead and the living with the proper offering for atonement. One scene shows the death of non-priests who make improper offerings, but this scene shows the right priest making the right offering. Aren’t we glad that the perfect high priest Jesus Christ stood between life and death on our behalf making the complete, right, and perfect atonement for our sins?

If there be any doubt about Aaron’s right to serve as high priest, the contest of the rods proves his authority. The rod of Aaron blossoms while no one else’s does. Life comes from the dead piece of wood. Aaron is the rightful high priest who points us once again to the great high priest who brought life while hanging on the dead piece of wood. Because of the priestly ministry of Jesus we can draw near to God without fear of death. Draw near today in worship.

Friday, March 13

Read: Numbers 20–21

Nearly forty years of wandering have passed. The older generation has passed away including Miriam and Aaron. Lessons have been learned the hard way. Or have they? The younger generation is complaining just like the older generation. God continues to provide just like he always has. The shock in this story comes from the actions of Moses. Striking the rock instead of speaking to the rock was not mere disobedience for Moses. It was a lack of faith. Lack of belief in God (20:12). Just as the older generation was not allowed to enter the promised land due to their lack of faith, neither will Moses enter the land due to his lack of faith.

The people begin to get a taste of victory at the beginning of chapter 21, but even victory could not temper their impatience. As they have to avoid the land of their angry cousins in Edom, Israel's detour leads to their discontentment. Like their parents before them, the younger generation complains about being set free from bondage in Egypt and whines about the quality of the free food provided for them from heaven each and every day. They haven't learned the lessons of the wilderness.

Like we've seen before, God sends judgment upon his faithless people, but this time the weapons of judgment are fiery snakes. Their poisonous bites end their complaining and the lives of many people. The people turn to Moses the mediator again, and he faithfully stands in the gap and prays for the people. Yahweh hears the prayers of Moses and gives an unusual antidote to the bite of the serpent: look upon a bronze serpent. Following the Lord's instructions, Moses makes a bronze serpent and lifts it high upon a pole. Anyone who willingly lifts their eyes to the serpent in faith will be healed. Many people are saved that day and they continue on their journey through the rest of the chapter.

Many people were saved from physical death when they looked upon the bronze serpent. Jesus taught that many will be saved from spiritual death in a similar manner. One night Jesus was explaining the necessity of being born again to Nicodemus, and Jesus gave a clarifying illustration:

¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; ¹⁵ so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

John 3:14–15

Simply lifting the serpent into the sky on a pole was not enough to save anyone. They had to look at the bronze serpent in faith to be healed. We, too, must look to Christ in saving faith. Dear reader, look to Christ today.

Can anything stop the plans of God? Can anything separate us from the love of God? God has promised to bring his chosen people into the land of his own choosing. God has been on record from the Garden of Eden about his sovereignty and strength as well as his mercy and grace. Nothing, no nothing, will stop the plans of God.

The sons of Israel are camped on the plains of Moab and are not looking for a fight. However, the king of Moab is greatly afraid of Israel because he has heard of the great victories God has provided for them. He sets forth a plan to defeat Israel, not by military might, but by cursing them. Balak the king of Moab attempts to hire Balaam the prophet to curse the people of Israel. Balaam's reputation as a prophet must warrant this confidence from the pagan king of Moab. In one of the funniest and most memorable scenes in all of Scripture, the supposedly wise prophet cannot even see an angel in front of him. But his donkey can! And his donkey can talk about it, too!

Balaam has been hired to curse Israel, but he can't do it. Even if he wants to earn his pay, he can't curse the people of God. In fact, when he wants to curse them, he can only bless them. God is sovereign over this whole situation. Throughout three blessings that were supposed to be cursings, Balaam realizes that he must only speak the words Yahweh has put in his mouth (23:12). God's blessings cannot be bought and sold.

The spotlight in these scenes is focused on Balaam and Balak. Israel is not in view. In fact, it seems likely that Israel doesn't know any of this is going on at all. Just like Job did not know what happened in the throne room of heaven between God and Satan, Israel doesn't know how their enemies are conspiring against them. Yet the sons of Israel are learning the same lesson the psalmist learned.

*⁵ You have enclosed me behind and before,
And You have put Your hand upon me.
⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
It is too high, I cannot attain to it.*

Psalm 139:5–6

They are learning the same lesson Abraham learned: God has promised this land and blessing, and nothing can thwart that. The sons of Israel are learning the lesson Joseph learned: what you meant for evil against me, God meant for good. Whenever we are reminded of the story of the talking donkey, let's remember the bigger picture: we can trust God to keep his promises!

Tuesday, March 17

Read: Psalms 14–15, 105

Life is full of contrasts. The darkness of night is the opposite of the light at high noon. Some enjoy the chill of winter while others crave the heat of summer. The crack of thunder pierces the otherwise silent sky. One scene helps us understand the other. The Psalms are full of contrasts, starting with the introduction to the entire book found in Psalms 1–2. From the beginning, the editor of the Psalms intentionally organized these hymns/poems in such a way to make a point in much the same way the gospel writers organize their narrative and that Paul organizes his arguments in his letters. In Psalms 1–2 we get contrasting images of the blessed life and the wicked life. Psalms 14–15 once again give us contrasting images.

Psalm 14 paints a vivid picture of the darkness and wickedness of humanity apart from God. Paul uses this very language in Romans 3 as he shows our need of the Savior, Jesus Christ. The fool does not have an intellectual problem, but instead a righteousness problem. He's not called a fool because of his brain power but because of his sin problem. Psalm 14:7 ends a group of laments (Psalms 10–14) and the prayer is for salvation and restoration. God's people need deliverance from wickedness and it can only come from above.

Psalm 15 paints the contrasting picture of the righteous life against the wicked life, and it stands out as distinctly as the rising sun against the night sky. David asks the essential question: who can worship God? Who can approach him? Who may fellowship with him? Psalm 24 asks these same questions and makes the answer plain: the one who has submitted to the King of Glory.

David gives the picture of a righteous man and not a fool. He is not teaching that someone can save themselves by having this kind of life. No one can perfectly live out these verses; David certainly could not! But for the one who has found the salvation of the Lord, his life will look differently. His life will look a lot less like Psalm 14 and a lot more like Psalm 15. The blessed life stands out differently from the wicked life. Belief in Christ will always lead to changed behavior empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Psalm 105 gives thanks to God for his faithfulness. From the covenant and promises to the patriarchs to the exodus and wilderness wanderings, God has been faithful every step of the way. The psalmist doesn't mention how stubborn and unbelieving Israel was at times; that will wait until Psalm 106. For now the focus is on God's faithfulness. Yesterday, today, and forever, God is faithful. Let us praise him.

Read: Deuteronomy 34; Psalm 16

The book of Deuteronomy covers roughly a one-month time span and features Moses giving his final sermons to the children of Israel before they enter the promised land without him. We come today to the end of the book of Deuteronomy and also the end of the life of Moses. What a mighty man was Moses! God used this great deliverer to bring his people out of bondage in Egypt through the wilderness and right to the edge of the promised land, but Moses will not enter. We teach our children that obedience brings blessings and disobedience brings consequences. Is this not dramatically pictured in the life of Moses? Because Moses failed to believe God (Num 20:12), he will not enter the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Are you disobeying God? A true Christian will not be cut off from the eternal rest of Christ, but we can still face earthly consequences like Moses. Let us obey God!

Moses was the greatest prophet in Israel's history, but he was not irreplaceable. Neither are you or I. Moses did his part, Joshua does his part, and you and I must do our parts as the Lord has called us. Let us serve God!

Jesus later tells us that John the Baptist was the greatest prophet in Israel's history, surpassing even Moses, but both Moses and John were ultimately pointing us to Christ. And while Moses had deeply personal, face-to-face intimacy with Yahweh, Jesus has made it possible for us to know God in an even more personal way. The greater prophet whom Moses predicted in Deuteronomy 18:15–19 has opened the new and living way to God by his own flesh (see Heb 10:19–25). We now have access to God! And one day, we too will see him face to face (Rev 22:4). Let us draw near to God!

Psalm 16 is fittingly paired with this account of Moses's death. David uses imagery from the division of the land for Israel in verses 5–6 and voices his confidence and contentment in the Lord. Much of what David says in this psalm could easily have been voiced by Moses. David has joy and confidence in verses 9–11 that the believer is secure in the promises of God, even at the moment of death. Moses has that same confidence also. Peter (Acts 2:25–28) and Paul (Acts 13:35) both find the ultimate fulfillment of this confidence in Christ. Because the Holy One Jesus Christ did not stay in the grave, we (along with Moses, David, Peter, and Paul) have that same confidence that death is not the end of the story. Thanks be to God!

Thursday, March 19

Read: Joshua 1–2

Moses, the servant of Yahweh, is dead, but there's a new Moses in town. We've met Joshua in previous passages as Moses' assistant, but he comes into focus in the book that bears his name. Just as God promised to be with Moses, he also promises to be with Joshua. Joshua and his responsibilities are often described in the same ways that Moses was described. As the book progresses we will see this new Moses used by the Lord like the first Moses; after all, both are servants of the Lord.

God tasks Joshua with the responsibility of leading God's people into the promised land. Multiple times he is told to be strong and courageous, for the work the Lord has prepared for Joshua will certainly demand strength and courage. Conquering the enemies of God and inheriting the land of God will be a great challenge, but perhaps the hardest work of all will be for the man of God to stay anchored to the Word of God. Prosperity and success for the people of God is not primarily tied to the best leadership or the greatest bravery, but faithfulness to the Book of the Law (1:8–9). In Joshua's day that would have referred only to the first five books of the Bible, but for Christians today our blessings are tied to our faithfulness to the entire Bible. Forty years earlier the people of God had not been faithful to the word of God and they wandered in the wilderness for forty years with an entire generation dying because of their failure to trust the promises of God.

This new Moses takes command by once again sending spies into the promised land. This time only two spies are sent into the land, and they go to the closest thing resembling a hotel in their day. The camera lens of Scripture zooms in on this Gentile woman Rahab. Because Rahab has shown lovingkindness to the spies of Israel, the spies of Israel will show lovingkindness to Rahab. With instructions that echo the Jewish passover in Exodus 12, Gentile Rahab is told how her life and the life of her family will be spared when Jericho is defeated. Rahab is praised in the New Testament for her faith but not for her deception (see Heb 11:31; Jas 2:25). Rahab has heard of God's mighty deliverance from Egypt just like God had promised. The Gentiles have heard of the exodus, and at least some like Rahab are trusting in the God of Israel. In the wonderful providence of God, faithful Rahab is found in the family of Jesus in Matthew 1. All who trust the promises of God by faith are welcomed into the people of God.

God has promised to be with Joshua just as he was with Moses (3:7). Today we see the Lord use Joshua to lead his people through the Jordan River just as Moses led the people through the Red Sea. As Joshua prepares the people to cross the river, he gives them the same instructions God gave through Moses in Deuteronomy 7:1–2. The mouthpiece may change, but God’s Word stands forever.

God will go with his people and they will drive out the enemies of God. Joshua 3:10 reminds us that for Israel to possess the land God has promised, those currently living in the land must be driven out. We sometimes become uncomfortable reading about the conquest of the land in Joshua. We forget that God told Abraham back in Genesis 15:16 that judgment would certainly come upon the Canaanites in God’s timing. The question is not why would God judge the sinners of the world, but why is he so patient in his judgment? We’ve already seen in the life of Rahab that anyone—Jew or Gentile—who trusts the promises of God by faith will receive the salvation God offers and provides. The Canaanites in the land are not being punished because of their ethnicity but because of their sin.

God miraculously parts the waters of the Jordan River in the same way he parted the waters of the Red Sea. The exodus ends just as it began. The priests stand securely on the dry river bed holding the ark of the covenant. How can anyone miss the picture of God himself parting the waters and standing in the gap for his people as he delivers them exactly as he promised? The Lord uses the events of this day to magnify Joshua in the sight of Israel. The new Moses will be revered or feared in the eyes of Israel just as was the first Moses. Of course Joshua, whose name means “Yahweh Saves,” is pointing forward to the greater Moses—Jesus Christ—who will save his people through the waters of death and deliver them safely into the promised rest (see Heb 4).

The mighty works of God are worthy of being told from generation to generation. God instructs the fathers of Israel to teach their children about God’s deliverance that day. The crossing of the Jordan will be memorialized with stones from the river bed. This monument will continually point present and future generations back to the salvation of God. Shouldn’t fathers in our generation tell their children about the greatness of God and the mighty works he has done? Whether you’re a father or not, commit today to telling others about the salvation of our God.

Monday, March 23

Read: Joshua 5–6

As the sons of Israel prepare to conquer the promised land, God is clearly being faithful and preparing the victory for them. The fame of God's work is spreading as people hear about Yahweh's drying up the Jordan River while the Israelites crossed into the land. Those who should have been enemies of the people of God are terrified because of the mighty works of God. What a vivid description in 5:1: "their hearts melted" and they didn't have the spirit to resist. God is preparing the enemy, but Israel is not prepared for battle.

Even as God was being faithful in bringing his people into the land, they also needed to be faithful. The faithless generation of the last forty years had failed to circumcise their sons. Moses nearly died on his way back to Egypt because of his failure to bring his son into the covenant by circumcision, and now Israel is not prepared to represent God without being fully brought into the covenant. Victory will not come without obedience. With the reproach of Egypt gone, the nation celebrates the Passover for the first time since being brought out of Egypt. God continues to provide for his people, now through the fruit of the land rather than manna from heaven. We also see another heavenly encounter showing us similarities between Moses and Joshua. The stage is now set for the conquest of Canaan.

Yahweh tells Joshua that the first city Israel will conquer is Jericho. The battle plan demonstrates that victory will come from the Lord and not from brilliant military strategy. The place of the ark of the covenant in the parade around Jericho visually portrays the presence of the Lord among his people— The battle is the Lord's. Hebrews 11:30 reminds us that the people trusted God's battle plan by faith, and the walls of Jericho indeed tumble down. Yahweh has told Israel how they should act in victory. The entire city of Jericho is set aside as an offering or a tithe to God. It is devoted to destruction as the text keeps reminding us. As we saw in yesterday's reading, this is part of God's righteous judgment upon the people of the land. To put it plainly, there are no innocent victims in this story. God's judgment also serves as a warning to Israel: disobedience will bring your own destruction.

God is always faithful to keep his promises. To Israel. To Joshua. To the Canaanites. To Rahab. To you. Only God could provide the strange victory of Jericho, and only God can provide the salvation that happened for Rahab and her family at Jericho.

Great victories are sometimes followed by great failures. The miraculous victory at Jericho is followed by tragedy among the people of Israel. The chapter begins with a summary statement in 7:1; we're told from the beginning that the sons of Israel acted unfaithfully in regard to the devoted things or the things devoted to destruction. How can they fall so far so quickly? We must read carefully and pray that we avoid the sins that ensnared them.

We're told that Joshua once again sends spies into the land, but we're not told if God actually instructed Joshua to send the spies. They return with a report that the men of Ai will be so easily defeated that Israel shouldn't waste too many men on the battle. This overconfidence is quickly overpowered and Israel is defeated. Joshua is shocked, but rightly goes to the Lord for answers. The answer: hidden sin. It quickly becomes apparent that one man's sin is affecting the entire nation. We like to think that our sins are secret and only affect ourselves. Achan's sin caused his entire nation to be defeated and his entire family to be executed along with him for his sins. Sin matters. Holiness matters. The sin that Achan thought was private was soon enough made public, and it was known by God the whole time.

God's mercy is greater than our greatest sin. Defeat does not have to be final. Now that Israel has dealt with their sins they can continue to receive the blessings of the Lord. Following God's guidance Israel is led to a great victory. The foe that had previously defeated them now falls easily into their hands. The sons of Israel had previously fallen in battle not because of their weakness, but because of their disobedience to the Lord. Now they are victorious not because of their strength but because of their obedience to the Lord. God is the one who makes all the difference.

The Lord gives the plunder to Israel but that is not the real celebration in the story. The high point of victory is found at the end of chapter 8. Failure to follow the voice of God given through Moses had led to defeat. Renewed after repentance, Joshua and Israel follow the law of Moses to the letter. Victory is found in the Word of God. This covenant renewal ceremony is in keeping with the instructions given in Deuteronomy. Notice not only are the people faithful to the text, but the text is for everyone. From the oldest to the youngest, God's Word is what each person needs. How can you better prioritize the Bible in your own life?

Wednesday, March 25

Read: Joshua 9–10

As Christians we are to walk by faith and not by sight. Sometimes we trust our own eyes and minds and not the Word of God. Today's reading reminds us of our great need to trust God's Word even when things may seem to be obvious to our own understanding.

As word spreads about Joshua's victory at Jericho and Ai, many enemy kings and armies gather to fight Israel. Gibeon takes a different approach. The men of this country make the plan to pretend that they are from a far off land, complete with worn out clothing and worn out food. They present a very detailed story to Joshua and the elders of Israel which reflects a detailed knowledge of what Yahweh did in Egypt and Canaan. After listening to the story, it seems to the leaders of Israel to require an obvious answer: make a treaty with these people from a far off land. Just look at their appearance. Just listen to their story. The answer seems obvious. But Joshua and the leaders failed to pray to Yahweh. They failed to ask God about the situation. Instead they act upon what they see and make a covenant with the men of Gibeon. In just a few days the truth comes out. Rather than executing the Gibeonites like all the other inhabitants of the land, Joshua spares them to keep his word. The people of Gibeon will be slaves of Israel going forward, but they will serve in the worship of God.

What a strange picture of God's providence. The men of Gibeon clearly acted deceptively. The men of Israel clearly failed to pray and seek God's will. Yet, the mercy of God extended even to the people of Gibeon. Knowing that they were destined for destruction, they also knew that their only hope was being identified with the people of God. God can never be tricked into showing us mercy, but we praise him for bringing us into the people of God.

God's mercy and care continues for the people of Israel. A coalition of five kings attack's Israel's new ally Gibeon. God provides victory over many enemies in the way that only God can. He sends large hailstones from heaven. He causes the sun and moon to stand still. Yahweh fought for his people, and Yahweh provided the victory. Joshua and the men of Israel fight until the enemy is completely destroyed. Being strong and courageous, they move on from there and continue to make their way southward and defeat every enemy. Trusting the Lord and walking by faith, Israel is victorious. How can you trust God's Word today instead of your own understanding?

What is a gift that you cannot enjoy? What is an inheritance that you never receive? Much of the latter half of Joshua is recording the distribution of the inheritances in the promised land. Caleb makes a rousing plea to claim the hill country land the Lord promised him decades earlier. Not weakened by age, he is ready to claim the inheritance God promised him because he knows Yahweh will be with him. God makes many promises to us in the Bible. Can we trust him with the same boldness and confidence of Caleb?

As we move to the end of the book of Joshua, we notice connections with the beginning of the book. The book began with Joshua receiving the mantle of Moses after his death, and the book is ending with Joshua preparing to pass the mantle of leadership to the next generation. Joshua believes, like Moses before him, that an important part of preparing the next generation is reminding them of where they have come from. He recounts God's promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He reviews the history of the exodus from Egypt until the present day. Think of how far they have come. The children of Israel have received much of the land God had promised their forefathers. Many of their enemies have been defeated. The promises are not entirely fulfilled and the enemies are not entirely defeated, but look how much God has done for them.

Joshua reminds the people that they must “fear Yahweh and serve him in integrity and truth” (24:14). Because God has been faithful over and over, time and time again, he is worthy to be worshipped and served. Great is his faithfulness! After reviewing God's dealings with his people, Joshua presents the straightforward choice to the next generation:

“If it is evil in your sight to serve Yahweh, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve Yahweh.”

Joshua 24:15

Over and over the people declare their loyalty to the God of their fathers. We will watch carefully as we continue reading the big story of the Bible to see how they fare in their faithfulness. If we've learned anything so far, it is how prone we are to wander from God and how great is our God's mercy. 1 Corinthians 10:11–12 teaches that these stories are examples and warnings for us. We should never think we're beyond the sins of Israel, nor are we beyond the grace of the God of Israel.

Friday, March 27

Read: Job 1, 42; Psalm 49

Today's reading gives us a sweeping overview of the dramatic saga of a man named Job. Likely the oldest book in the Bible, the story seems to have taken place in around the same time of the patriarchs. Job is identified as a man of great integrity with great wealth and a great family. His integrity is presented in a four-fold manner: he is blameless, upright, fearing God, and turning away from evil (1:1). His four-fold character is challenged by four successive catastrophes on one single day. Notice how the bad news kept coming "while this one was still speaking" (1:16–18). In one day this great man is broken. His wealth (oxen, donkeys, sheep, camels, and servants) as well as his children are all taken from him. These crises would cripple almost any man, and yet Job ends the day without sinning or offending God, but instead praising God.

The story of Job is remarkable for his ability to suffer well. And yet, the story of Job is shocking because the hand of God is behind it all! In a shocking glimpse into the throne room of heaven, Satan is given access and is even instructed to bring all this evil upon Job. We the reader know what is going on behind the scenes, but Job does not. How can he hold up under such suffering?

Much of the book is filled with cycles of conversations between Job and his friends. Some of what they say is helpful, but much of it is harmful without proper understanding. Job answers his friends and questions God, but at the end of the book we're given a thunderous response from heaven. Chapters 40–41 contain God's stunning response which silences Job. Who is like our God?

It makes the story even more remarkable when we realize that Job didn't know what we the readers know. Job did not know about the interaction between God and Satan. God did not explain Job's sufferings later in the book either. From beginning to end, Job has to trust the goodness, wisdom, power, and justice of God. In the face of suffering, even suffering that we don't understand or think we deserve, can we respond like Job does at the beginning of chapter 42? We can trust God to set the record straight, just as he does with Job and his friends. We can trust him to restore our fortunes if he chooses to do so, but even if he does not, let us bless the name of Yahweh.

Psalm 49 reads like a commentary on Job. Let the example of this man Job and the poetry of the psalm shape us into true worshippers who trust God even in the midst of excruciatingly dark circumstances.

If the book of Joshua provided a picture of mostly success, the book of Judges provides a picture of Israel's overwhelming failures. The nation's downward spiral of disobedience grows more shocking with each chapter. As we begin reading through the book of Judges, it is helpful for us to hear how it ends:

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

There is no godly leadership in the land. The faithful generations did not pass on the knowledge and worship of God to the next generation (2:10) and this results in national catastrophe. That loud clanging gong at the end of the book is already beginning to ring at the beginning of the book. Chapters 1 and 2 serve as prelude to the actual account of the judges beginning in 3:7. Joshua has died but no new leader is announced. Things seem to be going well with the tribe of Judah, but a sour note rings in 1:19: “they could not dispossess the inhabitants of the valley.” Conquest is incomplete. That sour note is sadly repeated throughout the rest of chapter one as we're told of tribe after tribe who did not dispossess the inhabitants of the land. The angel of Yahweh makes clear in 2:1–5 that because of Israel's disobedience in obeying God's instructions in the land, they will not be able to drive out all of their enemies. Disobedience brings consequences.

The cycle in 2:11–2:23 will play out time and again in Judges. The people of God will not worship God, but instead worship false gods. God will allow their enemies to defeat them because of their sin. The people will cry out to God and he will answer, because he is faithful (unlike fickle sinners). God will graciously raise up a judge to deliver his people from their enemies, but victory will not last long. They will quickly fall into idolatry again, with each successive generation acting “more corruptly than their fathers” (2:19). God is testing his people, to see if they will obey (3:4).

The bulk of the book of Judges from 3:17–16:31 tells the stories of twelve judges. Some judges receive greater attention than others, and the judges themselves are not always righteous or even obedient to the will of God. While the Spirit of Yahweh is upon Othniel for special service (3:10), we'll see a downward trajectory even with the judges themselves. May the time spent in the dark book of Judges cause us to reject the temptation towards faithless sin and cling tightly to our faithful Savior.

Tuesday, March 31

Read: Judges 4–5

The cycle of sin continues. “Then the sons of Israel again did what was evil in the eyes of Yahweh” (4:1). The people are defeated. They cry out to God for help. This is the part where we expect to see the male judge arrive; but we’re introduced to a woman instead. Deborah the prophetess is leading Israel at the time, sort of. She is dispensing wisdom and justice in some sense, but she doesn’t actually lead the army. She challenges a man named Barak to lead the army (4:6–7) not because she thinks it’s a good idea, but because Yahweh has commanded him to lead. That should be all the encouragement or motivation that Barak needs, but he insists Deborah go with him. It has become necessary for her to lead in Israel because men like Barak have failed to lead. Deborah is not an example of female empowerment but of failed male leadership. Deborah’s strength is that she continues to remind Barak of what Yahweh has said. It is God who has commanded Barak to lead the men into battle, and it is God who will be with him during the battle.

After God parted the Red Sea and defeated the enemies of Israel, Miriam led the people of God in song. God has once again defeated his enemies, and the proper response again is song. Chapter 4 reads like a textbook account of a battle whereas Chapter 5 reads like an eyewitness account of the battle. Both perspectives remind us of the idea that God is the true hero of the battle. Barak did not want to enter the battle but he did with Deborah’s encouragement and prodding. In the gracious providence of God, it is Barak who is mentioned in Hebrews 11 along with other examples of faith. What a reminder that God isn’t looking for perfect faith but obedient faith. But the text is clear that Barak did not win the battle. It is Yahweh who routed Sisera in battle (4:15). It is God who subdued the king of Canaan (4:24).

What about the nail-driving Jael? How should we think of her? Deborah makes clear in her hymn that Jael is blessed for her bravery in *crushing* the head of Sisera. Ever since Genesis 3 we’ve been looking for the seed of the woman who will crush the head of the serpent. We don’t see the serpent-crusher yet in Judges. But the faithfulness of Jael in crushing the seed of the serpent surely causes us to long for the true Serpent-Crusher who will one day come. Because Christ has come and subdued the enemy, we can be faithful rather than fearful in serving him.

Things aren't going as planned. The people of God are not flourishing but floundering. They are living in caves and hideouts, and they are not enjoying the fruit of the land. God promised Abraham that his offspring would be so many that they would not be able to be counted, but it is the offspring of Midian that are so many that they cannot be counted. They are like the locusts of Egypt spread throughout the land and oppressing the people of God. So they cry out to God, as usual, and he reminds them of his power and deliverance, as usual. But this time God's words ring out in judgment at the end of verse 10, "You have not obeyed my voice." Will God deliver Israel again or has God's mercy run out?

We are now introduced to this man Gideon, whom we must assume will be the next deliverer of Israel. But where do we meet him? Hiding down in a winepress attempting to thresh wheat. To thresh wheat you need to be on a high place where the wind will blow freely, but this also exposes you for all to see. Gideon must be greatly afraid to work in such a counterproductive manner. Some mighty man of valor he is. Like Moses before him, Gideon responds to God's call on his life with excuses. Surely there must be someone stronger than Gideon to lead the people of God. Isn't that just like God to choose the weak things of the world to shame the wise? The Lord uses Gideon to show the complete weakness and inability of the false god Baal, but God also shows us in the text how weak and wavering Gideon himself can be.

How often do we build our theology from our experiences? Our feelings and emotions typically reign supreme over the truth of what we know from the Bible. We see this in the life of Gideon. He is told plainly by the angel of the Lord that God is with him, and yet because of his circumstances, Gideon doubts the truth of God's word. He builds his theology from his experience. He obeys God in tearing down the town's idolatrous altar, but he tears it down at night for fear of his own family and the townsmen. Gideon is a mixture of fear and faith. We see this clearly in his infamous fleece. God has already told Gideon what to do; no fleece or any other sort of test is needed. God is patient with Gideon, but we should not emulate Gideon and his feeble-faith fleece. We should take God at his word and obey in faith.

Thursday, April 2

Read: Judges 7–8

God is the hero of the Bible. Far too often when we read the Bible, we're looking for the human hero or villain in each little story and we miss the big point. It's at this point in Judges that we're tempted to look at Gideon as the hero. We've already seen his feeble faith in chapter 7, but now he leads Israel to a mighty victory in chapter 8. Isn't he the hero? Or is he simply the human instrument of our all-powerful God?

God brings victory in the way that only he can. He reduces Gideon's army in a way that has no human explanation. The lapping water test and the final number of 300 soldiers are not military insights we should be applying today; they are simply the methods of our sovereign God. In a battle that seems as strange as the battle at Jericho, God brings the victory for Gideon in chapter 7. Gideon continues fighting in another battle in chapter 8, but this time God does not seem to be involved. He's not mentioned in the text, and Gideon is not described in heroic or godly ways. Gideon is now chasing the enemy whereas God had previously delivered the enemy into his hands. He seems to be petty and is feuding on a personal level. Worse still, Gideon leads the nation into false worship. He gathers the gold of the people and crafts an idol! This mighty man of valor who started out like a new Moses now sounds a lot like Aaron with the golden calf. How the mighty have fallen. This is yet another reminder that God's goodness and faithfulness to his people is not due to human goodness but all due to God's grace.

The author of Hebrews includes Gideon in the hall of faith in Hebrews 11. Gideon is not the hero of the story, but neither should we disregard him altogether. God used Gideon to bring rest to the land for forty years, and he is the last judge of whom that will be said. Even though the people tried to make Gideon the leader of a family dynasty, he told them that Yahweh is their ruler (8:23). While Gideon is sinful (see the multiple wives and concubine), God used him to do good to and for Israel. The final assessment of Gideon's life in 8:33–36 indicates that Israel was kept from greater sin and idolatry because of the leadership of Gideon. What a complicated legacy. May we be faithful like Gideon was in his best moments, and we may avoid the stumbles he made in his worst. Above all, may we cling to the One who is able to keep us from stumbling (Jude 24).

My father is king. That's what Abimelech means. His father Gideon had sworn he would not be king and he would not begin a family dynasty in Israel, but he named his son "my father is king." While Gideon had some glory days of faithfulness in service to Israel mixed with some dark days of sin, his son Abimelech has no such glory and far deeper darkness.

How did Abimelech become king? By killing his brothers, all seventy of them. He eliminated all potential challenges to the throne. Wait, he missed one! Gideon's youngest son Jotham hides and survives his brother's murderous rampage. Jotham ascends Mount Gerizim and tells a parable to the leaders of Shechem, comparing the new "king of the forest" to the lowly bramble bush. Jotham ultimately pronounces curses on them because they have not acted in good faith in calling brother Abimelech to be king. When Israel entered the promised land, they joyfully pronounced the blessings of the covenant of God from Mount Gerizim just as Moses commanded. Now the blessed mountain has become the cursed mountain because of the lack of truth and integrity from the people of Shechem. What a prologue to Abimelech's reign.

We're told that "my father is king" ruled for three years. It is interesting to note that the word used in 9:22 is not the same word Gideon used when he declared God as ruler in 8:22–23. Abimelech may be governing but he is not king. The people made him king, but he is a distant second to God as true king. In God's providence, the same people who made Abimelech king turned on him and now oppose him as king. We're given details of the back and forth battles between the king and the people of Shechem, and Jotham's parable proves true. Because Abimelech was certainly the wrong choice as ruler, "the bramble" shoots out fire and destroys the stronghold in 9:49, 52. Jotham also predicted that Abimelech would be destroyed, and he is destroyed in a most unusual way. His fear of being known as the man who was killed by a woman is exactly how we remember Abimelech all of these thousands of years later. What a conclusion to Abimelech's "reign."

This dark story of Abimelech leaves the reader to respond in the same way the entire book of Judges leaves us to respond: looking for someone better! This would be king is no king at all. He certainly was not a godly leader. How can we read of Abimelech and not pause to thank God for the true king who has come? O worship the King!