

BIBLE IN A YEAR

**THE READING PLAN IS TAKEN FROM
“READING GOD’S STORY: ONE-YEAR CHRONOLOGICAL PLAN” BY YOU VERSION**

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English Standard Version**

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STUDY AND COMMENTARY

BY

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FROM “THE INTERSECTION”©

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January 1, 2018
IN THE BEGINNING

Readings for the Day: Genesis 1 & 2

Nothing. Emptiness. Void. Before time. Before space. Before matter. There was only God. Already Trinity. Already Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Existing from eternity in Three Persons. Complete. Full. Rich. God needed nothing. God lacked nothing. God was eternally satisfied in Himself. Decision. Resolve. Commitment. God choosing to create. God choosing to bring forth life and light and beauty and order. God choosing to love and be loved.

Let there be Light!
Let there be Heaven!
Let there be Earth and Seas!
Let there be plants, trees, and flowers!
Let there stars and sun and moon!
Let there be fish and birds!
Let there be beasts on the earth!

Something. Time and space and matter now come into being. A universe filled with stars and planets and galaxies bursts into being. The first sunrise. The first sunset. Tides begin. The first buds appear on the earth. The first babies are born on the earth and in the sea. And through it all, there is God. Still lacking nothing. Still needing nothing. Still eternally satisfied but deeply in love with all He creates.

Out of love, God provides a guardian. Someone to take care of all He has made. A creature made in His own image. Male and female, they too are to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. They are given a sacred charge. To subdue the earth. To hold dominion over creation. God entrusting to them a precious gift. They are to steward life. To make sure it flourishes and God's good purposes come to pass. They are to nurture and care for it. They are to work and keep it. They are to guard and protect it.

So much gets lost in the debates over whether creation happened in six literal 24-hour days. Or whether the plural first person ("Let us make...") is an early reference to the Trinity or simply the use of the royal "we" that was common in Ancient Near East literature. Or parsing the differences between the two creation accounts, one poetry (Gen. 1) and one prose (Gen. 2), that we lose sight of the point of the text.

God creates something out of nothing. Brings order to chaos. Light to darkness. Fills the void. And then sets humanity up as His vice-regents on the earth. They are given the authority to rule over all He has made in His name. They are to walk in obedience with Him and thereby enjoy a unique relationship with their Creator. They are to work. They are to be fruitful. They are to multiply and fill the earth with the image and glory of God. This is their purpose. This is the role God designed them to play.

Think about all God has entrusted into your hands today. Think about all the responsibilities God has given you. Family. Friends. Work. Wealth. Talent. Ability. How are you stewarding these gifts for His glory? How are you living out your God-given purpose to nurture life today in all you say, think, and do? How will you contribute to the flourishing of those around you?

January 2, 2018
IN THE BEGINNING...JESUS

Readings for the day: John 1:1-3, Psalm 8, Psalm 104

I am such a linear creature. As such, I too often fall into the trap of thinking there was a time when Jesus was not. Intellectually I know it's not true, of course. I can recite the creeds from memory. But in my heart...well, that's been a different story.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." I had read these words a hundred times but had never fully grasped their meaning. I still remember where I was sitting in Stuart Hall in the second row of my theology class with Dr. Bruce McCormack. He was lecturing on the Doctrine of Election and for the first time I felt like I really heard what the Apostle John was saying. (Reminded me of the scene from *White Men Can't Jump* where Wesley Snipes tells Woody Harrelson, "No, no, no there's a difference between hearing and listening...You see, white people, y'all can't hear Jimi. Y'all listen.") I felt like I had been listening to John for years but hadn't really been hearing the depth of what he was trying to convey.

Before time. Before space. Before matter. Before the universe and all that is in it (including us) existed. God made a decision. He decided to be Jesus. To be God for us (though we didn't yet exist). To be God with us (though none of us were around). To define Himself as Savior from eternity (though humanity had not yet sinned).

In the beginning...don't think of it so much in terms of time but in terms of a time before time.

Was the Word...Jesus. Alpha and Omega. First and Last. Faithful and True. Comforter and Counselor. Friend of Sinners. Prince of Peace. Suffering Servant. Atoning Sacrifice. Savior and Lord. This is who Jesus is and always has been even from eternity.

And the Word was with God...Jesus has always been at His Father's side. Creating. Shaping. Forming. Dreaming. Planning. Changing. Transforming. Perfecting. In perfect concert with the Father and the Spirit.

And the Word was God...Not only has Jesus always been with the Father, He and the Father are One. Just as He and the Spirit are One. All three Persons acting in one accord. All three Person existing as One God.

I am such a linear creature. As such, I too often fall into the trap of thinking there was a time when Jesus was not. Intellectually I know it's not true, of course. I can recite the creeds from memory. But in my heart...well, that's been a different story. I've had a hard time grasping the full implications of what it means that Jesus has loved me from before the foundations of the world. So when I first "heard" the Apostle John that day in class, it felt almost like a second conversion. I was overwhelmed at the thought that I've had an advocate before the Father, a faithful high priest in the heavenly kingdom, from eternity. There has never been a time in my life when God was not for me. When God was not with me. When God did not love me because there has never been a time when Jesus – the perfect revelation of God's love and grace – was not! He has always been there and will always be there! And He remains the same yesterday, today, and forever!

This is why the Psalmist breaks out in praise! This is why God's people from Abraham on forward have praised and worshiped God with all their hearts, souls, minds, and strength! When the enormity of this eternal truth comes crashing in on you, it changes you. It humbles you. And it reorients your entire life! Your attitudes. Your emotions. Your thoughts. Your work. Your relationships. Your play. Everything changes when you realize there is no part of your life where Jesus – the very Word of God - is not at work to will according to His good pleasure!

What would it mean for you to live your life from the perspective of praise? To live into the truth that God is really, truly for you and not against you? How would it change your prayer life to know that when you pray, you are not "overcoming God's reluctance but laying hold of God's willingness" as Martin Luther learned? Friends, knowing you have access to the vast, immeasurable treasures of grace through Christ can you give you strength TODAY to face any challenge, endure any trial, face any pain!

January 3, 2018
ANATOMY OF SIN

Readings for the day: Genesis 3, 4, 5

Who knows how long Adam and Eve lived and worked in the glory of Eden. What we do know is that there came a day when paradise wasn't enough. Tempted by Satan, they disobeyed God. They fell into sin. And because of their exalted position – literally God's vice-regents on earth – all of creation suffered the consequences of their tragic choice.

Why is the world so full of violence? Why is the world so full of suffering and pain? Why do human beings seem so bent on hurting themselves and one another? Why is there so much hate? So much spite? So much anger? Why are we so selfish? Greedy? Full of pride? Why are we so prone to attack? To think the worst of one another? To focus more on what divides rather than what unites? Why is it so hard for us to love God with all our hearts? Or to love our neighbor as ourselves? Sure, we might be able to do it in spots. Brief moments of time, often brought on by crisis, where the clouds seem to lift and the glory of God comes shining through. But then the fog settles back in, we go back to our routines, and the lessons from those moments are lost.

God did not intend the world to be this way. As we discovered in the first two chapters of Genesis, God created everything to be good. Perfect. Beautiful. And who knows how long the paradise lasted? Who knows how long Adam and Eve lived and worked in the glory of Eden? What we do know is that there came a day when paradise wasn't enough. Tempted by Satan, they disobeyed God. They fell into sin. And because of their exalted position – literally God's vice-regents on earth – all of creation suffered the consequences of their tragic choice. To whom much is given, much is expected and Adam was given dominion over all God had made. So now creation groans awaiting the day when God will set all things right and make all things new.

When we read Genesis 3-5, we see the anatomy of sin played out over and over again. It always takes the same course. It begins with disbelief. Distrust of who God is and what God has said. "Did God really say..." Satan's first tactic is to always get us to disbelieve God. "Surely you won't die?" Once Eve starts to doubt, Satan launches his second attack. Desire. "When you eat of it...you will be like God..." And Eve begins now to look at the fruit differently. Rather than see it as God sees it, she begins to desire it. She starts to rationalize. "It is good for food." "It is a delight to the eyes." "It will make me wise." Desire unchecked leads to action and so Eve plucks a fruit from the tree and eats. She gives some to Adam - "who was with her" so you can't pin this all on Eve – and he ate as well. And then comes Satan's final attack. After doubt has given birth to desire. And desire left unchecked has led to sin. The result is always shame. Adam and Eve suddenly feel exposed. Naked. Guilty. So they sow fig leaves together to hide from each other and God.

We see the same story played out with Cain. His offering isn't accepted and he grows angry. He refuses to believe God when He gives him a second chance, "If you do well, will you not be accepted?" Instead he lets his anger grow to the point where he murders his own brother in cold blood. Then comes the shame. "My punishment is greater than I can bear..." And the implication in the second half of chapter four and the generations listed in chapter five is that this same pattern is being repeated. How do we know? By the refrain, "And he died..." Death, according to God, is the righteous punishment for sin. And all have sinned. All have fallen short of God's glory. Therefore all die.

Is there any hope at this point in the story? Genesis 5:24. "Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him." Even here, in the opening chapters of Genesis, there is this sense that death cannot hold those who walk with God. Death has no power over those who walk with God. And we see this preeminently in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Here was a Man who walked with God! Here was a Man whom Death could not

overcome! Here was a Man who knew no Sin yet who became Sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God!

So...are you walking with God? Do you take every thought, every feeling, every emotion, every action captive to Christ? Do you trust God's promises? Do you believe God is who He says He is? Have you placed your faith in the Son of God and do you walk in faith every moment of every day? Or do you allow desire to run unchecked? Do you allow your doubts and fears and shame to overwhelm? Hear the good news of the gospel from Romans 8:1-2, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death." Believe this! And live today in God's grace, love and power!

January 4, 2018
HEART OF DARKNESS

Readings for the day: Genesis 6, 7

The corruption was so vast and so evil that God actually regrets that he made man in the first place and is deeply grieved to see what has become of the special creature He made in His own image. And because the evil is so radical and so pervasive, God performs an equally radical and pervasive form of surgery.

“What about the half-demon dudes?” I was in a small group men’s Bible study in college when I first heard about the Nephilim. I had never read Genesis 6 before and was completely confused. Who were the sons of God? Who were the daughters of men? Were we simply talking about the contrast between the descendants of Seth and the descendants of Cain? Is this the first injunction against intermarriage between the godly and ungodly that we see so often repeated in the rest of the Old Testament? Or is there something more going on? Why were their offspring so special? Mighty men of old? Men of renown? The word “Nephilim” literally means “giants” so these folks were potentially a different breed than the rest of humanity. Could this perhaps be the origin of the myths and legends we see in so many cultures of half-human, half-divine heroes running around? An embellishment on stories passed down through the generations from the pre-Flood time period?

There are good, biblical reasons to believe so. First of all, the only other time the phrase “sons of God” (bene elohim) is used in the Old Testament is in Job 1:6, 2:1, and 38:7. In each case, it clearly refers to angels. Second, there are three New Testament passages that seem to suggest the same...1 Peter 3:18-22, 2 Peter 2:4-5, and Jude 6-7. For example, 1 Peter 3:18-22 says, “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water.”

What did Christ proclaim to the spirits in prison? His victory over sin and death. His victory over hell and evil. His victory over Satan and all his minions. Remember, Satan was present in the Garden when he hears God lay down not only the curse on humanity but also the first prophecy of a Messiah. Genesis 3:15, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” As a result, one can easily imagine Satan setting about to do all he can to prevent the prophecy from coming to pass. He would make it his aim to destroy the offspring of Eve. He gets to Cain as we saw in Genesis four, making him a murderer and destroying Abel before he can bear any children. But God’s plan will not be stopped so easily. He gives Adam and Eve a third son named Seth through whom the godly line will continue. Satan, seeking to pervert this line, sends his fallen angels (sons of God) to seduce the daughters of men and therefore bring corruption on the entire human race even at this nascent stage of its existence. The corruption was so vast and so evil that God actually regrets that he made man in the first place and is deeply grieved to see what has become of the special creature He made in His own image. And because the evil is so radical and pervasive, God performs an equally radical and pervasive form of surgery. Not because He’s angry or capricious or hateful but because He knows He must take this step to save the human race. Like a doctor treating a patient with stage four metastatic cancer, God gives the world “chemotherapy” in the form of a great Flood.

Whether the Flood was truly world-wide or more localized is not the point as humanity at this point in time would have only occupied a very small portion of the earth. As such, their view of the “world” would have been very limited. What we do know is that Noah, by faith, believed God and built an ark. I love how Hebrews 11:7 describes it, “By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.” So God cleanses the earth of its evil and corruption. With deep grief in His

heart, He “uncreates” all He has made even as He’s trying preserve it. It must have broken His heart to see everything die and yet die it must in order to give the world a second chance.

Anyone who has gone through cancer can identify on some level with this story. Sometimes the disease we face is so evil, we must undergo therapy that actually attacks our bodies with the hope that it will kill the corruption within us before it takes our lives. The reality is we all were born in sin. We all were born with a fallen nature. And this nature corrupts everything we do, every thought we have, every feeling or emotion we experience. There is not one part of our lives that is not touched by this disease. Thankfully, God is still performing “radical surgery!” Through the Holy Spirit, God “floods” our hearts with His grace, love, and power delivering us. Rescuing us. Lifting us above the death and destruction just as He once lifted up Noah and his family above the flood.

How has God saved you? Can you think of a time in your life when God reached down and delivered you? Where do you need saving today? God is able! Call on Him! As the floodwaters rise, threatening to overwhelm, know that God is still in the “ark-building” business! In Christ, He will deliver you!

January 5, 2018
STARTING OVER

Readings for the day: Genesis 8, 9, Psalm 12

And so God begins the daunting task of starting over. The hard work of rebuilding life. Piecing back together a broken world.

How many of us have experienced the death of someone we love? Or the end of a relationship that once held such promise? How many of us have felt the grief and pain that accompanies such a loss? And then, of course, comes the daunting task of starting over. The hard work of rebuilding a life. Piecing back together a broken heart.

The most stunning part of the Noahic story is the insight the Holy Spirit gives us into the very heart of God. In Genesis 6-8, we come face to face with the heartbreak of God. The pain of God. The grief of God. Close readings of these chapters reveal not an angry tyrant who lashes out at His creation but a grieving parent whose heart breaks at the hostility He encounters from the creature He so dearly loves. The Hebrew word for "grieve" in Gen. 6:6 is the exact same word used for the "pain" the woman will suffer as a result of the curse of sin in Gen. 3:16. Eve is clearly not the only one who will experience an intensification of the pains of labor and bear her children in anguish! In choosing to be Immanuel – God with us - God freely enters into the pain of our existence and bears it Himself. The central message of this story is that the heart of humanity which is "only evil continually" (6:5) has not been changed by the devastating judgment of the flood. No, the intentions of the human heart remain forever bent towards evil and hostile towards God. (8:21) So God has a decision to make. Of course, it's one He's already made from eternity. "Never again will I curse the ground...Never again will I destroy all living creatures...As long as the earth endures, seed time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease." In other words, God will be faithful!

And so God begins the daunting task of starting over. The hard work of rebuilding life. Piecing back together a broken world. He calls Noah and his family forward. He renews with them the "Great Commission" He once gave Adam and Eve in the Garden. Be fruitful. Multiply. Fill the earth. Have dominion over all I have made. This is territory we've already trod. The difference now is the commission is accompanied by a promise. A rainbow set in the clouds so that every time it rains (one can only imagine the PTSD this family experienced every time they saw the clouds come over and the rain begin to fall), Noah and his family will remember they don't have anything to fear. "The water will never again become a flood to destroy all flesh." No matter what happens from this point forward. No matter how dark humanity's sin may get. God will be faithful. He will keep His promise.

And if you read even more carefully, you will note God's commitment to His promise is immediately put to the test. Noah begins to till the soil. He plants a vineyard and gets drunk off his own harvest. One of his sons, Ham, enters his father's tent and "sees his father naked." Many scholars have pointed out the probability of Ham's sin going far beyond voyeurism. Most likely, "seeing his father's nakedness" is Hebrew idiom for rape which in the Ancient Near East was an all too common way for younger men to establish their superiority over older men, even among family members. Ham is attempting here to take over the family clan by violently shaming his own father which is why when Noah wakes and learns "what his youngest son had done to him", he curses Ham's son Canaan by reducing him the status of a slave. That may sound harsh to our 21st century ears but often our sin has generational consequences and one has only to look at who the Canaanites become to see how the sins of Ham get passed down. And yet, even this horrific act does not annul the promise of God! He still remains faithful and true to His Word!

Do you realize this same promise is true for your life? No matter what you do or where you go or where you've been or what you've experienced, God is faithful! He will never leave you or forsake you! He will never abandon you to your fate! As long as you draw breath, He remains at work healing your wounds. Binding up your broken heart. Comforting you when you mourn. Giving you peace amidst the storm. Trust Him today with all of your trials! All of your struggles! All of your suffering! All of your pain!

January 6, 2018
A BRAVE NEW WORLD

Readings for the day: Genesis 10, 11

Humanity has such a “fortress” mentality. One of our deepest needs is to feel safe.

A new beginning has been made. God has started over with Noah and his family. The salvation plan of God is renewed through them and they are commissioned to fulfill the calling once given to Adam and Eve. Be fruitful. Multiply. Fill the earth. Have dominion. The purpose of the genealogy in chapter 10 is to show us how this took place. The children of Noah begat their own children. And their children begat their own children. Names we probably recognize begin to appear. Egypt. Assyria. Nineveh. The Canaanite tribes who will figure so prominently a little later on in the Old Testament. One gets the sense that the descendants of Noah are being fruitful. They are multiplying. However, there is a problem. They aren’t filling the earth.

Put yourself in their sandals for a bit. You’re fathers and grandfathers just walked out of the ark into a brave new world. A world that had drastically changed. Nothing is familiar. Nothing feels safe. You find yourself jumping every time it rains. Plants and trees are beginning to grow again. The moldy, mildewy smell that often hangs around forever after a flood is finally gone. (I experienced this personally after Hurricane Katrina when we did relief work in Mississippi.) The animals are multiplying and scattering. The entire earth is in recovery mode. You know God’s plan for your life. He has commissioned you to go out into all the earth. To scatter abroad and help in this great recovery effort. To bring about the flourishing of all of creation. That’s His will. But you are afraid. Afraid of what you might find. Afraid of the unknown. Afraid of losing touch with your family, your clan, your tribe. So what do you do? You stick together. You protect each other. You find safety in your own strength.

Humanity has such a “fortress” mentality. One of our deepest needs is to feel safe. The Bible clearly teaches in Genesis 11 that this has always been the case. Rather than scattering according to God’s command, the people migrate from place to place together. Eventually they reach the plain of Shinar (think Babylonia or modern-day Iraq) where they decide to build a city and a tower so high it can be seen for miles. This will keep them from being dispersed. No matter where they go, they can keep the tower in sight and it will guide them back home. But God’s plan will not be so easily thwarted. He comes down to look in on what they are doing. He sees their resistance to scatter. He knows their fears and insecurities. He understands that if He doesn’t intervene, they will not go out on their own and creation will suffer as a result. So He confuses their languages and drives them all over the earth. Forcing them out of their comfort zone. Forcing them out of their safety net. Forcing them to abandon their “fortress” and engage the world in the way God intends. (By the way, we will see something similar take place with the early church in Acts where God uses persecution to scatter them around the Roman Empire.)

As they scatter, there is one particular family. One particular clan. One particular tribe that the Spirit zooms in on. The line of Shem. This is the line of salvation. Though all of humanity is given the same call to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and have dominion; this particular part of humanity will be given an even greater task. A higher calling. So again, the names pass before us until they get to Terah. And Terah has three sons. And these three sons will all play a significant role in God’s plan moving forward. But even here there is danger. One of the boys will die young. Abram’s wife is barren. They too have had to leave their home. Terah will lose his own life along the way. Death and brokenness and sin continue to pose threats to the salvation plan of God.

Be fruitful. Multiply. Fill the earth. Have dominion. The creation mandate remains in place for your life and mine. How’s it going? When you consider your work, your family, your plans for the future...do they align with God’s plan to use you for His glory? To bring about the flourishing of those you love? Your friends and neighbors and co-workers? Do you take risks to reach out or do you play it safe? Where is God calling you to leave your comfort zone today?

January 8, 2018
GOD'S CHOSEN INSTRUMENT

Readings for the day: Genesis 12 and 13

Welcome to week 2! This week begins with the call to Abram. A seminal event in salvation history. God choosing one man from one family, one clan, one tribe descended from Noah's oldest son Shem to become the father of a great nation. God's nation. The nation of Israel.

And what is God's call to Abram? Essentially the same call He gave to Adam and Eve. The same call He gave to Noah and his family. Be fruitful. Multiply. Fill the earth. Have dominion. Only this time, God isn't going to leave it up to Abram. Because human beings remain so prone to evil, God steps in...

I will make of you a great nation! (Be fruitful)

In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed! (Multiply)

Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you! (Fill the earth)

I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing! (Have dominion)

All that sounds well and good except Abram's got issues! He is 75 years old which is not the best time in life to be starting over. His wife Sarai is barren and their childlessness is a source of incredible shame. He has to leave yet another city where he was established to go to an unknown place. When he finally arrives in the Promised Land, there is a famine. This drives him to Egypt where he fears his life will be in danger. He lies about his relationship with Sarai which puts God's promise at risk. He returns from Egypt only to experience so much conflict with his nephew, they have to separate. Life is certainly not easy for Abram!

And yet the call of God remains. After everything is said and done and Abram's finally found a good spot to settle down, God speaks to him again...

Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. (Fill the earth)

I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. (Be fruitful. Multiply)

Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you. (Have dominion)

God's promise will be fulfilled. Not because Abram is faithful. Not because Abram is righteous. Not because Abram found favor with God. But because God is all these things and more! God will bring about His will on the earth! God will deliver on His promises! God will fulfill His purposes! And it doesn't really matter what humanity does or doesn't do. God will bring His plan to pass!

Does this give you hope today? To know He is at work in your life right now making you fruitful? Multiplying you in ways you cannot begin to imagine? Sending you out to fill the earth with His image and glory? Giving you dominion over all He has made? Does it take the pressure off a bit? Knowing that God will accomplish this in your life? I hope so! And like Abram, it doesn't matter what obstacles stand in your way! God is faithful! In Christ, His promises are sure! In Christ, His promises will come to pass! In Christ, He will fulfill His plan and purpose for our lives!

January 9, 2018
FIRST FAMILY

Readings for the day: Genesis 14, 15, 16

Even crazier than taking 318 men and defeating four kings as they returned victorious from battle is old, childless Abram looking up into the night sky and believing God's promise. That's why God declares him righteous.

January 10, 2018
WALK BY FAITH

Readings for the day: Genesis 17, 18, 19

All one has to do is look at the life of Abraham...It's not a perfect life. It's not a safe life. It's not an easy life. Abraham is given far more than he can ever handle. He is pushed further than he himself would ever choose to go. God never stops demanding, never stops commanding. And he just keeps walking by faith.

January 11, 2018
FEAR OF THE LORD

Readings for the day: Genesis 20, 21, 22, 23

One of the most famous stories in all of Scripture is the sacrifice of Isaac. It has been the subject of some of the most incredible artwork throughout the centuries. It has influenced the plot lines of famous works of literature. There is just something deeply compelling about this story for believers and non-believers alike. An old man taking his son. His only son. The son whom he loves and offering him as a sacrifice.

January 12, 2018
LET GOD BE GOD

Readings for the day: Genesis 24, 25, 26

These are all honest, real questions that should be raised by any reflective, thoughtful, engaged readers of the Bible. And they press us to the primary question which will undergird our entire journey this year...Will we let God be God? Can we agree that His ways are higher than our ways and His thoughts higher than our thoughts? Can we agree that in standing outside of time and space, He has a perspective we can never grasp? Can we agree that God is infinite in wisdom and understanding? Omniscient and omnipotent? Again, will we let God be God?

January 13, 2018
INTER-GENERATIONAL FAITH

Readings for the day: Genesis 27, 28, 29

The grace of God is radical, friends. The love of God is unconditional. The mercy of God is unfathomable. It is not rational. It is not reasonable. It is not explainable. It simply is true. And we either believe it or we don't.

January 15, 2018
WRESTLING WITH GOD

Readings for the day: Genesis 30, 31, 32, 33

That's when God shows up and He begins to go to work on Jacob. Wrestling with him. Struggling with him. Forcing Jacob to come to grips with himself on a lot of levels. Forcing Jacob to face his past, his sin, his fear, his brokenness. But Jacob is a strong and stubborn man. He fights God all night long.

January 16, 2018
BUT FOR THE GRACE OF GOD

Readings for the day: Genesis 34, 35, 36, 37

No matter what Abraham's descendants may do. God would remain faithful. And with each successive generation, we see God renew that promise.

January 17, 2018
JUDAH AND TAMAR

Readings for the day: Genesis 38, 39, 40

Today's readings include all kinds of material that can often seem confusing to our 21st century ears so we'll save Joseph's story for tomorrow.

The story of Judah and Tamar seemingly comes out of nowhere. It's almost an interruption in the much larger story of Joseph. And yet, it is critical for our understanding of the saving purposes of God. In the first chapter of Matthew's Gospel, Judah and Tamar are both mentioned and Matthew knows his audience will immediately call to mind this story from Genesis. Women, by the way, are almost never included in any genealogy but Matthew makes sure we know the names of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. That's prostitute, prostitute, Moabite, and adulteress for those scoring at home. The point Matthew is making is that even the family tree of Jesus is not free from scandal and sin!

All kinds of important questions are raised by this text. Why does God kill Er and Onan for seemingly minor offenses? Why is Judah engaging the services of cult prostitutes? Is this his regular practice after his wife dies? And why is the penalty for adultery so harsh for Tamar? Burning at the stake? What is God up to here?

After the incident with Joseph where Judah sells his own brother into slavery, he leaves his family. Perhaps out of guilt over what he has done. Perhaps just to get away from the family dysfunction. We aren't given a reason. He marries outside his clan and his wife bears him three sons. Er, his oldest, is so wicked that the Lord puts him to death. Again, no reason is given. It is simply something we have to accept. In the ancient near east, brothers were required to take their widowed sister-in-laws into their home with the hope they could get them pregnant and thereby continue the family line. Onan is fully aware of this custom but apparently only uses Tamar for his own personal sexual gratification while refusing to fulfill his filial responsibility. And the Lord puts him to death for his offense. This rightfully frightens Judah. He's not about to lose his third son as this will put his own family's future at risk so he sends Tamar home to her own family and asks her to wait until Shelah comes of age.

Then the subject of the passage shifts. Tamar is now the primary actor. She also is frightened for her future. She's been married twice. Her reputation is in tatters as both men have died. She's been sexually abused by at least one husband. And she knows by now that Judah has no intention of fulfilling his promise. So she dresses herself as a cult prostitute, complete with a veil so he won't recognize her. She knows his wife has died. Perhaps she even knows Judah visits prostitutes with regularity although the text doesn't indicate as such. And she places herself in prime position to meet him along the way. Judah takes the bait and Tamar is crafty enough to ask for his signet, cord, and staff, all of which clearly identify him to the community. Then she returns home. Three months later, she starts showing. And even though she's living in her father's home, she is technically Judah's responsibility. He brings her out to be burned at the stake and that's when the other shoe drops.

So what is God up to here? Over and over again, this family He has chosen puts their promised future at risk. The scheming and lies of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The barrenness of Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel. And now Judah's failings as a father-in-law. It always seems like the salvation plan of God is teetering on the edge of collapse. And yet God remains faithful! He continually bends the arc of human sin towards His purposes!

What about your life? Where have you sinned and fallen short? Where have you failed and lost sight of God's promises? Where have you seen God bend even your failings towards His purposes? Where have you seen God use all things for your good?

January 18, 2018
NOTHING BUT A DREAMER

Readings for the day: Genesis 41, 42, 43

God often speaks to us in our dreams. If we have the ears to hear and the heart to listen. Sometimes those dreams are prophetic in that they tell the future. Sometimes those dreams are prophetic in that they convict us of sin. Sometimes dreams bring to light anxiety and fear that we need to bring to our Heavenly Father. Sometimes our dreams affirm us or reveal the deepest desires of our heart.

January 19, 2018
GOD'S PERSPECTIVE

Readings for the day: Genesis 44, 45, 46

Consider all that Joseph had gone through. Assaulted by his own brothers. Sold into slavery. Falsely imprisoned. He could easily have adopted a victim mindset. He could easily have become bitter and angry. He could easily have sought revenge. But Joseph – perhaps more than anyone else save Abraham in the Book of Genesis – walks with God.

January 20, 2018
LIFE'S CONSEQUENCES

Readings for the day: Genesis 47, 48, 49, 50

We live our lives before God. Whether we realize it or not, He is always there. And His grace is amazing. His love is unconditional. He mercy knows no end. He loves us for who we are in all of our imperfections. But sin still has consequences.

January 22, 2018
SUFFERING

Readings for the day: Job 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

All agree Job is righteous. All resonate with Job's suffering. All feel Job's pain. He is us. We are him. Everyone who has experienced deep suffering in their lives can identify with this man. But the Book of Job makes it clear that Job's suffering is not the primary point of the story but rather how his suffering points us to the greater reality of God.

January 23, 2018
DANGERS OF SPIRITUAL PLATITUDES

Readings for the day: Job 6, 7, 8, 9

I have been in the emergency rooms with parents as they said goodbye to their children. I have been in the neonatal units watching infants struggle for every breath. I have sat at the bedside of those dying from cancer and tried to bring comfort to their loved ones. I have been in the developing world and seen life-threatening poverty. I have prayed over men and women whose condition is utterly hopeless because they simply do not have access to the resources they need to survive. In EVERY single case, I feel helpless. Inadequate. Afraid. Frustration. Despair. These feelings threaten to overwhelm me and, if I am not careful, can cause me to say things more for my own benefit than for the good of others

January 24, 2018

DESPAIR

Readings for the day: Job 10, 11, 12, 13

When things were at their most desperate. When life was at its most uncertain. When everything I held dear was slipping through my grasp, this one truth remained. God. And when that realization came flooding in, everything changed.

January 25, 2018
RELENTLESS

Readings for the day: Job 14, 15, 16, 17

“Pain won’t kill you.” Miss Annie shared those words with me when I first visited her. She was 95 and living at home by herself. I was all of 29 years old and a freshly minted pastor just out of seminary. As I listened to her story, my heart just broke. She had been battling a host of diseases for decades. She had fought off various cancers. She could barely walk due to her COPD. She had a degenerative back condition that left her in excruciating pain. She was also one of the meanest, nastiest people you will ever meet. She treated the home health nurses that cared for her terribly. Constantly cussing them out and calling them names. She did the same to her family to the point where they hated coming around. I visited her about once a month to serve her communion since she was one of our home bound members. A lot of the time, I left without serving her the elements because she refused to confess her sins before the Lord and I refused to make a mockery of the sacrament. During those times, she would cuss me out as I headed out the door. But she always welcomed me back the next month and along the way there would be these breakthroughs. Moments of grace where a window would open into her soul. She would weep. She would confess. She would repent. Those were sacred moments where God’s Spirit rushed in.

The pain Job feels is relentless. It is ruthless. It is excruciating. With no end in sight. He longs for death. Longs for the release of the grave. (I cannot tell you how many times I prayed with Miss Annie for the Lord to take her as she slept. This was her most heartfelt prayer request.) The way Job describes his experience is almost painful in itself. “But the mountain falls and crumbles away, and the rock is removed from its place; the waters wear away the stones; the torrents wash away the soil of the earth; so you destroy the hope of man...He feels only the pain of his own body, and he mourns only for himself.” (Job 14:18-19, 22)

“Surely now God has worn me out; he has made desolate all my company. And he has shriveled me up, which is a witness against me, and my leanness has risen up against me; it testifies to my face. He has torn me in his wrath and hated me; he has gnashed his teeth at me; my adversary sharpens his eyes against me...I was at ease, and he broke me apart; he seized me by the neck and dashed me to pieces; he set me up as his target; his archers surround me. He slashes open my kidneys and does not spare; he pours out my gall on the ground. He breaks me with breach upon breach; he runs upon me like a warrior.” (Job 16:7-9, 12-14)

“My spirit is broken; my days are extinct; the graveyard is ready for me.” (Job 17:1)

Job’s pain is an endless cataract, cascading down on his body, mind, and soul. There is never an end to it. It is so terrible and horrifying, I’m sure it made Eliphaz want to squeeze shut his eyes and close his ears. He simply cannot handle what he’s seeing and hearing. So he opens his mouth again and this time one can hear his frustration. “But you are doing away with the fear of God and hindering meditation before God...Your own mouth condemns you, and not I; your own lips testify against you...Why does your heart carry you away, and why do your eyes flash, that you turn your spirit against God and bring such words out of your mouth?” (Job 15:4, 6, 12-13) I cannot tell you the number of times I got frustrated listening to Miss Annie. Over and over again, I felt compelled to rebuke her. Correct her. Challenge her. Her racist rants were offensive. The way she spoke of her kids disrespectful. Even the way she talked about God made me angry. I cannot tell you the number of times I threw up my hands and walked away. And yet, God’s Spirit kept bringing me back. Forcing me to walk into her living room where she lay in her hospital bed and engage her once again.

The great C.S. Lewis once said, “Pain insists on being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” The reality is God was trying to “rouse” Miss Annie. In the midst of her suffering, He reached out for her over and over again. His love never wavered. His faithfulness never failed. His grace never reached its limit. As dark as things have gotten for Job – and they will get darker still before the dawn – God is present. Always there. Hovering in the background for now but by the end of the book, manifesting Himself in all His glory. And for centuries, He has used Job’s pain as a megaphone to rouse our deaf and dying world.

January 26, 2018
MY REDEEMER LIVES

Readings for the day: Job 18, 19, 20, 21

Job's suffering resists all logic. It resists any and all attempts to make sense out of it. It resists the formulaic notions we have about cause and effect. Blessing and curse. Health and wealth. It forces us to grapple with the hard truth that the righteous do suffer. The unrighteous do prosper. Bad things happen to good people. Good things happen to evil people. There is no rhyme or reason to these things. Time and chance happen to us all as the writer of Ecclesiastes once wrote.

January 27, 2018
DOUBLING DOWN

Readings for the day: Job 22, 23, 24

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

I sometimes think about that man when I pray. I wonder where he is? Where life took him? If he ever got any help or if he just continued to barely survive on the streets? Doubling down each chance he got when someone gave him some money? I think about my own life. In so many ways, I am just like him. Doubling down on my own sin in my own heart rather than humbly submitting to God. As I read Eliphaz's words this morning, I can feel his frustration boiling over. The general theological principle he's held to his entire life – the righteous prosper, the unrighteous are punished - has failed him. But rather than humbly recognizing the failure and taking a step back, he doubles down. He attacks his dear friend Job. He accuses him of crimes against God. "Is not your evil abundant? There is no end to your iniquities." (Job 22:5) You have robbed your brothers. You have stripped the naked. You have withheld water from the thirsty. You have not fed the hungry. You have treated widows and orphans (the true measure of pure and undefined religious devotion according to James 1:27) with disdain. Over and over again, he verbally assaults his friend. (Someone asked earlier why Satan is not more visible in this story? We hear him very clearly here in Eliphaz's words. The word satan means "accuser.")

How does Job respond? He doubles down on God. "Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his seat! I would lay my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would know what he would answer me and understand what he would say to me. Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; he would pay attention to me. There an upright man could argue with him, and I would be acquitted forever by my judge." (Job 23:3-7) Job is confident in God's justice and righteousness. Confident God will hear his prayers. Confident God would pay attention to him, unlike his friends who seem so bent on contending with him.

The problem, of course, is Job can't seem to find God in the midst of his suffering and pain. Though he's assailed the heavens, they seem shut up. Though he's cried out, all he's received so far is deafening silence. Job has done his best but to no avail. "Behold, I go forward, but he is not there, and backward, but I do not perceive him; on the left hand when he is working, I do not behold him; he turns to the right hand, but I do not see him." However, he does not despair. Why? Because he trusts God. "He (God) knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold." (Job 23:10) Though Job can't seem to find the way to God, God knows the way to him. And at the end of all the trials and all the trauma, Job is confident God will make things right. Job is confident he will emerge better than before. Refined. Purified. Sanctified as God separates the gold from the dross in his life.

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

January 29, 2018
INSULATION

Readings for the day: Job 25, 26, 27, 28

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

As a Christian living in 21st America, I am “insulated” from so much that goes on in the world. My government is stable and has a history of peaceful transfers of power. My community is protected by faithful men and women who serve on the police force and in fire departments. I have access to the best medical care in the world. My household income places me in the top... .06% of the world’s wealthiest people. As such, I can buy what I need when I need it. I live in a warm home in the winter, a cool home in the summer. My children go to great schools where they are taught by some of the best teachers around. College is not just a pipe dream but an expectation for them. Because of the color of my skin, I have never had to face racism either on a personal or systemic level. I have never been held back because of my gender. My sexual orientation places me in no danger. All these advantages create “layers of insulation” that have afforded me a pretty safe and comfortable, dare I say even idyllic, life.

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

And yet Job believes. He holds fast to his faith. The language he uses to describe God in chapter 26 is some of the most beautiful and stirring in all of Scripture. “Sheol is naked before God, and Abaddon has no covering. He stretches out the north over the void and hangs the earth on nothing...He has inscribed a circle on the face of the waters at the boundary between light and darkness...Behold, these are but the outskirts of his ways...” (Job 26:6-7, 10, 14) And I love how he describes his search for wisdom in chapter 28. “But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding? Man does not know its worth, and it is not found in the land of the living. The deep says, 'It is not in me,' and the sea says, 'It is not with me.' It cannot be bought for gold, and silver cannot be weighed as its price...Gold and glass cannot equal it, nor can it be exchanged for jewels of fine gold...From where, then, does wisdom come? And where is the place of understanding?...Abaddon and Death say, 'We have heard a rumor of it with our ears.'” (Job 28: 12-15, 17, 22)

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

January 30, 2018
MORE TRUE THAN WE KNOW....

Readings for the day: Job 29, 30, 31, 32

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

Job’s friends are an easy target in this book. Their theological purity brings little comfort to their suffering friend. Furthermore, their beliefs are far too simplistic for we all know the righteous are not always rewarded nor are the wicked always punished. Therefore, their attacks on Job are without warrant. Having said that...here’s a mind-bender for you...Job actually believes the same way they do! Listen to what he says, “I put on righteousness, and it clothed me; my justice was like a robe and a turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy, and I searched out the cause of him whom I did not know. I broke the fangs of the unrighteous and made him drop his prey from his teeth.” (Job 29:14-17) The reality is Job believes his cause is 100% just. He believes he’s done nothing to deserve his fate. Because he is a righteous man, he cannot imagine why God would allow these things to happen to him. “God has cast me into the mire, and I have become like dust and ashes. I cry to you for help and you do not answer me; I stand, and you only look at me. You have turned cruel to me; with the might of your hand you persecute me. You lift me up on the wind; you make me ride on it, and you toss me about in the roar of the storm. For I know that you will bring me to death and to the house appointed for all living.” (Job 30:19-23) Essentially Job is making the same argument his friends have made throughout the book. Why does God not reward the righteous (in this case, Job himself) and punish the wicked? Job clearly believes He should. Clearly is angry with God that He doesn’t. Job has held fast to his integrity. He has not committed any sin worthy of his suffering. He even goes as far as recounting all his righteous deeds in chapter 31. Making his closing argument before God.

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

So let me put the question to all of us...do we fear God for no reason? Asked another way, why do we love God? Is it for the eschatological goodies? A guaranteed pass to heaven? Health? Wealth? Blessings in this life and the next? Or is God enough? Do we love God simply because He’s God? If there were no eternal rewards. If there were no promises. If God never gave us a single thing, would He be worthy of our love and devotion?

January 31, 2018
RIGHTEOUS SUFFERING

Readings for the day: Job 33, 34, 35, 36

"In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 1:6-7)

"For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it." (Hebrews 12:10-11)

"For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead." (2 Corinthians 1:8-9)

There is such a thing as righteous suffering. Redemptive suffering. Suffering with a purpose. We may not always see that purpose and, in fact, it is often only revealed upon reflection after the fact. But that doesn't mean all suffering is meaningless. Or all suffering is bad. Or all suffering is to be avoided. Clearly, the first century believers suffered. 10 of the 12 Apostles would be tortured and executed in excruciating ways for their faith. (Judas committed suicide and John, though he suffered, died of old age.) Throughout the first three centuries of the church's existence, Christians were burned as torches in Nero's garden. Thrown to the lions for sport in the arena. In certain regions of the Empire, they were systematically rounded up and killed. This was not only true back then but remains true in certain places around the world today. According to Christianity Today, it is estimated that over 70 million Christians have been martyred since the time of Jesus. They suffered and died in places all over the earth. Ottoman Turkey. Nazi Germany. Soviet Russia. Communist China and North Korea. Uganda. Sudan. Mexico. Columbia. And the suffering continues. I have seen it firsthand in Ethiopia and have spoken to eye witnesses in South Sudan, Djibouti, and Somalia.

The introduction of Elihu to the narrative represents a turning point in Job. At first glance, Elihu just seems to be piling on. Repeating the same tired arguments of Job's friends. But a careful reading of the text reveals a significant shift. Elihu bursts on the scene declaring his anger at both Job and his three friends. (Job 32:1-5) He believes he has something new to offer that has not yet been said. So what is it that Elihu brings to the table? It is the idea that God does allow the righteous to suffer in order to purify and to save. Perhaps the key passage is Job 33:12-30...

"Behold, in this you are not right. I will answer you, for God is greater than man. Why do you contend against him, saying, 'He will answer none of man's words'? For God speaks in one way, and in two, though man does not perceive it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on men, while they slumber on their beds, then he opens the ears of men and terrifies them with warnings...Remember, they had no Bible. No written records. So the Word of God would come to them in visions and dreams. Why? To punish? To judge? To wound? To destroy? No...So that God may turn man aside from his deed and conceal pride from a man; he keeps back his soul from the pit, his life from perishing by the sword. This is deeply significant as it adds a new layer of meaning to the story. God does allow suffering but it's for our good. He uses suffering to purge the pride from us. The pride – as I said yesterday – Job himself suffers from. Yes, Job is a righteous man. Yes, Job is a blameless man. But Job is also a sinful man. Though he has a heart after God, he is not perfect and God will use his suffering (as we will see at the end of the book) to cleanse the depths of Job's heart.

God not only warns us in dreams and visions and through His Word, he also uses our physical pain for our good and for His glory. "Man is also rebuked with pain on his bed and with continual strife in his bones, so that his life loathes bread, and his appetite the choicest food. His flesh is so wasted away that it cannot be seen, and his bones that were not seen stick out. His soul draws near the pit, and his life to those who bring death." If we follow the logic of Job's friends – whom Elihu rebukes strongly – we would conclude that those who suffer deserve it. They should go down to death. But that's not where Elihu lands. His God is not a harsh judge but a faithful, loving Father who delivers His children ultimately from their pain and suffering. "If there be for him an angel, a mediator, one of the thousand, to declare to man what is right for him, and he is merciful to him, and says, 'Deliver him from going down into the pit; I have found a ransom; let his flesh become fresh with youth; let him return to the days of his youthful vigor'; then man prays to God, and he accepts him; he sees his face with a shout of joy, and he restores to man his righteousness. He sings before men and says: 'I sinned and perverted what was right, and it was not repaid to me. He has redeemed my soul from going down into the pit, and my life shall look upon the light.' "Behold, God does all these things, twice, three times, with a man, to bring back his soul from the pit, that he may be lighted with the light of life." The key phrase being that last sentence. It is God who does all these things for man in order to bring his soul back from the pit, lighted with the light of life.

This understanding squares with what Christians have said throughout the centuries. Martyrs facing their death without fear. Those who suffer enduring for the sake of something greater. They understand God is at work even in the middle of their pain. Not only bringing about His will and His glory but also continuing to sanctify and purify even their own hearts in the midst of it all. The reality is Job needs to be humbled and indeed will be humbled before the Lord of Hosts. This is one of the most important lessons from the Book of Job for all of us.