

## 01 JANURAY 2024

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January 1, 2024  
How it All Began

Readings for today: [Genesis 1-3, Psalm 1](#)    [\(video Intro \)](#)    [\(audio reading\)](#)

The creation story of the Bible is unique among ancient near east creation narratives. Most of the other cultures surrounding ancient Israel described creation as a war between the gods and chaos. Light and darkness. Good and evil. Typically, the gods prevail over chaos and literally dismember it in order to make the heavens and the earth. It's a gruesome, violent depiction. Furthermore, it's a battle that never truly ends as the forces of chaos are always looking for opportunities to re-assemble and overthrow the natural order of things. This requires constant vigilance which is why so much of ancient near east worship was geared towards maintaining the order of the universe and appeasing the gods so they will protect and provide for humanity. It's very transactional and mutually beneficial with both gods and humanity benefiting from the arrangement.

Genesis 1 tells a completely different story. God doesn't battle the formless, empty depths of the waters at the beginning of time. There is no war in heaven as God struggles to impose His will on creation. No, God simply speaks and creation comes into being. Light (Time). Heavenly expanse (Weather). Dry land and vegetation (Food). The very building blocks of life for the people of the ancient near east. Sun and moon and stars to rule over time. Birds to fill the heavens and fish to fill the sea. Animals on the earth. All of it designed by God with humanity in mind. For we are the crown of His creation. The creatures made in His own image. Given dominion over all He has made. Called not to hold back chaos - that's already taken care of - but to live in covenant relationship with God and care for all He has made. There is no hint of conflict. No hint of violence. No hint of heartbreak, suffering, or pain. At least, not until Genesis 3.

There are two critical takeaways from today's reading that set up the rest of what we will read this year. First and foremost, we were made to live in perfect relationship with God. We were made to live with God in paradise. We were made to reflect His image and glory to the world. This was God's great desire at the beginning and it remains His great desire to this day. Because we are made in God's own image, we are created with agency. Free will. The ability to make choices and be held responsible for those choices. In relationships, love must be freely given and freely chosen or it is not love at all. Sadly, and here's the second key takeaway, we chose "self" over God and fractured our relationship with Him with devastating consequences. Conflict entered the world for the first time. We now live in conflict with God, with each other, with the land, and even with ourselves. We've become agents of chaos now and all that has gone wrong in the world is the ripple effect of our sinful decision to walk away from God. From this point forward, God will re-enter the picture to fight the forces of chaos we've unleashed and yet He will never let go of His original dream. He will continue to work with us and through us to bring order and love and life to this world, entrusting us as people of faith to fulfill His original purposes. This is our call, friends, and the rest of the Bible is the story of God's mission to restore all that was lost.

How can you join Him today?

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 4-7, Psalm 2

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**January 2, 2024**  
**Humanity's Choice**

Readings for today: [Genesis 4-7, Psalm 2](#)    [\(video intro\)](#)    [\(audio reading\)](#)

Today we read about the growth of humanity on the earth. It's important to note this is not an exhaustive, anthropological account. God is not giving us the history of the human race as much as giving us the details important to salvation history. The people listed in this narrative chart the genealogy that will eventually bring forth the Messiah. Furthermore, God is also showing us the impact of sin on each and every generation. The downward spiral of humanity is a direct result of the curse all of us are born under. This curse corrupts us to the core and turns us inward towards self rather than upward towards God and the results are frankly terrifying. Violence. Suffering. Pain. Abuse. Tyranny. Murder. Humanity rejecting the call to be our brother or sister's guardian.

Why is humanity the way that it is? Why is humanity so prone to violence and anger and outrage and hate? Why is humanity so selfish and narcissistic? Why is humanity so greedy and power-hungry and corrupt? Even a brief, cursory look at history provides plenty of evidence to support the theological doctrine of original sin. Though we like to think of ourselves as fundamentally good, though flawed, people; it seems clear to me both on a macro as well as micro level that the opposite is true. We are fundamentally broken, selfish, sinful people who occasionally are capable of great good. This is the impact of the Fall. It is the impact of the choice humanity made in the Garden to define "good" and "evil" for themselves.

The story of Cain is a powerful one that sums up humanity's biggest and most persistent challenge. Cain presents his offering before the Lord and it is not acceptable. Rather than choose the path of humility and reflect on the deficiencies of his own heart, Cain blames his brother for bringing the better offering and hatches a plan to eliminate the competition. God sees his rage and knows where it will lead so He offers Cain a choice, "If you do what is right, won't you be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it." (Genesis 4:7) Sadly, Cain rejects God and murders his brother in cold blood. This elicits God's judgment.

Interestingly enough, it is couched more in terms of logical consequences than arbitrary punishment. "Then God said, "What have you done? Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground! So now you are cursed, alienated from the ground that opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood you have shed. If you work the ground, it will never again give you its yield. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth." (Genesis 4:10-12) Like Adam and Eve before him, Cain will now experience alienation. Alienation from his family. Alienation from his community. Alienation from the very land he must till to survive. Alienation leads to shame as the full weight of sin comes crashing down on Cain's shoulders. It is no longer crouching at the door, it has fully mastered him, enslaving him from this point forward. Listen again to Cain's despair. "My punishment is too great to bear! Since you are banishing me today from the face of the earth, and I must hide from your presence and become a restless wanderer on the earth, whoever finds me will kill me." (Genesis 4:13-14)

As a pastor, I can't tell you the number of times I've sat with people and seen this same dynamic play itself out. Sin is always crouching at the door and its desire is always to enslave us. It manifests itself in all sorts of ways. Lust. Pride. Greed. Selfishness. You name it. It is always there. Every day, we are faced with the same choice Cain faced. Will we do what is right? What is good? What is glorifying to God? Or will we go our own way? Serve ourselves? Feed our own sinful desires? When we choose to submit to God, we choose life. When we choose to surrender to our base desires, we choose death. Take

some time today and ask the Holy Spirit to show you those areas of your life where you have yet to surrender to God.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 8-11, Psalm 3

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January 3, 2024  
Identity

Readings for today: [Genesis 8-11, Psalm 3](#)    [\(video intro\)](#)  [\(audio reading\)](#)

Who am I? What defines me? What is my core identity? These are the fundamental questions every single human has to answer on some level. These questions seem to transcend culture and time and place. They seem to haunt every single human being who has ever lived. Some draw their answers from the culture around them. Some find their answers in their family of origin. Some tie their identities to specific abilities or vocations. Some ground their identities in sexual desire or ethnicity. Some seek to define themselves over and against their biological makeup as in the case of gender dysphoria. All of these fall short, of course, with devastating consequences. Fear and anxiety. Depression and despair. Isolation and loneliness. We experience these feelings because we have sought purpose and fulfillment and happiness in something other than God. We have tried to replace the divine identity He gave us at the beginning with a false identity of our own making.

This is the fundamental issue at stake in the Tower of Babel story. Listen again to the motivation that drives humanity. “Come, let’s build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky. Let’s make a name for ourselves; otherwise, we will be scattered throughout the earth.” (Genesis 11:4 CSB) Let us build for ourselves. Let us make a name for ourselves. This is the core problem with the human race. Rather than trust God, we look to our own strength and wisdom. Rather than rest content in our identity as image bearers of God, we have this insatiable appetite for more. Rather than surrender to God and submit to His plan and His will and His way, we believe our plans are better. We believe our ways are what’s best for us. Nothing could be further from the truth, of course, but we seem stuck on an endless cycle of “wash, rinse, repeat.” Every generation repeating the same mistake. Each generation believing they can somehow finally get it “right” without God. We all want the Kingdom without bowing the knee before the King. We want all the blessings but want nothing to do with the Blesser. We want all the benefits of heaven but reject our Benefactor. It’s insanity. Following the same rebellious path over and over again but expecting a different result.

So what’s the answer? We exchange all our false identities for our true identity in Christ. We stop fighting God and instead, surrender to His love and grace. We resist the temptation to define ourselves apart from God and instead, let us His Spirit fill us and sanctify us. In Christ, God redeems our fallen natures. He heals our broken hearts. He renews our fallen souls. He restores His image in us. He makes us a new creation. We find our truest and deepest identity in Him. Our union with Christ becomes the very thing that defines us and this impacts not only who we are and how we live but also those around us. It changes how we relate to our spouses and children and parents. It changes how we relate to friends and colleagues. It changes how we relate even to those with whom we are in conflict. In short, it changes everything because we’ve been changed. How are you living out your identity in Christ today?

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 12-15, Psalm 4

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**January 4, 2024**  
**Spiritual Journey**

Readings for today: [Genesis 12-15, Psalm 4](#)    [\(video intro\)](#)    [\(audio reading\)](#)

One of the things I've learned as I've traveled the world and interacted with Christians from different cultures is to integrate rather than segregate my life. The physical is not separate from the mental. The mental is not separate from the emotional. The emotional is not separate from the spiritual. Our lives are not like lunchables. We are not made up of hermetically sealed compartments. No, our lives are fully integrated so what happens to us emotionally impacts us physically, mentally, spiritually and so on. I cannot tell you how freeing this perspective has been for me. For years, I believed the lie that I could segment out my life. I ignored the warning signs in my physical body when I would bottle up my emotions. I dismissed concerns over how the things I was exposing my mind to impacted my soul and heart. I found myself striving so hard to compartmentalize a life that was meant to be integrated. That's when God stepped in. He reminded me that His great desire is that I would love Him with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. In other words, love Him in a fully integrated way. As I began to embrace this new perspective, my life changed pretty radically. I felt a freedom I had never experienced before. My life got a lot more healthy and whole and I found myself growing in all sorts of ways.

As I read Abraham's story for the umpteenth time, what struck me this year was the number of times Abraham encounters God or hears from God or builds an altar to God or calls on God as he makes this journey from Haran to the Promised Land. Genesis 12 begins with the call to Abram while he's living with his family in Haran. Abram obeys God's call and starts out on his journey. God shows up again at the oak of Moreh outside of Shechem so he builds an altar. He keeps walking through the hillside and comes to Bethel where he builds another altar and calls on the name of the Lord. Because of famine, Abram disobeys God, leaves the Promised Land, and enters Egypt. Notice he doesn't meet God there. Doesn't call on God there. Doesn't build an altar there. Instead, he trusts in his own wisdom and almost train wrecks his family. So he leaves Egypt with his family and heads back to Bethel where he again calls on the name of the Lord. Abram and Lot separate and after Lot departs, God visits him yet again after which he moves to Hebron where he builds yet another altar to the Lord. Finally, he returns from winning a great victory in battle, receiving a special blessing from Melchizedek, and once again God meets him in a vision to give him the promise of a child. Make no mistake, the physical journey Abram has undertaken to get to this point reflects a deeper spiritual journey his soul is making as well. Abram is growing in every facet of his life. Every step represents a concrete act of faith in the God who first called him out of Ur and renewed that call when he lived in Haran. Abram has left everything to follow God. His home. His family. His clan. His business. His safety and security. He did it based on a promise that God would make him into a great nation and give him a great name and use him to bless the people of the earth. Abram believed God and the rest is history.

What about you? As you think back over the course of your life, can you see how your physical journey is tied up with your spiritual journey? Can you see the connection between emotional maturity and mental health? Do you seek an integrated life under the Lordship of Christ or are you striving to keep your life segmented and segregated? Let me encourage you to believe as Abram did. Trust God with everything. Hold nothing back. Lay it all down at His feet. Believe me when I say He'll never let you down.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 16-18, Psalm 5

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**January 5, 2024**  
**Covenant Faithfulness**

Readings for today: [Genesis 16-18, Psalm 5](#) [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

I give God so many reasons to walk away but still He remains faithful. If one were to catalog my sins from a single day or week or month or year, one would have more than enough evidence to cut bait but God does not. My life is a series of ups and downs, successes and failures, good and bad decisions and still God is with me through it all. This is what it means to live in covenant relationship with God. A covenant is not a contract. It is not an agreement between two equal parties. It is not transactional in nature. A covenant is eternal because God is eternal. A covenant cannot be broken because God never breaks faith no matter what we say or do. God guarantees His covenant with His very life. He refuses to walk away no matter how bad things get. He never leaves us or forsakes us even if we leave or forsake ourselves.

Don't believe me? Consider what happens in Abram's life. Consider all the factors in play that put the covenant God has made with him in jeopardy. Family dysfunction. An illegitimate heir. Strife between Sarai and Hagar. Age considerations. Physical limitations. The shame of barrenness. And what does God do? He meets Abram in the middle of the mess. He sees Hagar in the wilderness. He blesses Ishmael as well as Isaac. He gives them new names and new identities. Abram will now be Abraham - "Father of a multitude." Sarai will now be Sarah - "Princess." Both will be blessed. Kings and nations will come from their family line. Through their family and household, all the nations of the earth will be blessed. There could be no greater promise for an ancient near east patriarch than to know the future of his family was secure. And if this were a contractual arrangement, Abraham would have no hope. He's already proven he can't hold up his end of the bargain. God would have every right to walk away. But it's a covenant. An eternal arrangement made by God Himself. All these things will come to pass in Abraham's life because God is faithful even where Abraham is not. And the same is true for us.

Jesus Christ invites us into a new covenant. A covenant sealed by His own body and blood. A covenant guaranteed by His own life. This covenant involves the forgiveness of sins. It includes the gift of eternal life. Those who enter it will always be part of it. No matter where they go or what they do. Why? Because Jesus is faithful. He chases down every single lost sheep. He searches for every single lost coin. He never rests until every single lost child comes home. This is His promise to all those who believe in Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 19-21, Psalm 6

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**January 6, 2024**  
**The Patience of God**

Readings for today: [Genesis 19-21, Psalm 6](#)    [\(video intro\)](#)  [\(audio reading\)](#)

God is the most patient being in the universe. He has to be if He's going to stay in relationship with us. We are fickle creatures. One day we are strong and growing and humble in our faith. The next we are weak and struggling and full of doubts and fears. One day we are willing to take extraordinary steps of faith and the next, we try to manage life on our own. Through all of these ups and downs, God is with us. He works with us and through us and in us to bend every single decision and action - good, bad, or otherwise - to His perfect will.

Lot and Abraham serve as great examples for us. Their lives are case studies that reveal the gentle but relentless patience of God as He works to implement His salvation plan on earth as it is in heaven. Consider the case of Lot. Lot is a deeply compromised man. He lives in a corrupt city among a corrupt people. Their lives are marked not only by sexual violence and abuse and immorality but, according to the prophet Ezekiel, pride, greed, injustice, and terrible neglect of the poor in their midst. Some try to suggest that it was the latter sins rather than the former that called down God's wrath but that's parsing things too thin. The reality is Sodom was full of all kinds of sin and deserved her fate and it begs the question why a man like Lot would choose to live there with his family? Not only that but when the angels come to rescue him, he hesitates. He resists. He asks for all kinds of accommodations. Even then, the Lord has mercy. Genesis 19:16, "But Lot hesitated. Because of the Lord's compassion for him, the men grabbed his hand, his wife's hand, and the hands of his two daughters. They brought him out and left him outside the city."

Abraham is no paragon of virtue. Chapter twenty finds him once again acting out of fear and potentially putting the promise of God in jeopardy. He repeats the mistakes of his past as he tries to manage through a difficult situation with Abimelech. Rather than trust in the Lord, he trusts in his own ideas, his own wisdom, his own plans and the result is almost a disaster. Thankfully, the pagan Abimelech is more righteous than Abraham in this story and he returns Sarah unharmed and untouched thereby preserving the sanctity of her marriage. (The fact that he finds an almost 100 year old woman attractive enough to put in his harem is another story for another day.) Abraham's actions put so much at risk. The promise of God. The inheritance of his clan and tribe. The future of his family. Thankfully, the Lord has mercy. Genesis 20:6-7, "Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know that you did this with a clear conscience. I have also kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I have not let you touch her. Now return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not return her, know that you will certainly die, you and all who are yours."

What about you? How has the Lord preserved you even in the face of doubt and fear and hesitation in following His will for your life? How has the Lord protected you even in the face of sinful and difficult choices you made along the way? Rest assured, God is faithful. He promises to use all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. All means all. The good, bad, and ugly of our lives. God takes it all and uses it all to make us more in the image of Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 22-24, Psalm 7 (No devotionals on Sundays)

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Readings for today: [Genesis 22-24, Psalms 7](#)

(video introduction)

(audio reading)

**January 8, 2024**  
**The Will of God**

Readings for today: [Genesis 25-28, Psalm 8](#)

(video introduction)

(audio reading)

What is the will of God and how do I stay within it? It's a common question. One I get a lot by virtue of my profession. So many people - especially Christians - want to know what God's will is for their lives and how they pursue it. At the same time, there are a lot of misconceptions out there about the will of God. Especially when it comes to how God's will relates to our will. God did not make us robots. He endowed us with the inalienable right to make our own decisions. This is what is commonly known as "free will" and it is very real. Human beings have the ability to make real choices and God holds us accountable for those choices. At the same time, God has made a choice. He has made a decision to love us and love the world in which He placed us and He is at work to bring about the renewal of the world through us. But how does all that work together? How does God's sovereign will and our free will interact? Where do they intersect? What does that actually look like in real time? Glad you asked...;-)

Think about what we read today. The family of Abraham is a dysfunctional one just like all human families. Abraham practiced polygamy which was common in his day, especially for wealthy men, but it wasn't wise. It put the inheritance of Isaac in jeopardy so he had to essentially exile his other sons in order to secure Isaac's position as head of the family. He sends his servant to find a wife for Isaac within the extended family or clan but she is barren thus creating yet another threat to God's salvation plan. Isaac could have chosen a second wife but instead chooses to pray to the Lord and the Lord opens Rebekah's womb. But the two children begin fighting before they are even born thus setting in motion a competition that will last most of their adult lives. Jacob steals Esau's birthright and inheritance. There is favoritism in the family between dad and mom. Esau gets angry and threatens to murder his brother and it appears we may be headed for another Cain and Abel situation. It's quite a mess and it leaves one wondering if God made the right choice when He chose this family out of all the families on earth to be His chosen people.

Despite the many bad decisions of Isaac and Rebekah and Esau and Jacob, God is faithful. He continues to intervene to keep His sovereign plan on track. He opens Rebekah's womb. He reaffirms His promise to Isaac and provides miraculously and abundantly for him in the Promised Land. He establishes Isaac at Beer-sheba and meets Jacob in a dream at Bethel. Through it all, God is working His sovereign will in and through and over and among the people He has chosen for Himself. All of Isaac's decisions - even the sinful ones - are used by God to further His purposes. All of the choices Jacob makes - even the deceitful, manipulative ones - are used by God to accomplish His will and move His salvation plan forward. This doesn't make their choices any less real nor does it make them any less responsible.

The same is true for us as well. We too make decisions each and every day. Some are good. Some are bad. Some are ugly. Thankfully, God is sovereign. He will bend our decisions to serve His perfect will no matter what and that should give us all hope.

Readings for tomorrow: [Genesis 29-31, Psalm 9](#)

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January 9, 2024  
Best Laid Plans

Readings for today: [Genesis 29-31, Psalm 9](#)      [\(video intro\)](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

I don't know about you but I am a planner. In fact, I make backup plans to my backup plans just in case my original plans don't come through. I plan out each day. I plan out each week. I plan out each year. I have three year plans and five year plans. I have a professional plan. I have a financial plan. My wife and I have a plan for our family. We teach our kids to plan. We are working with our parents on their plans. Planning is a good thing, of course, but only if it is surrendered to the Lord. Ultimately, we can put together our best laid plans but it is the Lord's plan for our lives that matters most. That's why I try to hold onto my plans loosely. Walk with open hands before the Lord because He has a way of changing my plans along the way.

In our story today, it's clear that everyone has a plan. Jacob has a plan. Leah has a plan. Rachel has a plan. Laban has a plan. Each of their plans is based on what they believe is best for them. Each of them is after something and they are willing to do just about anything to achieve those ends. Jacob has a plan for a wife and a family. Leah has a plan to earn her husband's affection and love. Rachel has a plan for children to end the shame over her barren condition. Laban has a plan to use Jacob to grow his wealth. They compete. They deceive. They lie. They steal. They scheme. It's striking to note that none of them seeks the Lord for His plan for their lives. They simply assume God is with them. (As an aside, how often do we make the same mistake in asking God to bless our plans rather than seek His plan?)

Finally, God intervenes. He makes His plan known to Jacob. Once again, it involves returning to the Promised Land. Returning back to the original plan God first gave to Abraham and Sarah. Returning back to the place God has given him and his family. "I am the God of Bethel, where you poured oil on the stone marker and made a solemn vow to me. Get up, leave this land, and return to your native land." (Genesis 31:13 CSB) No matter where we go or what we do, God is faithful. He will use all our decisions and all our choices and all our experiences - good, bad, or ugly - to bring about His sovereign will for our lives. God's plan is for Abraham's family to inherit the Promised Land. God's plan is for Abraham's family to establish themselves in the Promised Land in order to bless the nations of the earth. God's plan is to grow Abraham's family until they outnumber the stars of the sky and the sand on the seashore. No matter what Abraham's family does, God will make sure His plan comes to pass and this should bring us great comfort.

God has a plan for your life as well. He has made promises to you that He will bring to pass no matter what. This doesn't mean we should take Him for granted or ignore Him or dismiss Him and do our own thing. There are consequences for the choices we make. The consequences for Jacob and Laban and Leah and Rachel were significant and painful. But when we align our plans with God's plan for our lives, there is blessing and joy and fulfillment and peace. Before you make your plan for today, take some time and ask God to show you His plans for you.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 32-34, Psalm 10

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**January 10, 2024**  
**Beautifully Broken**

Readings for today: [Genesis 32-34, Psalm 10](#)    [\(video intro\)](#)    [\(audio reading\)](#)

There is nothing harder than having to face the serious consequences of the decisions you've made in your life. You have no one else to blame. Nowhere else to go. Nowhere left to hide. It's just you coming to grips with the choices you made and the ripple effect they created for your family, friends, and community. I can't tell you the number of times this has happened in my life. It's never easy. It's always painful. It creates all kinds of shame and heartbreak. And though I've often tried to run away from it all, God is faithful. He brings me back. He sets me in front of the mirror. He forces me to face myself in all my failures. He breaks me so that He might build me back up.

Jacob finds himself between a rock and hard place. He has burned every bridge possible. Laban, the father-in-law he defrauded, is behind him. Esau, the brother he usurped, is in front of him. For all he knows, he and his family are about to be wiped out. He's under tremendous pressure. His fears and anxieties have gotten the best of him. All his scheming and manipulation have brought him to this point. God has him right where He wants him. He meets Jacob down by the river. He wrestles with Jacob all night long. He forces Jacob to come grips with all his failures. He breaks Jacob utterly to the point where he is given a new name and a new identity. He will now be known as "Israel", the one who struggles with God. The one who walks with a limp for the rest of his life as a reminder of his encounter with the Holy One.

Perhaps you know how Jacob feels? Perhaps you too have wrestled with God? Perhaps you have been broken by Him? I know I have. My life is not the same as it was prior to 2009. I wrestled with God for months, spending almost every night pacing and arguing and cursing out God in prayer. I fought with God. I battled God. And I was utterly broken before Him. God did to me what He did to Jacob. He was faithful to stay in the fight. He never overwhelmed me. Never forced Himself on me. He simply waited until I exhausted myself struggling against Him. Once I came to the end of myself, He held a mirror up to my soul. There I saw all the ugliness of my pride and anger and frustration and bitterness and selfishness and fear reflected back at me. God gave me a choice in that moment. I could choose to continue fighting or I could surrender to His will for my life. Thankfully, I chose the latter but believe me when I say I walked away from that encounter with a serious limp.

Friends, God's plan for your life is simple. He wants you to become more like Jesus. He is like a master sculptor taking up his hammer and chisel to break those parts of you that don't belong. He is molding and shaping you in ways you cannot see. He is always at work using everything you're going through in your life to complete the good work He's begun in you. This is not an easy process. It is not a clean or neat process. It is not a linear process. It is often painful and hard and confusing. We often resist His sanctifying work in our lives. But God is faithful. He is patient. He will keep wrestling with us until we finally surrender to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 35-37, Psalm 11

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**January 11, 2024**  
**Sinful Self-Interest**

Readings for today: [Genesis 35-37, Psalm 11](#)      [\(video intro\)](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

The besetting sin of humanity is selfishness. From the moment we fell in the Garden of Eden, we turned inward, elevating “self” over everything and everyone else. We prioritize self over family. We prioritize self over friends. We even prioritize self over God. The checkered and often tragic history of the human race is replete with examples of human beings acting in their own sinful self-interest. On a micro level this results in broken relationships. On a macro level this results in all kinds of conflict and injustice. When you combine sinful self-interest with opportunity, power, and a certain level of authority, we human beings become capable of terrible evil.

Consider what happens in our reading today. Jacob/Israel acts in his own self-interest by privileging his favorite son of his favorite wife over his older brothers. In doing so, he breaks all kinds of cultural conventions and creates a situation where Joseph’s brothers feel deeply threatened. After all, what happens if Jacob/Israel should decide to make Joseph the leader of the family? This threatens their potential position in the line of succession and puts their inheritance at risk. This was no small thing in the ancient near east which is why they hatch a plot to get rid of Joseph. It isn’t simple jealous driving their decisions but sinful self-interest. Furthermore, their decision to sell Joseph rather than kill him also is driven by sinful self-interest. Why profit do they gain from his death? Better to sell him and get rid of him. It accomplishes the same purpose and rids them not only of a nuisance but also a rival for their father’s affection, position, and wealth.

Thankfully God is at work. He bends even our sinful self-interest to His divine purposes. Joseph’s brothers have no idea at this point in the story that the decision they make to sell Joseph into slavery will end up saving their lives and that of their families. They have no idea at this point in the story that God is orchestrating things, turning what they intend for evil into good. This is always how God works. He takes every decision we make - even the ones driven by our own sinful self-interest - and uses it bring about His good in our lives. This doesn’t mean it always feels good. Joseph’s brothers are going to go through a lot of pain and hardship and suffering. Joseph himself will undergo all kinds of pain and hardship and suffering. But in the end, God uses their sinful decisions to bring about their salvation and this gives us hope for our lives as well.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 38-40, Psalm 12

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**January 12, 2024**  
**God with Us**

Readings for today: [Genesis 38-40, Psalm 12](#)      [\(video intro\)](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

One of the things we celebrate every Christmas is the idea of Immanuel, a name that literally means “God with Us.” It’s powerful idea that continues to captivate each and every generation. We love the idea that the God of the universe would humble Himself to come and stand at our side. We love the idea that God would care for us so much He would walk with us through every season of life. We love the idea that God is so faithful that no matter where we go or what we do, He is always with and for us. He never walks away. He never abandons us. He never forsakes us. This is one of the unique features of the Christian faith.

God didn’t just become “Immanuel” on the day Jesus was born. He has always been Immanuel. He is Immanuel for Tamar as she wrestles over the cultural expectations of her day which would have her wed multiple men of the same family when the one who is her husband dies. He is Immanuel for Judah when he seeks comfort, unknowingly, in the arms of Tamar after the death of his wife. He is Immanuel for Perez and Zerah as they wrestle in the womb for supremacy. He is Immanuel for Joseph when he’s raised up to rule Potiphar’s house and then brought low through a false accusation. God is with us in the good and bad and ugly of life. Hopefully, you are beginning to see this as one of THE major themes in Scripture and it is what gives us hope even in the face of our own challenges and fears.

There are so many people in the world today processing all kinds of pain and suffering and heartache. There are all kinds of people living around us today who have all kinds of doubts and questions and fears. Lots of people who formally might have identified as Christian are deconstructing what they formally believe as they seek some kind of peace and wholeness and beauty and love in their lives. They want to be seen. They want to be known. They want to be free. They want to be affirmed. And the great news of the gospel is that God is with them every step of the way. He does see us. He does know us. He does set us free. He does affirm as His beloved. He also confronts us and convicts us and seeks to conform us to the image of His Son. Not through manipulation or coercion or by force but by loving us and comforting us and drawing us near. No matter where these opening weeks of 2024 find you, trust God is with you. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He will never leave your side.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 41-42, Psalm 13

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**January 13, 2024**  
**Full of the Spirit**

Readings for today: [Genesis 41-42, Psalm 13](#)      [\(video intro\)](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

When I played lacrosse in college, my coach would often talk about how all the great athletes had “it.” You couldn’t really define “it” but you knew “it” when you saw “it.” It was a special quality. A character trait that gave a person confidence to step up in critical moments like when the game was on the line. An instinct that not everyone possessed that allowed a woman or man to take advantage of a moment and elevate not only themselves but those around them as well. In today’s vernacular, we talk about an athlete being “Him” or “Her” and we marvel at their greatness. They always perform at their highest when the lights are brightest.

Joseph had “it.” Joseph was “Him.” He found success wherever he went whether it was in Potiphar’s house, the prison, or before Pharaoh. He never missed a moment. Never failed to take advantage of the opportunities God was giving him along the way. Why was Joseph so favored? It wasn’t because Joseph was especially smart or strong or gifted in any way. There’s nothing in the text to suggest Joseph was anything but an ordinary man. No, the one thing that set Joseph apart was the Spirit of God. After spending years in prison, Joseph appears before Pharaoh. His life is on the line. If he fails to perform, he could easily be thrown back in prison for the rest of his life or even executed. But when the lights were brightest, he turns to God. He doesn’t claim any special powers for himself. He doesn’t try to steal any of the credit or any of the glory from God. He doesn’t promote himself at all. He simply stands before the most powerful man on earth at the time fully trusting in God’s ability to deliver an interpretation. And after he does so, what is the response of the pagan king? “Can we find anyone like this, a man who has God’s spirit in him?” (Genesis 41:38 CSB)

Do you have God’s Spirit in you? He’s really all you need. If you want to live a life full of blessing and favor from God. If you want to experience God in a profound way on a regular basis. If you want to walk in close companionship with God. Then you need the Holy Spirit. He is God’s faithful, abiding presence. He indwells the heart of every believer. He grants us the gifts and graces to live in complete contentment and fulfillment and joy. When we are full of the Spirit, we are given access to divine wisdom and strength to tackle the most difficult problems and overcome the most challenging obstacles. So how do we be filled with the Spirit? We must deny ourselves daily and follow Christ. We must empty ourselves of “self” and ask the Lord to fill us with His Spirit. We must keep in step with the Spirit every day of our lives, walking in obedience to His will and His way. Most importantly, we must allow the Spirit to sanctify our character and nature so that we become more and more like God.

When I think of the greatest people I have ever known, the number one quality that stands out is that they are full of the Spirit. They are people no one has ever heard of who played a critical role in my life. They are men and women of deep faith who taught me more about Jesus than I ever thought I’d learn. They showed me by the way they lived what it meant to walk in the Spirit and be full of the Spirit and, as a result, they lived some of the most extraordinary lives. Most of them were not rich or well-known. They were not influencers by any stretch of the imagination. They were simply ordinary people who had given their lives to an extraordinary God and God blessed them immeasurably. That’s what I want for my life as well.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 43-45, Psalm 14 (No devotionals on Sunday)

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Jan 14 2024

Readings for today: [Genesis 43-45, Psalms 14](#)

(video introduction)

(audio reading)

**January 15, 2024**  
**God's Tenderness**

Readings for today: [Genesis 46-47, Psalm 15](#)

(audio reading)

There are moments in the Bible when we see the tenderness of God on full display. I cannot imagine how Jacob must have felt when he first received the news that his beloved son was alive. For years, he had grieved Joseph's death and it has taken its toll on him. When he appears before Pharaoh, he describes his life as short and hard and not on the same level as his ancestors. "My pilgrimage has lasted 130 years. My years have been few and hard, and they have not reached the years of my ancestors during their pilgrimages." Jacob has endured a lot of emotional and relational turmoil. He grew up in conflict with his brother. He took advantage of his ailing father. He deceived his uncle. He buried a beloved wife. He believed he lost a beloved son. And yet, God has been faithful. He has never left Jacob's side. And now at the end of his life, God has one final surprise for this man He loves so much.

"I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you back. Joseph will close your eyes when you die." (Genesis 46:3-4 CSB) Jacob will get to see Joseph again. Not only that but Joseph will be the one to close his eyes in death. Joseph will be the one who will secure his body and make sure he is buried in the Promised Land. Joseph is the one who will make sure all of God's promises come to pass because Joseph is God's chosen instrument. The one God sent before Jacob and his entire family in order to preserve God's plan of salvation. God could easily have accomplished all this without giving Jacob this special gift but God loves Jacob. God has loved Jacob from before he was born and God will love Jacob all the way to the end. In His tender mercy, God allows Jacob to see His plan come to pass. It's a beautiful and tender scene.

Friends, God looks at us with that same tenderness in His heart. The Bible says it is God's kindness that leads us to repentance. It is God's love that drives His relentless pursuit of us. It is God's desire that all should be saved and none perish. As we move into Exodus in the coming weeks, we will see God literally define Himself as the God of compassion. Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast, loyal love. This is who God is, friends. Today, yesterday, and forever. As you approach God in prayer today, come with the sure and certain knowledge that God loves you with such deep tenderness. His heart is for you. It breaks for you when you go through pain. It rejoices with you when you have success. It mourns with you when you experience loss. It is stirred for you when you are excited. God loves you, friends. There's no greater news in the world!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 48-50, Psalm 16

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**January 16, 2024**  
**Turning Evil to Good**

Readings for today: [Genesis 48-50, Psalm 16](#)

[\(video intro\)](#)

[\(audio reading\)](#)

God specializes turning what we intend for evil to the good. The history of humanity is replete with example after example of humanity making decisions that serve their own selfish purposes. The problem with this approach to life is that it creates a ripple effect that invariably impacts others in a negative way. All of us fall prey to it. All of us struggle with it. There is no such thing as a decision that has no consequences. Every decision or even non-decision creates conditions that others experience as frustrating, painful, or disappointing. Some even create conditions that are harmful or life-threatening. The more power and influence one has, the greater the ripple effect but even those who have little to no power or influence can still have an impact.

Several years ago, I was traveling with a team to one of the poorest places on earth. As we ministered all week alongside and among those living in life-threatening poverty, one of the members of our team pulled me aside and asked how God could allow such conditions to exist. It was a great question. One everyone should ask when they come face to face with extreme suffering. As we talked, I asked her why she was so quick to blame God. She replied with the classic theological answer that since God was in control over all things, He must be responsible when things go south. I then asked her if she felt any responsibility herself for the conditions of the people we were serving. She did not. I asked her why. She shared with me that her life was lived on the other side of the world, in a different country, and she didn't have either the power or the opportunity to change things. I challenged her on this line of thinking. Imagine, I said, if she reoriented her entire life around relieving conditions like what we had just experienced. Imagine if she recruited friends and family and neighbors to the cause. Imagine entire communities or even nations rallying together to provide clean drinking water and food security to every single person on the planet. It certainly could happen. We simply lack the will because we all ultimately want to take care of ourselves first. And therein lies the problem. Thankfully, God is faithful. He works through His people in all sorts of amazing ways to meet the needs of the poor and powerless and marginalized and broken. Billions of dollars are given each year to relieve life-threatening poverty and provide access to education and all sorts of other opportunities for people around the world. God promised Abraham that it would be through him that all the nations of the earth would be blessed and God has never wavered on that promise. It is through us that God will work His perfect will for the world, turning what we often intend for evil for His good.

This essentially is the narrative behind Joseph's story. God takes what Joseph's brothers intended for evil - selling him into slavery - and turns it to the good. God takes what Potiphar's wife intended for evil - falsely accusing him of rape and throwing him in prison - and turns it to the good. God takes what the cupbearer intended for evil - by promptly forgetting Joseph once he was restored to his position at court - and turns it to the good. God takes a massive famine - a natural evil - and turns it to the good by providing an opportunity for Joseph to step into leadership. Over and over again, God uses the circumstances of Joseph's life to mold and shape and prepare him for the good that was to come. As a result, Joseph was able to not only save his family but all of Egypt from a mass starvation event.

When one looks back at Joseph's life and takes each incident in isolation, it would be tough to see where everything was headed. However, once the full picture is in view, one can easily see the hand of God at work. The same is true for us. If we focus on the isolated events of our lives, it's hard to see the impact - good or bad - that we make. However, if we step back and look at the big picture, we can see

how God is at work using all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 1-3, Psalm 17

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**January 17, 2024**  
**Progressive Revelation**

Readings for today: [Exodus 1-3, Psalm 17](#)      [\(video intro\)](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

It's hard for us to imagine what it must have been like for the ancient Israelites. We live two thousand years post-resurrection. We have the full counsel of God revealed in a complete Bible. We have generations of church history to look back on where we can see the hand of God at work. Most importantly, we have the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit inside us, keeping us in constant contact with our Heavenly Father. The ancient Israelites had none of these things. Four hundred years had passed since they last heard from God. All they had were a few family stories to go on of this God who occasionally spoke to their ancestors. They had no Scripture. No worship. No Law. Nothing to go on. They didn't even know God's name.

One of the things we have to remember as we read through the Bible is the nature of progressive revelation. God reveals Himself in different ways to different people in different situations over time. He speaks to them in a language they can understand, taking into account their particular time and place and culture and worldview. This can result in misunderstandings about God. When we see Him reveal Himself in different ways, we might be tempted to think He is contradicting Himself. But nothing could be further from the truth. God's character and nature are eternal and unchanging and everything He does has a purpose. It is geared to bring about His great salvation plan.

Consider the plight of Israel. They have lived for hundreds of years in exile from the Promised Land. The king of Egypt no longer remembers the contributions their forefather Joseph made to the nation. As the Israelites grow in number, they represent a potential threat. After all, no empire wants a powerful people group living on their border. So Pharaoh acts decisively to enslave them and decimate their population by killing all the male children. It's brutal. It's violent. It's terrifying. Such was life in the ancient world. One wonders why God didn't intervene? Why did He not reach down and strike Pharaoh down? Why did He not pluck His people up and bring them back to the Promised Land? Why did God allow such evil and suffering? Once again, we come face to face with God's unchanging nature and character. He absolutely refuses to change His eternal plan. In the beginning, He gave humanity dominion over all He had made and He has never taken that gift back. So if salvation is to come to the world, it must come in and through the creatures who bear His image. The creatures He set up to reign and rule over all He has made.

I love the end of chapter two. "After a long time, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned because of their difficult labor, they cried out, and their cry for help because of the difficult labor ascended to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the Israelites, and God knew." (Exodus 2:23-25 CSB) God heard. God remembered. God saw. God knew. God never abandoned His people. He was always there though they could not see Him or hear Him or perceive Him. God was always faithful and at the right moment - after the king of Egypt had died - God raised up a deliverer to save His people.

Now think about your own life. Think about the many ways you groan due to difficult labor or cry out due to struggle and heartbreak. Sometimes it may seem like God is silent. It may seem like God isn't responding to your prayers. But God is faithful, friends! And at the right time, He will act. He will send deliverance - usually through another person - to bring you comfort and peace.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 4-6, Psalm 18

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**January 18, 2024**  
**Second-Guessing**

Readings for today: [Exodus 4-6, Psalm 18](#)      [\(video intro\)](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

We all second-guess ourselves. We all question ourselves at times. Especially when we are about to make significant decisions or take great risks. I remember when I was thinking about asking my wife to marry me. Although I was pretty sure she would say “yes” after a year or so of dating, there were no guarantees. So I second-guessed myself. I wasn’t worthy of her love. I wasn’t the man she needed me to be. I didn’t have great job prospects after college. I wouldn’t be able to provide for her like I felt she deserved. I remember when I was getting ordained. Although I was pretty sure God had called me, I didn’t feel worthy to serve Him in this way. I know my sin. I know my struggles. I know my fears. I know my doubts. I wondered if these things disqualified me. I’ve served three churches since graduating from seminary. The risks in each situation were great. Things could have gone very wrong and in one case did. There were no guarantees that I would be successful in leading those churches. I was anxious at times. Struggled with self-confidence. Wondered at certain moments if I should go and do something else. But through it all, God was faithful. He kept encouraging me and working with me and challenging me to surrender more and more of my life to Him.

The same is true for everyone we encounter in Scripture, including great leaders like Moses. Today’s reading includes one of my favorite stories. I love how vulnerable Moses is before God. He expresses his fears and doubts. He wonders if he’s the right man for the job. He struggles to accept God’s call on his life. And how does God respond? He is patient. He works with Moses. Encourages Moses. Even gets stern and challenges Moses. As a result, Moses goes back to Egypt. Back to the place where he was wanted for murder. Back to the place where he grew up. He goes back to face his fears and failures. And he takes nothing with him except a staff and a promise from God. It’s a powerful example of how God can use anyone to accomplish His purposes.

Perhaps you know how Moses feels? Perhaps you’ve second-guessed yourself a time or two? Perhaps you have fears and questions and doubts? We all do. And the great news is God invites us to share those things with Him. He invites us to be vulnerable before Him. And He encourages us to remember it is not by our might or our power or our wisdom that we make our way in this world. It is by God’s Spirit. Read and re-read Psalm 18 today. Let those words fill your heart with the confidence that can only come from God. No matter challenges you may be facing in your life, know God is with you! “I love you, Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock where I seek refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I called to the Lord, who is worthy of praise, and I was saved from my enemies.” (Psalms 18:1-3 CSB)

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 7-9, Psalm 19

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**January 19, 2024**  
**Hardness of Heart**

Readings for today: [Exodus 7-9, Psalm 19](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

I used to have little sympathy for Pharaoh. I would read through this section of Exodus and shake my head at the number of times he hardened his heart against the will of God. I considered him evil and therefore not really worthy of my attention. He was the enemy of God's chosen people who oppressed them in all sorts of terrible ways and therefore didn't deserve any mercy or grace at all. Furthermore, God seems to feel the same way about Pharaoh. After all, He tells Moses He will harden Pharaoh's heart in order to demonstrate His greatness over the nations of the earth. He will display His glory for all the earth to see as He humbles the greatest ruler of the greatest empire on earth at the time.

However, as a pastor, I have sat across the counseling table with far too many people and have watched them harden their own hearts against the will of God. It is heartbreaking to witness. People I love dearly who are experiencing all kinds of crisis and still they resist God. Often they will take steps to follow God initially when things are at their darkest, just like Pharaoh does throughout our reading today. At times it seems he is on the verge of letting God's people go only to recant once a particular plague has passed. The same is often true of the people I work with. As soon as the worst of the crisis passes, they return back to their old ways.

The mystery of who hardens Pharaoh's heart is a challenging one to grapple with. Does God harden Pharaoh's heart? Does Pharaoh have a choice in the matter? Does Pharaoh harden his own heart? Does God simply reinforce the choices Pharaoh is already making? I honestly do not know. Neither does the Apostle Paul who grapples with this very question in Romans 9. There he essentially asks, "What if God raised Pharaoh up so that He might display His power in him and proclaim His name in the whole earth?" Does this make God unjust? Not so, says Paul. For God is God and He is fully within His rights to show mercy on whom He will show mercy and harden whom He wants to harden.

At the end of the day, none of us can answer this question for anyone but ourselves. Are we hardening our hearts towards God? Are we thinking and acting in ways that reinforce sinful patterns in our lives? Have we truly humbled ourselves and surrendered to God? The Scriptures say God desires all to be saved and come to a knowledge of His truth. They say God so loved the world that He gave His only Son and whosoever believes in Him shall not perish - shall not have their heart hardened - but shall receive everlasting life. Do not harden your heart today. Respond to the call of the gospel. Give your life to Jesus Christ and He will give you a new heart, one that can never be hardened again.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 10-12, Psalm 20

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**January 20, 2024**  
**Preparation**

Readings for today: [Exodus 10-12, Psalm 20](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

Several years ago, I read a book about the leadership principles of the Jesuit Order. If you don't know the history, the Jesuits have been around for over four hundred years. They have established themselves across the globe in many different cultures. They are adaptable, flexible, and highly successful at accomplishing their mission. The current pope is a Jesuit by training. They mainly focus on education but are highly engaged in their local communities as most Roman Catholic orders tend to be. One of the four principles they base their way of life on is to always live "with one foot raised." In other words, they are always open to what's next. They are willing to go wherever God calls them to go. Do what He calls them to do. They are prepared to leave at a moment's notice when His call comes.

I find this way of living inspiring and it reminds me of how the Israelites prepared for Passover. Of all the instructions given, the one that intrigues me the most is the one about how they should dress. "You must be dressed for travel, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. You are to eat it in a hurry; it is the Lord's Passover." (Exodus 12:11 CSB) God was getting ready to do a mighty work in their lives. He was preparing a miracle just for them. The meal they ate was a sign of the deliverance that was to come and they were to dress in such a way that they could take advantage of the kairos moment when it arrived. Imagine the kind of faith it must have taken for these beaten down, broken people to trust Moses when he said God's deliverance was on its way. They had been slaves for four hundred years. They had lived for generations under the merciless lash of the Pharaohs. But now things had changed. God remembered them. God saw them. God heard their cries. And the time had come for them to be set free.

What about you? Do you live with one foot raised? Do you live in anticipation of what God can do in your life? Do you trust God? Despite your past, despite your circumstances, despite your fears and failures? Do you believe God is at work even now to bring you greater freedom? Greater joy? Greater peace? Greater love? Greater blessing? Are you willing to dress for that future? Prepare for God's future? Step into it when it arrives?

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 13-15, Psalm 21 (No devotionals on Sundays)

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**Jan 21 2024**

Readings for today: [Exodus 13-15, Psalms 21](#)

[\(audio reading\)](#)

**January 22, 2024**

**Sabbath**

Readings for today: [Exodus 16-18, Psalm 22](#)

[\(video intro\)](#)

[\(audio reading\)](#)

I was talking with a colleague recently about keeping a Sabbath. One day out of every seven to rest and recharge. We discussed how he spent his Sabbath. The kinds of things he did in order to renew his soul. He intentionally spent time with the Lord in worship. He went on hikes in the mountains. He played with his grandchildren. He read. He worked out. All great practices for a Sabbath day. We then started talking about how he spends his time on the other six days. And though his approach to the Sabbath is deeply biblical, his approach to the other six days is much different. He started talking about his need to guard his time. His need to set boundaries around work. His unwillingness to work past certain hours or respond to emails, texts, and phone calls unless it worked for him. He talked about his right to have a certain number of days off each week and each year. He talked about his right to take a sabbatical (three months off) every five to seven years. I asked him if he felt his approach to his work was as biblical as his approach to his Sabbath. After taking a few moments to reflect, he was honest, “probably not.”

Six days shall you work and the seventh day you shall rest. This is the divine rhythm set up by God for human beings to flourish. Six days we shall go out to gather. Six days we shall work on some level. It could be at our jobs. It could be around our homes. It could be with our families. God has provided six days to take care of our responsibilities. Six days to be fruitful and multiply. Six days to labor and exercise dominion over all He has entrusted into our hands. And then on the seventh day, we are to rest. We are to honor God by reminding ourselves we live “not by might, not by power, but by God’s Spirit.” We are to remind ourselves that everything we have is a gift. It’s divine provision. Our time. Our talent. Our treasure. All of it comes from the Lord. God instilled this way of life into his people in the wilderness. Six days they were to go out and gather manna from heaven. Six days they were to harvest from the land. However, on the seventh day, they were to rest. They were to honor God by trusting His ways over their ways.

Following the Sabbath principle in our lives is a test. It tests us because many of us want to work seven days a week. We labor and labor and never take the time to rest. We push ourselves so hard with all the activities we build into our schedules and our lives. We set a pace that is unsustainable and it eventually causes us to crash and burn. But it also tests us on the flip side as it relates to our work. Many of us are just working for the weekend. We do the minimal amount necessary to get by. We punch the clock either literally or mentally and refuse to do anything more. We believe we have a right to an American weekend. We believe we have a right to work forty hours or less. We believe we have a right to several weeks of vacation. In certain professions, we believe we have a right to sabbaticals which become extended periods of time off. According to Scripture, work is not a necessary evil. Sabbath rest is not laziness. God has created us to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. We are created for rest in Christ. We are created for this divine rhythm God has set for eternity and we find our deepest fulfillment as align our lives with Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 19-21, Psalm 23

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**January 23, 2024**  
**Relationship before Laws**

Readings for today: [Exodus 19-21, Psalm 23](#)      [\(video intro\)](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

“Christianity is not about rules, it’s about a relationship.” I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve heard this or said this myself over the years. It’s true of course. But too often people make the mistake of thinking this is a New Testament idea when in fact its roots go much farther back. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. The same God who revealed Himself fully in Jesus Christ, reveals Himself to His people at Mt. Sinai as a God of relationship. A God who brought them out of Egypt on eagle’s wings. A God who delivered them from bondage and slavery. A God who refuses to abandon His people but remains faithful to the covenant He first made with Abraham and Sarah,

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery.” (Exodus 20:2 CSB) This is where the Ten Commandments begin. Not with a rule but with a relationship. Not with law but with love. “I am the Lord your God...” God has laid claim to this particular people. He has set them apart as a nation of priests in order to bring blessing to the world. They will serve as an example to the nations of what it means to live by faith. To walk in holiness and purity before the Lord. And to help them understand their new identity as God’s chosen people, God gives them a set of laws to govern their lives in an ancient near east context. Some of these laws - like the Ten Commandments - are transcultural, meaning they remain in force in every time and place. Some of these laws will be ceremonial, meaning they govern the worshipping life of ancient Israel and no longer apply in our context. Some of these laws are civil in nature, meaning they apply to the nation of Israel, a theocratic state that no longer exists. Don’t get lost in the details. The main point is to stay focused on what God has done to save and set apart His people.

The Apostle Peter will pick up some of these same ideas in the New Testament. He will call the people of God a “a chosen people” and “a nation of priests” and a “people set apart for God’s own possession.” You and I are grafted into the covenant. Through Jesus Christ, we enter into a relationship with God whereby He delivers and saves us from our sin. Jesus is the greater Moses. He accomplishes eternally what Moses can only do temporally. He secures for us a place in God’s eternal Kingdom and when that great day comes, we too will be lifted up on eagle’s wings to dwell with the Lord forever.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 22-24, Psalm 24

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**January 24, 2024**  
**God's Invitation**

Readings for today: [Exodus 22-24, Psalm 24](#)    [\(video intro\)](#)    [\(audio reading\)](#)

I love the invitation God extends to the leaders of Israel. He invites them to cross from earth to heaven. From the dimension of this world to the dimension of the world to come. It's a great reminder to us all that heaven is not "up there" somewhere in outer space but a reality that exists all around us all the time. It's the dimension where God dwells and it's the place God is actually preparing for us as His people. The leaders of Israel get a taste of this reality when they ascend Mt. Sinai with Moses. "Go up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of Israel's elders, and bow in worship at a distance. Moses alone is to approach the Lord, but the others are not to approach, and the people are not to go up with him....Then Moses went up with Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of Israel's elders, and they saw the God of Israel. Beneath his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as clear as the sky itself. God did not harm the Israelite nobles; they saw him, and they ate and drank." (Exodus 24:1-2, 9-11 CSB) Can you imagine the moment when you cross from rocky ground to pavement made of gemstones and sit down at a table to eat with God? It must have been incredible and it makes the choices some of these men make a little later in the narrative even more heartbreaking.

God's invitation is still there for us. It's not just for special people or holy people or people who went to seminary and became pastors. Jesus Himself says He goes to heaven to prepare a place for us so we can live with Him for all eternity. The visions recorded throughout the Bible of the heavenly realm describe it as a place of breathtaking beauty and splendor. And the reality is we can experience a taste of it even in this life. How you ask? Listen to the Psalmist. "Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not appealed to what is false, and who has not sworn deceitfully. He will receive blessing from the Lord, and righteousness from the God of his salvation. Such is the generation of those who inquire of him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob." (Psalms 24:3-6 CSB) God promises that all those who seek Him will find Him if they will seek Him with all their hearts. The key is not perfection but an honest and authentic desire to truly dwell in God's presence and walk in His ways.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 25-27, Psalm 25

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**January 25, 2024**  
**God's Dwelling**

Readings for today: [Exodus 25-27, Psalm 25](#)    [\(video intro\)](#)    [\(audio reading\)](#)

God's desire from the beginning was to dwell with the creatures He made in His own image. He will stop at nothing to have a relationship with us. He will allow nothing to get in the way. No matter how far we run or how often we hide or how many times we sin and turn away; God refuses to let us go. Yes, He exiled us from Eden but it was for our own good. He refused to let us eat of the Tree of Life and live forever in our sinful, broken condition. His plan has always been to restore us and the world to its original condition. This is why He instructs His people to build a Tabernacle. A sanctuary where God will dwell. A place for them to talk with Him and meet with Him. "They are to make a sanctuary for me so that I may dwell among them." (Exodus 25:8 CSB)

It's easy to get lost in the minutiae of passages like the one we read for today. All the instructions for all the liturgical furniture. The Ark of the Covenant. The Table of Presence. The Tabernacle itself. It's hard for us to see or understand why this is important. But take a step back for a moment. Look at the big picture. God wants to dwell with His people! God wants to walk with us just like He did in the Garden of Eden! God wants to meet with us and speak with us and have a relationship with us! It's amazing. Especially so in light of what the New Testament says about the new tabernacle. "Don't you yourselves know that you are God's temple and that the Spirit of God lives in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16 CSB) By faith, God makes each of us a Tabernacle. Ever since Pentecost the Spirit of God no longer dwells in a building but in each and every believer's heart. God walking with us and talking with us as we move throughout our lives.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 28-29, Psalm 26

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**January 26, 2024**  
**Intercession**

Readings for today: [Exodus 28-29, Psalm 26](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

I remember my ordination service. It was nothing like what we read about today thankfully! ;-) No sacrifices. No special anointing oils. No incense. No elaborate dress. I was 29 at the time. I stood before my colleagues in the Presbytery of South Alabama and took vows to serve the Lord and God's people with all my heart and all my strength. When I read these verses about the ordination of Aaron and his sons, it feels strange. The cultural distance between our time and ancient Israel is vast. I struggle to connect or even picture all the rituals and sacrifices. However, there is one thing I do understand. Every time Aaron entered into the presence of the Lord, he carried the names of Israel with him. His job was to keep their names ever present before God. He interceded for them. He understood their needs, wants, and desires and brought those to God. His job was to represent the people to God and God to the people. "Fasten both stones on the shoulder pieces of the ephod as memorial stones for the Israelites. Aaron will carry their names on his two shoulders before the Lord as a reminder... Whenever he enters the sanctuary, Aaron is to carry the names of Israel's sons over his heart on the breastpiece for decisions, as a continual reminder before the Lord." (Exodus 28:12, 29 CSB)

I feel very much the same way. I don't have gold breastpieces or gemstones or anything else to carry with me when I enter God's presence but I do take the time and make the time to intercede for God's people. I meet with lots of folks on a regular basis so I can understand their needs, wants, and desires and bring those before the Lord. I represent the people I am called to serve to God and God to the people. However, this calling is not just for pastors. It's for every believer. We are a royal priesthood according to 1 Peter. Each of us is called to act in a priestly fashion and intercede for our families, friends, churches, communities, nation, world. We are called to bring the names of those we love and even those we hate before the Lord to ask for His grace and mercy on their behalf. We are to bring their needs, wants, and desires and submit them to God. We are to represent them to God and represent God to the people.

It's a sacred responsibility and a precious one. To think that God knows each of us by name. He wants to hear about our lives. He wants to know all we think, say, or do. Not to curse us but to bless us. Not so much to judge us - though there is some of that - but to love us. Not to tear us down but to raise us up. Not to ruin us but to restore us. This is God's will for us and why He calls each of us to a ministry of intercession.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 30-31, Psalm 27

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**January 27, 2024**  
**Worship**

Readings for today: [Exodus 30-31, Psalm 27](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

“I have asked one thing from the Lord; it is what I desire: to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, gazing on the beauty of the Lord and seeking him in his temple.” (Psalms 27:4 CSB) This is the heart of every believer. We long to be in God’s presence. We long to hear His voice. We long to experience the power of His Spirit. This has been true throughout the centuries going all the way back to ancient Israel. The cultural forms of worship have obviously changed since those days. We no longer need to engage in elaborate rituals in order to approach the throne room of grace. Jesus Christ, through His death and resurrection, has opened the way. His blood has washed us clean. Made us pure. Sanctified us so we can enter God’s presence without fear.

The Israelites didn’t have the benefit of Christ’s saving death but everything they engaged in prefigures what He does for us. The sights and smells and sounds of Old Testament worship is but a foreshadowing of Christ’s saving work on our behalf. Just as Aaron burned fragrant incense morning and night throughout the generations, so Christ Himself becomes the fragrant incense for us. Just as Aaron and his sons had to engage in ritual washing so they presented themselves clean before the Lord, so Christ washes us clean by His blood. Christ embodies and fulfills every single part of Old Testament worship and this is an important truth to keep in mind as we read. It helps bridge the cultural distance between us and ancient Israel and makes the readings more relevant to our lives.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 32-34, Psalm 28 (No devotionals on Sundays)

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Readings for today: Exodus 32-34, Psalms 28 [\(video introduction\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

January 29, 2024  
**No Such Thing as Ordinary**

Readings for today: [Exodus 35-40, Psalm 29](#) [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

When I graduated from college, I had one mission. To become a pastor. I wanted to go to seminary. I wanted to get ordained. I wanted to serve a church. God had other plans. My grades from college were terrible. I flunked out after my sophomore year due to excessive drinking. When I became a Christian, my life turned around and I re-applied and got back in under probation. Though I did pretty well my last two years, the hole I dug for myself was deep so I graduated by the skin of my teeth. The chances of me getting into grad school were slim at best. Two weeks after graduation, I got married to the love of my life and our mentors advised us to wait at least a year before going off to school. Looking back, it was great advice but it didn't feel good in the moment. It felt like yet another barrier to me doing what I felt called to do. So I got a job. I went to work for Boulder Community Hospital. I hired on as an admissions clerk, making \$7.75/hr. My wife and I rented an old, run-down apartment and did our best to make ends meet. Honestly, it was the best thing that could have happened to me.

When we read the Bible, it's tempting to focus on the main characters. Guys like Moses. Women like Miriam. But what about the lesser known characters? Those entrusted with the more mundane aspects of Israel's life together? What can we learn from guys like Bezalel and Oholiab? They didn't see a burning bush. They didn't hear the voice of God. They didn't go up on the mountain with Moses. They were not warriors. They were not leaders. They were not among the seventy elders Moses called. They simply were two people with God-given talent and a passion for craftsmanship. Prior to building the Tabernacle, I imagine they spent most of their days in obscurity. Building carts. Repairing tents. Making clothes. The everyday, ordinary, mundane work required to sustain God's people on their journey to the Promised Land. Amazingly, their work caught the eye of God. "Moses then said to the Israelites, "Look, the Lord has appointed by name Bezalel son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. He has filled him with God's Spirit, with wisdom, understanding, and ability in every kind of craft to design artistic works in gold, silver, and bronze, to cut gemstones for mounting, and to carve wood for work in every kind of artistic craft. He has also given both him and Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, the ability to teach others. He has filled them with skill to do all the work of a gem cutter; a designer; an embroiderer in blue, purple, and scarlet yarn and fine linen; and a weaver. They can do every kind of craft and design artistic designs." (Exodus 35:30-35 CSB) Because these men had been faithful in the small things, God entrusted them with the most sacred work imaginable...building a home for God!

When I started at Boulder Community Hospital, I was per diem. I would only be called in when people were out sick or on vacation. Within a few weeks, several people in my department quit so I was asked to go full-time. Within another few weeks, the lead in my department quit and I was asked to take her position. Within six months, my manager resigned and I was asked to step into her shoes. Within a relatively short period of time, I was managing four departments and about 50 employees and I was all of 24 years old. I have no way to explain how this happened. I had no previous healthcare experience. I had never managed people before. My resume certainly didn't fit the responsibility I had been given.

The only way I can explain it is God. God filled me with His Spirit. He gave me ability and intelligence. He instilled in me, through my parents, a strong work ethic. He gave me a knack for working with people. And as I proved faithful in the small things, like checking in patients day after day, He entrusted me with greater things like managing all of “Patient Access” services.

Bezalel and Oholiab are great reminders that all of us have been gifted by God in some way and all of us are called to use our gifts for His glory. It’s not just pastors or missionaries who are the heroes or heroines. It is the people of God exercising the gifts God has given each of them for the upbuilding of the Body of Christ and the glory of God’s Kingdom. When we fail to exercise our gifts or diminish our gifts in any way, we lose out on at least part of what God has planned for us. And those around us lose out as well. Think about how impoverished we would be if there had never been a Bezalel or Oholiab? Think about the impact on the worshipping life of Israel if there were no craftsmen around to make all God had planned? Now think about our life together. Think about our worship together. What gifts do you bring? Is it the gift of music? The gift of prayer? The gift of friendship? The gift of production? The gift of preaching? The gift of teaching? The gift of serving? If you are a Christian, you have the same Spirit of God filling you that filled Bezalel! This same Spirit imparts all the gifts and talents we need to worship and serve God as He demands. So how are you exercising your gift? How are you seeking to use your gift to build up others in your home, your neighborhood, church, and community?

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 1-4, Psalm 30

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January 30, 2024  
Sacrifices

Readings for today: [Leviticus 1-4, Psalm 30](#)      [\(video intro\)](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

Today we dive into Leviticus and the reading gets significantly more challenging. The biggest reason is the cultural distance between us in the 21st century and the people of Israel living in the ancient near east. Much of what you will be reading was fairly normative back then. Sacrifices were made to gods and goddesses of all kinds throughout the region. At the same time, there were some stark differences between Israel and her neighbors which we will see as we move through this book. What was the point of all the sacrifices and especially, all the blood? Purity. Ritual purity before the Lord. Ancient Israelite culture - much like ancient near east culture - was deeply concerned with purity. There were very specific rules regarding what was clean and unclean, pure and impure, holy and unholy. And when those rules were violated, a sacrifice was required to “atone.”

Atonement is a reparation made to right a wrong or restore that which was broken or repair an injury. It's a key word in Leviticus. It's God providing a way for Israel to dwell in His Holy Presence. Remember, everything we're reading must be seen through the lens of relationship. God wants to restore the relationship He once had in the Garden of Eden with humanity. But humanity has fallen. She is unclean, impure, and unholy. So God, in His graciousness and because of His great love for us, provides a way to reverse our condition. He gives us specific instructions on how to maintain our relationship with Him. It requires a series of sacrifices and, as we'll see as we get deeper into Leviticus, a specific way of life but it's all done so that we can walk with God and talk with God just like it was in the beginning. In fact, one might argue what we'll read here in Leviticus is what life would have looked like in the Garden pre-Fall and it is what life will look like in the New Jerusalem when Jesus returns. In the Garden and in the New Jerusalem, there is no sin. The law of God is written on our hearts. We walk in obedience out of our deep love and affection for the Lord. This is what God desires but we live in the “in between.” We live in the “already but not yet.” And that requires us to resist the desires of our sinful nature and walk by the Spirit.

So why don't we perform the sacrifices listed here in Leviticus? Why don't we follow all the laws we'll be reading about in the days ahead? Because of Jesus. Jesus Christ is the perfect sacrifice. On the cross, He made full atonement for all our sin. He is the “once and for all” sacrifice that puts an end to the need for bulls and goats and sheep. His blood is powerful enough to wash away the sins of the world. Jesus also perfectly fulfills the law. And because He lived the life you and I were designed to live, we are set free from the tyranny of legalism and offered forgiveness and grace. This brings us back to the video we watched for our devotional about the favor of God. The favor of God is granted to us not through human effort but because of what Christ has done. Thanks be to God!

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 5-7, Psalm 31

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January 31, 2024  
Holiness

Readings for today: [Leviticus 5-7, Psalm 31](#)    [\(video intro\)](#)    [\(audio reading\)](#)

“Be holy because I am holy.” (1 Peter 1:16 CSB) God created us to be holy as He is holy. He created us to be perfect and pure just as He is perfect and pure. He created us as eternal beings, vessels made in His image, literally built to carry the weight of His glory. But we fell from grace. We sinned and went our own way. We decided we wanted to be our own gods. As a result, sin and corruption and impurity and unholiness polluted our souls. We are conceived in iniquity. Born with a sinful, broken condition. Our loves are disordered. Our desires disoriented. Our focus is inward rather than outward and upward. And this creates separation between us and God. So how do we bridge the gap? That’s the question this section of Leviticus is attempting to answer.

The first thing to remember is Leviticus comes from God. In this book, He is providing a way for the breach to be repaired. Through His laws, He is offering to restore that which was broken. It is at God’s initiation. God takes the first step towards us. He builds the bridge from heaven to earth in order to give us a chance to walk across it and return to Him. He does this eyes wide open. He knows the depth of our sin. Still He shows us grace. Still He provides a way. Still He longs to be in relationship with us. And yet, He also refuses to take away our voice. He refuses to deny us agency. He offers us a choice because love must be freely offered and freely given. It can never be coerced or forced.

The second thing to keep in mind is the vast chasm between a holy God and an unholly people. We can’t begin to fathom the distance between us. We can’t begin to understand the sheer breadth and depth of the void we created when we walked away from God. The reality is we don’t take God’s holiness nor our unholiness with enough seriousness. If we did, we would find the stories of the sacrifices told in these chapters far more palatable. We would understand our need for atonement. We would fall on our knees in worship and deep gratitude for all God has done.

The third thing to remember is God’s mercy and grace. He meets us where we are in life. The poor are not required to give a disproportionate sacrifice. Means are offered to make their offering proportional to where they find themselves. Two turtle doves. Two handfuls of flour. God makes allowances for each and every one of us. It’s yet another powerful reminder of His amazing grace.

I know the Old Testament sacrificial system seems weird and arbitrary and archaic. We are too far removed from the ancient world and therefore have a difficult time wrapping our minds around all the death and blood. But when we fast forward to Calvary, we see where it all comes to fulfillment. God offering up Himself as the perfect sacrifice for our sin. God building the bridge all the way from heaven to earth. God making us holy by washing us clean once and for all through His shed blood.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 8-10, Psalm 32

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