

The Big Story—A Thirty-Day Journey through the Bible

For the next 30 days, we will take a journey through the entire Bible as a way of understanding the big story we are all a part of—God’s story. From Genesis to Revelation we see the entire arc of human history from creation to the fall into sin to God’s redemption through Jesus Christ, and finally to the coming new heavens and new earth where King Jesus will reign and peace and love will prevail. When we know and understand this bigger story, we are better able to find our place and purpose in the story.

Day 1—The Good Creation

Read Genesis 1:1–2:3

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

And God said, “Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water.” So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. God called the vault “sky.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.

And God said, “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.” And it was so. God called the dry ground “land,” and the gathered waters he called “seas.” And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, “Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.” And it was so. The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the third day.

And God said, “Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years, and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth.” And it was so. God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. God set them in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth, to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the fourth day.

And God said, “Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky.” So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems and that moves about in it, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the fifth day.

And God said, “Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind.” And it was so. God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so.

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.

By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

Reflect

The Bible opens, fittingly, with the words “In the beginning God...” So, the first truth we know is that there was a beginning and God was already there. And, as we read further, we discover that God created all things—*all* things—as well as the fundamental rhythms and cycles of all things. Scholars believe that the purpose of this creation story—possibly written by Moses—was to rightly orient human beings to God and His creation and to dispel pagan creation myths rampant during Moses’ day.

- In this familiar story of creation, what stood out to you most as you read through it this time? What surprised you? What confused you?
- In this passage, certain repeated phrases create a kind of rhythm as you read—“and there was evening, and there was morning” and “and God saw that it was good.” These refrains

seem to echo the rhythms God built into creation. What rhythms do you see reflected in this passage? What rhythms do you recognize in your own life?

- What responsibilities did God give human beings?
- What does today's passage reveal to you about God? What do you know about all that you see in the world—the mountains and plains, oceans and sky, sun and moon, the animals, and every human being, including yourself?

Respond

Creator of all things, God of the heavens and the earth, thank You for the goodness and beauty and intention with which You created all things. Remind me every morning when I open my eyes that You spoke all that I see into being. Help me to see the rhythms You have built into each day, week, and year as sacred, meant to be noticed as a sign of Your presence and care. And above all, may I remember with gratitude and worship that You are God and there is not one ray of light, corner of darkness, tiny animal, or broken person beyond Your reach. Amen.

Day 2—A Break in Relationship

Read Genesis 3:1–15

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”

The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

“You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?”

He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”

And he said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?”

The man said, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”

Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?”

The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

So the LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this,

“Cursed are you above all livestock
and all wild animals!
You will crawl on your belly
and you will eat dust
all the days of your life.

And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel.”

Reflect

God created man and woman good and He made them to be in community with God and with each other. God also granted human beings the freedom to choose whether to follow God’s ways for their lives or not. God determined not to force humans to love Him; He gave us the choice. In today’s passage we see that this ability to choose opened humans to the temptation to follow their own path instead of God’s. The serpent, who we later learn is Satan (Revelation 12:9), tempted the man and woman to question God’s ways and even His goodness and they fell for it, eating the fruit God had specifically instructed them not to eat. As a result, they experienced a spiritual and relational death—they were separated from God and from each other. Thus begins the human struggle with brokenness, shame, and sin. But, it is here—in the curse God issued upon Satan—that we find the first promise of the coming of Jesus Christ to stamp out evil and sin.

- How would you describe the man and woman’s reaction to failing to follow God’s instructions not to eat the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden?
- Reflect on your most common temptation to sin. What desire, fear, insecurity, or pain underlies that temptation?
- What relationships are impacted when you give into the temptations in your life? How so?
- What does today’s passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

God, my Redeemer, I read this passage and am reminded of the shame and hurt that come when I choose my own path instead of Yours. And I know the relational breakdowns that result when I act selfishly or out of fear and pain. Thank You for the grace and power that came through Jesus, who did just as You promised He would, stamping out sin and evil by His death and resurrection. In this in-between time, as we wait for Jesus' return, I rest in knowing I have been restored to You and that the day is coming when Your peace will reign again. Amen.

Day 3—God's Promise

Read Genesis 11:27–12:1–5

This is the account of Terah's family line.

Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran. And Haran became the father of Lot. While his father Terah was still alive, Haran died in Ur of the Chaldeans, in the land of his birth. Abram and Nahor both married. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milkah; she was the daughter of Haran, the father of both Milkah and Iskah. Now Sarai was childless because she was not able to conceive.

Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Harran, they settled there.

Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Harran.

The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

"I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you."

So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

Reflect

Between the fall of Adam and Eve into sin and God's call to Abram, we see the ravaging effect of sin on humanity. Adam and Eve had sons and one (Cain) killed the other (Abel) out of anger and envy (Genesis 4:1–12). Thereafter, wickedness prevailed and "every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time" (Genesis 6:5). To curb this endemic wickedness and put

an end to the suffering it was causing, God flooded the whole earth, killing every living thing except Noah—the only righteous man—and his family, and a single pair of each living animal. After the flood, the sinfulness of the human heart reared its head once again and Noah’s descendants disregarded God’s ways, seeking instead to become gods themselves (Genesis 11:1–9). In response, God scattered the peoples all over the earth. But then, God reached out to Abram, a descendant of Noah, and gave him a mission (“Go...to the land I will show you”), promised to make his descendants as numerous as the stars to be a blessing to all of humankind, and made a covenant with Abram to give his descendants a land (Genesis 15:18–21).

- What one or two elements of God’s calling and promise to Abram stood out to you as you read today’s passage? Why do you think those particular elements stood out?
- Reflect on the faith it would have required for Abram to hear God’s instruction to leave everything familiar to go to an as-yet-unidentified land. What has been the most faith-stretching action you have taken in your life? What did it feel like to exercise your faith in that way?
- God makes Abram a seemingly impossible promise—to make him into a great nation. After all, Abram was an old man and his wife Sarai was not able to conceive children. What seemingly impossible hopes do you have?
- What does today’s passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

God of the impossible, thank You that Your promise to Abram has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. I want to be a blessing to others because of the blessing I have received in Christ. Allow me to know Your presence in my life and to walk in faith as Abram did. I know my heart and my hope wavers with doubt that You will care for me in the ways I need. But increase my faith, open my heart anew to all that is possible in You, and fill me with hope for the impossible even when my circumstances look hopeless. Amen.

Day 4—Oppression Has Come

Read Exodus 1:1–22

These are the names of the sons of Israel who went to Egypt with Jacob, each with his family: Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah; Issachar, Zebulun and Benjamin; Dan and Naphtali; Gad and Asher. The descendants of Jacob numbered seventy in all; Joseph was already in Egypt.

Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, but the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them.

Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. “Look,” he said to his people, “the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with

them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.”

So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labor the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly.

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, “When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.” The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, “Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?”

The midwives answered Pharaoh, “Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive.”

So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.

Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: “Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.”

Reflect

Today’s passage picks up several generations after God’s covenant with Abram, who God renamed Abraham, meaning “father of many.” Twenty-five years after God made His promise, Abraham and his wife Sarah had a son named Isaac, who, in turn, had two sons with his wife Rebekah—Jacob and Esau. Jacob (renamed Israel) had twelve sons, whose families came to be known as the twelve tribes of Israel. Because of a severe famine in the promised land of Canaan, Jacob and his sons moved to Egypt where one son, Joseph, held a high position. The Israelites flourished in Egypt until a new ruler rose to power and grew afraid of the increasing number of Israelites. So, he not only enslaved them and worked them harshly, but also ordered the unthinkable—that all of their newborn boys be killed at birth.

- Where do you see God’s grace and provision in today’s passage?
- Reflect on what the Israelites would have thought and prayed for as they suffered under the harsh treatment of their Egyptian masters just a few generations after God made His promise to Abraham. What doubts would they have suffered? What fears?
- What are the most persistent doubts that you have when it comes to God’s promises or provision? What do you do when those doubts arise?
- What does today’s passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

Faithful God, thank You that You are a promise-keeper and that I can rely on what You've said to be true. When I struggle with doubt and uncertainty, point me to Jesus—the ultimate fulfillment of Your promises. Fill me again with the faith and grace I need to keep walking ahead as You direct me. Give me ears to hear You and a heart to serve those who are hurting in the world. Amen.

Day 5—Chosen by God

Read Exodus 3:1–22

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.”

When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!”

And Moses said, “Here I am.”

“Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” Then he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

The LORD said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.”

But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

And God said, “I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.”

Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?”

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

God also said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.’”

“This is my name forever,
the name you shall call me
from generation to generation.

“Go, assemble the elders of Israel and say to them, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—appeared to me and said: I have watched over you and have seen what has been done to you in Egypt. And I have promised to bring you up out of your misery in Egypt into the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—a land flowing with milk and honey.’”

“The elders of Israel will listen to you. Then you and the elders are to go to the king of Egypt and say to him, ‘The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us. Let us take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the LORD our God.’ But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless a mighty hand compels him. So I will stretch out my hand and strike the Egyptians with all the wonders that I will perform among them. After that, he will let you go.

“And I will make the Egyptians favorably disposed toward this people, so that when you leave you will not go empty-handed. Every woman is to ask her neighbor and any woman living in her house for articles of silver and gold and for clothing, which you will put on your sons and daughters. And so you will plunder the Egyptians.”

Reflect

Moses was one of the baby boys that should have been killed according to the Egyptian pharaoh’s order that we read about yesterday. But he wasn’t. Just as he was floating down the Nile River, the pharaoh’s daughter spotted him and had him pulled out and rescued. He was raised as the son of pharaoh’s daughter, enjoying the privileges that came with his position. After Moses had grown up, though, he killed an Egyptian and was forced to flee. In our passage today, we find Moses as an older man. Despite the fact that Moses had committed murder, God appeared to him in spectacular fashion and chose him for a special mission.

- What stood out to you as you read today’s passage? Why?
- What does God’s name—I AM WHO I AM—say about who He is?
- Is there anything in your past that you’ve allowed to hold you back from the things God has called you to do or be? How might Moses’ story and the way God used him give you a way to begin to release whatever resides in your past?
- What does today’s passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

LORD, God, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, thank You that You hear the cries and prayers of Your people. Thank You that You use broken people to accomplish Your purposes in the world. Thank You for the ways You have used me and will use me. I pray that I would have an open heart and hear You when You call me. Grant me the courage and strength to say yes to whatever You ask without delay. Amen.

Day 6—Liberated!

Read Exodus 14:13–30

Moses answered the people, “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.”

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground. I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them. And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen. The Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen.”

Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel’s army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.

The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh’s horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea. During the last watch of the night the LORD looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. He jammed the wheels of their chariots so that they had difficulty driving. And the Egyptians said, “Let’s get away from the Israelites! The LORD is fighting for them against Egypt.”

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen.” Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward it, and the LORD swept them into the sea. The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen—the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived.

But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. That day the LORD saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore.

Reflect

God sent Moses, along with his brother Aaron, to tell Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to let the Israelites go free. Moses did just that—eleven times—and despite the fact that Pharaoh’s refusals caused increasingly harmful plagues to befall his people, he refused to let the Israelites go until the last of ten plagues (Exodus 7:1–10: 28). The plague of the firstborn struck every Egyptian family, including Pharaoh’s. But God preserved the lives of the Israelites’ firstborn because at God’s instruction, they had placed the blood of a lamb on their doorframes (Exodus 12:21–28). During the night of this tenth plague, Pharaoh finally relented and released the Israelites to go with their families and livestock out of Egypt. Thus, the Israelites 430-year stay in Egypt came to an end. As the Israelites fled, Pharaoh changed his mind and sent his army to overtake them and force them back. The Israelites cried out to Moses and here is where today’s passage picks up. With the Egyptian army on the Israelites’ heels, God displayed His power and glory by splitting the Red Sea so that the Israelites could cross and closing the seawater over the Egyptian pursuers. God had liberated the Israelites from their oppressors!

- Based on reading the text of this passage and perhaps the ones referenced above, why do you think God chose to liberate the Israelites in the way that He did?
- As much as you are able, imagine being among the Israelite people as they approached the Red Sea with the Egyptian army close behind. What do you think you would have felt as the Sea began to part and you took a step off the shore?
- When you reflect on the concept of liberation, what or who comes to mind for you? What do you need freedom from in your own life?
- What does today’s passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

God, the great Liberator, thank You for the reminder that comes through today’s passage. The world is filled with oppression and injustice. Systems and people and substances and money oppress so many. I myself have patterns and habits from which I need freedom. Remind me of the freedom I have in Christ and allow me to access and claim that freedom. I hold my life open to You as best as I am able and ask that You would liberate me from anything that holds me down or back from giving my full self to You and to others. Amen.

Day 7—Shaped by God

Read Deuteronomy 6:1–12

These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. Hear, Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, promised you.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

When the LORD your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you—a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant—then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

Reflect

After God liberated the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt, He led them into the wilderness and immediately began to form them into a holy nation that would reflect the wholeness of life God intended human beings to have. This formation, though, would require the Israelites' obedience to the law God set forth to govern their lives. Exodus and Leviticus tell about God giving the people the Ten Commandments and other regulations, and implementing a system of sacrifices and offerings so that the Israelites could orient their lives around Him. God also directed the creation of a sanctuary—the tabernacle—in which He would dwell among His people. Though we often see God's commands and regulations as constraints on human freedom and desire, God gave them because He knew living them out would result in freedom, fullness, and peace.

In today's passage, we find ourselves with the Israelites after they came through the wilderness and Moses began preparing them to enter the land God promised Abraham. To ready them, Moses reinforced the law God had given and the reasons for that law. And then Moses called the Israelites to demonstrate their love of God by obeying His commands. Moses' point was that the Israelites would flourish and be a light to other nations only if they loved God by living according to His ways.

- Verses 4–9 of today's passage, set forth below, became a prayer, called the *Shema*, recited every morning and evening by Jewish people, including Jesus, throughout history. Write out the *Shema* (below) and take note of its different parts. Which parts stand out to you?

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

- In our day, what does it mean to love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength? What does it mean in your life in particular?

- Today's passage ends with Moses' warning the Israelites not to forget the Lord once they've reached the land and eaten their fill of good foods. Why do you think Moses gave that warning? How might his warning apply to you?
- What does today's passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

My Lord and God, I desire to love You with all my heart and with all my soul and with all my strength. Show me where my heart still clings to false gods, where my soul still seeks solace in things that don't last, and where my strength is wasted. Heal my wounds and give me renewed awareness of Your presence and Your love. And send me out, for the sake of this world that You love, to serve and share the good news of Jesus and Your kingdom. Amen.

Day 8—Into the Promised Land

Read Joshua 3:14–4:7

So when the people broke camp to cross the Jordan, the priests carrying the ark of the covenant went ahead of them. Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest. Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge, the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away, at a town called Adam in the vicinity of Zarethan, while the water flowing down to the Sea of the Arabah (that is, the Dead Sea) was completely cut off. So the people crossed over opposite Jericho. The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord stopped in the middle of the Jordan and stood on dry ground, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground.

When the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua, "Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, and tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, from right where the priests are standing, and carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight."

So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, and said to them, "Go over before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever."

Reflect

After years of leading the Israelites through the wilderness and then preparing them to enter the land God had promised Abraham, Moses would not be the one to take the Israelites the final step. Years earlier, when the Israelites found themselves in Kadesh after they had been liberated from the Egyptians, God determined someone else would bring His people into the land because Moses had disobeyed God and failed to trust Him at a critical juncture. That someone else was Joshua. After

Moses died, God spoke to Joshua, telling him to ready himself and the people to enter the land. Then, as we see in today's passage, in a manner reminiscent of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, God parted the Jordan River for His people to cross on dry ground. And there they were—standing on the land God had promised Abraham hundreds of years earlier. Many years of war and fighting awaited the Israelites as they came to possess the land, but in that moment, standing on the shore of the Jordan River, they witnessed God's glory, goodness, and the beginning of His promise fulfilled.

- Read today's passage again slowly, and this time, notice what stands out to you the most. What struck you? Why do you think that particular word, phrase, or image stood out?
- Notice that the Jordan River didn't part until the priests' feet touched the water. What faith it must have taken to keep walking ahead! In what area of your life is God asking you to keep walking ahead and trust that He will make a way where no way seems obvious? Who can you ask to encourage you in your faith and listen to your doubts?
- God ordered the Israelites to build a memorial so that future generations would be reminded of what He did bringing His people across the Jordan into the land. What are the markers you can look back on and see God's action and faithfulness in your life? (For example, perhaps you have a rock from a beach where you felt God's presence in a unique way, or there is a song that reminds you of a particular time God's love overwhelmed you.)
- What does today's passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

God, thank You for this story of faith and faithfulness. Help me remember the times You have demonstrated Your presence, provision, and faithfulness in history and in my own life. I don't want to forget that You are a God who acts in the world—parting the seas, appearing to Your people, entering into human flesh to dwell among us, healing wounds and relationships, and transforming hearts and minds. May I be someone who joyfully joins Your work with every measure of faith and love You have placed within me. Amen.

Day 9—Israel Rejects God As King

Read 1 Samuel 8:1–22

When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as Israel's leaders. The name of his firstborn was Joel and the name of his second was Abijah, and they served at Beersheba. But his sons did not follow his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice.

So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, "You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have."

But when they said, "Give us a king to lead us," this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the Lord. And the Lord told him: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up

out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights.”

Samuel told all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, “This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the Lord will not answer you in that day.”

But the people refused to listen to Samuel. “No!” they said. “We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.”

When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the Lord. The Lord answered, “Listen to them and give them a king.”

Then Samuel said to the Israelites, “Everyone go back to your own town.”

Reflect

At the end of the book of Joshua, we find the Israelites having secured full control of the land God had promised Abraham. Before his death, Joshua exhorted the Israelites—as Moses did—to follow God’s ways so they would continue to flourish, be a light to the nations around them, and remain in the land. Not long after Joshua’s death, however, as we read in the book of Judges, the Israelites did evil in God’s eyes and did not follow His ways. They almost immediately began to worship the pagan fertility god Baal. Then, for hundreds of years, the Israelites fell over and over into worshipping pagan gods, causing God to allow them to be overtaken by their enemies. Each time the Israelites cried out to God, God delivered them from their oppressors by raising up a military leader, or judge, to free them. Throughout the period of the judges, Israel increasingly abandoned God’s ways.

Samuel was Israel’s last judge and in today’s passage, we see why. God was king of His people, acting through the judges. But the people decided they didn’t want to be set apart as God’s people, ruled by God. They explicitly wanted to be like all the other nations. And so, after warning the people of what would befall them under the rule of an earthly king, God instructed Samuel to give Israel what it wanted.

- What do you think motivated Israel to desire an earthly king to rule them instead of God? What was underlying their desire to be like all the other nations?

- Reflect on a time in your life when you have essentially rejected God’s reign over a situation, relationship, decision, or habit. What was underlying your desire to reject God’s reign in that way? What was the outcome?
- Who in your life is currently rejecting God either entirely or in a particular area of their life? Prayerfully consider how you might be present to them, bringing both truth and grace, or share your own story with them.
- What does today’s passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

God, my king, thank You for the reminder that You are my rightful ruler and king. I know I have rejected You in explicit and implicit ways during my life. Forgive my arrogance, my sinful longings, my brokenness. Help me return to You each time I’m tempted to turn away out of fear, pride, or lust. Open me to hearing the truth from those who seek to bring it forth to me. And may my desire always be to be Yours, set apart as a light to others. Amen.

Day 10—A King After God’s Own Heart

Read 1 Samuel 16:1–13

The Lord said to Samuel, “How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king.”

But Samuel said, “How can I go? If Saul hears about it, he will kill me.”

The Lord said, “Take a heifer with you and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.’ Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what to do. You are to anoint for me the one I indicate.”

Samuel did what the Lord said. When he arrived at Bethlehem, the elders of the town trembled when they met him. They asked, “Do you come in peace?”

Samuel replied, “Yes, in peace; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord. Consecrate yourselves and come to the sacrifice with me.” Then he consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, “Surely the Lord’s anointed stands here before the Lord.”

But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

Then Jesse called Abinadab and had him pass in front of Samuel. But Samuel said, “The Lord has not chosen this one either.” Jesse then had Shammah pass by, but Samuel said, “Nor has the Lord

chosen this one.” Jesse had seven of his sons pass before Samuel, but Samuel said to him, “The Lord has not chosen these.” So he asked Jesse, “Are these all the sons you have?”

“There is still the youngest,” Jesse answered. “He is tending the sheep.”

Samuel said, “Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives.”

So he sent for him and had him brought in. He was glowing with health and had a fine appearance and handsome features.

Then the Lord said, “Rise and anoint him; this is the one.”

So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon David. Samuel then went to Ramah.

Reflect

Though the Israelites rejected God as king, God did not reject the Israelites as His people. After all, it was not the righteousness of the people that caused God to choose them in the first place; rather, it was His love for them. But God gave the people what they desired and placed a king over them—King Saul, from the tribe of Benjamin—who reigned over Israel for 42 years. Through Samuel, God set forth the rights and duties of kingship, intending whomever became king to comply with His vision for how His people should be ruled. Not long after Saul became king, though, he began disobeying God’s commands, repeatedly deciding to follow his own instincts instead of God’s clear instructions. Thus, God rejected him as king, and this is where today’s passage picks up. While Saul was still king, God sent Samuel to anoint a new king—David, a shepherd boy and youngest son of Jesse of Bethlehem, whom God described as a man after His own heart.

- Read God’s words to Samuel in the first line of today’s passage again. Why do you think these words were necessary? What might Samuel have been holding onto that God wanted him to release?
- Is there anything you have been mourning—whether a loss of some kind, or missed expectation or hope—that God has been prompting you to get help working through or release? What comes to mind? What do you sense God inviting you to do?
- Where do you see inconsistencies between what people see on the outside and what is in your heart? What attitudes, thoughts, or desires that you carry inside you do you pray God would transform?
- What does today’s passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

God, the lover of my heart, thank You for knowing me and all the things hidden within me. Thank You for Your grace and patience with me. Examine my heart and transform any attitudes or desires that do not align with Your will and Your ways. Heal the wounds that keep me from loving others

well. Fill me anew with Your Spirit so that I, like David, can live as someone whose heart is after Your heart. Amen.

Day 11—A Promise of the Forever Kingdom

Read 2 Samuel 7:1–16

After [King David] was settled in his palace and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, he said to Nathan the prophet, “Here I am, living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent.”

Nathan replied to the king, “Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the Lord is with you.”

But that night the word of the Lord came to Nathan, saying:

“Go and tell my servant David, ‘This is what the Lord says: Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling. Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, ‘Why have you not built me a house of cedar?’”

“Now then, tell my servant David, ‘This is what the Lord Almighty says: I took you from the pasture, from tending the flock, and appointed you ruler over my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men on earth. And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders over my people Israel. I will also give you rest from all your enemies.

“‘The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands. But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.’”

Reflect

After Samuel anointed David king and God withdrew His Spirit from Saul, the Scriptures say that an evil spirit began tormenting Saul and he grew increasingly unglued, paranoid, and driven by anger and envy. His paranoia and envy were particularly aimed at David. So, although David defeated the Philistine Goliath in the now-famous story, played the lyre (a small u-shaped harp) to calm Saul’s spirit, became close friends with Saul’s son Jonathan, and acted on Saul’s orders to defeat many of

Israel's enemies, Saul was threatened by David's success. Saul sought to kill David, and for years, David was on the run from Saul and fled to Philistine territory to escape. When Saul's army was on the brink of defeat by the Philistine army, and his sons had been killed, Saul took his own life.

Today's passage begins after David has defeated the Philistines and established his kingship over all of Israel. He has settled in Jerusalem as king and God has given him and the Israelites rest from their enemies. After years of running, fighting, and uncertainty, David and the people must have been exhausted and hopeful about their future. Recognizing all of this, God made a series of promises to David—recorded in the last paragraph—that should remind us both of God's promise to Abraham made generations earlier as well as the Gospel writers' description of Jesus as the Son of David (Matthew 1:1; Mark 10:48).

- What strikes you about David's words in the first line of today's passage? Given all David had been through since the moment God chose him to be king, what kinds of emotions would you expect David to have at the point when rest finally arrived?
- After reading God's words to David that we see reflected in the remainder of today's passage, how would you describe David's calling as king of God's people? What had God entrusted to him?
- What or whom has God entrusted to your care? What are the values with which you believe God has called you to act in caring for what He's entrusted to you? How do you feel you're doing at carrying out those values?
- What does today's passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

Lord Almighty, the one who has established a forever kingdom, thank You. Thank You for Your promises to David, fulfilled in Jesus Christ. I long for Your kingdom to come finally and fully. Help me remain steadfast in faith, lavish with love, and committed to Your ways in this world. Fill me with hope and joy so that my belief in Your promises and goodness is evident in my attitudes and actions. And may my heart toward the people You place in my path and the work You have given me reflect Your heart. Amen.

Day 12—Let It Be Known

Read 1 Kings 18:16–39

So Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him, and Ahab went to meet Elijah. When he saw Elijah, he said to him, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?"

"I have not made trouble for Israel," Elijah replied. "But you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the Lord's commands and have followed the Baals. Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table."

So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. Elijah went before the people and said, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him."

But the people said nothing.

Then Elijah said to them, "I am the only one of the Lord's prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. Get two bulls for us. Let Baal's prophets choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the Lord. The god who answers by fire—he is God."

Then all the people said, "What you say is good."

Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire." So they took the bull given them and prepared it.

Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. "Baal, answer us!" they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made.

At noon Elijah began to taunt them. "Shout louder!" he said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.

Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come here to me." They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the Lord, which had been torn down. Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord had come, saying, "Your name shall be Israel." With the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord, and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs of seed. He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, "Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood."

"Do it again," he said, and they did it again.

"Do it a third time," he ordered, and they did it the third time. The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench.

At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: "Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again."

Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.

When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, “The Lord—he is God! The Lord—he is God!”

Reflect

David’s son Solomon became king of Israel following David’s death and 40-year reign. Solomon is known throughout history for his wisdom and for the creation of God’s temple in Jerusalem. With the establishment of the temple, we see the fulfillment of God’s promise to make Abraham’s descendants into a great nation in a land with God at its center. Indeed, the temple in Jerusalem became the place where God’s people came to worship and make their offerings to God. As Solomon grew older, however, he violated the covenant with God, turning away from Him and worshiping pagan gods. As a result, God tore the kingdom, with the exception of the tribe of Judah, away from Solomon’s heirs and the once-united Israel split into a northern kingdom (ruled by one of Solomon’s former officials) and a southern kingdom (ruled by Solomon’s son Rehoboam). The books of 1 and 2 Kings, chronicle the many kings that ruled over Israel and Judah over many generations and the kingdoms’ fall into idolatry and exile. In the end, the northern kingdom (Israel) was destroyed by Assyria and the southern kingdom (Judah) was destroyed by Babylon, with the temple burned to the ground and God’s people being exiled to Assyria and Babylon.

All hope was not lost during these dark days, however. God raised up prophets to confront the kings and to continue to call the people back to God. We see an example of this in today’s passage as the prophet Elijah confronts the king of the northern kingdom, Ahab, and the prophets of Baal, the fertility “god.” God used Elijah to call out the idolatry of His people and demonstrated His dominion and incomparable power over all things.

- What stood out to you as you read today’s passage? Why do you think that particular word, phrase, or idea caught your attention?
- As you reflect on your daily life, is there anything—a relationship, person, possession, goal, substance, experience, loss, desire, or event—that absorbs your heart and mind more than God does, or that you want more than you want to obey God? What is it? Why do you think it has such a hold on you?
- What would have to change for you to be freed of the power the person or thing you identified in response to the question above has over you? What is your prayer?
- What does today’s passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

God, my One and Only, thank You that You rule over all things. Forgive me for the times I turn away from You as the Israelites did, and toward other things to seek to fulfill my desires and needs. Remind me of all the ways You have provided for me in the past and remind me of Your goodness and grace. Increase my trust in You and allow me to rest in the truth of Your love, as revealed so undeniably in Jesus. May my life be an example of Your power, love, and grace to others. Amen.

Day 13—A Son Who Will Reign Forever

Read Isaiah 8:19–9:7

When someone tells you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? Consult God's instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—

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

You have enlarged the nation
and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest,
as warriors rejoice
when dividing the plunder.

For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
you have shattered
the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor.

Every warrior's boot used in battle
and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning,
will be fuel for the fire.

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.

And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the greatness of his government and peace

there will be no end.

He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.

The zeal of the Lord Almighty
will accomplish this.

Reflect

After Assyria had conquered the Northern Kingdom (Israel), and before the Southern Kingdom (Judah) was defeated and captured by the Babylonians, God's people, in large part, had turned away from God and were worshiping and offering sacrifices to the gods of the nations around them. In the midst of this context—about 700 years before Christ—God raised up a prophet named Isaiah and called him to confront the Israelites' idolatry, pronounce God's judgment for their waywardness, and challenge them to repent because of the coming salvation for the faithful and repentant.

In today's passage, we read one of the great Messianic prophecies in Scripture. Isaiah's words were intended to provide the hope of light and salvation in dark and desperate times. God's people not only found themselves unable or unwilling to remain faithful to the one true God, but also had experienced nearly constant oppression and injustice at the hands of their human kings (as the prophet Samuel had warned them when they first rejected God as their king). Now God—through the words of Isaiah—was assuring them that a different kind of king was coming—one whose kingdom would last forever, one who would rule with justice and righteousness, and one under whom peace and rest for weary souls would prevail. In fact, this king would be God Himself dwelling with His people as He once did in the Garden of Eden.

- When you read today's passage in light of what we have studied so far on our 30-day journey through the Bible, what new insights or understanding do you have about how these words would have impacted God's people?
- What particular kinds of darkness and despair in our world today most often generate anger or discomfort within you? How do you sense Jesus calling you to be His light with respect to whatever you identified? Who is Jesus calling you to love, extend His grace to, or speak His truth to?
- What kinds of darkness and despair do you see in your own heart? Are you being judgmental, lacking in grace, or refusing to see God's image in certain others? Are you sinking into despair, or harboring bitterness? Are you closing your eyes to the pain or oppression of others? What is the Holy Spirit seeking to transform in you?
- What does today's passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

Living God, God of all light and hope, thank You that Isaiah's prophecy was and is true. Thank You for Jesus, the Son given to save, to bring life, and to reconcile. Thank You that because of Jesus I can walk in hope and reject despair and darkness. Help me to live out this truth and be someone who brings grace, love, and light into places where hope has been lost or darkness prevails. Give me words of love, a spirit of kindness, and an openness to the transformation of my own heart where it lacks in compassion, patience, and self-control. Amen.

Day 14—I Will Give You a New Heart

Read Ezekiel 36:22–38

“Therefore say to the Israelites, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: It is not for your sake, people of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Sovereign Lord, when I am proved holy through you before their eyes.

“‘For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God. I will save you from all your uncleanness. I will call for the grain and make it plentiful and will not bring famine upon you. I will increase the fruit of the trees and the crops of the field, so that you will no longer suffer disgrace among the nations because of famine. Then you will remember your evil ways and wicked deeds, and you will loathe yourselves for your sins and detestable practices. I want you to know that I am not doing this for your sake, declares the Sovereign Lord. Be ashamed and disgraced for your conduct, people of Israel!

“‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: On the day I cleanse you from all your sins, I will resettle your towns, and the ruins will be rebuilt. The desolate land will be cultivated instead of lying desolate in the sight of all who pass through it. They will say, ‘This land that was laid waste has become like the garden of Eden; the cities that were lying in ruins, desolate and destroyed, are now fortified and inhabited.’” Then the nations around you that remain will know that I the Lord have rebuilt what was destroyed and have replanted what was desolate. I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it.’

“This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Once again I will yield to Israel's plea and do this for them: I will make their people as numerous as sheep, as numerous as the flocks for offerings at Jerusalem during her appointed festivals. So will the ruined cities be filled with flocks of people. Then they will know that I am the Lord.”

Reflect

God used many prophets, including Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Amos, and Habakkuk, to warn the Israelites, both before and after they were exiled, to turn back to God and stop following neighboring nations by worshiping other gods lest they face God’s judgment. But they refused to listen, and God allowed them to be taken over by the nations they sought to be like. Hosea traces God’s agonizing decision to expel His people from the land He’d given them. And the Psalms written during this period and the book of Lamentations demonstrate the pain God’s people experienced once they had been expelled. Indeed, the impact of being removed from the land, and watching the “City of David”—and the temple Solomon built so that God’s glory would be among His people—burn to the ground cannot be overestimated. This was an extreme tragedy. As we have seen before, though, all hope was not lost. The prophets also spoke of restoration and salvation. Although the Israelites had been unfaithful, God remained faithful and still claimed them as His own.

In today’s passage, we see this hope in Ezekiel’s words. He was a prophet among the Israelite exiles in Babylon and prophesied at a time both before and after Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed in 587/6 BC. Ezekiel made clear that the Israelites found themselves in exile because God had brought judgment upon them as a result of their brazen, unapologetic idolatry. God would restore them, however, in order to demonstrate His glory, power, and faithfulness. He would accomplish this restoration by fixing the underlying problem to all of people’s problems—their hearts. As God recognized in Noah’s day, every inclination of the human heart is evil all the time (Genesis 6:5). Humans need a heart transplant and help from God Himself to follow His commands, and that is precisely what God promised through His prophet Ezekiel.

- What stood out to you as you read today’s passage? Why do you think that particular word, phrase, or image caught your attention?
- Write out all the promises God makes in today’s passage. What would it have felt like to the exiled Israelites to hear these promises? Are there particular words that come to mind?
- Which one of God’s promises in today’s passage resonates most deeply with you? Why?
- What does today’s passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

Faithful God, thank You for the promises You made to Your people through Ezekiel. Reading them calms my heart and mind because I know You have been, are, and will continue to be faithful to them. Thank You for making me new in Christ, and giving me the gifts of forgiveness and Your Spirit to guide and instruct me. I pray that You would continue to cleanse, renew, and remake me in the image of Christ. Amen.

Day 15—One Like the Son of Man

Read Daniel 7:9–14

“As I looked,

“thrones were set in place,

and the Ancient of Days took his seat.

His clothing was as white as snow;
the hair of his head was white like wool.

His throne was flaming with fire,
and its wheels were all ablaze.

A river of fire was flowing,
coming out from before him.

Thousands upon thousands attended him;
ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.

The court was seated,
and the books were opened.

“Then I continued to watch because of the boastful words the horn was speaking. I kept looking until the beast was slain and its body destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire. (The other beasts had been stripped of their authority, but were allowed to live for a period of time.)

“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.”

Reflect

Daniel was one among many Israelites taken to Babylon before all the Israelites were expelled in 587/6 BC. He was an example of someone who remained faithful to God even amidst great pressure to conform to Babylonian culture and influences. Like Joseph before him, Daniel found himself in a high position in the Babylonian government, and the stories about him and those exiled with him are legend—the story of Daniel surviving being thrown into a lion’s den, the story of his friends escaping the burning furnace, and the eerie story of the writing on the wall. But it is also in the book of Daniel that God begins to give some clear depictions of what the future holds for His people and for the whole world.

In today’s passage in particular, we read Daniel’s report of a vision he had of “one like a son of man” approaching God on His throne and being given authority, glory, sovereign power, worship, and dominion. Scholars believe this “son of man” describes Jesus because He referred to Himself as the Son of Man (for example, Matthew 12:8; Luke 19:10; John 5:27). Daniel describes the Son of Man’s kingdom as everlasting, and one that will never be destroyed.

- Why do you think God gave Daniel the dream about the coming kingdom and the Son of Man?

- What are the elements of the coming kingdom of God? What makes this coming kingdom different than any other kingdom?
- What characteristics come to mind when you think of worldly kingdoms? What characteristics come to mind when you think of God's kingdom?
- What does today's passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

God of heaven, thank You for the hope of this passage—that there is a kingdom, the one Jesus inaugurated, that is and will be unlike any kingdom the world has ever seen and that will last forever. As I look at our world, so filled with injustice, war, violence, corruption, and hatred, I long for this coming kingdom. Give me eyes to see where this kingdom is already breaking in so I can celebrate and be a part of it. And help me to be faithful to You, as Daniel was, in the face of a world that continues to call me away. Amen.

Day 16—God Preserves His People

Read Esther 7:3–8:8

Then Queen Esther answered, “If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king.”

King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, “Who is he? Where is he—the man who has dared to do such a thing?”

Esther said, “An adversary and enemy! This vile Haman!”

Then Haman was terrified before the king and queen. The king got up in a rage, left his wine and went out into the palace garden. But Haman, realizing that the king had already decided his fate, stayed behind to beg Queen Esther for his life.

Just as the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was reclining.

The king exclaimed, “Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?”

As soon as the word left the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face. Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs attending the king, said, “A pole reaching to a height of fifty cubits stands by Haman's house. He had it set up for Mordecai, who spoke up to help the king.”

The king said, “Impale him on it!” So they impaled Haman on the pole he had set up for Mordecai. Then the king's fury subsided.

That same day King Xerxes gave Queen Esther the estate of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came into the presence of the king, for Esther had told how he was related to her. The king took off his signet ring, which he had reclaimed from Haman, and presented it to Mordecai. And Esther appointed him over Haman's estate.

Esther again pleaded with the king, falling at his feet and weeping. She begged him to put an end to the evil plan of Haman the Agagite, which he had devised against the Jews. Then the king extended the gold scepter to Esther and she arose and stood before him.

“If it pleases the king,” she said, “and if he regards me with favor and thinks it the right thing to do, and if he is pleased with me, let an order be written overruling the dispatches that Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, devised and wrote to destroy the Jews in all the king's provinces. For how can I bear to see disaster fall on my people? How can I bear to see the destruction of my family?”

King Xerxes replied to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, “Because Haman attacked the Jews, I have given his estate to Esther, and they have impaled him on the pole he set up. Now write another decree in the king's name in behalf of the Jews as seems best to you, and seal it with the king's signet ring—for no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked.”

Reflect

In 539 BC, nearly 50 years after the Israelites were exiled to Babylon and their temple and city were destroyed, they were allowed to return. God moved the heart of Cyrus, the king of Persia—which had conquered the Babylonians—to permit the Israelites to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. In the book of Ezra, we can read the list of about 50,000 exiles that decided to return (many others stayed where they were) and the gold and silver they were given to take back with them. It took 23 years for the Israelites to complete the temple and just under two months for the walls surrounding Jerusalem to be rebuilt under Nehemiah's leadership in about 445/4 BC. During this time of Persian rule, God continued to preserve and care for His people, whether they returned to Jerusalem or remained in exile.

The book of Esther, one of just two books in the entire Bible named after a woman, tells one story of how God preserved His people during the exile through a young Jewish woman named Esther and her older cousin, Mordecai. (The Israelites came to be known as Jews—from the word “Judah,” the tribe from which the remaining Israelites descended—while they were in exile.) Esther was chosen to be queen by King Xerxes of Persia, and in today's passage, we read of the great courage she exercised in risking her own life to request that King Xerxes overturn a law his underling, Haman, signed requiring all Jews to be killed. Though God's name is never used in the book of Esther, the orchestration of events we see in Esther leaves no doubt that He intervened to protect and preserve His people.

- God uses ordinary people to carry out His purposes on earth. We've seen this throughout our journey through the Bible so far, and Esther is no exception. What do you think is

required for God to use someone to carry out His purposes? How do you desire for God to use you?

- Who comes to mind for you when you think of a courageous person? Why does that particular person come to mind? In what way are they courageous?
- What's the most courageous thing you've done? Are there things that have required physical courage and things that have required emotional or relational courage? Which was harder?
- What does today's passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

God, the preserver and sustainer, thank You for preserving Your people throughout the generations and specifically during Esther's day. And thank You that You use ordinary people like me to carry out Your purposes in this world. Help me to act with courage and faith when circumstances seem dire or overwhelming. Open my ears to hear You as You guide my thoughts, words, and actions, and extend Your love and goodness to everyone I encounter. Amen.

Day 17—God Will Come to Save You

Read Isaiah 35:1–10

The desert and the parched land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.
Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom;
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.
The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon;
they will see the glory of the Lord,
the splendor of our God.

Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;
say to those with fearful hearts,
“Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come,
he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution
he will come to save you.”

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness

and streams in the desert.

The burning sand will become a pool,
the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
In the haunts where jackals once lay,
grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness;
it will be for those who walk on that Way.
The unclean will not journey on it;
wicked fools will not go about on it.
No lion will be there,
nor any ravenous beast;
they will not be found there.
But only the redeemed will walk there,
and those the Lord has rescued will return.
They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Reflect

After the Israelites were permitted to return to Jerusalem, and the temple and city walls were rebuilt, they continued to live under Persian rule until the Greeks, led by Alexander the Great, took control of the Middle East in 333 BC. And, after a brief period of independence, from 142 to 63 BC, Jerusalem (and the rest of the Middle East) fell under the control of the Roman Empire. Thus, although many of the Jewish people were in the land God had promised them, they were an occupied people, and their traditions, culture, and identity were increasingly threatened by the nations that controlled them. During these very challenging years, the faithful Jews held tightly to the promises God made through His prophets that He would save and restore them. We see this promise in today's passage from the prophet Isaiah.

- What stood out to you most as you read through today's passage?
- What elements of God's restoration do you notice in Isaiah's words?
- Are there promises of God that you cling to in your own life when you experience pain or difficulty? What are they? What purpose do they serve for you? What restoration are you seeking?
- What does today's passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

God, the one who saves, thank You for Your promises. I long for the total healing and restoration of this world You have made. So many things are broken, disordered, and misused. Thank You that You came to be among Your people in Jesus and that through Him You are saving, restoring, healing, and making all things new. As best I know how, I turn my own life over to You and ask that You would restore my broken parts and disordered thinking. I await, with all the faith and hope You have granted me, Jesus' return. Amen.

Day 18—By His Wounds We Are Healed

Read Isaiah 52:13–53:12

See, my servant will act wisely;
 he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.
 Just as there were many who were appalled at him—
 his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being
 and his form marred beyond human likeness—
 so he will sprinkle many nations,
 and kings will shut their mouths because of him.
 For what they were not told, they will see,
 and what they have not heard, they will understand.

Who has believed our message
 and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
 He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
 and like a root out of dry ground.
 He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
 nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
 He was despised and rejected by mankind,
 a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
 Like one from whom people hide their faces
 he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

Surely he took up our pain
 and bore our suffering,
 yet we considered him punished by God,
 stricken by him, and afflicted.
 But he was pierced for our transgressions,
 he was crushed for our iniquities;
 the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
 and by his wounds we are healed.
 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
 each of us has turned to our own way;
 and the Lord has laid on him
 the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed and afflicted,
 yet he did not open his mouth;

he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
 and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
 so he did not open his mouth.
 By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
 Yet who of his generation protested?
 For he was cut off from the land of the living;
 for the transgression of my people he was punished.
 He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
 and with the rich in his death,
 though he had done no violence,
 nor was any deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
 and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin,
 he will see his offspring and prolong his days,
 and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.
 After he has suffered,
 he will see the light of life and be satisfied;
 by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,
 and he will bear their iniquities.
 Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
 and he will divide the spoils with the strong,
 because he poured out his life unto death,
 and was numbered with the transgressors.
 For he bore the sin of many,
 and made intercession for the transgressors.

Reflect

In today's passage, we read Isaiah's depiction of a coming servant who would not only be highly exalted and shut the mouths of earthly kings, but also would suffer and be pierced for the transgressions of others. Through this servant's suffering, God's people would be healed and cleansed from their sin. With our post-Christ eyes, it is impossible not to see Jesus in these words of Isaiah. For the Jewish people of Jesus' day, though, the notion that the coming messiah-king would suffer was a shocking revelation, and a barrier to many of them believing Jesus was the promised messiah. In their minds, the messiah-king would come in power and in one act, release them from captivity, bring their enemies to judgment, and take the throne as their king. God has chosen to bring about His restoration and judgment differently, though, inaugurating His kingdom with the coming of Jesus, expanding Israel to include the Gentiles, and promising to return again to bring His kingdom fully and finally.

- Read through this passage again slowly and pay attention to the words, phrases, or images that stand out to you. What were they? Why do you think those particular words, phrases, or images struck you?
- How do you think it would have been as a Jewish person who has learned about a coming savior and king their whole life to come to understand that the savior and king would suffer

for the sins of his people as a way of healing and cleansing them? What does this truth stir in you?

- As you read this passage, is there anything that stirs in you to speak or pray to God? Share whatever that is with Him.
- What does today's passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

God, my savior and healer, thank You for Jesus. Thank You for the cleansing and healing that has come and continues to come through Him. I long for Your kingdom to come fully and finally so that there is no more death, suffering, or war, and everything that causes pain or despair comes to an end. My hope is in You and I trust Your promise that Jesus will return in glory and reconcile all things to You. May it be so.

Day 19—Jesus the Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham

Read Matthew 1:1–17

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham:

Abraham was the father of Isaac,
 Isaac the father of Jacob,
 Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,
 Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar,
 Perez the father of Hezron,
 Hezron the father of Ram,
 Ram the father of Amminadab,
 Amminadab the father of Nahshon,
 Nahshon the father of Salmon,
 Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab,
 Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth,
 Obed the father of Jesse,
 and Jesse the father of King David.

David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife,
 Solomon the father of Rehoboam,
 Rehoboam the father of Abijah,
 Abijah the father of Asa,
 Asa the father of Jehoshaphat,
 Jehoshaphat the father of Jehoram,
 Jehoram the father of Uzziah,
 Uzziah the father of Jotham,
 Jotham the father of Ahaz,
 Ahaz the father of Hezekiah,

Hezekiah the father of Manasseh,
 Manasseh the father of Amon,
 Amon the father of Josiah,
 and Josiah the father of Jeconiah and his brothers at the time of the exile to Babylon.

After the exile to Babylon:

Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel,
 Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel,
 Zerubbabel the father of Abihud,
 Abihud the father of Eliakim,
 Eliakim the father of Azor,
 Azor the father of Zadok,
 Zadok the father of Akim,
 Akim the father of Elihud,
 Elihud the father of Eleazar,
 Eleazar the father of Matthan,
 Matthan the father of Jacob,
 and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah.

Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.

Reflect

If we're honest, today's passage is typically one we skip or skim when we read the Gospels. It's so long and we don't know who most of the people listed are! But this genealogy that Matthew provides at the outset of his Gospel is critical to understanding the rest of what Matthew writes. In fact, the first line of today's passage is essential. Now that we have made our way through the key points of the Old Testament (about 400 years pass between the Old and New Testaments, referred to as the intertestamental period), we know how important it was for Matthew—speaking initially to a primarily Jewish audience—to say that Jesus was the Messiah, a son of David, and a son of Abraham. When Matthew's audience heard these descriptions about Jesus, their ears would have perked up. They had been waiting for a coming messiah. They knew the messiah would be in the line of King David—recall the covenant God made with David that we read about in 2 Samuel 7:1–16. And they knew that God would use the descendants of Abraham—the Israelites—to bless all the nations. When Matthew called Jesus Messiah, son of David, son of Abraham, he was saying: God has fulfilled His promises! In short, the entire story of the Old Testament leads to one destination: Jesus.

- What names do you recognize on the list now that you have read through the high points of the Old Testament? Who were those people?
- In Matthew's day, genealogies typically only included men. Notice the four women mentioned in today's passage other than Mary. What do you know about those women? Why do you think they were included?

- How does having studied God’s promises to Abraham and David (and to the Israelite people) impact the way you read Matthew’s genealogy? How does it impact your understanding of Jesus?
- What does today’s passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

God of every generation, thank You for the Scriptures and for the incredible, comprehensive story they tell. Thank You for Jesus. I am grateful for the insight You have given me as I have studied the Old Testament. Continue to open my mind and heart to increasing knowledge and understanding of You and Your purposes in this world. May I be a light in the world today so that through me, someone I encounter might encounter You. Amen.

Day 20—The Kingdom of God Has Come Near

Read Mark 1:1–20

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way”—
“a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’”

And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” At once they left their nets and followed him.

When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

Reflect

When we read these words that begin Mark’s Gospel, it’s impossible not to hear echoes of what we’ve been reading so far this month in the Old Testament—a way is being prepared for the Lord, a Son is being announced, and the promised kingdom of God has arrived. This central message of Jesus—that the kingdom of God has arrived—doesn’t strike our ears in the same way when we don’t know the story of the Israelites and the promises God made to them over many generations. But when we have the Israelites in mind, we see how stunning Jesus’ message must have been. The day had finally come and God’s promises were being fulfilled right before their eyes in a man who walked among them named Jesus.

In our time—over 2,000 years after Jesus walked the earth—we recognize that God’s kingdom has not fully come. Our world is still broken, sinful, and disobedient to the ways of God. But Jesus inaugurated God’s kingdom. As scholars explain: we live in an “in-between time.” The kingdom is now—Jesus is on the throne and God is with us and among us in the Holy Spirit, who indwells all those who believe in Jesus—and simultaneously, the kingdom is yet to come.

- What echoes of the Old Testament story do you see in today’s passage, or in other places in the Gospels? What impact does seeing those echoes have on your faith?
- How does Jesus’ announcement that the kingdom of God has come near resonate with you differently knowing the long history of the Israelites and God’s promises to them?
- What does today’s passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

Father in heaven, thank You for opening my eyes to the story of Your people so that I can understand the good news of Jesus even more deeply and fully. I can’t imagine being there when Jesus announced the arrival of the kingdom. Fill me with the joy and soul-satisfaction that the arrival and coming of Your kingdom would have stirred in the Jews of Jesus’ day. Give me a way to explain this good news to others with words that convey the beauty and hope of Jesus’ message. Amen.

Day 21—The Dead Are Raised and the Blind See

Read Luke 7:11–23

Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his

mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, “Don’t cry.”

Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.

They were all filled with awe and praised God. “A great prophet has appeared among us,” they said. “God has come to help his people.” This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country.

John’s disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them, he sent them to the Lord to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”

When the men came to Jesus, they said, “John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?’”

At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

Reflect

Yesterday we read about Jesus’ words that in Him, the kingdom of God had arrived. Today, we read about Jesus’ actions. Did they too show the arrival of the kingdom of God? This is the question John the Baptist wanted an answer to. He asked, “Are you the one who is to come?” (meaning “the messiah and king we have been waiting for”). And Jesus, instead of saying yes, told His disciples to tell John (who was imprisoned at the time) that the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the sick are healed, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Of course, as we know from our study, these are exactly the signs the prophets said would evidence the arrival of God’s kingdom and God’s Messiah. Jesus’ actions demonstrated who He was and what He came to do.

- Reflect on what it would have been like to see some of the healing and restoration that Jesus brought to the people in and around Jerusalem. What comes to mind? How do you think you would have reacted? What would you have wanted to know about Jesus?
- When you read about Jesus raising the dead to life, giving sight to the blind, healing the sick, causing the lame to walk and the deaf to hear, and telling the poor that there is good news, does any person or group come to mind? Why do you think that is?
- What does it mean for your life that Jesus is the King and Savior?
- What does today’s passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

Father God, thank You for the healing and life that is found in Jesus. Thank You for the new life I have in Him, for the forgiveness I have received through Him, for the ability I have to participate, through the Holy Spirit, in the restoration of this world, and for the promise of eternal life. I pray for Your presence and healing to become more evident in our world and for more and more people to turn to You with open and repentant hearts. May I be someone through whom others will come to know Your healing power and loving presence. Amen.

Day 22—Love God and Love Your Neighbor

Read Matthew 22:34–40

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Reflect

During the intertestamental period (the 400 years between the Old and New Testaments), a variety of Jewish groups that practiced their faith in different ways and held varying beliefs about how to live until God ushered in His kingdom began to emerge. The Pharisees practiced radical obedience to the law (the Torah) and believed that separation from anything and anyone that was unclean was the way to live until God’s kingdom came. The Sadducees, who were teachers of the law and loyal to the Temple power structures, believed the way to live was to work with Roman governing officials. The other two groups—the Zealots and Essenes—espoused overthrowing the government and withdrawing from the world altogether, respectively.

What none of these groups proposed lined up with what Jesus announced as the way to live until God’s kingdom came fully and finally—with love. As we see in today’s passage, Jesus took something the Jewish people were very familiar with and prayed three times a day—the Shema (“love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind”)—and added a command He said was equally important: to love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus would spend the rest of His life teaching what He meant by these companion commands and that, to everyone’s surprise, the poor, one’s enemies, and the unclean were among a His definition of neighbor (Luke 10:25–37). And where such love is expressed, the kingdom of God is on display.

- Why was it revolutionary for Jesus to teach that loving one’s neighbor as yourself was on par with loving God?
- How would you describe what it means to love your neighbor as yourself? In what ways do you find this command to be a stretch for you?
- Who do you naturally think of when you hear the word “neighbor”? What person or group is it harder for you to naturally include in your definition of “neighbor”?

- What does today's passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

Lord, God, this passage sets out both my desire and my weakness. I long to be a person who loves You with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength and loves my neighbor—that is, *everyone*—as myself. I know I fall short. I tend to want to go my own way and follow my broken desires and inclinations. And I tend to judge, exclude, and demonize others—especially when they don't look, believe, or vote like me. And even more so, it seems, when they sin differently than me. I need Your help, Lord. Fill me with Your Spirit and allow me to love more and better. Help me to love like Jesus does. Amen.

Day 23—Life to the Full

Read John 10:1–18

“Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice.” Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

Reflect

Most of us have lived through seasons—and for some, maybe that season is now—in which our faith in Jesus didn't seem to impact our day-to-day life. Perhaps we began to treat our salvation in Jesus much like we might treat an insurance policy—it will serve us well in the future, but doesn't

impact the here and now. When we do this, we not only miss out on all Jesus seeks to offer us right now in our life on this earth, but also, we diminish the gospel. In today's passage, we see that Jesus came to bring life to the full for those who believe in Him and decide to follow Him. *Life to the full*. This doesn't mean more money, cars, and homes, or business success, or even happiness in the way we most often think of happiness. What we see in Jesus' description to the Pharisees is that life to the full is life in communion with Jesus Himself—life in which He speaks to us, we hear His voice, and He guides and leads us. The only way we are really able to love God and love our neighbor as Jesus instructed is to allow Him to show us how to do so, and to form us into the kinds of people who naturally love.

- When have you felt most alive? What made you feel that way? What kinds of things were you doing, or what relationships were you in, during that time?
- When have you felt most connected to Jesus? Is there overlap with the time you felt most alive? How so? If not, what made the two times different?
- Reflect on your life right now. Where do you feel a gap between what you think Jesus meant by “life to the full” and how you're experiencing life today? What are you longing for from Jesus? What is your prayer?
- What does today's passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

God, my shepherd, thank You for life and breath today. Thank You that in Jesus, I can have life to the full in the here and now. Forgive me for the ways I have flattened the gospel and lived as if Your salvation is only for later. I long to live in communion with You—loved, led, guided. When I forget or get distracted, pull me back to You and remind me of the fullness You offer. Where I feel gaps between my life as it is and what You offer, help me, give me eyes to see where to go, and a heart that's open and surrendered. Amen.

Day 24—Jesus, the King of the Jews

Read Matthew 27:27–56

Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand. Then they knelt in front of him and mocked him. “Hail, king of the Jews!” they said. They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross. They came to a place called Golgotha (which means “the place of the skull”). There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it. When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots. And sitting down, they kept watch

over him there. Above his head they placed the written charge against him: this is Jesus, the king of the Jews.

Two rebels were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, “You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!” In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! He’s the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” In the same way the rebels who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land. About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”).

When some of those standing there heard this, they said, “He’s calling Elijah.”

Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. The rest said, “Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to save him.”

And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs after Jesus’ resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people.

When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, “Surely he was the Son of God!”

Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee’s sons.

Reflect

Jesus spent three years teaching, healing, and making His identity clear to those whose eyes and ears were open. He showed anyone watching Him how to love. He spoke truth to the religious and political authorities who wielded power and influence. He guided and taught His disciples how to live in the world and shared with them what the kingdom of God was like by using parables and stories. He ate with outcasts, called sinners to repent, and healed every kind of ailment. He even raised the dead to life. But Jesus’ ministry life was short. As the prophet Isaiah predicted hundreds of years earlier, and as Jesus Himself made clear to His disciples, the Messiah would suffer and be put to death, bearing the sins of the world to save the world. He would not be the only one to suffer, though. Jesus told His disciples that they too would suffer for their loyalty to Him. To follow the way of Jesus was and is to follow the way of the cross—not necessarily the physical cross

(although for some this was the way), but a metaphorical one—anything from ridicule and social exclusion to torture.

In today's passage, we read about Jesus' suffering and crucifixion—the horrible torture He experienced in His body, mind, and spirit at the hands of those who feared His powerful influence and subversive message. We know from the writings of the prophets and the apostles that by His death, Jesus—God in the flesh—saved humankind and all of creation from sin and made a way for Jews and Gentiles alike to be in intimate relationship with God once again. Indeed, the curtain that separated the section of the temple where God's presence resided from the rest of the temple was torn in two when Jesus gave up His spirit, opening the way to God's presence.

- Today's passage is likely one you have read before, but what stood out to you this time? Why do you think that is?
- As best you can, imagine being a bystander as Jesus was so gruesomely killed, when He gave up His spirit, and when the temple curtain split in two and dead bodies were raised to life. What would that have been like? What do you think the women watching from a distance would have been feeling?
- Knowing that Jesus' death opened a way for you to be in relationship with God, what thoughts or emotions stir in you as you read about His crucifixion? What prayers arise in you?
- What does today's passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

My God and Savior, I am at once heartbroken and grateful as I read this passage. My heart breaks over my own sin and waywardness and over the sin of the world. And my heart rejoices because of Your love expressed through Jesus. I can't grasp the anguish Jesus experienced as He suffered or the love that could have compelled You to save us in this way. I am in awe and stand before You in humility and gratitude. Amen.

Day 25—Jesus, the Life and the Resurrection

Read John 20:1–18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had

reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "*Rabboni!*" (which means "Teacher").

Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

Reflect

Knowing the end of the story, it is difficult for us to imagine the sorrow and despair that must have come upon Jesus' disciples when He breathed His last breath on the cross. This wasn't what they expected, and after all they had heard Jesus say, the way they must have felt in His presence, and the miracles He performed, their hopes that God's kingdom had finally arrived must have been crushed. Yet, there was more to come. Jesus rose from the dead, life restored to His actual body, and walked among them again. The Jewish people believed that all of God's people would participate in a physical resurrection when God's kingdom arrived and all of creation was renewed and restored. So what did it mean that Jesus had been raised from the dead, but the current world seemed to be progressing as it had been? And why does Jesus' resurrection stand at the very center of our faith?

Jesus' resurrection was not simply an amazing miracle. Its meaning extends beyond Jesus Himself. As He said before His death, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die" (John 11:25–26). In other words, just as Jesus' death had implications for all humanity and all creation, so too did Jesus' resurrection. Not only did the process of renewal and restoration of creation begin, but also, anyone who believes in Jesus will participate, or share, in His resurrection.

- As you read about the resurrection of Jesus, what questions come to mind for you? What is difficult to understand?
- What feelings arise in you when you think about your own death? How does the truth of Jesus' resurrection impact those feelings?
- Re-read the portion of today's passage in which Mary encounters Jesus. What do you think Jesus wanted Mary to hear and know when He spoke her name? What do you imagine it would be like to hear Jesus say your name?
- What does today's passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

God, giver of life, thank You for the promise of new, resurrected life in and through Jesus. I am reminded again that I do not need to fear death because it doesn't have the final say. I pray for Your help in living in a way that acknowledges this truth. Release me from fear and anxiety. Grant me Your peace and give me the words to share the good news about Jesus and the resurrection with the people You put on my path. Amen.

Day 26—Go and Make Disciples

Read Matthew 28:16–20

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Reflect

As we read this passage, echoes of Scriptures we've read over the last 25 days come to mind. Just to name a few: In Daniel 7, we read about the prophet Daniel's vision of "one like a son of man" who was given all authority, glory, and sovereign power, and whom all nations and peoples of every language worshiped; in Genesis 12, we read that all the peoples on earth would be blessed through Abraham; in Ezekiel 36, we read that God would give His people new hearts and put His Spirit in them so they could follow God's ways; and earlier in the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 22), we learned the two commandments upon which Jesus said all the Law and Prophets of the Old Testament rested: love God and love your neighbor (which Jesus defined as including everyone!).

In these final words that Matthew records of Jesus (referred to as "the Great Commission"), so much of the story comes together. And the last piece of the story is Jesus' commissioning of His disciples to join Him in carrying out the redemption and restoration of all the earth. But Jesus didn't command His followers to take up arms and defeat their enemies with swords, and He didn't decide

to use violence to establish His kingdom rule. Instead, he invited His disciples—both then and today—to partner with Him in spreading the news of forgiveness and life and love in Him, and living out, and teaching others to live out, the way of love.

- How has reading other parts of the Bible over the last few weeks informed the way you read the Great Commission?
- Read today’s passage again slowly, and this time, pay attention to what words or phrases stand out to you. What were they? What invitation do you sense God is extending to you today or in this particular season of your life?
- Who are you teaching to be a disciple of Jesus? How are you doing that? Who is teaching you to be a disciple of Jesus? How so?
- What does today’s passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, help me to live out Jesus’ final commission. I want to walk in the way of love, to teach others to do the same, and to be a part of Your mission in this world. Show me the ways in which I’m harboring unforgiveness or anger or resentment so that love cannot flow freely. Give me ears to hear what more You’re inviting me to do to spread the good news of Your kingdom, grace, and love. And grant me the courage to dive in with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength to point my neighbors—that is, everyone that comes across my path—to You. Amen.

Day 27—A Spirit-Led People with a Spirit-Led Mission

Read Acts 1:3–9, 2:1–21

After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

...

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”

Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.”

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

“In the last days, God says,
 I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
 Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
 your young men will see visions,
 your old men will dream dreams.
 Even on my servants, both men and women,
 I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
 and they will prophesy.
 I will show wonders in the heavens above
 and signs on the earth below,
 blood and fire and billows of smoke.
 The sun will be turned to darkness
 and the moon to blood
 before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.
 And everyone who calls
 on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ ”

Reflect

The book of Acts tells the story of the birth of the church—Jesus’ disciples empowered by the Holy Spirit—and the spreading of God’s kingdom after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension to be with God the Father. Through the church, referred to elsewhere in the New Testament as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27), Jesus would continue to do and teach what He had done and taught while on earth. But instead of His work being largely confined to Israel, He would now, through the church, reach out to the ends of the earth.

Before the disciples began their mission though, two things happened. First, Jesus was taken up into heaven and seated at the right hand of the Father (Acts 2:33), meaning Jesus now and forever shares the throne with God, ruling over all. Second, just as Jesus promised, the Holy Spirit was poured out on His disciples and this happened on the Feast of Pentecost, the day on which the Jews celebrated the renewal of God's covenant with Abraham. With the arrival of the Spirit, as prophesied by Joel, the last days had come and the church began its mission. Those who believe in Jesus are a part of the church's mission. Every disciple over the ages has been given the Spirit and is empowered to carry the love of Jesus Christ everywhere they go.

- How would you describe the mission of the church? What role has God invited you to place in that mission?
- What questions or confusion do you have about the Holy Spirit? Ask God for His help in deepening your understanding.
- How have you experienced the power of the Holy Spirit in your life?
- What does today's passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

God in heaven, thank You for Your Holy Spirit. Remind me of Your presence within me. Show me how to walk in Your ways and to share the love of Jesus with anyone and everyone I encounter. Transform my heart so that I can be the kind of person from whom love and patience and compassion naturally flow. And give me the words to share about Jesus and the kingdom of God. Amen.

Day 28—A Fellowship of People From Every Nation Under Heaven

Read Acts 2:36–47

“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Reflect

Yesterday we read about the miraculous pouring out of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. One of the many amazing elements of Pentecost was the incredible diversity of the people who came to see what had happened. The Bible tells us that “God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven” gathered in “bewilderment because each one heard their own language being spoken” (Acts 2:5–6). In our passage today, we read the end of Peter’s first sermon to this diverse crowd. He called them to repent and be baptized, and 3,000 of them were added to the number of believers. Thus, when we read the last paragraph of today’s passage—a description of the first church—we must understand how diverse and different this fellowship was. They didn’t all look the same, speak the same language, have the same background, or believe the same things. And yet, as they gathered in devotion to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, and to the breaking of bread and prayer, they began to have everything that mattered—their love of God and of others—in common, provide for each other’s needs, and eat together. It was through this group of believers empowered by the Holy Spirit that, as we read throughout the rest of the book of Acts, the gospel of Jesus Christ began to spread in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, just as Jesus promised.

- What stood out to you as you read today’s passage? Why do you think that is?
- Reflect on the groups with which you gather at church, in your home for meals, or elsewhere. How diverse are those groups? What is gained by the diversity you experience? What is missed if there is a lack of diversity? Spend a minute or two listening to what invitation God might be extending to you through today’s passage.
- Identify all the elements of activity and devotion you see in the last paragraph of today’s passage. Which elements are you currently experiencing? Which ones are missing?
- What does today’s passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

God of every nation, language, and people under heaven, thank You for the reminder that You are God of all and that Your church is a diverse body of people. Grow my desire to be a part of diverse gatherings that reflect Your church. Give me the courage to reach across racial, ethnic, and religious divides, and to model Your heart for every person. Forgive me for the times I have thought of others as “less than” for any reason, but especially because of their skin color, accent, background, or beliefs. Expand my heart to love as You love. Amen.

Day 29—The Gentiles Are Heirs Together with Israel

Read Ephesians 3:1–13

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—

Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all the Lord’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

Reflect

After the Holy Spirit was poured out, and as the church in Jerusalem began to grow, Jesus’ apostles and disciples began to be persecuted and killed for their loyalty to King Jesus. And as persecution grew, the disciples began to scatter and share the gospel in Judea and Samaria. But it wasn’t until a man named Saul—a persecutor and hater of Christians—encountered Jesus Christ in a dramatic, life-changing way (Acts 9:1–19) that the message of Christ expanded to the Gentile world. The onetime persecutor of Christians, Saul, became Paul, a compelling and significant voice in the history of Christianity. In fact, in the rest of the book of Acts and the New Testament, we read of Paul’s journeys and words to spread the gospel to the Gentiles.

One of the primary ways Paul shared the gospel was by planting churches and then writing them letters to help them understand what Jesus accomplished by His death and resurrection, and the meaning of the gospel in their lives. A critical element of the good news of Jesus, which Paul explains in today’s passage (from a segment of his letter to a church in Ephesus), is that the salvation Jesus offers is not only available to the Jewish people who had been awaiting their Messiah and clinging to God’s promises for hundreds of years, but also to the rest of the world—the Gentiles. In other words, Paul explained, through Jesus, the Gentiles had become heirs to God’s promises made to Israel long ago. That means the promises of God that we’ve been studying throughout the Old Testament about God’s coming kingdom, and the life and forgiveness He offers are for us!

- Paul told the Ephesians—and thus tells us: “In [Jesus] and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.” Reflect on how you approach God in prayer when you are in need. Is it with freedom and confidence? If not, what words would you use to describe how you approach Him? How might Paul’s words begin to change the way you approach God?

- Consider some of the promises of God that we've studied over the last 30 days, or others that you are familiar with in the Bible. Which ones stand out to you? Which ones seem particularly meaningful in the season of life in which you currently find yourself? Pray a prayer of gratitude for those promises and that God is faithful to keep them.
- Paul said that God gave him the task of preaching the “boundless riches of Christ.” How would you describe those riches to a friend or family member?
- What does today's passage reveal to you about God?

Respond

Faithful, loving God, thank You for Your promises of salvation, forgiveness, life, and Your coming kingdom. Thank You for enfolding me into Your flock and including me in Your promises. Thank You for Your grace and for the boundless riches of Christ. Help me to come to know more of these riches, to abide in Your presence more deeply, and to approach You with the freedom and confidence that I have through Jesus. Give me the words and the desire to share the gospel with those You place on my path. Amen.

Day 30—A New Heaven, a New Earth, and the Holy City

Read Revelation 21:1–14, 22–27, 22:1–7

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’”

He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.”

One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the

gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

The angel said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God who inspires the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place."

"Look, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy written in this scroll."

Reflect

Revelation, written by the apostle John, is the last book of the Bible, and it tells of the day when God's kingdom will be finally realized, and sin, evil, suffering, and death will be no more. Shalom—peace and wholeness—will be restored. We will see God face-to-face and live in His presence. But for now, the big story—God's story—continues. This is where we come in.

God has invited each of us to participate in the story as part of the church. We get to be light in a dark world. We get to continue Jesus' mission to announce salvation and the kingdom of God. Through our love for God and our neighbor (which includes everyone!) we get to demonstrate the presence of that kingdom in the here and now. We get to embody the Holy Spirit's presence and power in all realms of life—at work, at home, at kids' soccer games, at the grocery store, on business trips, while waiting in line, at funerals, in hospitals, in small towns and in big cities, and everywhere in between. And we get to share the hope we have for the day Jesus will return and the kingdom of God will be fully and finally realized. In today's passage we get a glimpse of what that future is going to look like. We've never seen or imagined anything like it, and yet, as we have learned throughout these last 30 days, God is faithful to fulfill what He has promised.

- Read this passage again slowly and notice what images, words, and promises grab your attention. Write them out and reflect on why they stood out to you. What hope do those images, words, and promises provide you?
- What does today's passage reveal to you about God?
- What are two or three truths you have learned having journeyed through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation in the last 30 days? How will those truths impact your life as a follower of Jesus? How will they impact the way you share the gospel with others?

Respond

Lord God, creator, sustainer, and restorer of all things, thank You for Your word. Thank You for this grand, sweeping, beautiful love story that You have been writing throughout history. Thank You for inviting me in and allowing me the privilege to be a part of it through Jesus Christ, my savior and king. Empower me by Your Spirit to love as You have called me, to do the work You have given me, and to hold on to hope until the day all things will be restored. When I am tempted to stray, when my heart feels faint, or when suffering and pain overwhelm me, may I remember Your promises and Your faithfulness. And may my every thought, word, and action bring You honor and glory. Amen and amen.