



Revealing Moments in Scripture

Day 1

Read: Genesis 1:2-5

Out of Chaos

God started with chaos. The earth was empty, formless, and dark—a gloomy state of affairs. But chaos was transformed when God “swept over the face of the waters.” The result—after darkness, light. God spoke and there was light. God gave order to that light, dividing it into night and day, morning and evening. He created a “day” and the possibility of many more to come.

Have you ever thought of how wonderful a “day” is? Morning and evening, darkness fades into light, light giving way to darkness and the end of another day. With each movement God gives us a gift, an opportunity to begin again, to allow Him to show His glory:

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge (Psalm 19:1, 2).

While each day brings its own special forms of chaos, just the knowledge that there is a new day can remind us of how God works to transform our chaos. Out of darkness God can give light, out of a formless void God can create something wonderful, as wonderful as the first day created long ago.

As you consider God, the Creator of this day, what special chaos is present? Life offers many different forms and each seems just as dark as the other. But each day brings new hope, new possibilities, new opportunities for God to create out of chaos some new work in you. Whatever your need, God is one who delights in bringing order out of chaotic situations—your situations!

R&D Recall an occasion when God created a new beginning out of a chaotic situation in your life.

Prayer: God of mercy, create order out of my chaos; and as you brought light from darkness and created day and night, let me pour forth speech that speaks of your glory to the world.

Day 2

Read: Genesis 3:1-7

The Fall

This is the turning point in the history of creation and the start of what we call “salvation history.” What began as pure gift, pure love, and pure joy is now destroyed. From now on the struggle in the human heart, mind, and will is going to be the battle to recover those graces, overcoming the deception and destruction caused by sin. This story is the pivotal event that is universal. All creation has fallen and can’t get up!

The first sin is in our spiritual enemy, Satan, the Devil, the Serpent, the crafty one. Self-deceived, he seeks to convince others of the lie. The first evangelist is a snake-oil salesman. His tactics are effective. First, sow the seed of resentment through the use of exaggeration and distortion. “Did God really say”? The trustworthiness of the Creator is put into question. One lie leads to confusion, for God did not say the tree could not be touched. Second, another lie, or set

of lies, in vv.4-5 clinches the sale. Deny the veracity of God and then attribute base motives to His prohibition: He only wants to restrict your personal growth, limit your potential, cramp your style. The same tactics work today in the pornography industry, the abortion industry, and the idolatry business.

Deception and confusion do their work then and now. As Alfred Adler pointed out, the basic human drive is for power; our spiritual parents opened the door through which we all walk. We want to do it our way. The result is also universal. Instead of the holy innocence of v.2:25, shame becomes the corrosive acid in our souls. All sin begins in rejecting God as the Lord and choosing self as our guide.

R&D Write in your journal a spiritual timeline of your own Fall and what led to it. Then, write how God has reached out to you to restore you.

Prayer: "To him that believes aright, and overcomes all temptations to a wrong belief, God shall give the accomplishment of fullness, and fullness of joy, and joy rooted in glory, and glory established in eternity. And this eternity is God." (John Donne)

Day 3

Read: Genesis 11:27-12:4

Abram Goes in Grace

How was it that Abram and Sarai went from Ur of the Chaldeans to the land of Canaan? It was because God said, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you." Yes, it was an act of faith, but that faith leaned upon a deeper factor. It was the grace of God. Faith is from us, but grace is from God.

It is significant that Abram and Sarai's names were not yet changed to Abraham and Sarah. God's prevenient grace was already granting them the promise of what they would one day become. God's grace went with them and before them, opening the way to a new life for them and a new nation of holy people. They had not earned this grace; it was God's gift.

Grace is the unmerited gift of God to us by which we live in a loving relationship to Him and receive eternal life in His Kingdom. We are not kept close to God in this life because we deserve the closeness by our behavior, but because, by His grace, He holds out His arms to us. Nor will we go to heaven because we have earned a place there. We will be there as His free gift; we could never buy our way into heaven.

Abram knew that he was united to God by grace, and he lived in the amazement that God would bless him who had done nothing to merit this good will. This attitude is what made him an admirable patriarch. He was a hero of faith to the Apostle Paul (see Galatians 3) not because he was a great man in terms of his own works but because he leaned on the greatness of God.

How wonderful it is to know that we are not required to prove anything to God before we can be loved by Him. What anguish people go through because they are convinced that they are not "worthy" to be loved by God! Of course we're not worthy, but that's just the point—God loves us anyhow! That's sheer grace.

R&D As you grow spiritually, in what ways do you catch yourself working to earn salvation?

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank You for loving me as I am; now make me what I ought to be.

Day 4

Read: Genesis 18:16-32

Intercession

Jesus encouraged perseverance in prayer (Luke 18:1-8; Matthew 7:7-11). There is not a better example of it than our reading for today! We have a God who is there for us, but He expects us to come to Him with our pleas for His help. Abram gives us a model of honest, persevering prayer.

Preceding our reading for today (vv.1-15), the Lord had appeared to Abraham by way of three visitors who arrived at his tent. Abraham and Sarah ministered to the men and were promised once again that the child (Isaac) would be born, stating that it would be within a year. Sarah laughed, although she denied that she had.

It is as the men get up to leave that God decides He should let Abraham know that they are on their way to Sodom to destroy it. He is a God who is not only there for Abraham, but also empathetic toward the feelings of Abraham, whose nephew Lot and family lived in Sodom. God had heard the outcry against Sodom for its grievous sin of sexual immorality.

Against this setting we see the classic prayer for mercy, as Abraham pleads with God that He spare the righteous who might be living among the wicked. It is true that God knows our thoughts before we express them. But He wants *us* to know the depth of our own concerns and our utter dependence on Him. We demonstrate that by praying boldly and specifically for the things that are on our hearts.

R&D *What can you learn about prayer from Abraham's plea to God?*

Prayer: *Lord, make us bold and honest in our prayers.*

Day 5

Read: Genesis 39:1-12

Avoiding Adultery

Once again, Joseph is our good illustration in the Bible of how to obey the Seventh Commandment. He had been taken to Egypt by Midianite merchants who had bought him from his brothers, who were otherwise planning to kill him. In Egypt he was sold by the Midianites to Potiphar, one of the Pharaoh's officials. Joseph was put in charge of Potiphar's household when he proved himself successful in all that he did because the Lord was watching over him.

Joseph lived in Potiphar's house, and the man's wife became attracted to him. Potiphar's wife apparently tried to seduce Joseph on many occasions (v.10), but Joseph managed to avoid the attempts and stayed away from her. One day when no one else was around, however, she managed to grab him by his cloak and plead with him to have sex with her. Joseph fled, leaving her holding his cloak.

The immediate outcome for Joseph was not good. Potiphar's wife accused Joseph of attacking her and had his cloak to support her case. Joseph went to jail as a result; but, because God's hand was on him, one thing led to another, and he ended up being the second most important person in Egypt. The key thing to note is that, in refusing the seduction, Joseph acknowledges that committing adultery with the woman would have been wrong, not only because of the loyalty he owed his employer, but it would also have been a sin against God (v.9). There was none of this malarkey about things being all right so long as they are between "consenting adults"—Joseph knew sin when he saw it, and he wasn't giving in.

In our day, we should not only avoid breaking the Seventh Commandment ourselves, but, as Christians, we have a responsibility to do whatever we can to fracture the grip that sexual immorality seems to have on the American public generally. We need to be involved in the fight against pornography and other factors that degrade human life. We need to help other people (especially young people) understand their sexuality from a biblical perspective. We should avoid dirty jokes and stories that downgrade the sanctity of life. We should stand against anything that cheapens the value of life.

R&D What are you doing to promote biblical sexual morality in your community, your church, the nation?

Prayer: Lord God, help us always to keep sexuality in a biblical perspective.

Day 6

Read: Exodus 18:5-27

The Jethro Solution

Two extremely important things happen in this fascinating exchange between Moses and his father-in-law Jethro. One has to do with evangelism and the other lay ministry.

There was obviously a warmth of feeling between the two men. They listened carefully and attentively to each other. On the first day (vv.5-12), Moses told Jethro all that had happened to them concerning Pharaoh and the Egyptians as well as the “hardships they had met along the way,” and how God had intervened in their behalf over and over again. Moses was telling Jethro the story of God’s love. As a result, Jethro (a priest of Midian), acknowledged that God was greater than all gods and worthy to be praised. Thereupon he offered sacrifices to God. Sometimes it is hardest to talk with our relatives about our faith, but Moses did so and won Jethro over.

The next day, it was time for Jethro to help Moses. Moses had taken upon himself the job of judging between the disputes of the people, something that occupied him from morning until night. The task was daunting at best, and destructive to Moses at worst. After watching this procedure patiently, Jethro asked Moses why he was doing it that way. Following Moses’ reply, Jethro told him flatly that it was not a good idea and suggested a remedy. Moses should remain the representative of the people before God, but other godly men could be appointed to settle disputes between the people. It is the same problem churches face today when the clergy, or clergy and staff, try to do all the ministry rather than sharing it with the lay people. Moses heeded Jethro’s advice.

R&D What can you take from this lesson and use in your everyday life?

Prayer: Lord, help us to listen to one another more attentively in families that we might better share your love and your ministry with one another.

Day 7

Read: Joshua 24:14-27

No Other Gods

Joshua is our good example of following the First Commandment. When he addresses the people as his life nears its end, he tells them to fear (hold in awe) the Lord and serve Him with all faithfulness. He specifically tells them to throw away all the gods their forefathers had worshiped

in Egypt. He wants the people to make a choice: to renew their covenant with the one true God, or to admit that they will fail to give full loyalty to Him and will put other gods before Him.

The people must decide if they will follow the Lord, who had proved His trustworthiness to them, or if they will run after other gods, which were just man-made idols. We have a natural tendency to want to control our own lives rather than being dependent on someone else, even when that someone is God—maybe especially if that someone is God. So it was with these Israelites, and they had shown a tendency to stray to gods of their own choosing. Knowing this tendency, Joshua wants to pin them down. He makes it clear that they had a choice; he is not forcing them into the decision he wants them to make.

Joshua does give them an example to follow: his own. “But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” (v.15b). Talk is cheap. It is easy to talk the talk, not so easy to walk the walk. But Joshua has done so. His life was a model of following the Lord. The Israelites followed God during Joshua’s lifetime...a tribute to Joshua’s faith in God and his forthright leadership of the people.

The covenant Joshua wanted the people to renew with God was that they would obey Him and worship Him alone. The purpose was that they become a holy nation that could influence the rest of the world for God. The conquest of Canaan was a key step toward accomplishing that purpose. God wants us Christians to “conquer Canaan” (bring the world to Him) in our own day, but to do so spiritually through our love and care for others. We can do that if we put no other gods before Him.

R&D What would “conquering Canaan” be like for Christians today? What steps might be involved?

Prayer: Lord God, why would we look to any god but You? You are our All in All. Keep us focused on Your love and shield us from the temptation to follow other gods.

Day 8

Read: Judges 6: [1-24] 25-32

No Idols

Although Gideon is a somewhat reluctant hero, once he yields himself to God, he becomes a destroyer of idols. After God called Gideon to lead the Israelites, He immediately asked him to tear down the altar of the pagan god Baal. This would put Gideon’s faith and commitment to the test. God would have no idols.

The problem for Gideon was that the Canaanite religion was political in nature. Therefore, the destruction of an idol was like an attack on the local government responsible for the idol. As a result, Gideon could face repercussions from his action. To the local authorities, he would be considered guilty of a crime and subject to punishment. Thus, he performed the deed at night to avoid detection.

Gideon was at great personal risk to himself for obeying God’s law concerning idols. The townspeople wanted to kill him when they learned what he had done. Many of those who wanted to kill him were fellow Israelites...showing how far they had strayed from their faith in the one true God. God had said that idolaters were to be stoned (Deuteronomy 13:6-11), but these Israelites wanted to stone the destroyer of idols instead! Thanks to Joash, the people were brought to their senses about the situation, and Gideon went on to be one of the greatest heroes of the faith in the Old Testament.

If we are serious about our faith in Jesus Christ, there will be idols for us to destroy as well. This can occur when we stand up against an immoral business practice where we work, or confront a friend who has become an alcoholic. When we do so, it will be dangerous for us. We may lose our job or a friendship. Sometimes the very ones who oppose our action are those who say they, too, are Christians. Nonetheless, we must do what God calls us to do regardless of the consequences. In the long run, we will be vindicated by God just as Gideon was.

R&D *What idols has God called you to destroy? How faithful were you in doing so?*

Prayer: *Blessed Lord, thank You for the model You have given us in Gideon. Help us to be steadfast in standing against idols in our day.*

Day 9

Read: Ruth 1

Loyalty

This story takes place during the time when judges ruled Israel, before there were kings. Because of a famine, Naomi, her husband Elimelech of the family of Judah, and their two sons were forced to leave their home in Bethlehem and move to the country of the Moabites, east of the Dead Sea. There was open hostility between the Moabites and the Israelites. While living in Moab both sons married Moabitish women, named Orpah and Ruth.

During their ten year stay in Moab, Naomi's husband and both sons died, leaving the three women to fend for themselves. When Naomi heard that Jehovah had come to the aid of her people in Bethlehem, she decided to return home. She instructs both of her daughters-in-law to remain in Moab, because it is their home. Orpah agrees to stay behind and return to her people. Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem as the barley harvest is beginning.

This is the story of Ruth and her faithfulness to Naomi and how God blesses Naomi and Ruth for her love and devotion. Ruth declares, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God." Here Ruth is declaring her commitment to Naomi and to God. She is giving herself to God as we Christians must give ourselves to Christ. God always honors a commitment made from the heart. As we spend a few days in the Book of Ruth, we will see how God honors Ruth, just as He honors us when we live our lives for Him.

R&D *Do you know a "Ruth" personally? Tell about her.*

Prayer: *Father, thank You for faithful people who lead the way to eternal life.*

Day 10

Read: Job 42:1-17

Drama Ends

The drama ends swiftly. Under the weight of God's questioning, Job puts aside his indignation and whining and accepts that God's purposes cannot be "thwarted." "I have uttered what I did not understand," says Job, "things too wonderful for me, which I did not know."

"I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear," says Job, "but now my eye sees you." Thus is Job's problem of faith resolved. Not by more words, more reports about God, but by experiencing or "seeing" God. What did Job see? All truth, all wisdom?

No, what Job saw was God caring enough for him to argue with him. Job's path to faith, it turns out, was the very act of questioning—and of listening. Job demanded of God, argued with God, accepted chastisement from God, bore God's questions. At first he blustered, but in the end he also listened. That entire experience, it seems to me, took Job from a faith based on ancient words about God to a faith founded on a living encounter with God.

The key wasn't passive resignation. Faith isn't that easy; we can't just fall flat before God and consider our faith-work done. Job did the harder work of probing and protesting, demanding, in effect, that God take him seriously and invite Job into the mysteries.

That was the faith that God then rewarded. First, God chastised Job's three "friends" for their empty and self-serving words. God required them to make an offering to Job and ask him to be their intercessor. Then, God restored Job's fortunes twofold and enabled him to live a prosperous and serene life.

Job's message to us? In an age of abiding passivity—passive entertainment, passive politics, consumer religion, a prevailing feeling of powerlessness—Job's experience says to talk back, to argue with God, to engage God, to demand that God lead us beyond our ignorance. And by extension engage the world, engage others, break out of passivity. Job never once gave in and confessed unworthiness just to make peace. He took himself and God more seriously than that. So should we all.

R&D In what ways have you confronted God, and what were the results?

Prayer: Lord, thank You for teaching us when we are in need of understanding.

Day 11

Read: 2 Samuel 12:1-14

"You Are That Man"

There are many "unsung heroes" in the Bible, but certainly Nathan stands tall as one of the greatest of all. Prophets often did not fair well in confronting monarchs, and seldom were they confronting on as personal a level as Nathan does here! There is a saying, "Go to God about the man before you go to the man about God." One has to believe that that is just what Nathan did. He had prayed about how to approach David, and God had given him a way. David's behavior will not go unpunished. Nathan's famous parable of the poor man's lamb evokes rage and anger in David. "The man who did this ought to die." He invites his own condemnation by Nathan's words, "You are that man."

Through Nathan, the Lord reminds David that all he has, even his life, have been gifts from the Lord. David's sin is grave. He must publicly face the consequences of divine justice: continual violence within his immediate family and personal humiliation—the seduction of his concubines. The Lord has forgiven...David's life is spared but bitter consequences will follow.

All of the events prophesied by Nathan came to pass. Because of David's sin with Bathsheba and his conspiracy leading to Uriah's death: (1) murder was a constant threat in his family (13:26-30, 18:14-15, 1 Kings 2:23-25); (2) his household rebelled against him (15:13); (3) Absalom had intercourse with his concubines openly (16:21-22); and (4) the child of the adulterous act did not live (12:18). There are consequences to sin. God can forgive us, but the natural results of what we have set in motion must run their course. It might be helpful to remember what happened to David the next time we are tempted to evil.

R&D *Share a time when you felt the anguish of personal sin and cast your lot on God's mercy.*

Prayer: *"My sacrifice is a humble spirit, O God, you will not reject a humble and repentant heart" (Psalm 51:17).*

Day 12

Read: 1 Kings 3:3-15

A Prayer for Wisdom

In Solomon's dream at Gibeon (the location of the tent of the meeting, 2 Chronicles 1:3), God appears to him and says, "Ask what I shall give you." Solomon may ask for whatever he desires because all things are in God's power to give.

Before asking for anything, Solomon acknowledges that it is God who has made him king and then prays that God will give him that which he needs to carry out the responsibility given him. He recognizes his own insufficiency. His request for an understanding mind to govern God's people and to discern good and evil is pleasing to God because it is not a selfish prayer. It is a request for a gift which will benefit His (God's) people. Because his prayer is pleasing to God, God gives Solomon not only what he has asked for but much more besides.

God has given us the responsibility to proclaim the gospel, to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to welcome the stranger, to clothe the naked, to visit the sick and the prisoner. In our society we are encouraged to be self-reliant. Often we have erroneously been told that "God helps those who help themselves." Instead, we, like Solomon, are to recognize our own insufficiency and ask for the gifts we need to accomplish the tasks God calls us to do. Jesus has given us the answer, for he has said, "Ask, and it will be given you" (Matthew 7:7-8, Luke 11:9-15). "And this is the confidence which we have in (Jesus), that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him" (1 John 4:14-15).

R&D *What gift(s) of the Holy Spirit (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4) has God given you in order to serve Him effectively?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, for fully equipping us to serve in ministry.*

Day 13

Read: 1 Kings 19:7-14

Elijah and God

This is not the first time that Elijah is alone in the wilderness. When he first appeared on the scene in the 17th chapter announcing the beginning of the drought, he was told by God to go and hide himself in a ravine east of the Jordan River. The boldness and the unwelcome nature of this initial prophecy to King Ahab put Elijah in danger of losing his freedom and quite possibly his life.

This second time, however, the burden of his lonely journey is greater. Then he was just coming on the scene as a prophet to be reckoned with. Now he has achieved amazing success, but despite it all, his confidence in God and in himself has fled.

Yet he can't let go of God. He journeys on alone to Horeb, that is, Mount Sinai, the mountain of God, where the people of Israel had received the divine Law, the Torah. There he and God

meet in one of the Bible's best known episodes: God comes to him not in the earthquake, wind or fire but in a still, small voice.

Much can be made of this. One significance we can find relates to what has been happening to the prophet. The earthquake, wind and fire are demonstrations of power which can bring to mind Elijah's recent triumphs. (There is a hot dry wind called the sirocco which is often associated with drought conditions, and then there was the fire from above in his contest with the prophets of Baal.)

But Elijah needed to meet his God under more humbling circumstances. It was at the time when he felt weakest that God spoke with him quietly but distinctly (see 2 Corinthians 12:10).

R&D Have you made a similar journey to God in your life? Share your experience of hearing a "still small voice" deep in your soul.

Prayer: Lord, may I not be so attuned to what seems great that I fail to hear You in what seems small or insignificant.

Day 14

Read: Psalm 51:1-12

Clean Heart

For those of us who think our sins are too great to be forgiven, this psalm is our assurance to the contrary. This is the psalm King David composed after his adultery with Bathsheba and having arranged for her husband Uriah to be killed in battle so that David could have her for his own. Few of us could equal David in sinning; yet, as pointed out earlier, he was referred to as a man after God's own heart. Why? Because he was truly repentant and wanted to live in a new and obedient relationship with God.

The important thing is that David saw that his sins were sins against God (v.4). Even though particular people were also sinned against in the process, the overriding offense was against God. Sin is rebellion against the ways in which God has commanded us to live. In this psalm, David not only wants his sins forgiven, but he wants to

turn his shortcomings over to God for God to remove them. He knows that God "desires truth in [David's] inner parts" and wants to teach him "wisdom in his inmost place." David's fondest hope is stated in verse 10: "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit in me." This is what we want and need, that God will lead us away from our sinfulness and into a new place wherein the fruit of the Spirit can grow.

God can, among other things, transform our inclinations toward sin into inclinations toward wholeness. What has been destructive in us can be transformed to be constructive. Those of us who are leaders are ones who tend to seek power, but power can be used for good instead of for selfish purposes. Those of us who have been controlled by our sensuality can let the love of God flow through us for the good of others instead of satisfying our lustful desires. Those of us who are materially wealthy can come to the aid of those in need instead of building our own financial empire. We can't; God can.

R&D Is there sin in your life that you believe cannot be forgiven by God? Confess it now, knowing that Jesus died for ALL sin and you have newness of life because of Calvary.

Prayer: *Jesus, thank you for giving yourself for All my sins. I am sorry that I have felt that your sacrifice wasn't enough for every sin. Your sacrifice was and is perfect and you washed my heart clean.*

Day 15

Read: Luke 1:26-38

Loving God

Perhaps no one other than Jesus himself has shown the love of God equal to that of Mary. As we reflect on the glory of Christmas Day, it is an especially important time to look at what her love of God has meant to all the rest of us down through the years.

To the people of Mary's day, she would have seemed unimportant to God. She was young, poor, and a female living in a strongly male-dominated society. Yet God chose her for one of the most important acts of obedience in the history of the world. From Mary's point of view, the message delivered to her by Gabriel was a mixed blessing at best. True, she had been chosen to give birth to the Messiah; but, as an unmarried girl, she would be subjected to ridicule and worse. Think what hinged on Mary's "Yes"!

Disaster seemed to face Mary. Unless the father of a child agreed to marry a pregnant woman, she would probably remain unmarried for life. If her own father rejected her, she could be forced into begging or even prostitution in order to survive. Furthermore, Mary's story that her pregnancy was the result of the action of God, the Holy Spirit, would have been a sign of insanity. Against all of these practical reasons for her to suggest to Gabriel that someone else would be a better choice, Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."

Because Mary loved God enough to yield obediently to His will, a child was born who changed the world. You and I are able to live with God eternally because of Mary's obedience. How small that makes the tasks God asks us to do! In a sense, the call upon Mary is God's call upon us today, to "birth" Jesus into a world desperately in need of his saving grace in whatever way God would use us to do that.

R&D *What task does God have for me today?*

Prayer: *Thank You, God, for Mary.*

Day 16

Read: Luke 2:1-20

Jesus' Birth

Today we focus on the praise of God for the birth of His Son. Luke tells the story in an intriguing way. Joseph and Mary must obey an imperial decree and journey to Bethlehem because Joseph is of the family of David. Mary is on the verge of delivering a baby, yet there is no room for them in the inn. Housed in a stable, the baby is born. The King is placed in a manger. The Light has shined in the darkness (John 1:5). The Creator has entered His creation in the form of a babe.

An angel appears, heralding the good news. The appearance, however, is not to the religious leaders nor officials of the government. It is to the humblest of mankind, the shepherds tending their flocks. "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people." The long awaited Messiah has come to us, just average folks who are humble enough to accept the great gift God has given us.

More angels appear, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men upon whom his favor rests.” The shepherds go to Bethlehem to see this miracle, then spread the word about what they have seen. All are filled with wonder, as is Mary who will treasure all that has happened and ponder it in her heart. The shepherds return to their work, “glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen.”

“But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons” (Galatians 4:4). We have the benefit of this great gift from God, for which we praise Him.

R&D It has been said that the authenticity of the Christmas story is that it could never have been invented by a human; it had to be of God. Comment.

Prayer: We praise You, Lord, for the Gift above all gifts, Your Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Day 17

Read: Luke 9:18-27

The Central Question

It has been estimated that in a single day most people ask somewhere between 300 and 400 questions. “What time is it?” “What’s the weather like?” “Is the coffee on?” “What’s for dinner?” Most questions deal with the routines of life. Others, however, are more profound. “Do you love me?” “Am I up to this task?” “What if I fail?”

In this passage the questions Jesus asks his disciples are of the profound kind. Jesus begins with a general question: “Who do the people say that I am?” (v.18). The disciples answered that people hold a variety of opinions. But, as with every profound inquiry, it doesn’t finally matter what other people think. It matters what we think. So, Jesus asks the disciples, “But who do you say that I am?” (v.20). There is no more central question of fact or faith than this.

It is interesting to see that Jesus is a superb teacher. It is noteworthy to understand that Jesus has the power to create miraculous results. It is a good thing to see Jesus as an example of how human life can be lived at its best. But while those things are very worthwhile, they are not central to faith. The central question of faith is not about what Jesus did, but about who he is. Peter saw and believed that Jesus was “the Christ of God” (v.20). When we understand and commit ourselves to that conviction, all else falls into place. If we cannot commit, it will not finally matter what else we believe about him.

R&D When you picture Jesus in your mind, what qualities occur to you first? What does it mean to you that he is the Christ?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, the father of a child you healed cried out to you, lord, I believe. Help my unbelief “Let that cry, O Lord, be my prayer as well.

Day 18

Read: Luke 23:26-49

Jesus’ Death

Today’s reading is a somber scene in the midst of a study about praising God. Yet there is no more important reason to praise God than for what happened in this passage of Scripture. As

horrible as this scene is, our focus should be on the Son of God and what he accomplished for us. He bore our sins and offered his life for many. We, like the “good thief” on the cross, would be entitled to be “punished justly...getting what our deeds deserve,” but Jesus, sinless and obedient to his Father, takes the punishment for us.

It is enlightening to look at how Jesus responds to others as he faces crucifixion. He comforts the women who are weeping for him. He forgives the thief hanging next to him and promises him a place in paradise. In John’s Gospel, he makes provision for the care of his mother (John 19:26, 27). Despite the gruesome pain and impending death, Jesus’ attention is toward those around him. In this desperate situation, he is noticing needs, answering prayers and reaching out in love. He voluntarily gives his life to pay for the sins of the whole world.

As Christians, we are called to righteous living. There is nothing inherently righteous in us. Only Christ is righteous, and the only righteousness we can have is being righteous in him. Our sins were imparted to him and he bore them on the cross for us. Now he imparts that righteousness to those who accept him as the Lord and Savior of our lives. When the Father looks upon those of us who are privileged to be in Christ, He does not see us in our sinfulness; He sees His Son who lives in us through the Holy Spirit. That is reason for praise indeed!

R&D Meditate on the crucifixion. What does it mean to you personally?

Prayer: Blessed Lord, we praise You for what Jesus did for us, that we might be in a right relationship with You.

Day 19

Read: Acts 2:1-13

Gift of the Spirit

There are at least three ways of looking at what happened at Pentecost. Many see it as the birth of the Christian Church. Others recognize that it represents the Holy Spirit being poured out on the followers of Christ, making this one of the most important events that has ever happened in the history of the world. A third way of looking at the event is that it models for Christians our responsibility to witness to Christ across any barriers of language, race, culture, or anything else. That will be our focus in this study.

We praise God today that there are no limits to whom He can reach through us. We are His ambassadors of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:20), “as though God were making his appeal through us.” God poured out His Spirit on Jesus’ followers at Pentecost so that they were able to communicate with people from many nations by speaking “the wonders of God” in their own tongues (v.11). This was, of course, a remarkable demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit working in His people, but it also spoke to the hearts of those who would, as a result, become His people. Acts tells us that 3,000 people became followers of Christ that day (2:41).

We live in a pluralistic society today that has forgotten the Judeo-Christian principles that governed the lives of earlier generations. We are surrounded by people of other races, cultures, languages, and religions. So were those new Christians at Pentecost! God worked mightily through them, and He can through us. What an opportunity! Every person who is led to Christ across one of the cultural barriers that we encounter today becomes another ambassador for Christ in his or her surroundings.

The question we can ask ourselves is: What special attribute, opportunity or gift do we have that will allow us to “speak in a tongue” that reaches across some “barrier” to bring others the Christ?

R&D *What special assignment does God have for me as His ambassador?*

Prayer: *Lord, fill me with a wellspring of love that will flow out on others and lead them to You.*

Day 20

Read: Acts 4:32-27

Generosity

The opposite of stealing is giving. Barnabas was a great giver! In the early days of the Christian Church the members didn't think of what they had as being their own. They shared freely, eliminating poverty among them. They refused to let a brother or sister in Christ suffer when someone else had plenty. The unity these people felt in the Holy Spirit was what motivated them to be free of materialism and open to the needs of others.

Barnabas was a leader in the early church. A Levite by birth, he was a member of the Jewish tribe that had responsibility to care for the Temple. However, his family moved to Cyprus, so he couldn't serve in the Temple. He became a Christian and a missionary companion of Paul. Not only was he generous with his property, as in our reading for today, but he was generous of spirit. He had introduced Paul to the Christians in Jerusalem when they were fearful of the former Saul, persecutor of Christians. He supported John Mark when Paul would have nothing more to do with the young man.

Barnabas was nicknamed “The Encourager,” and he showed his unselfish generosity in these several ways. He can be a model for us as we think about how we can show the spirit of the Eighth Commandment, not only by not stealing, but by giving instead.

Generosity of spirit is, of course, shown by giving at least 10% of our income for the work of the Lord. But we also do it by serving our community in various ways: giving blood regularly, being a “Meals on Wheels” driver, serving at the local homeless shelter, assisting Habitat for Humanity in various ways, being a Boy or Girl Scout leader, or helping with the Little League team. There are unlimited numbers of things that need to be done in our families, our churches, our neighborhoods and beyond. They give us ample opportunities to obey the spirit of the Eighth Commandment.

R&D *What activity are you involved in, or does God want you to get involved in, to reflect generosity toward others?*

Prayer: *Lord, there is no way we can out give You; but we pray that Your love for others might be shown through us to meet those needs around us that You want us to meet.*

Day 21

Read: Acts 7:54-8:4

Jesus Stands

Stephen accuses the high priest and the Council of the Jews of resisting the Holy Spirit, betraying and murdering the Righteous One, and failing to receive the law as delivered by angels. God in His mercy opens the heavens and reveals to Stephen, who reports his vision to angry

witnesses, that Jesus, the Son of Man, is standing at the right hand of his Father. This is the only New Testament occurrence of the phrase, “Son of Man” outside of the Gospels. In Mark 14:61-62, Jesus tells the high priest that he is the Christ and that, “You will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One.” By the power of the Holy Spirit operating through the eyes and mouth of Stephen Jesus’ words come true! Jesus is indeed at the right hand of the Father.

Jesus stands to witness and acknowledge before the angels of God (see Luke 12:8) the martyrdom of Stephen. Jesus was killed for blasphemy. He claimed to be the Son of God (Luke 22:70-71). Jesus asked the Father to forgive those who killed him. Stephen, accused of blasphemy (Acts 6:11), also asks the Father not to hold the sin of false accusation and murder against those who stone him to death. Like Jesus (Luke 23:46), Stephen asks God to receive his spirit. Luke wants us to see how like Jesus Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, has become.

As the church is scattered by persecution and Saul (later named Paul) “ravages” the believers, we have a sense that Stephen’s death marks a new beginning. Those who are scattered “went about preaching the word” (8:4). Persecution leads to evangelism!

What enables a Christian to find courage when suffering and persecution are the result of faith and witness? No doubt Stephen had an incredible fullness of the Holy Spirit. He had something else. He truly wanted to be like Jesus, even to the point of sharing in his suffering. When we suffer for him, Jesus shares in our suffering. There is no closer place to the Lord and no greater blessing than to suffer for our faith.

R&D Imagine Jesus sitting at the right hand of the Father witnessing to your faith. What would he say?

Prayer: Lord, by the power of Your Holy Spirit give me the courage to witness to my faith in You, no matter what the consequences to me.

Day 22

Read: Acts 8:5-25

Philip the Evangelist

In Acts 1:8 Jesus commands his followers to be his witnesses “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.” The scattering of the Church, as a result of the persecution following the stoning of Stephen, sends the growing number of believing disciples preaching throughout the region of Judea and Samaria (8:1). The twelve apostles with some courage stay in Jerusalem.

Philip, one of the seven chosen to serve as Stephen had (6:5), preaches the Gospel, accompanied by signs and wonders, in a city of Samaria. Philip will later (Acts 21:8) be identified as “Philip the Evangelist.” To the Jews the Samaritans were outcasts of the Jewish faith. The Assyrian conquerors of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BC had allowed some Jews to remain in the occupied territory. These Jews, disobeying the Law of Moses, intermarried with the strangers whom their Assyrian conquerors had brought in to settle the land. The Jews of the Southern Kingdom (Judea) who were carried into captivity to Babylon in 586 BC had remained faithfully Jewish. When they returned from captivity, the Jews who had kept the faith contemptuously refused to associate with the “impure” Samaritans of the Northern Kingdom who had failed to keep the Law. Philip’s success in bringing the Gospel to the Samaritans is an important first missionary step confirming for the first believers that Jesus’ message was for all the world.

This text has also been an important reference for those who wish to explore the relationship between baptism and the receiving of the Holy Spirit. In this text, baptism does not appear to include filling with the Holy Spirit. Beginning with verse 9, in the story of Simon, from which our word simony comes, we are reminded of two important aspects of our faith. First, the gift of faith is not for our glory. Through faith we are called to glorify the giver of that faith. Simon wanted the glory that would come to him if he could do what the apostles could do. Second, Peter told Simon to pray for repentance. Instead, Simon asked Peter to pray for him. His prayer request was to avoid the consequences of sin. But only the sinner can repent of sin in prayer. The Lord looks on the heart (1 Samuel 16:7). Early Christian legend records that Simon's heart never changed and that he opposed Christianity.

R&D When you are praised for the gifts of ministry you exercise, how do you redirect the praise to the Giver of the Gifts?

Prayer: Help me to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with You.

Day 23

Read: Acts 9:1-9

The Road to Damascus

There are many who consider Paul to be the second most important person in the history of Christianity, next only to Jesus himself. He wrote one-fourth of the New Testament. Two-thirds of the book of Acts tells us about Paul. His conversion is so important that it is told three times in Acts. Paul is regarded as the greatest missionary of all time.

Here we encounter him as Saul, the chief persecutor of those who would later be called Christians. Saul had been born in Tarsus, a city in what is today Turkey, on the northeast corner of the Mediterranean Sea. He had been trained in the strictest form of the Jewish Law, under the well-respected Gamaliel (see 22:3). He was "far more zealous for the traditions of [his] ancestors" (Galatians 1:14) than his contemporaries. And, as we know from our previous study, he stood consenting as Stephen was stoned (8:1-3).

Saul apparently had done his best to eliminate the "people of the Way" (v.2, the name by which the early Christians were known) in Judea and Samaria, and was now on his way to Damascus to find those who had escaped persecution and bring them back to Jerusalem. His conversion is certainly one of the most awesome displays of the power of God in Scripture. As Peter Wagner points out, it involved "a supernatural light, a vision, a falling under the power of the Spirit, hearing the voice of God and a new birth."

What happened to Saul is stated this way by Simon Kistemaker: "What a reversal of events! Paul, who desired to dash the believers to the ground, is lying face down on the ground. He, who wished to bring prisoners bound from Damascus to Jerusalem, now is led as a prisoner of blindness into Damascus....He, who came to triumph over the Christian faith, now submits to the Captain of this faith."

R&D Why do you believe so much attention is paid to Paul's conversion in the book of Acts? Recall moments of conversion in your life. Is there a time when through argument or pride you "persecuted" believers?

Prayer: *Dear Lord, in any way in which we are “headed for Damascus,” bring us down that we may rise anew in your service.*

Day 24

Read: Acts 9:10-19

To Be Used

It is said that there is no greater satisfaction in life than to be used in and for the service of a cause or a person in whom you believe. If the root meaning of being a disciple of Jesus is to believe in and follow him, an integral part of discipleship is our willingness to be used by him in the service of other people. The boy scout banner proclaims service to God and to country. The disciple’s banner proclaims service to God and to others.

Someone has said that the call to ministry is a call to action. Ministry is not given to confer status or privilege or position on the minister, either priest or lay, but it is to carry out a task for the Lord. It is a part of discipleship. It is service for Christ (Matthew 20:25-28; 25:31-46).

Ananias was a disciple. He believed in and followed Jesus. He knew who Jesus was! When Christ spoke to him in a vision, Ananias did not answer, “Who are you, Lord?” but “Here I am, Lord.” His relationship with Jesus was such that when the call to service came, Ananias could express his true feelings. Understandably, however, Ananias had a problem with Saul. He was afraid of him for he knew what Saul had been doing to other Christians and why he was coming to Damascus. Ananias was not eager to confront Saul and risk imprisonment and death. Yet, in spite of his fears and hesitation, he accepted the Lord’s reassurance and call to service.

How God used Ananias! Responding to God’s call, Ananias found Saul. His first action was to offer Saul Christian love and fellowship. “Brother Saul, no matter what you have been, you now belong, you are a part of us.” Then Ananias was used by the Lord as the minister of Saul’s healing and to be the vehicle for Saul’s personal Pentecost and baptism.

As disciples who know Christ, we, too, are called to be used. We may think that there is little that we can accomplish but all Christ needs is that we, like Ananias, be willing to serve.

R&D *What does the story of Ananias tell you about God’s call to you today?*

Prayer: *Here I am, Lord.*

Day 25

Read: Acts 10:9-20

Peter’s Vision

To the Jew of Peter’s day, Gentiles (including God-fearers) were unclean. At this point in his life, Peter would not have thought of himself as a Christian. He was a Jew, although a Messianic Jew. He would have still been keeping the Jewish Law, and one thing he knew for sure was that he wasn’t supposed to enter a Gentile house. Thus, for God to get Peter to Cornelius’ house, a very specific message would have to be given.

Peter and Cornelius had both been praying during what we might call today their “quiet time.” Each had set aside a specific time to be with the Lord in prayer. Sometimes we resist establishing and following a daily routine of prayer. The discipline of it can make it seem too structured and even boring. It seems significant that God honored the routine of prayer for both of these men by communicating with them so clearly and specifically during their “quiet time.”

As mentioned above, to the Jew, the Gentile was “unclean.” There were also certain foods the Jew could not eat (see Leviticus 11) because they were “unclean.” As Peter Wagner states it, “No Jew went around fighting the temptation to eat a ham sandwich or rabbit stew or steamed clams—the very thought of eating such things was nauseating.” Entering a Gentile home would have a similar effect.

Thus, God not only gives Peter the message as clearly as it could be illustrated, but he does it three times just so Peter will have no doubt! “What God has made clean” means that God has Himself prepared the way; and, to make matters clearer still, all of this happens just as the “unclean” messengers from Cornelius arrive at Peter’s door.

R&D Have there been times when God had to communicate with you as specifically as He did with Peter in order for you to get the point? Can you personally share an occasion when “God made clean” an unclean place in your life and relationships?

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for opening the faith to the Gentiles so that we might also be saved.

Day 26

Read: 1 Corinthians 12:31—13:13

The Supremacy of Love

Did you notice in today’s reading that the only thing in this list that is eternal is *love*? Prophecies, tongues, even knowledge—they will all pass away, because “when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears” (v.10). What an awesome hope we share! We are told to “eagerly desire the greater gifts” (v.31), the gifts of faith, hope and love, but we’re also told that “the greatest of these is love” (v.13). Love is also defined for us: it is patient, it is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, nor self-seeking; it is not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongs. Love rejoices with the truth; it always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Always, always, always! And to top it all off, love never fails. Never.

Doesn’t it just fill your soul to know that this is what we’re called to? God, the source of all love and whose very essence is love, calls us heavenward to this life of perfection. Although in our human condition we fall short of this greatest gift, love is our beginning and our end. It is effortless and natural to love others after experiencing God’s love for us. This is why we must abide in His love.

We have faith *in* Jesus, hope *because of* Jesus, and he *is* love. When we love, we *have* him, and we *reveal* him! Our ability to love increases as he grows in us. Love is our goal. Impatience, pride, envy, these are all signs of a deficiency in love. Galatians 5:22 lists the fruit of the Holy Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

Without the Holy Spirit, we are doomed to live in the mediocrity and despair of pride, isolation, and self-centeredness. With the Holy Spirit, received when we willingly accept Christ’s gift of salvation, we are reborn into the life of Jesus. We must actively abide in him, in his love, so that the fruit of his Spirit may be revealed through our lives.

R&D What does it mean to yield to the Holy Spirit? Are we allowing Jesus to live in us and through us?

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, thank You for Your love. Help us experience Your love in greater measure today, so we may love as You love.*

by Harry C. Griffith

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