



Ancient City
BAPTIST CHURCH

40 Days of Learning



*"Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take up my yoke and learn from me, because I am lowly and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."
(Matthew 11.28–30)*

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Welcome to the ***40 Days of Learning!***

The ***40 Days of Learning*** begins Sunday, September 11,
and goes through Thursday, October 20, 2022.

Jesus gathered around him disciples—that is, those who would *learn* from him. He told those of us who are weary and burdened to take up his yoke—his teaching—and *learn* from him. But he wasn't just talking about "book learning." Too many of us have learned *facts* but haven't really learned about life and how to truly *walk with God*. That's a fear with our ***40 Days of Learning***—we will approach it as information only. The truth is, there *is* a lot of information in the ***40 Days of Learning***, but please recall that Jesus told us not just to *teach disciples*, but to *teach disciples to obey*. Our hope is that these 40 days will draw us closer to God himself, not just the concepts presented.

We are excited that you will be joining us in this journey! **The format is simple: there is a short (one page) "chapter" for each of the 40 days.** We pray that this will both encourage you and equip you in your desire to learn more about God, others, and yourself!



This emphasis is part of our plan of balanced Christian living we call **DiscipleLIFE**. Every Christian should grow in ***head, heart, hands, and feet***. Stated simply:

- **A Disciple Learns (HEAD)**
- **A Disciple Loves (HEART)**
- **A Disciple Serves (HANDS)**
- **A Disciple Shares (FEET)**

While the primary emphasis of ***40 Days of Learning*** is the "head," you will notice that it includes all four components of growth.

Thanks, and may God bless us all through the ***40 Days of Learning***.

Footnotes indicate additional Scripture references or notes provided in appendix.

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So then, just as you have received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to walk in him, being rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, and overflowing with gratitude. (Colossians 2.6–7)

How are you doing in your walk with God?

That’s a tough question for many of us. How do I even start answering it? Is it based on how I think God is treating me? Or on how I *feel*—whether things are going well in my own life? Or how closely I think I am keeping to the “straight and narrow” path? Who is the judge of how I am doing in my walk with God—me, God, the pastor, the church, all of the above?

In many areas of life, evaluation is easier. If my goal is to get my weight to a certain level, I can get on the scale each day to monitor my progress. In school, grades are given that evaluate our progress. Many jobs include periodic reviews and the possibility of bonuses for work well done. We measure our children in various ways to note their progress. If expected growth doesn’t seem to be taking place, we try to find out if there are underlying issues so that we can take corrective action.

It seems to be harder to measure spiritual growth, because it is, well—*spiritual*. It is not as tangible. But while it may be harder, it is not impossible to measure spiritual growth. We have put together a model that is simple, memorable, and (hopefully) helpful: **A disciple grows in “head, heart, hands, and feet.”**

Jesus said, “Learn from me...”¹ **A disciple learns.** (Head)

Jesus said, “Love God... Love neighbor as self.”² **A disciple loves.** (Heart)

Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant.”³ **A disciple serves.** (Hands)

Jesus said, “Go... and make disciples.”⁴ **A disciple shares.** (Feet)

Then there are **stages of development**: briefly, they are “pre-birth,” “infancy,” “growth,” and “maturity.” (See Ephesians 4.11-16.)

This model helps us evaluate our walk with God. From time to time we have a 40 day emphasis on one of the components to help us focus our growth in that area. There is **40 Days of Sharing**, emphasizing our need to share our faith, **40 Days of Serving**, emphasizing our responsibility to serve others with the gifts God has given, and **40 Days of Love**, emphasizing our love for God, others, and self.

Today we embark on the journey, **40 Days of Learning**. There are things we need to *know* to walk with God. But knowledge itself is not enough. We need to put it into practice. We will look at basic concepts in this **40 Days** experience. I hope it will be a help and a reminder. As we begin, let’s pray for God to do a great work of teaching in us all. Take a moment here on Day 1 to do just that: *Pray for yourself and all of us to learn! And not just learn facts but learn to trust and obey!*

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1.1)

Whether you realize it or not, the most important question in life is, “Is there a God?” That affects everything else about your life. Some think everything is God (pantheists). Others think there are many gods (polytheists). Many today believe there is no god (atheists)—and many others *live* as if there is no God, whether they say they believe or not.

Look again at the simple verse above—the first verse of the Bible. Wow! What a way to start our learning! We’ve always been told to start at the beginning, and the first verse of Genesis does just that. It lets us know that in the beginning someone was already here—and at work!

I have seen many begin with just the first four words in our English Bibles—“In the beginning, God...”—to emphasize this idea of God’s existence prior to the beginning (and that is true!), but the Hebrew language puts words in a different order and emphasizes God’s *action*: ***“In the beginning God created...”*** (The verb actually comes first in the Hebrew: *“In the beginning created God the heavens and the earth.”*) God is not simply a passive, impersonal overseer. He is a God of action! That was true in the beginning and is true today. In the final chapters of Revelation, as he is speaking of a new heaven and a new earth, God says, ***“Look, I am making everything new!”***⁵

We begin with God, and we begin with the mystery of God.

What does the Bible tell us about God? One of the most important verses in the Bible says there is one God (monotheism): ***“Listen, Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart... all your soul, and... all your strength.”*** (Deuteronomy 6.4–5)

So there is **one God**—not zero and not more than one. And God is *not* all creation. He created everything but remains apart from his creation.

Yet, there is a greater mystery. God is one... but he exists in three personalities that are distinct: Father, Son, and Spirit. We see this as early as Genesis 1.26: ***Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness...”***

We call this the Trinity—a “Tri-unity.” Three in one; one in three. We can’t fully understand it, but it is thoroughly taught in Scripture. We will emphasize each person of God in the next three days.

As finite people, we cannot understand all about the infinite God. That’s why the Trinity is beyond complete grasp. Yet, we must be careful not to use this idea to explain *all* mysteries. Much *can* be understood, and we are to test things. Otherwise, we can fall to many false doctrines. But we should expect God himself to be beyond full understanding...

Are you awe-inspired by God and what he has done? Recapture that now!

[Jesus said,] “But an hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth. Yes, the Father wants such people to worship him.”
(John 4.23)

While much we can say about God applies to all three “persons”—Father, Son, and Spirit—each has distinct characteristics. The Father is not the Son or the Spirit; the Son is not the Father or the Spirit; the Spirit is not the Father or the Son. Yet, Father, Son, and Spirit are all the One God.

Throughout the Bible when we read the word “God,” the writer is almost always speaking of **God the Father**. In fact, “Father” is a term for God that is used very sparingly in the Old Testament. God is alluded to as Father there just a few times, mostly by prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah.

Jesus popularized the use of the term “**Father**” for God—first, because Jesus is the unique **Son** of God, and, second, because he wants us to know that we also can call on God as Father! We are “adopted” children of God through faith in Jesus, and we are encouraged to call him, “**Our Father...**”⁶ The Jewish religious leaders were aghast and offended that Jesus would call God his Father—they understood that this claim was also a claim (in that culture) of his being actually *equal* with the Father.

Often God was seen as a distant, demanding God who had passed down all these laws they were unable to keep. However, as we look back, we can see how often the people of the Old Testament days simply missed what God had in store for them. As Isaiah spoke for God, “**These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.**”⁷

But the Father had revealed himself through his many names. The most personal name of all was **Yahweh** (or Jehovah), and it is said to mean, “I am who I am,” letting us know of his eternal, powerful existence. In most English Bibles, in the Old Testament (OT) **Yahweh** is translated as **LORD**. And we see so much of the care of the Father through some of the many names combined with **Yahweh** in the OT. Consider some of these Hebrew names: **Yahweh Yireh**—the Lord who provides; **Yahweh Rohi**—the Lord is my shepherd; **Yahweh Rapha**—the Lord heals; **Yahweh Shalom**—the Lord is our peace; **Yahweh Shammah**—the Lord is present; **Yahweh Tsidkenu**—the Lord is our righteousness; **Yahweh Mekadesh**—the Lord who sanctifies; and more. *Which speak to you?*

There are other wonderful names that reveal much to us about God. But out of all these, there is one name that is most precious of all... **Father**. This speaks to guidance, care, discipline, and to the highest of all of God’s attributes that Scripture reveals: “**God is love.**”

Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing... in Christ. (Ephesians 1.3)

Meditate on these Names of God—and what it means that God is Father...



Jesus, the Son of God and God the Son

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. All things were created through him, and apart from him not one thing was created that has been created.
(John 1.1–3)

Jesus is the eternal Son of God and God the Son. John begins his gospel with the same words as Genesis: ***“In the beginning...”*** But he tells us that in the beginning was the ***Word***, speaking of Jesus. (If there is any doubt about that, look further down to John 1.14: ***“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”***) Where Luke and Matthew give us the *physical* Christmas story, John gives us the *theological* Christmas story: Jesus has always existed *with* and *as* God. He is the Creator. And he came to earth as a human to reveal to us what God is really like and to purchase and provide our salvation. We have a special name for God becoming a man—the ***Incarnation***.

We have admitted that the Trinity is mysterious and cannot be fully comprehended by the human mind, but it is clearly taught in Scripture. This is one of many passages where Jesus is revealed as God the Son.

Because some cannot wrap their heads around this, they deny Jesus is God—or at most they say he is a “lesser” God than the Father. They may argue, “Doesn’t a father have to come before a child?” I would respond that I was never a father until the moment my first child was conceived. It all happened simultaneously. But there is still a difference with God. There has never been a moment when God the Father was not, and there has never been a moment when God the Son was not.

Others point out that Jesus said, ***“The Father is greater than I.”***⁸ Paul points out in Philippians 2 that as part of his love for us in coming to save us, Jesus “emptied himself.” He gave up for a time part of what it meant to be the Son in heaven and relied totally on the Father. Yet, the Jewish leaders clearly recognized (more than once) when Jesus said, ***“The Father and I are one,”*** that he was claiming to be equal to God.

In Revelation, God (the Father) says in the first chapter, ***“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the one who is, who was, and is to come, the Almighty.”***⁹ In the final chapter, it is Jesus who says, ***“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”***¹⁰ Father and Son are both Alpha and Omega, beginning and end, both God.

It is only space that prevents sharing more evidence. (I hope you realize the limits of one page a day!) But we need to know that Jesus is not just the Son of God but is God the Son. He has eternally existed with the Father. We will speak more of his willingness to come to earth as a human as we go through this journey.

Meditate today on the humility of God who would give up heaven for you!

[Jesus said,] “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have told you.”
(John 14.26)

It’s one thing to acknowledge the Father as God and the Son as God; it’s another to understand that the Holy Spirit is God, too. Someone might refer to the Holy Spirit as “it.” The Bible, though, refers to the Spirit as “he,” just as with the Father and Son.

I understand the confusion. The Holy Spirit is often called “the Spirit of God” or “the Spirit of Jesus.” (After all, they *are* one!) But the Holy Spirit is identified as another “person” of the One True God. He is mentioned in the second verse of the Bible: “... **and the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters.**” (Genesis 1.2)

Jesus spoke much about the Spirit before his death. He said when he departed, he and the Father would send the Spirit to be *with* us and *in* us forever! The Holy Spirit is the person of God who indwells each believer! Before Jesus, the Spirit was active in the world and with people, but he did not indwell them. Jesus said he would not leave us as orphans. He would send the Spirit to comfort us, counsel us, guide us into all truth, convince us of sin and righteousness and judgment, and more. When we speak of Jesus living in us, we are actually talking about the Holy Spirit!

Does the Spirit get offended that he is often misunderstood or referred to as the Spirit of Jesus? No, not at all. He simply wants to draw us to God and live in us so that we can walk more closely with God. He is self-effacing; he glorifies Jesus. **Stop and read John chapters 14-16.** So much of this passage highlights the Spirit’s role in our lives. And we see him so active in the book of Acts as he draws people to God and directs them to do as God desires. As we walk in the Spirit, we will begin to see the Spirit bear fruit in our lives. **(Read Galatians 5.22-23.)**

There has been so much confusion about the Spirit of God throughout church history that some ignore him and even fear what he might do in their lives. But we are to embrace the Spirit! He is called the Spirit of Jesus. If you welcome Jesus, you welcome the Spirit! Yes, we want our understanding of the Spirit to come from Scripture and not from other sources. We are told Scripture came as “**men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.**”¹¹ So “**test the spirits.**”¹² The Holy Spirit *in you* won’t contradict *his own word*, the Bible. When we rightly understand Scripture, we rightly understand the Spirit’s role, too.

In Scripture we read that some *resist*, some *grieve*, and some *quench* the Spirit. Let’s not do any of these. Instead, let us *be filled*¹³ *with the Spirit*—that is, let us allow him moment by moment to guide us into all truth.

Ask God to help you walk in the Spirit always; rely on the Spirit today!

All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3.16–17)

Before we go further, we must ask, “How can we know anything about God?” Since we are finite and God is infinite, the only way for us to know about God is if he chooses to *reveal himself* to us. And he has done just that through Creation, his Spirit, and more, but believers in Jesus say that God has revealed himself most clearly through his Word, the Bible.

One might ask, “What’s so special about the Bible? Why is it different from other books that seem inspired or claim to be from God?” Good questions! And there are good answers. To begin with, only a handful of books even *claim* to be from God, so that narrows it down. Such qualities as historical accuracy and internal consistency can be evaluated.

Many ancient records and archaeological finds show just how accurate the Bible is historically—and some just in recent decades. These point to the promise of more finds in the future. The Dead Sea Scrolls show us just how accurate our copies have remained over time. The consistency of the Bible’s themes is truly amazing when you consider it has 66 books written by about 40 authors over a period estimated to be about 1,200-1,600 years. All this boosts our confidence in God’s Word.

Likewise, we can consider the *message* of the Bible. Its teachings about God and man can be considered. Does its message have the ring of truth? For instance, the Bible teaches that while we were made in the image of God, we have fallen to sin and we are thus all sinners by both nature and choice. Does that match up with your observation of humans? It should! After all, while we see great potential in them, we don’t have to teach children to do wrong or be selfish; we have to teach them to do right!

Many articles and books are available that go into far more detail for those with more interest, but in the end, we must all face the final challenge of the Bible. It *claims* to be from God. It *claims* to be written by eyewitnesses. Jesus validated the Old Testament with his words, and his resurrection confirmed all he said and did! The New Testament has the stamp of his words as well as the validation of the apostles.

Consider: **2 Peter 1.16-21; Luke 21.33; Psalm 18.30; Psalm 119.105.** Take a moment to read these and today’s opening passage as examples.

When we acknowledge that the Bible *claims* to be the word of God, there are only two final choices: *we can accept it or reject it.*

Christians accept by faith—but not blind faith—that the Bible is the Word of God. The Bible tells us who Jesus is. The Bible tells us how to live. The Bible is from God!

How are you taking advantage of God’s own Word to us in your life?

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1.1)

Would you take a moment and read all of Genesis 1? (I'll wait!) **[READ]**

This shows the great care God gave. Imagine all the joy the Father, Son, and Spirit experienced as they brought all into existence! But this chapter gives rise to many questions, too, especially for us living in a scientific age. Was all really created about 10,000 years ago (an estimate using genealogies in Genesis)—or since no one else was around to count, did God just reveal to us his creative process in a poetic-like formula to give us a pattern for life? After all, most scientists say the universe is *billions* of years old! Must we choose one or the other?

Most of us intuitively believe all this did not arise out of a mindless goo. Some living designer must have had an idea and brought it to fruition, especially life. I have come across about a dozen theories for the creation story, from the literal 24-hour days 10,000 years ago to the Day-Age Theory (since with God “a day is like a thousand years,”¹⁴ he is giving us an overview that makes sense to humans of all time) to the Gap Theory (between Genesis 1.1 and 1.2 there is an undocumented amount of time when “the earth became void”) and more. Most of these are brought forth by those who take the Bible seriously and seek to harmonize Scripture with science. Most have both strengths and weaknesses we could cite. There is also the hybrid “Theistic Evolution” that some posit as a way to avoid dealing with some of these issues at all!

These are all interesting, and I am fine with you holding the one that makes most sense to you and seems most consistent with both the *Word* God has given us and the *Nature* God has given us. Scripture says, “The heavens *declare* the glory of God”¹⁵—not *deny*. God wants nature to lead us to him as with awe we see all he has made. My problem is not when some hold a different view but when they insist theirs is the right way and all others are wrong. (*Maybe we should have some humility?*) Some seem to pull the rug of belief out from under others, it seems, but God has not asked us to throw away our brains to believe in him. All truth—is God's truth. We come to salvation by believing in Jesus, not by believing in one of the competing theories of *how* God created.

What *must* we believe? I think we can enjoy discussing ideas with each other, but I believe four parameters must indeed be insisted upon:

- 1) **God is the Creator.** He did it. It was his idea. We didn't just happen.
- 2) **“Man” is not just a fancy animal.** Unlike all others, we are made in God's image and likeness. We are not just the most highly evolved.
- 3) **Sin is real.** There is a real moral choice. We don't just go by instinct.
- 4) **Salvation is necessary.** Since sin brings judgment, we need help!

Much more to say! What are your thoughts on God's great Creation?



God said, "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness. They will rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, the whole earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth." So God created man in his own image; he created him in the image of God; he created them male and female. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. Rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every creature that crawls on the earth." (Genesis 1.26–28)

God made all else he created here... *for you!* It's like parents creating a nursery for an anticipated child. Humankind is the crown of God's creation, the only creation on earth made in his *image* and his *likeness*.

Have you ever pondered what it means to be made in God's image and likeness? Certainly it means we are somewhat like God and we are to reflect that image in life. (By the way, the coming of sin has *marred* but has *not eradicated* God's image in humankind.) Traditionally, his image has been understood as our being capable of reason, having true moral choices (rather than being prisoners of instinct), being social creatures (as God himself exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), etc. I am sure that these and more are inherent in what it means to be made in his image.

In my own meditation, I have asked the question, "What do we know about God so far when we get to this passage?" (In other words, what do we know about God from the first 25 verses of Genesis 1?) I find that three major characteristics of God have been revealed when God declares he will make humankind in his image, and I invite you to ponder these as you consider God's image and likeness in yourself. ***Because you have been made in his image and likeness...***

1) You have an eternal spirit

"In the beginning..." God is eternal in both directions—he had no beginning and will have no end. You and I *do* have a beginning, but we, like God, will live forever. We don't have a choice in that! We are eternal creatures! We will all live either with God or apart from him forever. *Where will you be spending eternity? God wants you to know!*

2) You have a creative spirit

"... God created..." That's the first thing revealed about God. You and I also have the ability to think, reason, dream, formulate ideas, and work to bring those ideas to fruition. A more prosaic way of saying that is that we can establish goals and attain them. *How are you using creativity?*

3) You have powerful abilities with words

God said, "Let there be light, and there was light." While we cannot speak things into existence, our words, spoken and written, can have great power, too. *How are you using your words in keeping with God's image? Take time to ponder God's image and likeness in your life, image-bearer!*

For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. (Genesis 2.24 NAS95)

Let me begin by affirming to be **single is sacred, too!** Jesus was single and said some are *called* to remain single and celibate. Paul was single as an apostle; he encouraged believers to consider remaining single.

Having said that, the pattern for most people in the world is marriage. **[READ Genesis 2.20-24.]** Woman was made from man, and is reunited with man through marriage. The first definition we see of marriage is God's, and it is still the best. In the verse above, we note two principles about marriage for those who trust in God—and a result.

First, **marriage is to be the primary relationship of life** (outside of one's relationship with God). From childhood, mom and dad have been the primary relationship, but there comes a time for change. So we "leave" father and mother to establish this new relationship. Until we are ready to make this person primary, we are not ready for marriage.

Second, **marriage is to be a permanent relationship.** "Be joined" has the basic meaning, "to stick to." Marriage is a covenant of God, a man, and a woman. ***"I hate divorce,' says the Lord God."***¹⁶ God hates divorce because he loves people. Jesus says divorce was not God's intent but was granted because of ***"hardness of heart."***¹⁷ While it only takes one to divorce and God forgives based on repentance, divorce is still caused by hardness of heart—someone's! Marriage of believers is based on a commitment by each one to do whatever it takes to make the marriage what God intends. We should approach marriage with this in mind.

The result? **Marriage is the unity of husband and wife.** ***"They shall become one flesh."*** While this literally speaks of the sexual relationship in coming together, it means so much more. It is a symbol of the total unity God intends and each person desires. And note that the sexual expression comes as a *result* of the commitment—not before—in God's design. Sex *inside* marriage is blessed by God and is a gift when there is mutual love and concern. Sex *outside* marriage is never God's plan.

But let's also note from Genesis 1, later reaffirmed by Jesus, that God made humans ***"male and female."*** There is purpose and identification in being male and female, and we should ponder the meaning, today more than ever. God made the woman as a "helper corresponding to" the man. We complement each other and thus have differences from our creation.

[READ Ephesians 5.21-33.] While we have different roles, we must be careful, particularly men. Some take headship much too far. Jesus said his followers were not to approach leadership by "lording it over" others but by servant leadership. And we are to love our wives as Jesus loved the church. *Married? Meditate today on God's plan for it in your life.*

GOD'S CREATION—ALL GOOD! Garden of Eden: A Wonderful Paradise

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good indeed. (Genesis 1.31)

Genesis 1 tells the broad story of Creation; Genesis 2 begins with God resting—giving us a pattern for rhythms of work and rest—and then focuses more on the crown of Creation—humankind. **[READ Genesis 2.]**

Here we note life the way God intended before the “fall” of man into sin, the subject of Genesis 3 (which we will consider tomorrow). In the last two chapters of Revelation (21 and 22), we see the restoration of the paradise God created. Here are some observations that are interesting and/or help us understand God’s intent and a Christian worldview...

Meaningful labor is a gift from God. We should get that already from God’s work in creation and our being made in his creative image, but more explicitly we see here: ***“The LORD God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden to work it and watch over it.”*** (Genesis 2.15) We were intended for meaningful labor, including creation care that was already mentioned in chapter 1. It is true that labor gets *harder* after the fall, but creative work is God’s plan. (And this gives hope to those who secretly fear heaven might be a bit boring, just playing a harp all day!)

There were all kinds of trees in the garden. And the fruit was ***“pleasing in appearance and good for food.”*** There were two special trees, the *Tree of Life* and the *Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil*. God told the man he could eat from all trees in the garden—except one.

The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. How many rules do you have in life? Dozens? Hundreds? In the garden there was only one. Adam was told not to eat the fruit of this tree. God gave choice to his creation, and with this comes the choice to disobey. The only way man could *know* evil in the beginning was to *do* evil, so there was one prohibition given—and a consequence, death.

The Tree of Life allowed humans to live forever as they continually ate from it. See Revelation 22 and note it bears fruit every month and heals.

Humans are social creatures. ***Then the LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone.”*** While God responds with the creation of the woman and instructions for marriage, this truth is not only about marriage. Some of us may be more introverted than others, but we all need each other. We all need God’s people, the church. We are not meant to go through lives on our own.

“Naked and unashamed”: Since this comes on the heels of God’s giving us marriage, we might first think this has something to say about sex. But it doesn’t—at least, not primarily. They are naked and feel no shame because true shame is a product of sin. This sets us up to understand what comes next. *Spoiler alert: It’s not good!*

How does knowledge of “the way it ought to be” inform your life today?

So she took some of its fruit and ate it; she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.
(Genesis 3.6)

We live in a broken world. It all goes back to what we learn in Genesis 3.
[READ Genesis 3 now.]

I hope you read slowly and carefully! There is so much that we learn in this chapter that explains why and how we live in a broken world...

We have an enemy—the evil one. He is called the serpent, the devil, Satan, the dragon, and more. While we might like to know more about this one we believe to be a fallen angel, it is enough to know that he is our enemy and tempts us, just as he tempted Adam and Eve. We will speak more of him later. Just note that he questions God's word and may use half-truths to mask his lies. He wants to destroy us!

Temptations to sin can look similar to what is blessed by God. Note the description of the fruit is the same as before, "*good for food and delightful to look at,*" with an additional bonus: "*desirable for obtaining wisdom.*" What, then, was the difference? Simply this: God had said, "Not this one." He had given them more than enough. We see the same pattern today. One example is marriage. Coming together is blessed with your spouse; for any other, God says, "Not this one."

Sin brings guilt and shame and tempts us to hide from God. Now they are naked and *ashamed*. They try to cover up. They want to hide.

Sin brings blame. Adam blamed Eve. Eve blamed the serpent. We always want to blame someone else rather than admit responsibility.

Sin brings death. God had told them this. The serpent said no. Who was right? God, of course! They died *spiritually* and had to leave the paradise. They began to die in their *souls*, and since they could no longer eat from the Tree of Life, they would die *physically*. Ultimately, death is eternal.

Sin brings consequences. Sin is the cause of death, disease, great pain, harder labor, and all kinds of calamities. We see the cause of much of our relational problems, particularly in marriage, in the curse on the woman. We see that nature itself fell in the curse on the man. Disease and suffering came into the world with sin. We need to be careful here, though, not to equate everyone's misery necessarily with their *own* sin! We are subject to these things simply by living in a fallen, broken world.

God brings hope and mercy. In the midst of the curse on the serpent, God gives his first prophecy of a Savior! Though somewhat veiled (Gen. 3.15), it is nonetheless clear in hindsight. And note another mercy easy to overlook: God sent them out of the garden "*[lest they] take from the tree of life, eat, and live forever.*" Yes, they were expelled. God did not want them to live forever *in their fallen state!* This is the essence of hell.

Think on your sinfulness. Do you blame others—or take responsibility?

Your adversary the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for anyone he can devour. Resist him, firm in the faith... (1 Peter 5.8–9)

We have an enemy. We are in a battle for our very souls. It started in the Garden of Eden and continues to this day. This enemy (called Satan, the evil one, the devil, etc.) hates God and wants to destroy us, and he has helpers—his angels (or demons). While we face many difficulties we see, we are told, ***“Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this darkness, against evil, spiritual forces in the heavens.”***¹⁸

Hints in Scripture lead us to believe Satan was a powerful, beautiful angel who ultimately wanted to usurp God’s throne; therefore, he and his angels (now called demons) were cast out, and they seek to destroy all that God loves. **Here are some basic truths to know...**

God is greater. Many philosophies see good and evil as equal powers that need to have balance. In contrast, we are told, ***“You are from God, little children, and you have conquered them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.”***¹⁹

Satan will be ultimately defeated. While a formidable foe for us, we have read the end of the story, and we know he will be cast out forever!

Satan is a tempter and accuser. God never tempts us to do wrong. Satan does, though we often bring it on ourselves! He often seeks to counterfeit something God has made and twist it into evil. Pleasure was created by God; Satan takes a pleasure and twists it for selfish use or tempts us when God has said, “Not this one” or “Not this way.” Even when we are forgiven, the evil one seeks to accuse us: *“You’re not really a Christian or you wouldn’t have done that”* or *“You can’t really be forgiven for that, and you know it.”* He is insidious! Don’t listen to him! But remember that temptation itself is not a sin; it is an *invitation* to sin.

Satan can be defeated through the power of God. Both Peter and James tell us to ***“resist the devil.”***²⁰ We are told he will flee from us! But we need God’s power. Before giving us the verse at the top, Peter says, ***“Humble yourself under the mighty hand of God.”*** James says to submit to and draw near to God. Paul tells us to put on the ***“full armor of God”*** as we fight the devil’s schemes. **[READ Ephesians 6.10-18.]**

While we resist the devil, we flee temptation. Temptation packages sin as something desired rather than something evil. We may think we are to face it. God says flee from it!²¹ Jesus said to pray that we wouldn’t be led into it.²² We will face enough temptation without looking for it. Make life habits that keep you away from your known temptations.

What are some of your temptations? How do you deal with them? Meditate on how these truths can help you find victory in your life...

For God's wrath is revealed from heaven against all godlessness and unrighteousness of people who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth, since what can be known about God is evident among them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes...have been clearly seen since the creation of the world, ... through what he has made. As a result, people are without excuse. (Romans 1.18–20)

We call it salvation. Over and over the Bible speaks of our need to be saved, or rescued. If we are being saved, what are we being saved *from*? In Romans 6.23, Paul reiterates what God had said in Genesis 2: ***"The wages of sin is death."*** Many today seem to have "outgrown" any idea of eternal punishment. Perhaps because of caricatures of hell and the devil or (pseudo) intellectualism, many today cannot tolerate the idea of eternal punishment. "I can't believe a loving God would send anyone to hell." Well, he doesn't. We send ourselves. We *earn* it with our sin. Jesus did not come to condemn us but to save us. **[READ John 3.16-18].**

Yet, God *will* be the ultimate judge²³ of our sin, and ***"how will we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?"*** (Hebrews 2.3)

Some today believe everyone will be saved. God's love will finally prevail, they say. They are known as **universalists**. If you like the idea (and most of us do when we consider those we love, at least), here's a suggestion: don't read the Bible. Don't listen to Jesus. Even the gospel written by John, known as the disciple of love, speaks also of wrath and salvation.

You see, God is not just a God of love, though that is prominent in Scripture. He is also a holy God, a God of justice. By the way, I am pretty sure you like justice, too. If you were called to pass sentence on a mass murderer, one that had not shown even a shred of remorse, would you say, "Oh, it's okay. I'm going to let you off this time"?

Others think those who aren't saved will be ultimately destroyed. That is, they will no longer live at all and therefore will not have to endure an *eternity* apart from God. At least these can make some kind of biblical case. There *are* verses²⁴ that speak of "destruction," though most understand this to be eternal. It's okay with me if God does this, but hear this—the clearest sentence in the Bible on the matter is spoken by Jesus: ***"And they [the wicked] will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."*** (Matthew 25.46)

What is the nature of eternal punishment? We don't know exactly. The two most prominent *pictures* are darkness (which speaks of fear, lack of direction, loneliness, etc.) and fire (which speaks to great discomfort.)

God's righteous wrath awaits those who are not rescued. But he loves you so much he doesn't want that for you. He has made a way of rescue. And, oh, the lengths he has gone to in order to bring it to fruition!

*Do you know for sure that you are saved? You **can** be!*

Indeed, we have all received grace upon grace from his fullness, for the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.
(John 1.16–17)

God, in love, created a paradise for humankind. Falling to the temptation of the evil one, humankind disobeyed their one prohibition. Humankind fell into death in three ways—spirit (immediately), soul (inclined toward sin in downward spiral), and body (ultimately would wear out and die).

Was there no hope for restoration? Fortunately, yes. Even in the curse, we see the first prophecy of salvation. Even in the banishment, we see the grace of restoration before access to the *Tree of Life* was again given.

God began to prepare for this restoration, this salvation for his most loved creature, the one made in his image and likeness. The lengthy preparation was perhaps mostly for us. God wanted us to be able to recognize his work. The evil one was still practicing his deception and would surely seek to counterfeit or veil all that God would do.

God chose to institute over time two main covenants to bring about the salvation he would offer. The older covenant, given through Moses, was the institution of the Law. God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mt. Sinai on stone tablets, and many other laws were given, too. In our Bibles, we call this the Old Testament. This covenant was based on obeying the law of God and was designed to teach us the holiness of God.

Even in the days of the old covenant, prophets were sent to tell us that a new and better covenant would be made by God for us. In Jeremiah 31.31-33, God said, ***“Look, the days are coming...when I will make a new covenant.... This one will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors... my covenant that they broke.... I will put my teaching within them and write it on their hearts.”***

And in the New Testament (the part of the Bible that describes the new covenant), we read, ***“Why, then, was the law given? It was added for the sake of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise was made would come.”*** (Galatians 3.19) It goes on to say it acted much as “guardians and trustees”²⁵ for us in our spiritual “childhood” until we were mature enough and the time was right for the new covenant.

The old covenant could not save. But it reveals our sinfulness and need for a Savior. I am not an expert on other faiths, but it seems in most or all outside of faith in Jesus, it is up to the person to save himself. He or she has to be *good enough* or *know enough* or *do acts that please the god or gods*. Often, sacrifices are not so much for sin but to feed or otherwise please or placate the god. God’s law teaches us that our efforts are never enough. We can’t be “good enough” to earn it. And we need to know that!

How does the law help you understand sin? More on covenants tomorrow.

SALVATION PREPARATION

The Old and New Testaments

Indeed, we have all received grace upon grace from his fullness, for the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. (John 1.16–17)

Note the verse above is the same from yesterday. It succinctly sums up the two covenants. In doing so, the apostle John identifies the key figure in the Old Testament as Moses, as he was the law giver, and Jesus in the New Testament, as the one who brought us grace and truth.

Some people think the Old Testament reveals an angry, wrathful God while the New Testament reveals a loving, merciful God. If you think that way, I would encourage you to read more closely. But let's think about the emphases of the Old and New Testaments.

The Old Testament emphasizes the law and the consequences of our disobedience in its role as “guardian,” but it has innumerable references to God's love. As just one example, while prophets often thunder against sin for more of their message, they invariably end with God's desire to forgive and restore based on his love and their repentance.

The New Testament emphasized the love and grace of God. God is love and God is light. But grace is offered in the context of ***“all have sinned”*** and ***“the wages of sin is death.”***²⁶ Grace makes no sense without these.

The Old Testament is about God establishing a nation, Israel. The New Testament is about God sending a Savior, Jesus.

God begins building the nation through Abraham. He makes the original covenant of circumcision with Abraham. And we see God's intention to save us by faith, rather than works, *before* the law was given through Moses. One of the key verses in all the Bible is Genesis 15.6: ***“Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”***

To be saved, we need righteousness. That is, we need to be “right” before God. In the law, each person was given the opportunity to gain righteousness through keeping the law, and, according to its purpose, it showed us we cannot. We aren't “good enough” to work our way to God. To do so, we would have to be perfect.

Notice that Abraham was “credited” with righteousness. That is, he wasn't a perfect man, but God *counted* his belief in him *as* righteousness.

I mentioned that many see in the Old Testament an angry, wrathful God. What we actually see is a *holy* God—one who is completely righteous and one who desires that for us. Several times in the law, and echoed in the New Testament, we read God saying, ***“Be holy, because I am holy.”***²⁷ Holiness takes sin seriously. In fact, that's why we will see such detailed preparation for salvation in the days ahead.

First, let's review a bit more about the Bible for the next couple of days...

To be holy is to be set apart. There is none like God! Meditate on holiness...

The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul... (Psalm 19.7 NASB)

Our Bible contains 66 books (for Protestants)—39 in the Old Testament (OT), 27 in the New Testament (NT). The OT comprises just over 3/4 of the pages of the Bible and is generally categorized into three sections: the **Law**, the **Prophets**, and the **Writings**.²⁸

The **Law** consists of the books of Moses, the first five books (Genesis-Deuteronomy), also called the Pentateuch or the Torah. In English Bibles, the **Writings** come next (Joshua-Song of Songs, which includes both history and poetry) followed by the **Prophets** (Isaiah-Malachi, further designated as “major” or “minor” by length, not importance).

The OT focuses on God’s creation of a special nation, Israel, through whom he would bring salvation by an anointed one, the Messiah, and reveal himself to the world. Abraham (first known as Abram) is the patriarch of the Jewish nation. A man who believes God, he is told that the entire world will be blessed through his offspring. He and his wife Sarah miraculously give birth to their only child, Isaac, when Sarah is 90, past the age of childbearing. Isaac has two sons, Esau and Jacob, but Jacob is the one through whom the nation of Israel will be built. (Jacob’s name is changed to Israel, which means, “he struggles with God.”)

Jacob has 12 sons, the 12 tribes of Israel.²⁹ One, Joseph, goes to Egypt as a slave but becomes Pharaoh’s wise counsel. During a famine, Jacob and sons move to Egypt, where they are enslaved 400 years. *Exodus* tells the story of Moses being sent as leader as God delivers the nation. Due to disobedience, they wander in the wilderness 40 years before taking the Promised Land of Canaan through Joshua’s leadership when Moses dies.

After a period of “judges” ruling, Saul is selected as the first king. God replaces him with the greatest king, David, out of whose line the Messiah will come. Solomon follows his father David as the kingdom reaches its greatest glory. Upon his death, Israel divides into the northern (called Israel, sometimes Ephraim) and southern (called Judah, sometimes Israel) kingdoms. Israel has no good kings; it is exiled to Assyria. Judah has some good kings and lasts longer but is finally exiled to Babylon.

King Cyrus allows the Jews to return home and rebuild the temple, which had been built under Solomon but destroyed by Babylon.

The **Prophets** give God’s message before, during, and after exile. Many of the **Writings** give history of various periods. The *Psalms* make up the hymnal of Israel; about half were written by King David. King Solomon compiled the *Proverbs*, a book of wisdom.

About 400 years pass after the last book, *Malachi*, is written before the coming of Jesus which ushers in the period of the New Testament.

Too brief an overview, but thank God for his preparation through the OT!

[Jesus said,] “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”
(Matthew 24.35)

The New Testament (NT) tells the story of the fulfillment of God’s promise in the Old Testament (OT) to bring salvation to fallen mankind.

We can categorize the 27 NT writings into **Gospels** (these are four biographies of Jesus), **History** (*Acts*, which is a history of the church, though the gospels could also be called history), **Epistles** or Letters (addressed variously to churches, general audiences, or persons), and **Apocalyptic** or Prophetic (*Revelation*).

While we accept the OT based on it being the word of God accepted by Jesus, NT books were accepted generally based on the authority of one of the apostles of Jesus. Matthew, John, and Peter were all apostles. Paul was appointed apostle to the Gentiles. Mark was a companion of Peter. The physician Luke, a companion of Paul, carefully researched his gospel and *Acts*. James was the half-brother of Jesus and the leader of the church in Jerusalem. Jude was a brother of James and also the half-brother of Jesus. We aren’t sure who wrote *Hebrews*. Some say Paul, but he isn’t identified. Others think it was Barnabas or Apollos, well-known in the NT times. We have confidence in our NT!

Not only does it tell of Jesus, the history of the spread of the church, and give us God’s wisdom for living our lives as believers, it also helps us understand how we are to use the OT today. Some wonder why we might study the OT, since it was a “guardian” until the time of Jesus and since it was a covenant of law rather than grace. But the OT is still God’s word. However, it does need to be interpreted through the lens of Jesus. Though we are not saved by following the law, the law still reveals God’s intent. It points to God’s desire. In the Sermon on the Mount, we are shown how to look beyond the letter of the law to the intent. Six times in Matthew 5, Jesus gives examples: **“You have heard that it was said...”** and he quotes a law, like, **“don’t murder.”** Then he says, **“But I say to you...”** claiming his authority over the meaning of Scripture and going beyond it: **“whoever is angry with his brother is guilty...”** He is telling us to look to the heart: murder begins with anger. In that sermon, he is giving us the key to our understanding the OT today.

We also note that some OT laws were *moral* but others were *ceremonial*, or symbolic, like not eating certain foods. Jesus said such laws no longer bind, as they were *symbols* of holiness and not holiness themselves as they were outward rather than inward. While we may not always agree on which are moral and which are ceremonial, most are clear. And it might just be a good idea to err on the side of keeping it when in doubt! Jesus said he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it! And he has!

How are you using the Bible to hear God and have your life transformed?

For Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed. (1 Corinthians 5.7)

God wanted to ensure that we did not miss his salvation—if we are open to him and seeking it—and that we would understand the need for it. In his great preparation, he foreshadowed the reality of it in several ways, none more powerful than the Passover.

It had been prophesied to Abraham that Israel would be enslaved 400 years and then freed.³⁰ Years later, this came to pass in Egypt when Joseph, a son of Jacob, rescued Egypt from severe famine.³¹ A new Pharaoh came to power who did not know about this and enslaved the Israelites, working them ruthlessly. As they cried out to God, he sent them a deliverer named Moses. Amazingly, Moses, an Israelite, had been raised by Pharaoh's own daughter as her child! Later, at age 40, he was forced to flee, but God called Moses to return when he was 80, giving the message to Pharaoh that God said, ***“Let my people go!”***³²

Pharaoh was stubborn and would not let these slaves go, so God sent ten plagues on Egypt. Some touched all; others did not affect the Israelites as God was making a distinction between his people and all others. Pharaoh continued to harden his heart until the last plague: God said that he would go through the land of Egypt and ***“strike every firstborn male in the land of Egypt.”*** However, there would be an exception for those who put their trust in God.

In Exodus 12, we read the instructions. Each family was to take a year old lamb that was unblemished (symbolizing sinlessness) on the 10th day of the month. On the 14th, they were to slaughter the lamb for their last meal in Egypt. They were also to remove all yeast from their houses (yeast symbolizing sin) and eat unleavened bread. Most importantly, each family was to take some of the blood of the lamb and put it on the doorposts and the lintel of the house. As God would go through Egypt that night to exercise the last plague, he said, ***“when I see the blood, I will pass over you.”*** The death of the spotless, unblemished lamb acted as a substitute for the death of the firstborn son! All those who placed their faith in God in this way were spared the death of the firstborn. Pharaoh was so distraught with the deaths that he told the Israelites to leave, then changed his mind, and God brought a mighty deliverance.

Even as he gave them instructions, God told the Israelites that the Passover would be an annual festival. God was placing this story in the lives and hearts of his people so they would understand the spiritual salvation that he was planning. The *physical* freedom from Egypt was a foreshadowing of God bringing *spiritual* freedom from sin. As Paul wrote, ***“Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed.”***

Meditate today how Jesus is foreshadowed through the Passover and how the sinless “Lamb of God” came to free you from your sinfulness.

Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come, and not the reality itself of those things, it can never perfect the worshipers by the same sacrifices they continually offer year after year. Otherwise, wouldn't they have stopped being offered, since the worshipers, purified once and for all, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? But in the sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year after year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. (Hebrews 10.1-4)

Another foreshadowing of salvation was given through the sacrificial system that was set up in the law. Though there were several types of sacrifices, the most prominent was the sin sacrifices made at the altar daily by the priests on behalf of the people. Similar to the Passover lamb, the animals had to be spotless, without blemish. When a worshiper brought the animal, he was supposed to think, "I deserve to die for my sins, but God is allowing this spotless animal to take my place so I can be forgiven." It was to be a reminder of the consequences of sin. While grateful for the sacrifice, the worshiper was to meditate on his own thoughts and behavior as he considered the wonderful and protective laws that had been given.

And I am sure many did. Others, though, just went through the motions of the ritual, thinking the simple act of providing the sacrifice was enough. And this became the habit of far too many. God said through the prophet Hosea, ***"For I desire faithful love [also translated mercy] and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."***³³ Earlier, Samuel had told King Saul: ***"Does the LORD take pleasure in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the LORD? Look: to obey is better than sacrifice, to pay attention is better than the fat of rams."***³⁴ Rituals are meaningless in themselves; God wants our acts of worship to come from the heart.

The holiest day of the year for the nation of Israel was and is a day of fasting and contrition called the Day of Atonement. The high priest would take two goats. One would be slaughtered with its blood sprinkled on the altar as required for all sin sacrifices. He would take the second goat, pronounce all the sins of the community committed in the past year, and release the goat into the wilderness, symbolizing that God had removed the sins from the people. More beautiful symbolism! But as our verses in Hebrews above tell us, it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats and lambs to actually take away sin. These are "shadows" of the real thing that God was preparing. He would send a Savior, his own Son, who would be spotless, sinless, and therefore worthy to be the real once for all sacrifice for our sins. That's why John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, pointed him out to others and said, ***"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"*** (John 1.29)

Ask God to help you better understand the cost of forgiveness.

Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: The virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will name him Immanuel, which is translated "God is with us."

(Matthew 1.22-23)

Another incredible way God prepared for us to be able to recognize the Messiah when he was sent was through prophetic messages. Multiple prophecies from multiple prophets all came together so that we could see the fulfillment in Jesus and only in Jesus.

Some prophecies seemed mutually exclusive when given: the Messiah (or Savior) would be born in Bethlehem; he would be called out of Egypt; he would come out of Galilee.³⁵ How could all these be true? It seemed impossible! But Joseph lived in Nazareth in Galilee but had to travel to Bethlehem for a census. While there, Mary delivered the baby. Due to danger from King Herod who saw Jesus as a threat, Mary and Joseph went to Egypt until Herod's death. They then moved back to Galilee. Wow! There would be no way to try to make all that happen!

Some prophecies had a dual meaning: a short term fulfillment and a longer term pointing to the Messiah, or Christ. When Isaiah prophesied that a virgin would give birth and name the child Immanuel³⁶, no one hearing him thought of a virgin who would have a miracle birth. They thought, "Oh, by the time a young maiden (who would be assumed to be a virgin) gets married and has a child who is old enough to know right from wrong, this foreign threat will be over." And that was the *short term* fulfillment. Only in retrospect we see the *longer term* meaning: a virgin will be with child through the Holy Spirit and give birth; since the child is the Son of God, he truly is "God with us" (the meaning of Immanuel.)

Perhaps the most startling prophecy of all is found in Isaiah 53. If you were to read it to anyone and ask of whom it speaks, those with almost any knowledge of such things will say, "Jesus." And they would be right! But this was written 700 years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem!

[READ Isaiah 53 now.] This points to his humble state, his rejection, his crucifixion, what his death did for us ("***We all went astray like sheep; we have turned to our own way; and the LORD has punished him for the iniquity of us all.***"), his silent submission, even his burial in a rich man's tomb and his resurrection, and how all this is God's plan for us!

Each gospel has a primary audience in mind. Matthew writes his as a way to convince fellow Jews that Jesus really is the promised Messiah. While others also mention fulfillment of prophecies, Matthew does it more than any other. He wants people to know how God has given multiple prophecies to help us recognize the one and only Savior, Jesus!

Take some time to marvel at how God has made it possible for seekers to be confident that Jesus is the Savior of the world! Praise him!

SALVATION DELIVERED!

God Loved Us and Sent His Son

When the time came to completion, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba, Father!” (Galatians 4.4–6)

After all the careful preparation—the giving of the law that helped us see our sinfulness, the foreshadowing through such events as the Passover, the establishment of the sacrificial system showing that forgiveness comes at the cost of the death of an unblemished (“sinless”) substitute, and the multiple promises or prophecies of a Messiah or Savior—it was time for the true salvation to be enacted.

As the verse for today explains, God sent his Son at just the right time. Jesus had no biological earthly father. His conception in the virgin Mary was truly miraculous. Born of the Father, Jesus is fully God. Born of the woman, Jesus is fully human. He is the Son of God and the Son of Man.

He was born in humble circumstances, having a feeding trough as his first bed. Angels announced his birth to shepherds. “Wise Men” followed a miraculous star that let them know of the birth. At age twelve at the Temple, he astounded people by the pertinent questions he asked and his own great understanding of spiritual truths. Yet, he grew up in a carpenter’s shop far from the seat of religious power.

His cousin John prepared the way, preaching a baptism of repentance. At age 30, Jesus began his earthly ministry, preaching also of repentance and faith and forgiveness. A man of compassion, he was called a “friend of sinners” as he led them back to God rather than condemning them. They sensed his love for them; he forgave their sin but would not leave them in their sin. He pointed to true righteousness from the heart.

Jesus performed mighty miracles—healing the sick, feeding the hungry, calming the sea, even raising the dead. These he did out of his compassion, yes, but there was a greater reason: these were attesting miracles to prove who he was—the Son of God and God the Son.

More remarkable than any of these things: Jesus never sinned, not once! He truly is the “spotless, unblemished lamb” of God. Jesus pointed out the hypocrisy of the religious elite; they hated him, ultimately having him executed on trumped up charges out of their jealousy. When he died on the cross, he was the Passover Lamb. He was the sin offering that acted as a substitute for us. He died as a ransom for us. God is willing to forgive our sins; his rightful wrath for sin was placed on himself!

“For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3.16)

Eternal life is a gift provided through the sacrificial death of Jesus. Are you trying to earn it? You can’t! Do you truly believe? Talk with God about it...

Now I want to make clear for you, brothers and sisters, the gospel I preached to you, which you received, on which you have taken your stand and by which you are being saved, if you hold to the message I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I passed on to you as most important what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. Then he appeared to over five hundred brothers and sisters at one time; most of them are still alive, but some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. (1 Corinthians 15.1–7)

The death of Jesus was not the end of the story! His body was placed in a tomb with a large stone covering the entrance and then sealed. Guards were placed there, too. (See Matthew 27.57-66.) But on the third day, the Father raised his Son from the grave. He was alive again! And the resurrection, like the death, is central to the gospel message, the good news that God has provide forgiveness of our sin through his Son Jesus. (Read Luke 24 for perhaps the most complete resurrection account.)

Without the resurrection, the gospel is incomplete. It shows that not only can our sins be forgiven but that there is the promise of eternal life. It shows that Jesus really is the sinless Son of God. Had Jesus sinned, even once, he would have had to die for his own sins and could not pay for ours. The resurrection is God's seal of approval on everything Jesus said and did. It shows we can trust him completely.

Some think the resurrection is a myth, a nice story that inspires us. It reminds us of fresh possibilities, like the coming of life in spring after the death of winter. The apostle Paul was adamant: if no resurrection, there is no gospel. When he most succinctly told how to be saved, he wrote: ***"If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."*** (Romans 10.9) You cannot be a Christian without believing that Jesus rose!

You see, one reason God gave the resurrection is proof of the truth of our faith. There are many religions, even many stories with someone giving their life for others. How do we know our faith is true? Luke writes, ***"After he had suffered, he also presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God."***³⁷ Paul preached the gospel in Athens and said, ***"[God] has provided proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."***³⁸

The resurrection, seen by over 500 eyewitnesses, serves as proof that God was truly in Jesus, ***"reconciling the world to himself..."***³⁹ And these eyewitnesses told everyone! They were willing to die rather than recant, knowing a better resurrection awaited them. What proof!

Thank God for the resurrection. How does it give you confidence?

And just as it is appointed for people to die once—and after this, judgment—so also Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.
(Hebrews 9.27–28)

Forty days after rising, Jesus ascended into heaven in the presence of his apostles. Two angels spoke to them: ***“This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you have seen him going into heaven.”***⁴⁰ They were reiterating something Jesus had told them not long before his death: ***“I am going away to prepare a place for you. If I go away and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am you may also be.”***⁴¹ While we know the place will be awesome, it will be so mostly because we will be there with *him*, and our salvation will be fulfilled.

You see, right now our salvation is not yet complete. We still live in a fallen world. It will be complete when we join Jesus in the place he is preparing. The New Testament is full of teachings of Jesus returning for his people one day. Many focus on the book of *Revelation*, but the second coming is taught in most of the books of the New Testament.

There has been much written by people trying to predict when Jesus will return, in spite of his telling us that no one knows the day or the hour. So far, everyone who has made a prediction has been wrong! There is much disagreement about when he *could* come, what else *must* happen, what else will *likely* happen, etc. You can have your favorite ideas, but look at the verse at the top again: he is coming a second time to bring salvation. Our salvation will be consummated. Right now, we have been given the Holy Spirit as a ***“down payment”***⁴² or a promise of our salvation, but our salvation is not complete until we are with him. Because of this, the Bible speaks of salvation in terms of past, present, and future.

Past: *“I have been saved.”* The moment I trusted Jesus, I was sealed in him through the Holy Spirit and given the promise of salvation. I was forgiven. The word for this is ***justification***. I have been declared “just” or “righteous” by God, even though I am not yet perfected.

Present: *“I am being saved.”* God is working with us now in the process of ***sanctification***, which means being made holy. God is in the process of making me more righteous as I walk in the Spirit. I am learning to have victory over sin more and more.

Future: *“I will be saved.”* This refers to the return of Jesus to actually bring salvation. It is called ***glorification***, and we will be delivered from our sin completely and from the presence of sin forever in heaven.

We can speak of salvation past, present, and future. We often speak of the past—our conversion—but that is only one aspect of our salvation.

Are you looking forward to his coming? How are you preparing?

Look, God's dwelling is with humanity, and he will live with them. They will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them and will be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; grief, crying, and pain will be no more, because the previous things have passed away. Then the one seated on the throne said, "Look, I am making everything new." He also said, "Write, because these words are faithful and true."
(Revelation 21.3-5)

As we begin today, take a moment and *imagine* the best life you could ever live. Do that right now... What would that be like for you? Think of loving relationships, of pleasurable experiences, of meaningful use of your time, and more... THINK!

Did you do it? Well, let me tell you something... *Heaven will be better than what you just imagined!* Some of you may be thinking, "Well, you don't know what I have been imagining!" Well, I don't care. Even if you were imagining something you *shouldn't* have been imagining, here's the truth: *Heaven will be better than that!!*

Paul writes, "***What no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no human heart has conceived—God has prepared these things for those who love him.***" (1 Corinthians 2.9) We cannot even *conceive* of all the wonderful things God has in store for us!

Yet, too many today seem to think heaven will be b-o-r-i-n-g! Perhaps it's popular misconceptions of sitting on a cloud, playing a harp for all eternity. Maybe it's all the conveniences of life today. We think this life offers all we want, so much that many today see heaven as a consolation prize for dying: "Well, it's a shame... but *at least she's in heaven!*"

Please hear me! God has built into us a desire to live and love here, so seek good health, yes, but make no mistake: *heaven is the main thing!* Read now Genesis 1-2 and Revelation 21-22 (the first and last chapters of the Bible). Note how it all comes together. All that God designed in the beginning will be restored! All sin's curse will be taken away, including death. We will once again have access to the tree of life. We will live with our Father God and our brother Jesus and other believers in love; we will enjoy meaningful labor, using our gifts and talents as first intended; perhaps there will be even more, as we will have the knowledge of how we have been saved by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus!

Because of harder lives in previous generations and suffering many have endured (and still do), many have had a greater longing for heaven than a lot of us today. Many seem afraid of death and seek desperately to prolong life here. May God grant us a more complete view of the glories of heaven. Jesus went away to prepare a place for us, and he wants us to be where he is. We should think more of the wonders of heaven!

Ask God to give you a new vision of the glories of life after this one is done!

SALVATION RECEIVED

“What Must I Do to Be Saved?”

If you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10.9)

We have spent many days talking about how God has provided salvation. But how do we acquire this salvation? How are we forgiven of our sins? How do we receive the Holy Spirit in our lives? How are we saved?

In some of his final words, Jesus said about the Messiah (himself): ***“Repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in his name to all the nations...”***⁴³ In Acts 2, as God sent the promised Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost ten days after Jesus ascended into heaven, Peter preached the first sermon of the church. Upon completion, the people cried out, “What should we do?” Peter replied, ***“Repent and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”***⁴⁴

So we see that repentance is required. In John 3.16, we are told that we must ***believe*** in him. So, **repentance of sin and faith (belief) in the Lord Jesus** is the proper response we make to God to receive salvation.

In the verse at the top of the page, Paul says to confess that “Jesus is Lord” and believe in this one who died and was raised from the dead in order to be saved. Is this something different or something additional?

Not at all. Confessing Jesus as Lord means making him the master or “boss” of your life. We are looking at the flip side of the same coin of salvation. To *repent* means to turn away. We turn away from our sins and at the same time we turn to Jesus, declaring that from now on we will follow him as Lord or master or boss. One side focuses on the turning away; the other on the turning to. Both are in essence the same.

Here’s a brief outline of the good news and our needed response:

- **God loves us**

For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. (John 3.16)

- **We have sinned and become separated from God**

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God... (Romans 3.23)

- **God has provided a way back to him through Jesus**

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring you to God. (1 Peter 3.18)

- **We must turn from our sins and declare Jesus to be the Lord (or master or “boss”) of our lives to be saved**

If you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10.9)

Knowing these facts is different from truly knowing God. Are you sure that you have repented, made him Lord, and are trusting him for salvation?

And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. The one who has the Son has life. The one who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I have written these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.
(1 John 5.11–13)

Many people go through life not knowing whether or not they have eternal life and will live in heaven with Jesus when they die. Some of these are positively paralyzed by the question. They hope for the best but fear the worst. They don't think anyone can know for certain whether they are God's children and will live with him forever.

What is the source of their doubting? It could be one of several things. Two are most prevalent. First, although they know that Jesus died on the cross for their sins, they inexplicably believe they have to somehow work their way to heaven. They may think their good deeds have to outweigh their sins on some cosmic scale or in some other way they have to earn salvation. Second, others think they can be saved for a while but then lose their salvation by committing new sins or by just not being committed "enough" to God. Some think they can have salvation and lose it multiple times. Saved by grace, they think they have to work to keep it.

Here's the good news: **God wants you to know for sure that you have eternal life.** He wants us to walk in confidence and in the light of his love, not plagued by fear or doubt. Look at the passage above. John writes so that we may **know** that we have eternal life!

I know I'm going to heaven. That would sound arrogant if I were basing that on how good *I* am! But I'm not. I am basing it on how good *God* is. "***God has given us eternal life,***" it says above, "***and this life is in his Son.***" It is a gift based on faith, not on works. Jesus speaks of being "born again"—a spiritual birth in which we become God's children. He doesn't speak of being born *again* and *again* and *again*. Here's the truth: you can only be saved once! And when you are truly saved, you are saved forever!⁴⁵ It is God's gift, and he will not take it away!

Yet, a valid question *is*, "Have I been saved?" In 2 Corinthians 13.5, Paul writes, "***Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith. Examine yourselves. Or do you yourselves not recognize that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless you fail the test.***" He presumes they are but encourages them to check. Were you serious in repentance? Did you truly decide to give Jesus leadership of your life? Salvation is based on your heart's true intent and promise, not your moment by moment obedience. Yet, if we have never been obedient, we might pause to ask if we really meant it when we confessed Jesus as Lord. Do you need to explore this?

Salvation is a gift, freely given by God. He wants you to know you are saved and live in confidence and freedom. Do you know you are saved?

For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

(John 3.16)

You did not choose me, but I chose you. I appointed you to go and produce fruit and that your fruit should remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he will give you.

(John 15.16)

We come today to address a great mystery of salvation. We can put it as a question. One of many ways to ask it is this: Does God choose who will be saved, or do humans have a real choice in the matter? This pits the **Sovereignty of God** against the **Freedom of Will of Humankind**.

This is a real question, and it has been a source of discussion and controversy for centuries. One “side” champions the Sovereignty of God, saying that he is in charge of everything and makes everything happen and nothing happens that is not his will, including the salvation of individual people. People are predestined by God to salvation—or not.

The other “side” says the Bible is full of volitional language, that is, it speaks often of choices and encourages us to choose. We are told to choose, to believe, to decide to follow God and his ways. How can God tell us to choose if we don’t have the ability to do so? Besides, they say, if you believe everything that happens is God’s will, you are charging God with sin, because he is then responsible for all murders, for instance, though he has said, “*You shall not murder.*” And we are told to pray for the Father’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. If it’s already done on earth, why does Jesus tell us to pray for it on earth?

By the way, there are more than two “sides” to this question, but these are the two most often taken. It’s not that one side follows the Bible and the other ignores it. Both sides have many Scriptures they follow as they seek the truth, and both sides can essentially embarrass the other side by quoting certain passages. One short example of each is given at the top of the page, but there are many, many, many examples.

A tendency we have when we take a side on *any* question is to embrace all the verses that led us to our conclusion and ignore all those that seem to say something else! Perhaps a better way would be to embrace all of Scripture lest we fail to listen to “***all the counsel of God.***”⁴⁶

While some truths are beyond our complete grasp, we can look for harmony in *all* the passages rather than picking one side and completely jettisoning the other. While we may not come to complete agreement on the larger question, we don’t have to! As Paul said, “***I testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus.***”⁴⁷ We all agree that repentance and faith are necessary. We don’t have to fight over where repentance and faith come from!

Ask God to help us find understanding as we look at this further tomorrow!

I don't want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you will not be conceited...
(Romans 11.25)

Often we see balancing truths in Scripture. Each truth gives a boundary and helps us avoid errors on either extreme. When we embrace one truth and not the balancing truth, though, we are much more likely to go to an extreme. Remember, there are ditches on both sides of the road! We don't want to fall into either. So we embrace all of God's truth and seek to understand the mystery of salvation...

In my mind, the first "law of the universe" is indeed **God is sovereign**. He can do whatever he wants however he wants. Another important "law of the universe," at least as it relates to us, is this: **Man has been given by God (limited) freedom**. It is true freedom, but if it comes into conflict with the first "law," God's sovereignty reigns! Our freedom is limited by God's sovereignty. If he needs something to happen, it will! And he is strong enough to turn our poor choices into his overall will!⁴⁸

Jesus gave us many parables or pictures to help us understand God and his relationship with us, and one of those is marriage. Jesus is the groom and we are the bride. Let me use this picture to try to harmonize the mystery of salvation. It helps me. Perhaps it will make sense to you.

In most cultures historically, the man has made the offer of marriage to the woman. It certainly was so in the culture of the Bible. The man offers himself and asks his choice to respond positively.

In our salvation, make no mistake. **God always initiates**. He always makes the offer. It comes through the Holy Spirit who convinces us of our sins and draws us toward God, letting us know of his love for us.

In a marriage proposal, the woman must give a response. She may say yes. She may say no. But she can only respond positively when she has been given a proposal. If she says no, there is no guarantee that the offer will be renewed. The man may make an offer multiple times. But if the woman says no, she cannot decide a year later to say yes on her own. She may show interest in some way, but she must await the question.

We cannot come to Jesus at just any time, as some claim who champion the freedom of humankind. God is often gracious and renews his call to us for salvation, but we must always respond to his initiation.

God chooses us, but we must choose him back. But he always initiates.

If a man asks and the woman says no, there is no marriage. If a woman wishes for someone but is not asked, there is no marriage. Both must choose each other at the same time. We can only come to saving faith while the Holy Spirit is wooing us. But we both have responsibility.

Don't get sidetracked by the mystery of choice. Simply share the gospel message of repentance and faith and let God take care of the rest.

*"Go, therefore, and make **disciples** of all nations, **baptizing them** in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*
(Matthew 28.19-20)

Yesterday we spoke of marriage as a picture of salvation. God chooses us, pops the question, and we respond with joy at the thought of his choosing us! Christian baptism in water, to continue the illustration from marriage, can be thought of as the "wedding ring" of the Christian life. A wedding ring is a beautiful symbol of marriage. And while a wedding ring is optional, baptism is commanded by Jesus (*see verses above*).

What have you been taught about baptism? There are different opinions on both its meaning and the method! Can we agree that we will look to Scripture to decide what is right rather than how we might have been raised or a church's tradition? Is that fair? Please note in the passage above that it is **disciples** who are to be baptized. Do you see it? While not questioning the salvation of anyone who trusts Jesus but has a different idea of baptism, a study of all passages relating to baptism (and I will be glad to share a list so you can see for yourself) presents this as a symbol of our faith that speaks to us on three levels:

1) Baptism symbolizes the washing away of our sins

One of my daughters said, "Dad, I want to be bath-tized." After I laughed, I realized its appropriateness! As a bath removes dirt from the body, baptism symbolizes the removal of sin from the heart. (*See 1 Peter 3.21*)

2) Baptism symbolizes the death and resurrection of Jesus

Or are you unaware that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we were buried with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in newness of life. Romans 6.3-4

3) Baptism symbolizes our own new life in Christ

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come! 2 Corinthians 5.17

We die to sin, and we are raised to walk in newness of life!

When we consider #1, any method of baptism (sprinkling, pouring, or immersion) can symbolize that. However, for #2 and #3, please note only a baptism by immersion captures the beauty of the symbolism of death, burial, and resurrection! You can study the Bible for yourself, but I think you can see from this brief summary that baptism is most correctly performed as an **immersion of those who believe**.

Baptism is designed to be the first, simple step of obedience to Jesus when you place your faith in him. If you have yet to have a Scriptural baptism, please consider this in prayer and contact us to discuss further.

THE LORD'S SUPPER

"Do This in Remembrance of Me"

*And [Jesus] took bread, gave thanks, broke it, gave it to them, and said, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."
(Luke 22.19)*

The Lord's Supper, or Communion, is practiced in every Christian church that I know of, and it arises out of the Passover meal that Jesus eagerly desired to eat with his disciples on the night before he was crucified.

The Passover celebration was over 1,000 years old, and it was to be practiced annually to commemorate the miraculous way God had delivered the nation of Israel from 400 years of slavery in Egypt. The Passover itself was the last of ten plagues—and the most devastating. The firstborn son of every family in Egypt would die on that night. The only exception would be for those who trusted in God. They were told to take a year old lamb without spot or defect and kill it for the evening meal. Some of the blood of the lamb was to be placed over the door frame of the house. When the angel of death went through Egypt on that night, the angel would "pass over" that house, and the child would be saved. The death of the lamb substituted for the death of the son. (Remember, this was a foreshadowing of Jesus, our Passover Lamb!)

Passover was instituted by God so they would *remember* what he had done for them. Jesus, during his last Passover, infused it with new meaning, adding some new words that pointed to his upcoming sacrifice for us. First, when he took the matzo (unleavened bread) toward the end, he said the words printed at the top. We also read in Scripture: ***"In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.""***⁴⁹

As with baptism, churches have differing ideas about the Lord's Supper. Some believe it actually becomes the body and blood of Jesus when we take it and is a needed ritual for salvation rather than faith alone.

Jesus himself said it more clearly after his figurative language: ***"Do this in remembrance of me."*** In other words, Communion serves to remind us of his life, especially his giving his body and blood in death for us. Paul emphasizes this when he wrote, ***"For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."***⁵⁰

This remembrance is really designed as worship for believers. Paul says to examine ourselves before we take it, to consider our own spiritual lives as well as what Jesus has done for us. None of us are perfect, and we don't have to be, but we should be serious about its meaning. As we partake of the Lord's Supper in worship, let us meditate on his death and also on what God might be saying to us about our own lives.

*Let's pause right now to meditate on the death of Jesus on our behalf.
Thank him for all he has done...*

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and signs were being performed through the apostles. Now all the believers were together and held all things in common. They sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as any had need. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple, and broke bread... They ate... with joyful and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. Every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2.42–47)

We said earlier that salvation can be seen in terms of past, present, and future. Some tend to concentrate only on the past. “I was saved when I was ten” might be their total testimony. Or they pray and pray for loved ones to come to faith in Jesus. When it happens, they breathe a sigh of relief. “Well, that’s done!” seems to be a too frequent attitude. “It’s over!” But having been saved is just the beginning, not the end.

Others just look to “pie in the sky by and by,” thinking that heaven is the next big thing. “If only we can survive this terrible world without too much damage,” can be the prevailing attitude. Heaven will be great, and many of us need to focus much more on it! But it is possible to be too focused on the end times. Jesus said to concentrate on today!⁵¹

Again, salvation **past** is *justification*. Salvation **future** is *glorification*. But there is salvation **present**, which is the process of *sanctification*, or being made holy. God has said often in Scripture to us, “*Be holy, for I am holy.*” We look back to placing our faith in Jesus with gratitude. We look forward to Jesus’ return and heaven with hope. But our primary focus now is on the time we actually live in—the present. Jesus *accepts* us as we are, but he is not content to *leave* us as we are. He wants to transform us—to change us! And we should desire that, too!

There are several ways we grow as believers. In our physical bodies, to be healthy we must eat nutritious food. (Yes, we can enjoy our dessert with joy, but we can’t eat all junk food and expect good health!) We also need proper exercise and to seek to live in a healthy environment with fresh air, clean water, etc. All these optimize our health. There are similarities in our souls. There are spiritual foods, spiritual exercises, and spiritual environments that we need to live in if we would grow as God intends—and as we (hopefully) desire. We will look at some of those in the next few days.

The passage above describes the habits of new believers just after God had birthed his church in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. Meditate on that passage. Note some of the habits. Ask yourself, “How am I doing these same kinds of things so that I may be healthy and grow?”

Do you want to be all God wants you to be? Do you want to discover and live his plan for your life? Talk to him about that right now...

Like newborn infants, desire the pure milk of the word. (1 Peter 2.2)
Solid food is for the mature... (Hebrews 5.14)

The early believers ***“devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.”***⁵² First, today, meditate on the word “devoted.” What does that word signify to you? A nonchalant, “take it or leave it” attitude? Or a serious priority?

The very first object of their devotion mentioned is “the apostles’ teaching.” What is this? How can we devote ourselves to it today?

Simply put, it is the teaching of God’s word. The apostles used *their* Bible to show how Jesus was the promised Messiah, and what they taught about Jesus ultimately became our New Testament! Earlier, we looked at some facts *about* the Bible, but the Bible is no good to us if it is not studied and applied to our lives. It is our primary food as believers!

How do we partake of it? Sermons? I hope so! Life Groups and other Bible studies? Of course. Devotional books like this one? Sure. But God’s word is available to you always today. What an advantage we have to those who did not have a copy of their own. Don’t take that for granted! As Peter says above, desire the word like a newborn desires milk. But don’t stop there. As you grow, move to solid food. How do you do this?

Read or listen to it regularly. Our world is opposed to God. We hear its messages every day whether we want to or not. We need to listen to God. How often in Scripture we are told to “hear”! Find a schedule⁵³ you can stick to. Ask questions as you read: ***What commands should I obey? What sins should I confess, forsake, avoid? What promises can I rely on? What truths can I learn? What attitudes toward God and others should I adopt? What specific changes should I make in my life?***

Memorize special passages. King David wrote, ***“I have treasured your word in my heart so that I may not sin against you.”***⁵⁴ Why should you memorize special passages? So it is more readily available for you to...

Meditate on the word of God. This is most important! One word for meditation is based on the act of a cow chewing its cud. You “swallow” the food (reading or memorizing) then bring it up to “chew on it.” We are taught the blessed person is one who ***“meditates day and night.”***⁵⁵ He bears fruit! We are transformed to God’s will ***“by the renewing of your mind.”***⁵⁶ Meditation is a key to renewing our minds.

I cannot overemphasize the place of God’s word in your life for you to be spiritually healthy! It’s the clearest way he speaks to you, the way you test all other things you think may be from him. Here are other passages to meditate on soon: Psalm 1; Psalm 19; Luke 21.33; 2 Timothy 2.15, 3.15-17; 1 Peter 2.1-3; Hebrews 5.12-6.3. Can you do one right now?

Talk to God about your “devotion” to his word in your life...

“Lord, teach us to pray...”

(Luke 11.1)

The early church was **devoted** to **God’s word**. They were also **devoted** to **prayer**.⁵⁷ When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he didn’t give them a sermon. He gave them a model, a plan. You already know it. I encourage you to use it *as* a model... Let’s use today’s time to pray...

PRAISE and THANKSGIVING: *“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name...”* Start there, and praise him for who he is and what he has done. Use some of the names of God or other Scripture to help lead you in praise, and let that flow into thanksgiving... (Hint: do that now!)

COMMITMENT: *“Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven...”* This reminds us to acknowledge our own commitment to God and his plan today. For example, you might pray, *“Lord, as I pray for your will to be done, I ask that it begin with me. I commit myself to you; I am available for whatever you want me to do, realizing that your plan is better and more fulfilling than any that I could design for myself. I ask you to perform your will in my life today!”* Pray Galatians 2.20: *“I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”*

INTERCESSION/PETITION: *“Give us today our daily bread.”* Asking for our “daily bread” includes **intercession**—that is, praying for others—as well as **personal petitions**—that is, praying for our own needs. Right now, pray **specifically** for some needs of others... pray for our church and community... pray for our nation and our challenges... pray for your own family and for yourself...

FORGIVENESS/VICTORY OVER SIN: *“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one...”* Praying this includes confession of sin. (Note that Jesus also includes a reminder to forgive others!) But we hope to forsake sin, not having to ask forgiveness day after day for the same sins, so we also pray for the power of victory over sin. Ask God for wisdom in identifying and dealing with temptations, especially in areas of sinful habits. Read and meditate on Ephesians 6.10-18...

CLOSING PRAISE: *“For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen!”* Older manuscripts don’t include these familiar words, but they are an appropriate ending! After you have prayed all that has come into your heart and mind, close by reminding God—and yourself—that the kingdom for eternity belongs to him.

Jesus said, “Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you.” Let us devote ourselves to prayer!

Jesus said, “On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.”
(Matthew 16.18)

The early church devoted themselves to God’s word, to prayer, and “**to the fellowship**” and “**the breaking of bread.**”⁵⁸ However you take the meaning of this bread breaking, these latter two speak of devotion to Christ’s body, the church. The church belongs to Jesus. He died for her. He bought us with his blood. He loves the church—and so should we!

Some think the church is an optional part of following Jesus. It is not. Throughout the Bible, God has always called out, not a collection of individuals, but a community of faith, hope and love. The great and influential church father Augustine said, “*He cannot have God for his father who does not have the church for his mother.*”

Not sure about that? Look at Scripture. What is the church? The most basic image given is **the body of Christ**. Read 1 Corinthians chapters 12-14 for a lengthier look; Paul says it more succinctly in Romans 12.4-5: “**Now as we have many parts in one body, and all the parts do not have the same function, in the same way we who are many are one body in Christ and individually members of one another.**”

Meditate on that passage for a few moments right now...

Do you find these insights? *Only together with other believers do we make up the body of Christ. We have different gifts, complementing each other, so when one part is missing, not everything can be easily accomplished. We can do more together than we can do apart. We belong to each other!*

Our participation in the body of Christ (the church) should be less a personal decision than a discernment of God’s call and gifting. When we are not involved in the church, we can be easily misled. God often uses the church in helping us understand his will. Meditate on this thought: *to the extent that you are not involved and using your gifts, you are handicapping the body of Jesus in our community!* With him as head, let’s give him a healthy body to do his work! Let’s be “devoted”!

Another image in Scripture for the church is **the bride of Christ**.⁵⁹ He loves her, cleanses her, and sacrifices for her. (This means you and me!)

The church is not a physical building. It is the people of God. We should be devoted to her as Jesus is and as the early Christians were.

Our own church’s mission is **Pursuing life in Christ with passion and purpose**. Each word and phrase is important.⁶⁰ How does someone become part of the church? We use three basic commitments: **1) Jesus is my Lord; 2) the Bible is my guide; and 3) this Church is my primary avenue of worship, fellowship, and ministry.**

Pray today about your own devotion to the body of Jesus. Ask him for wisdom in using your gifts together with other believers to do his will.

Jesus said, “Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take up my yoke and learn from me, because I am lowly and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”
(Matthew 11.28–30)

“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you...”
(Matthew 28.19–20)

Our discipleship model is based on our being the body of Christ as the church. Taking that same image of the body, we can use it to think of how we should grow as individual disciples. We speak of growing in “head, heart, hands, and feet,” and this model helps us evaluate whether we are balanced in our growth.

The first part of our model is the *head*, and it reminds us that **a disciple learns**. In many churches, this is the primary mode of growth that is offered. We have already championed the Bible as needed nourishment and the clearest way God speaks to us, so don’t misunderstand this: *the last thing some believers need is another Bible study!* It’s not the study that is the problem. It’s the balance. These **40 Days of Learning** emphasize this area, so this is simply a word of caution. You see, if we have too little learning, we can be easily deceived by false teachers; if we spend so much time on this area that we neglect the “heart, hands, and feet,” we can become “puffed up” with pride in our knowledge,⁶¹ or we may simply not have the time to develop our “heart, hands, and feet”!

Here’s an even bigger caution: the kind of learning Jesus has for you is not primarily “head knowledge”; that is, he is not interested in your simply learning more facts. The facts often build the foundation for what *is* important, but the facts themselves aren’t the point. Notice the words above from Matthew 11: Jesus says, **“learn from me.”** He is speaking of experiential learning, which includes his “yoke,” that is, his teaching, but he means his lifestyle as well. Too many in Jesus’ day knew only the Law, but they didn’t know how to show love, compassion, and mercy. In the second passage above, many miss how we are to teach. We are to teach them **“to observe (or obey) everything I have commanded you.”** Again, this goes beyond teaching facts and commands; we are to teach to *obey*. Perhaps the word *training* would make more sense to many of us today.

Here are some habits that help in this area: a regular “quiet time” (QT) that includes the Bible, participation in a Life Group or other small group, learning to use Bible study tools, presenting yourself for training, and learning some of the Christian “disciplines” such as QT, meditation on the word, solitude, fasting, prayer, and worship.

How are you doing in the “head”? How are you putting God’s word in your life? Are you learning for life change and not just for learning’s sake?

“Which command is the most important?” Jesus answered, “The most important is ‘Listen, Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other command greater than these.” (Mark 12.28–31)

What would you say is the most distinguishing mark of a believer? The ability to understand great mysteries of God’s word? Great, powerful faith? The supernatural power of spiritual giftedness? Giving tithes and offerings sacrificially? The willingness to become a martyr for God? The apostle Paul wrote that to have any or all these things *without love* was to render them all meaningless.⁶² The most distinguishing mark of God himself is love, and Jesus says that the greatest two of all the commands are for us to be people of love. As we think of what it really means to be a disciple, we think of the *heart, a disciple loves*.

A Disciple Loves God

This is your highest purpose for living! When your head hits the pillow tonight and you think about your day, the biggest question of all is this: *Did I love God with all I have today?* How can we answer that? Here are a couple of helps: **1) This love is expressed through worship.** Our English word *worship* comes from the word *worth*. We tell God how much he is worth to us. We not only do that in a “worship service”; we are to do that with how we live our lives every moment. That leads to the second help: **2) This love is demonstrated through obedience.** Jesus said, ***“If you love me, you will keep my commands.”***⁶³ Do you say you love God? The words ring hollow if we are not obeying him out of our expressed love.

A Disciple Loves Others

The apostle John wrote, ***“If anyone says, ‘I love God’ yet hates his brother or sister, he is a liar.”***⁶⁴ That’s why these two commands are so closely related. But our world misunderstands love. Our love must be defined by God’s word. (Read 1 Corinthians 13.4-8). And this love is the defining proof of our discipleship: Jesus said, ***“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”***⁶⁵

A Disciple Love Self

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” Did you catch that? We must properly love ourselves as the proper measure of love for others. This self-love is balanced by a sense of *worth* (since we are made in God’s image) and a sense of *sinfulness* (since we are fallen). Not selfishness, but self-love.

Some habits that help? Worship publicly, yes, but also worship privately. Be involved in a small group. Love those there, and together show love to those in the community and beyond—even your enemies.⁶⁶

Are you growing in your love for God and others? Are you cultivating a proper self-love based on God’s love for you? Pray about growth in love...

For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift—not from works, so that no one can boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do.
(Ephesians 2.8–10)

Just as each one has received a gift, use it to serve others, as good stewards of the varied grace of God.
(1 Peter 4.10)

A healthy disciple grows in “head, heart, hands, and feet.” The past two days we have looked so very briefly at the head and heart. Today we consider the *hands*, **a disciple serves**. Take a moment to reread the two passages above, noting how each talks about serving. Did you note that the first passage makes it clear that we are *not* saved *by* serving but that we are saved *to* serve? And the second passage reminds us that God has gifted us to do the service he has prepared for us!

A lengthier passage, Romans 12.3-8, goes into more detail: ***For by the grace given to me, I tell everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he should think. Instead, think sensibly, as God has distributed a measure of faith to each one. Now as we have many parts in one body, and all the parts do not have the same function, in the same way we who are many are one body in Christ and individually members of one another. According to the grace given to us, we have different gifts: If prophecy, use it according to the proportion of one's faith; if service, use it in service; if teaching, in teaching; if exhorting, in exhortation; giving, with generosity; leading, with diligence; showing mercy, with cheerfulness.***

Note how Paul speaks to them as to children: if your gift is serving, then *serve!* If your gift is teaching, then *teach!* If your gift is giving, be *generous!* You get the idea. So... what are your gifts? Not sure? Too modest? To be a disciple who serves, we must learn and hone them. Ask others what they see in you. Find a spiritual gifts inventory. Try something to see if you are any good at it—and a couple of times, since the first time there might be nervousness, etc. Paul above says to “think sensibly” about what you can do. Let's figure out how you can serve. There are many ways in church and community to use your gifts.

There are dangers of imbalance. If all we do is serve, we may start to think God loves us because we serve; we may think we are working our way to heaven. Read about Martha and Mary in Luke 10.38-40.

If we serve too little... well, James tells us that our faith may not be real if we don't minister. (He actually is a bit more pointed: see James 2.14-18.)

So let me say to you: serve intentionally in planned ministries; serve spontaneously as God calls you; and manage well God's resources!

How's your serve? What opportunities has God put in your path lately? How have you responded? Are you managing God's resources well?

How, then, can they call on him they have not believed in? And how can they believe without hearing about him? And how can they hear without a preacher? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.

(Romans 10.14–15)

Earlier we spoke of the mystery of God's sovereignty and man's choice in salvation. How interesting... right in the middle of a passage that speaks loftily about God's sovereignty and *his* choices in salvation, Paul returns to the human partnership in it.⁶⁷ First, before the passage above is the quote, ***"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."***⁶⁸ Then Paul turns from the individual responsibility to call on God to our responsibility as the church—that is, believers. How can someone call on Jesus if they don't believe? How can they believe if they don't hear about him? How can they hear if someone doesn't preach to them? We pray for God to do his work, but *someone has to supply the message.*

"How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news." So we come to the last "part" of our model, the *feet—a disciple shares.*

Peter writes to us, ***"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect..."***⁶⁹ Are you prepared?

What is the message? On Day 24 we reviewed a simple outline: 1) *God loves us;* 2) *We have sinned and become separated from God;* 3) *God has provided a way to him through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection;* and 4) *We must turn from our sins and declare Jesus to be the Lord of our lives.*

Who is a "preacher"? That's you, not just a pastor, evangelist, or missionary. Remember, though we can share the message with them, it is the Holy Spirit of God who draws people to himself.

How can I share? We went into detail in ***40 Days of Sharing*** previously, but here are some habits and tips that can help us in this task:

- Present yourself for training when it is offered. There are many ways to share the gospel. Find one that is most natural for you.
- Share a brief testimony. Some are more comfortable telling their own story of faith. Here's an outline: *my life before Christ; how I became aware of my need and trusted Jesus; how God has and is changing my life.* Don't neglect the last part! Tell how God works in you today.
- Invest in others. Care for them. Pray for them. Be a real friend. Jesus said that our love is how people will really know we follow him.
- Invite. Bring them to worship, Life Group, or an event to meet others.
- Mission involvement. Help send others to preach worldwide. Be personally involved in mission projects in some ways as able.

Do you have "beautiful feet"? Pray, asking God to help in this area...

And he... gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God's Son, growing into maturity... Then we will no longer be little children....But speaking the truth in love, let us grow in every way into him who is the head—Christ. From him the whole body, fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament, promotes the growth of the body for building itself up in love by the proper working of each individual part.
(Ephesians 4.11–16)

In our discipleship model, we speak of growing in “*head, heart, hands, and feet*.” But we must also consider *stages of development*. In our physical lives, there are different expectations at different times of life. We keep learning and growing but at different maturity levels. It’s the same in our spiritual lives. We are “born again” or “born from above” and are new in Christ. And as we grow in “*head, heart, hands, and feet*,” we don’t just “arrive” one day. There are different stages of development...

Pre-birth: this is before you place trust in Jesus. You may be interested, attend church, read the Bible, etc., but have not yet crossed over the line of faith, confessing Jesus as Lord. God’s Spirit is likely already actively drawing you to himself, but until you respond, he is not yet your Savior.

Infant: When we follow him we are “born again,” so at whatever age you make the decision to trust Jesus, you become an infant in Christ. It’s okay to be an infant when you are newly born. You will need others to feed you and show you the way. That’s what this infant stage is all about.

Growing: Paul speaks of “little children” negatively in the passage above. He doesn’t want us to stay too long as infants in Christ. He wants us to grow up! In the growing stage of life in Christ, you are still fed by others, but you are also learning to feed yourself and discern right and wrong. You learn to be filled with God’s Holy Spirit and walk with him. You take responsibility for your growth and are not as dependent on others.

Mature: In this stage, not only can you feed yourself, but you are also able to feed others and help them along. You are able to reproduce disciples in the body of Christ. You don’t do it all by yourself. You are still part of the body of Christ. You never graduate from the church. Look again at the last sentence in the passage above. We are not independent but are interdependent. God wants us all to grow into maturity.

A helpful matrix⁷⁰ is available that shows typical growth in each stage of development. There is also a profile⁷¹ to help you see where you are in your growth in “*head, heart, hands, and feet*” and prayerfully consider your own next steps in growth.

*Which stage of development would you say you are in right now?
Where would you like to be? How will you get there?*

Jesus said, “Take up my yoke and learn from me...” (Matthew 11.29)

Moses spent 40 days on the mountain, listening to God. Elijah walked 40 days to reach the mountain of God. Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness, fasting and being tempted. Somehow, there is a spiritual significance to a 40 day period, and I hope this has been so for you.

It seems long when it starts but goes by so very quickly.

You likely wonder why I didn't give more time to other important topics. Why wasn't there more on worship? Why didn't you talk more of a “Quiet Time” with God? Why didn't you speak more about walking with the Spirit and spiritual gifts? Or on the prevalence of and the purposes in human suffering? How could you not have mentioned the concepts of tithes and offerings, of becoming generous givers, of how we are simply managers of what God has given? Why didn't you delve more deeply into prayer? Why didn't you say more about defeating temptation and finding victory over sin? Why didn't you say more about heaven—and hell?

Yes, I get it. I wonder these things myself. As I compiled possibilities, I had so many more than 40! With missionaries using Bible storying so effectively these days, I flirted with the idea of presenting 40 of the most significant stories in the Bible. I came to realize the whole point of that is to *tell* the stories, to pass them down *orally*, and this was to be written.

So, yes, I realize we have barely scratched the surface. Were I to do it over, I might make different choices, but I am satisfied with what was presented—I just wish there had been room for more! And trying to keep to a devotional book one page length for topics that have had books of hundreds (or thousands!) of pages written about them was daunting!

But here's the point: we are to be life long learners. We are to learn from Jesus each and every day. Our mission statement is ***pursuing life in Christ with passion and purpose***. We won't arrive while we are here. How can we best continue our seeking? Here, I think, are the most needful habits for each one of us as we continue to grow to maturity:

- **Spend daily time with God.** You've done it for 40 days. Keep it up. Both the word of God and prayer are basic. Devotional books are good. Reading the Bible itself is best. Set aside a time and place. Make a prayer list. Meditate on the word of God. All this is personal worship.
- **Be involved in Jesus' church.** We are told not to neglect gathering together.⁷² We need each other. We need to worship together. We need to be part of a small group (Life Group). The church helps keep us from false teachers. Make sure your church teaches the Bible.
- **Present yourself for learning/training.** Take advantage of special classes that may be offered.
- **Be balanced.** Grow in “head, heart, hands, AND feet”! *Blessings to you!*



40 Days of Learning

Appendix: Scripture References and Notes

Day 1: ¹ Matthew 11.28-30; ² Mt. 22.35-40; ³ Mt. 20.16-28; ⁴ Mt. 28.19-20

Day 2: ⁵ Revelation 21.5

Day 3: ⁶ Matthew 6.9 is one among many others; ⁷ Isaiah 29.13, Mark 7.6

Day 4: ⁸ John 14.28; ⁹ Revelation 1.8; ¹⁰ Revelation 22.13

Day 5: ¹¹ 2 Peter 1.21; ¹² 1 John 4.1; ¹³ Ephesians 5.18

Day 7: ¹⁴ 2 Peter 3.8; ¹⁵ Psalm 19.1

Day 9: ¹⁶ Malachi 2.16; ¹⁷ Matthew 19.8

Day 12: ¹⁸ Ephesians 6.12; ¹⁹ 1 John 4.4; ²⁰ James 4.7-8, 1 Peter 5.6-9; ²¹ 1 Corinthians 6.18, 2 Timothy 2.22; ²² Matthew 6.13

Day 13: ²³ 2 Corinthians 5.10; ²⁴ Hebrews 10.39 is one example

Day 14: ²⁵ Galatians 4.2

Day 15: ²⁶ Romans 3.23, 6.23; ²⁷ E.g., Leviticus 11.44-45, 19.2; 20.7, 1 Peter 1.16

Day 16: ²⁸ Jesus used “the Law and the Prophets” to include it all, though on one occasion he mentions one of the Writings, the Psalms. See Luke 24.44; ²⁹ Later, because the Levites become priests and don’t inherit a geographic area, two tribes are assigned to Joseph through his two sons, so you may note some confusion in the names of tribes.

Day 18: ³⁰ Genesis 15.13-14; ³¹ Genesis 37-50 and Exodus 1 tell the full story; ³² the early chapters of Exodus tell Moses’ story

Day 19: ³³ Hosea 6.6, see also Matthew 9.13 and 12.7; ³⁴ 1 Samuel 15.22

Day 20: ³⁵ Galilee: Isaiah 9.1-7 with Matthew 4.12-17; Bethlehem: Micah 5.2 with Matthew 2.1-6 and Luke 2.1-7; Egypt: Hosea 11.1 with Matthew 2.13-15; ³⁶ Virgin birth and Immanuel: Isaiah 7.10-16 with Matthew 1.18-25 and Luke 1.26-38

Day 22: ³⁷ Acts 1.3; ³⁸ Acts 17.30-31; ³⁹ 2 Corinthians 5.19

Day 23: ⁴⁰ Acts 1.11; ⁴¹ John 14.1-6; ⁴² 2 Corinthians 1.22

Day 25: ⁴³ Luke 24.46-47; ⁴⁴ Acts 2 (read all)

Day 26: ⁴⁵ God won’t take our salvation from us. Whether we can refuse it is a valid question to consider another time.

Day 27: ⁴⁶ Acts 20.27 (KJV); ⁴⁷ Acts 20.21

Day 28: ⁴⁸ See Romans 8.28

Day 30: ⁴⁹ 1 Corinthians 11.25; ⁵⁰ 1 Corinthians 11.26

Day 31: ⁵¹ Matthew 6.33-34

Day 32: ⁵² Acts 2.42; ⁵³ We have two different schedules for reading in a year! Ask us!; ⁵⁴ Psalm 119.11; ⁵⁵ Psalm 1; ⁵⁶ Romans 12.2

Day 33: ⁵⁷ Acts 2.42

Day 34: ⁵⁸ Acts 2.42; ⁵⁹ Ephesians 5.25-29 and 2 Corinthians 11.2;

⁶⁰ <https://ancientcitybaptist.org/index.php/about/our-vision-and-mission>

Day 35: ⁶¹ 1 Corinthians 8.1

Day 36: ⁶² 1 Cor. 13; ⁶³ John 14.15; ⁶⁴ 1 John 4.19-21; ⁶⁵ John 13.35; ⁶⁶ Matthew 5.44

Day 38: ⁶⁷ Romans chapters 9,10, 11; ⁶⁸ Romans 10.13; ⁶⁹ 1 Peter 3.15 (NIV)

Day 39: ^{70,71} The matrix and profile can be found on our website

Day 40: ⁷² Hebrews 10.24-25



40 Days of Learning

Thank you for participating in *40 Days of Learning!*

Do you have any comments about your experience? Any insights to share? Any suggestions for future emphases?

Please send an email to fred@ancientcitybaptist.org or mail a note to:
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May God bless us all as we learn, love, serve, and share!

Pastor Fred

Other “40 Days” Experiences



40 Days of Love

When Jesus was asked to identify the greatest of all the commands God had given, he was not able to limit it to just one. He said: *“The most important is ‘Listen, Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other command greater than these.”* (Mark 12.29-31). But how do we love God? Our neighbors? Ourselves? That’s what the ***40 Days of Love*** is designed for—to give practical encouragement in how to love *God, others, and self* according to God’s ideas of love!

40 Days of Serving

God has put us together in his body, the church, and given gifts to each of us for service. As such, we are to minister to one another, helping each other along the journey of life. But there’s more. He wants us to expand the community by sharing the message of faith in Jesus Christ with others and including them in our community. One of the most powerful ways of sharing the message of Jesus is by serving others in the Name of Jesus. Our world around us has heard enough “talk”—they need to see our faith in action that gives credibility and authority to our message. But how do we go about serving? That’s where the 40 Days of Serving comes in—it is designed to give biblical and practical help as we seek to grow in this area of following our Lord Jesus.

40 Days of Sharing

God has called us to be a community of *faith, hope, and love*. But he doesn’t want us to keep our *faith* to ourselves. He wants others to enjoy the *hope* we have. He desires his *love* to be experienced by those around us. In short, we are called to spread this *faith, hope, and love*; we are called to share with others how our lives have been changed! I don’t know a single Christian who doesn’t *want* to share the good news with others. Often, though, we simply don’t feel that we know how to go about it or what to say. We are in need of practical encouragement. That’s what the ***40 Days of Sharing*** is designed to be—practical encouragement to help you share Jesus in a natural, positive way.

Join with us again for our next “***40 Days***” adventure!

