

42 Steps Ahead

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The Bible can be overwhelming at first glance and if you have no idea of where to start, you're not alone. 42 Steps Ahead is written for those who are just getting a start in the Bible.

Each day, there is a suggested chapter to read along with some background info given for each reading. These selected chapters will give you a bigger picture of the Bible and how it flows – they start with the story of Jesus, then move to the beginning experiences of the early church, followed by some highlights of the Old Testament (before Christ).

If you are not familiar with the Bible and don't know where each book can be found, just use the Table of Contents in the front of your Bible. Like anything else, the more time you spend in God's words, the better you'll be able to navigate. Don't be discouraged if it takes a while; give it some time and you'll be moving around the Scriptures with no problem.

A critical part of growing spiritual is knowing God and there is no better way to do this than spending time in the Bible. The Scriptures are not simply ancient words on a page; God uses them to grow us spiritually. *The word of God is alive and active.* (Hebrews 4:12)

God reveals himself to us through his words. *The unfolding of your words gives light.* (Psalm 119:130) No one understands everything in the Bible, but without question, God will reveal to us what he wants for us to see. Every time I open the Bible, I simply pray these words: *Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your word.* (Psalm 119:18)

I am jazzed for you as you begin this journey in God's word! Whatever chapter you are living right now, God's hope for you is to move ahead. And this is my hope for you, too ... as you take 42 steps ahead.

Steve

NOTES

DAY 1

Luke 1 Getting Ready for Jesus

When a product is ready to be released publicly, a flood of advertising is packaged in a media blitz. By the time a movie hits the theaters, we've seen the trailer enough to quote some of the actors' lines!

So when you think about God sending His only Son to earth, can you imagine this historical event taking place with no advertising? Promotion is a way to give us a sneak peak at what's coming. There are actually many places in the Old Testament that give us specific details about the life and purpose of Jesus.

In Luke 1, God sends an angel (Gabriel) to advertise the coming of two important people: John the Baptist and Jesus. Gabriel appears to John's father, Zechariah, and Jesus' mother, Mary. Take note of the response of both of these parents-to-be: they break out in song – a natural response to God's movement in our life.

LUKE 2 Jesus As a Child

DAY 2

Luke 2 gives us the details of the Christmas story. Then we get the only glimpse of Jesus as a child in this chapter. His childhood has always been a mystery since none of the four writers of Jesus' life (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) provide very much information.

What we do see in this chapter is Jesus astounding everyone even from an early age. It wasn't a dazzling miracle that was so amazing; it was how much He knew about spirituality and the words of God. Even as a young boy, Jesus was revealing His identity as God's Son.

DAY 3

MARK 1 First Steps of Ministry

The gospel writer, Mark, chose to start his record of Jesus' life by starting with the beginning of His ministry. John the Baptist is preparing the way for Jesus by telling everyone to be open for a change of life.

We then see Jesus in an act of submission and humility as He is being baptized by John. Baptism is a sign to the world that we are surrendered in our hearts to God.

Jesus forms a team of men (called disciples) with whom He chose to work and live closely. He then gets right to work in reaching the community around Him. In the midst of His work, we see Jesus taking time to pray to His Father. We learn as much from Jesus in His actions as we do His words.

Here's the importance of the first chapter of Mark. We see what are the key ingredients to Jesus' ministry: submission and humility, working in a team, reaching a broken world, and taking time out to connect spiritually to the Father. These form the foundation for our own spiritual walk with God.

MARK 9 A Sample of Miracles

DAY 4

As time goes on, Jesus reveals more of His power to those around Him. This power was not for show or to even impress anyone. The power was an affirmation that God was present and that Jesus was who He claimed to be.

Mark 9 starts with one of these affirming events. Many religious leaders across history have claimed to have experienced miraculous intersections with God, but the verification of Jesus is that great crowds around Him

witnessed these amazing validations, as is recorded in history. Jesus also redefines true greatness in Mark 9. As with other answers, His conclusions go counter to what our human instincts may be.

DAY 5

MATTHEW 5 Jesus Speaks

Matthew 5, 6, and 7 are often called the “Sermon on the Mount.” These chapters ring out like an overture that includes many themes that give a preview of who Jesus is and what His passion is all about.

In chapter 5, Jesus is readjusting years of teaching that the people had obviously been used to hearing. Many of the teachings begin with the words “You have heard it said,” or something similar. So many people were used to living by the Law or the religious rules of the day, but they had missed the most important thing in the spiritual life: the heart.

God is so much more interest in our inner world, our thoughts, our passion, our love for Him and others. Jesus is teaching that if our inner life is connected to God, the outer life will naturally follow.

MATTHEW 6 More On the Mount

DAY 6

Jesus’ message continues in the “Sermon on the Mount.” This chapter offers some practical teaching on some spiritual disciplines like prayer, fasting, and giving.

It makes complete sense that Jesus concludes that we are not to worry about our life on earth since God is in control of our lives. Jesus reconfirms that if our spiritual life is in order, God will take care of us.

DAY 7

LUKE 15 Three Treasure Stories

Luke 15 allows us to see the very thing that impassions God: rescuing people who have lost their way. Jesus tells three stories that all focus on the same thing: something of great value that has been lost, each of which merited an all-out search.

A lost coin, a lost sheep, and a lost son are the examples as the treasured examples. God reminds us that He will go to any means to find us when we've lost our way. God further proves His passion because the celebration as a result of finding the lost is unleashed.

JOHN 3 Keys to the Spiritual Life

DAY 8

Two keys to the spiritual life of a Christian are found in John 3. Jesus is approached by a religious leader who asks one of the most critical questions: how does spiritual life take birth in us?

The second key issue that is addressed in this chapter is the origin of Jesus. Was He simply another man who was a self-proclaimed religious leader? Or was He really sent from God?

The conclusion to these questions will determine whether we have religion or relationship. Our faith is more than an intellectual agreement with a list of religious precepts.

True spirituality is a reality where God ignites our spirit in the sense of a new birth. And our connection with God must come through someone that is authentically sent by God. These are 2 questions that we must answer.

DAY 9

JOHN 14 Departing Words

Jesus is breaking some news to His closest friends: He will soon lose His life and depart the earth. Obviously, this news troubled the disciples. So Jesus has two messages of comfort.

First, He assures His friends and us that thought He was entering heaven, He would be preparing a place for us to meet again. In other words, this earthly life is not all there is. We have the hope of life after death.

The second word of comfort from Jesus was that while we remain on earth, God connects with us through His Spirit. So as Jesus was leaving, He promised that we do not live this life alone and we have something to look forward to after our human existence.

JOHN 17 Jesus Speaks with the Father

DAY 10

Jesus often retreated for prayer in private places. For this reason, we do not know the content of these prayers. There are, however, a few times where we get to hear the words of Jesus' prayers and John 17 begins the longest prayer of Christ that we have recorded.

There are three parts to the prayer, which gives us a great model for our own prayer life. First, Jesus begins by surrendering Himself and His will to the Father. Jesus displayed this constant submission in His ministry, therefore, it is no surprise that He begins His prayer with a relinquishing of His will and heart to the Father.

Second, He begins to pray for His brothers and sisters in the faith - another great illustration of how we are to lift one another in prayer. There are

so many things to pray for one another: agreement with each other, spiritual strength in the face of temptation, clear direction from God's Spirit, open doors to share our faith, time with God ... the list is endless.

And finally, Jesus prays for those who had not yet believed in Him, but would eventually follow Him in the future. We pray for the world around us, our family, our friends, our co-workers, our neighbors. We pray that they would connect with God and find the spiritual life that God has intended for them to experience.

A perfect model for prayer: surrender of self, prayer for fellow believers, and prayer for those who are searching for God.

DAY 11

MATTHEW 26 The Pressure Mounts

The end of Jesus' life is like a river that is nearing the waterfall. With great intensity, Jesus experience injustice and betrayal that leads to an indictment by religious leaders.

This chapter in Matthew records these events in great detail. Woven into this narrative is the heart-breaking betrayal of one of Jesus' closest friends, Peter. We are reminded of the frailty of our wills at time when pressure mounts. In contrast, Jesus remains steady in the face of extreme adversity.

MATTHEW 27 The Cross

DAY 12

We see the final stages in the trial of Jesus. The traitor, Judas, takes his own life because of overwhelming guilt. In contrast, Jesus gives His life for the guilt of others. As would be expected, the crucifixion of God's Son is surrounded by dramatic miracles that astound even those who didn't

believe in God. The darkening of the sky coupled with an earthquake resonate once again the connection that Jesus had with the Father, the Lord of all creation.

The chapter ends with the death and burial of Jesus, the end of the story for every major figure in history ... but not for Jesus.

DAY 13

JOHN 20 Alive!

Mary Magdalene was a woman once shunned by her community. But Jesus changed all that. Jesus was willing to break the barrier of hate and reach into her life. Because of this, she found mercy and meaning to life.

It is no surprise, then, that she was the first that sought Jesus at His grave. Overcome by Jesus' impact in her life, she was now overpowered with grief. But grief turned to unexpected joy when she discovered the mind-blowing miracle of Jesus' resurrection!

While Mary sought Jesus, it was Jesus that searched out His disciples. It is hard to imagine the shock that these close friends experienced when they saw Jesus. Perhaps we would relate best to Thomas. Seeing was believing for Thomas, but Jesus commends those who *exercise* the faith to believe even though they have not seen.

Luke 24 Jesus Opens the Words of God

DAY 14

This final chapter in Luke is a key to understanding something critical about the Bible and about Jesus. After the resurrection, Jesus caught up with a couple of the disciples who were walking down a road to a place called Emmaus. The disciples didn't recognize Jesus. Many have offered explanations – but for whatever reasons, they didn't realize they were

with Jesus.

But here's the key: Jesus took the Scriptures [the Old Testament] and opened it to them and showed them all the places in the Old Testament that spoke about Him. We often think that only the New Testament (starting with Matthew) speaks about Jesus. But Jesus was pointing out the pictures that had been painted in the word of God that had pointed to Him all along. Cryptic to some, but revealed clearly to others.

This point should not be skimmed over. The validity of any religious leader is critical to the authenticity of that particular faith. No other spiritual leader has so many God-guided authorizations than Jesus. For thousands of years, God provides pictures that portray the coming of Jesus and the details are astounding. From birth to death, Jesus is predicted repeatedly in the Old Testament. This verification started with our very first reading on Day 1 and we find it again in this last reading of the story of Jesus. Jesus is God's Son and the Father wanted to make sure we would know who Jesus was when He arrived.

DAY 15

ACTS 9 Encounter

One of the greatest enemies of the early followers of Jesus was a man named Saul (also called Paul). He pursued Christians and played a role in murdering them. But God had different plans for Saul.

The greatest persecutor of the church was transformed into the greatest follower of Jesus Christ. Acts 9 gives us the details of this amazing turn-around. God proves again to us that the spiritual life is more than intellectual agreement. Following Jesus begins with a spiritual birthing in us that ignites the connection with God. Saul's life wasn't changed because he transferred from one religion to the next. He had a real encounter with God.

We are introduced to a man named Barnabas. Because of Saul's past, all of the disciples were terrified of him and they were not quite convinced

that he was a changed man. But it was Barnabas that had the courage to give Paul a second chance – a great model for us in accepting the life-change of someone who gives his or her life to God.

The chapter ends with a powerful exhibition of God's power through Peter. Jesus was proving that His work was just beginning and would continue even though He was not physically present on earth.

ACTS 16

The Multiplying Works of God

DAY 16

The message of Jesus was beginning to spread in the world through Paul (also known as Saul; see Day 15). As you read the unfolding story of those who were giving their lives to Jesus Christ, take note of the work of the Spirit of God. This is the incredible distinction of Christianity that affirms the authenticity of our faith.

God draws us to Himself through the Spirit, not because we are logically convinced of a good argument for religion. The Spirit was not only leading people to surrender their lives to Christ, but He was also directing the steps of these disciples and pointing them in specific locations where they were to travel.

As with other disciples, Paul landed in prison because of his faith. But the events that transpire in the prison are key to understanding how God uses adverse circumstances. When Paul and his traveling companion Silas are stuck in a jail cell, notice what they begin to do. Instead of complaining that they had been treated unfairly, they begin to worship God through music. In verse 25, we are told that "the other prisoners were listening to them."

People often look at us in these circumstances to see how we are going to react. Sometimes, it's not about the actual circumstance. God may be trying to reach someone that is *close* to us so that our response will speak volumes about the reality of God. As a result of their witness in the jail, the jailer himself gave his life to Christ. God grows His kingdom through those who are faithful ... in good times and bad.

DAY 17

ACTS 17 Head Wind

When you read about Paul's background, he was a pretty smart guy with a lot of training. He was going to need it. In Acts 17, three locations are reached: Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens.

At each of these places, Paul encountered those who reasoned with their heads with logic and philosophy. But they were no match for Paul who would prove to be brilliant in logic.

Acts 17 is a textbook training ground for sharing our faith. We see the importance of securely knowing the word of God. This doesn't mean that we have to be Bible experts. But the more we take in, the more we can give out. Peter wrote about this:

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. 1 Peter 3:15

When Paul arrived at Athens, we learn another vital key to sharing our faith. He *related* to those to whom he spoke. The Greeks had a lot of statues of gods and idols in their culture. Instead of condemning them, Paul found a common denominator and noticed that they had an altar with the inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.

This was Paul's starting place! He told them about the God that was unknown to them. He quoted their poetry and used it as an entry point of logic. This is a key that cannot be overlooked.

Our relating to others in their own language is critical to creating common ground of respect so that we can earn the right to speak of God. This language can come in the form of music, art, family ... there are many words of commonality that we can share.

ACTS 26

Telling the Story

DAY 18

Through the course of time, Paul discovered that speaking about Jesus didn't make everybody happy. Some listened, others didn't, and still others protested. These protests against the disciples often turned into attacks and sometimes arrests that were founded on bogus accusations. So Paul eventually found himself in front of some high-ranking officials that had the political power to bring charges against him that could ultimately lead to his execution.

In Acts 26, we see Paul before a body of rulers, including two prominent men, Agrippa and Festus (no, not the one from the Adams Family!). In Acts 17, we saw that Paul used logic to communicate the message of Jesus. But here, Paul takes yet another approach. He simply tells his story. From beginning to end, Paul shares with these rulers his real-life experience with Jesus.

God reminds us here that all that have crossed the line of faith and accepted Christ into their life have a story. A "before Christ" version and an "after Christ" version. We don't have to be theologians. Jesus chose some very simple men to change the world. We simply tell what God has done in our lives and let Him take it from there.

DAY 19

ACTS 27

Wrecked

Paul went through the ranks of the courts and made the ultimate appeal to be heard by Caesar. Since this request was granted (Acts 25:12), Paul found himself on a ship full of prisoners headed for Rome. Acts 27 records in great detail the dramatic events that take place at sea. Rough storms came upon them and things turned from bad to worse. Through the

entire episode, Paul keeps his head and offers both practical and spiritual encouragement to those in charge. In the end, the ship wrecks and all are forced overboard. But in the face of this disaster, the one thing that is not wrecked is Paul's faith. We never hear Paul give up or complain or despair. This is a model to us when life feels like it is wrecked. A steady stream of encouragement and faith doesn't always deter the ship from wrecking, but it will keep us in a place where we can help others.

ACTS 28

Final Destination

DAY 20

After the shipwreck, Paul and his fellow prisoners found themselves on an island called Malta. Even after surviving the disaster on sea, Paul is back in the game of showing concern and care for other people. Wherever we are, whatever the circumstances, however we got there, the mission remains unchanged: *people*.

God has a way, an amazing way, of taking our circumstances and making opportunity for us to share with others about our connection with God. Paul could have been put in the most drastic of conditions. The Roman prisons were brutal. But Paul was put in an environment where he had an open door to communicate freely. This allowed him to continue to do the work without being hindered. People could come and go without any consequences.

So Paul did what we are all called to do: use whatever God gives us to serve and share the good news of Jesus.

There is another stark lesson to be learned in this chapter. Paul draws a line with his faith. He realized that not everyone is going to put his or her belief in Jesus. If we take this to heart, the pressure comes off. Our mission is to take the news of Christ to the world. We cannot make anyone believe, and therefore, we should not carry any sense of failure when people don't want God. The fact is that God is the One that can convince a person's heart. Paul was not deterred one bit when the message was rejected. He realized that his job (and our job) was to simply share our faith.

DAY 21

ROMANS 3 A Better Way

The book of Romans was written by Paul. In fact, he authored the next group of books that start with Romans all the way through Philemon. Especially in this chapter, Paul shows his craftsmanship of logic.

For the logic of this chapter to make sense, it would be helpful to take a glimpse at the Old Testament system of the Law. Paul was born and raised in the Jewish faith and was an expert in that religious system. He sets up his argument for faith by laying a foundation on which his Jewish background was built. Then he compares how putting our faith in Christ differs.

The Old Testament Law was very strict. By obeying an extensive collection of rules or laws, a person could attempt at obtaining a sense of “right-ness” or righteousness. This system was an effort to gain a good standing with God.

This system of achieving righteousness was strenuous and stressful because it was based on human effort. Now there is something better. Beginning in verse 21, Paul lays out this different approach to finding right-ness with God. We now find our acceptance from God based on our faith in Jesus, and not on our human effort of obeying a lot of rules. This, in a nutshell, is the good news. We can have a close relationship through our faith and dependency on Jesus’ righteousness and His sacrifice on the cross.

ROMANS 7 The Battle Within

DAY 22

None of us typically need to be convinced that we aren’t perfect. If you wake up in the morning and you set a goal to live perfectly that day, you will most likely fail before you have your morning blend of coffee! So most of us will connect with the struggle that is explained in Romans 7. All

of us are born with a nature within us that seems to draw us away from God. The Bible defines this as the sinful nature. As you read this complex chapter, you'll see that it is this nature that generates a battle within us.

There are two comforting levels in these words of Romans 7. First, it's good to know that the inner battle is common to all of us. It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that we are the only ones that struggle. The spiritual fight is universal.

Second, there is hope in the war. His name is Jesus. And through the power of the Spirit, He reminds us that He is with us and that He can help us to both fight and to find comfort in knowing that God is near.

DAY 23

ROMANS 8 The Answer

If Romans 7 poses the question of how we fight the spiritual battle, Romans 8 is the answer. God is intricately involved in our lives through the infusion of His Spirit. The closer we stay to God, the more we will be in tune with what His Spirit is doing in our lives. If we allow Him, God will take more and more control of our lives through the working of His Spirit. As mysterious as this seems, the experience of God's presence and power will be undeniable for those who make room in their life for God to move in.

When we begin to have an interchange with God, a natural hunger for deeper things takes place. We begin to think more about life and the life that will exist after this one on earth. The Spirit of God brings the hope of eternity up in our inner being and we have a totally different perspective on life. We realize that this life is not all there is and consequently, we begin to prioritize what's really important and lasting. This is the work of God in our lives.

The Spirit also helps us to know that we are attached to God with an inseparable love. There is not a person on the planet that doesn't need to know this! God loves us through our successes and failures and nothing can change this.

1 CORINTHIANS 13

Real Love - Really

DAY 24

There is a different measurement of achievement in following Christ. In some religions, your level of success is based on some severe obedience to a set of rules. In others, a higher level requires great hours of meditation and self-denial. And in some circles, an increased amount of knowledge will prove your spiritual credentials.

But Jesus did a pretty good job of defining spiritual success in one word: *love*. When asked which of all the commands of God was the most important, Jesus defined the pinnacle as loving God and loving people. But love can become a broad concept that is just warm and fuzzy ... with a lot of wiggle room. What does real love mean ... really? God gives us a practical manual on real love in 1 Corinthians 13. Concepts turn into real life circumstances in phrases like: love does not boast, or love is not easily angered.

If we are to aim for anything in this lifetime, love would be the bull's eye. In fact, the chapter opens by informing us that without love, nothing that we do really matters. If we can accomplish great things, acquire tremendous knowledge, exercise amazing miracles ... it's all zero without love. Real love is a lifelong effort.

DAY 25

1 CORINTHIANS 15

Undeniable

The resurrection or the rising from the dead of Jesus is a phenomenon that no other spiritual leader has ever authenticated. The words of 1 Corinthians 15 are incredibly important to what's next after this life on earth.

Within this chapter lies a critical affirmation to the reality of the miracle

of the resurrection that defies argument. When Paul writes about the rising of Jesus, he could have said that he saw Jesus alive, but no one else did. This would have weakened his testimony. Most judges, in fact, would have thrown out such a testimony. But Paul reveals to us that Jesus actually appeared after He rose from the dead to “more than 500” people! Paul could have said that even though this happened, these 500 people would have attested to the facts, but they were all dead and gone. Again, this would have destroyed any credibility of this witness. But the amazing thing is this: at the writing of Paul’s public letter, he makes a point of announcing that these 500 people were still alive to tell about it. This is amazing proof. Any of these 500 could have denied what Paul was saying. Having 2 or 3 witnesses in a court case can prove to be the winning ingredient. But how about more than 500 witnesses? *Undeniable.*

So what’s the big deal about the resurrection? It’s actually a huge deal. By Jesus coming back from the dead, all the guess work about what happens next is disintegrated. Jesus proved, not be religious theory, but by reality, that death is not the final word and the grave is not our final destination. And because of this, we are charged to live this life as if it is temporary. So the final verse makes more sense than ever: Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” (v. 58) Our work is not in vain because it will make a difference in the undeniable life to come.

GALATIANS 5

Keeping Free

DAY
26

Getting something for free is hard to believe. If someone that you’ve never met before walked up to you and wrote you a check for a million dollars, you probably would assume the check was a fake. And even if the check were authentic, wouldn’t you be looking for the catch?

Our relationship with God is that way. Jesus died on the cross and makes an offer to us: complete forgiveness, friendship with God, and an eternity spent in heaven. You might wonder if it’s for real. Or perhaps you want to know the catch. Because it is tough to imagine how we could be the recipients of such a gift, our human tendency is to want to *do* something

in order to make us feel like we deserved it. Sometimes, other people come up with rules that we should obey in order to feel good enough to be recipients. Religious folks are really good at coming up with rules.

This is what was happening to the Christians at a church in a place called Galatia. There were people that didn't quite get the free gift of God and consequently, they felt the need to impose some old religious rites on these Christians. In particular, the Jewish ritual of circumcision was the rule-de-jour. But it can really be anything that someone convinces us that we have to do in order to receive God's favor. Paul cuts to the chase and says it like it is: *Phooey!* These words say it all: "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." (v. 6)

The Spirit makes us free from all the religious mess that would take us back to being severely limited. The Spirit brings life and when He is at work in our lives, we become like trees that bear beautiful fruit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Are you free? *Stay free.*

DAY 27

EPHESIANS 2 That's Amazing

Amazing Grace, the old hymn that nearly everyone knows is the theme song of this chapter. And though it sounds cliché, the best way to describe God's grace is: *amazing*. The word *grace* means that we receive favor when we least deserved it. God tells us "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:6)

That's amazing.

Ephesians 2 reminds us of how fatal our life before Jesus really was. Even if some would claim that their life wasn't decadent, we are told that a life without Christ is an existence without life. That is why we read that Jesus "made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions." We are the recipients and not earners of this act of God. Because of this,

not one person could ever brag about being in heaven - it is a gift!

In the Old Testament, the nation of Israel was chosen and favored by God. But the New Testament, the new agreement, opens the gate to Gentiles (non-Jews) making the whole world is eligible to receive God's favor. "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ." (v. 13)

Now *that's* amazing.

Philippians 2 Stepping Down

DAY
28

Jesus taught some things that defy human logic. For example, He said that those who want to be the greatest must step down to the lowest position. That's not the normal teaching of our culture. Usually in order to get higher, you have to step up ... sometimes step on somebody!

If becoming a servant means to learn how to step down, then Jesus becomes the perfect model. In Philippians 2, we see 5 steps down that Jesus was willing to make. He 1) made Himself nothing 2) took on the form of a servant 3) was made in human likeness 4) humbled Himself 5) became obedient to death.

And the result of stepping down? He became great. "Therefore God exalted him to the highest place." (v. 9) And God challenges us to have this same attitude:

"Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus." (v. 4-5)

Paul ends this chapter with a very tender reference to his prodigies, Timothy and Epaphroditus. We are reminded that it *is* possible to follow the servant model of Jesus. Timothy and Epaphroditus were normal folks, just like you. But they became servants of Christ, willing to step down to servanthood, willing to step *down* to greatness.

DAY 29

GENESIS 1 In the Beginning

The remarkable events of creation are found in the first chapters of the book of Genesis. Of course, in our lifetime, these chapters have been scrutinized and debated. Evolution is becoming more palatable to much of the world because the first four words of the Bible are challenging for some to comprehend: "In the beginning, God."

Many people who have seemingly made up their mind in favor of evolution have actually studied the theory very little. But the ingenious design of creation is undeniably from a brilliant Creator. From the complexity of DNA to the profound array of human emotion, one can only stand in awe at the amount of detail and enormity of the design. To imagine the contrast between microcosms and galaxies that are light years in distance is absolutely mind-blowing.

On the sixth day of creation, God personalizes His acts of creation by forming man in His own image. In fact, God reveals from the beginning the mystery of the union of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit by saying "Let *us* make man in *our* image." In all of creation, with all of its beauty, humans were God's most prized priorities. And nothing has changed for thousands of years. We still are the gleam in His eye and the pursuit of our heart. What a great chapter for which we should be thankful - for the stunning beauty of creation and for the personal attention of a God who formed us with His own hands.

GENESIS 3 Choices

DAY 30

God created us with the freedom to make choices. Anything less wouldn't have been love, but control. Adam and Eve were not only given choices, but they were showered with incredible positive options within the

paradise of Eden. In fact, God had only asked them to abstain from one choice. When God asks us to take certain roads and avoid others, the request always has a reason.

But we know the story. Adam and Eve made the fatal choice. And they didn't make it all by themselves. They were prompted and lured by the enemy of God: Satan. We learn in this chapter that the enemy is real and his plan is to deceive and turn our hearts from God's desire for us. In the end, the choices that the devil offers are damaging to our spiritual life. God had told Adam and Eve that they would die if they were to eat forbidden food from the designated tree. And that day, they did die ... *spiritually*. They became disconnected from God.

And Adam did that day what we do when we've made bad choices. He hid from God. We are created with the instinct to know when we have taken a road that runs opposite from God. The choice that Adam and Eve made that day ignited consequences with which we live today: death, hardship, pain, and a long list of other ripples in the water of life.

But the story ends with mercy. God covers them with the skins of animals in a show of compassion. We discover that no matter what choices we've made, regardless of their severity, God is there in mercy. This is the God we serve - full of compassion and love that knows no end.

DAY 31

GENESIS 22 Worship

God shows us an important step in coming to Him in worship. Many times, we think of worshipping God as singing songs to Him or spending some time in prayer. But an important part of worship is being willing to give God the important and valuable things in our life.

Abraham was not always one that was willing to do things God's way. God had asked Abraham to leave his home country and leave his family behind. Abraham took his nephew Lot, which proved to be a mistake. God had promised Abraham a son who would be born from his wife,

Sarah. Abraham chose to sleep with his servant girl in order to have the son. Not a good thing.

God came through on His promise to Abraham and gave him a son by Sarah. The miracle was that Abraham was in his nineties! So his son, Isaac, became the most valuable thing in Abraham's life. God came to test Abraham and asked him for a very odd thing: take the boy to a mountain and sacrifice him. Abraham had come to the place in his life where he realized God knew what He was doing. When they arrived at the place where Abraham was going to accomplish God's wish, he announced that he and the boy Isaac were going to the mountaintop to *worship*. Abraham understood that becoming completely surrendered in God's hand was an act of worship.

When Abraham was at the moment of sacrificing his son, God stopped him and announced that He himself would provide the sacrifice. Although God showed Abraham an animal that would be used for the sacrifice, this promise was a promise far greater than the immediate moment. God was promising that He would provide *Himself* as the sacrifice which He ultimately did in the person of Jesus on a wooden cross. The remarkable thing about this promise is that this incident with Abraham occurred on mount Moriah, the place very near where Christ was ultimately given as the sacrifice for the world.

EXODUS 3

An Encounter with God

DAY
32

The nation of Israel had become slaves in the country of Egypt and God wanted to free them from this situation. Although God has the power to accomplish anything He wants, He often makes the choice of using humans to carry out His plan. So when it came to liberating Israel, God chose Moses as the person to spearhead the operation.

Not only does God use humans, but He often uses *unlikely* people. Moses was a fugitive on the run because he committed first degree murder. But the heart of God is always about the second chance (and much more than

that), so Moses became an equal opportunity candidate for the job. God appears to Moses in an unusual way: a bush that is burning with fire, but not consumed. God is showing that He is more powerful than anything that Moses was going to face; Moses was going to have to be convinced of this. To be sure, there would be some people who would jump at the opportunity to be a national leader, especially if the commission came from God Himself. But most of us would be overwhelmed and probably not feel up to the job. This was the case with Moses.

Moses questioned God's choice for this mammoth task. And so it goes with us. When it comes to the spiritual world, we don't always feel capable or competent or even worthy of being used by God. But the lesson that we learn in this conversation between Moses and God is that it is *God* who makes us capable and deserving and not ourselves. When Moses questions God about this, God clarifies His ability to work through us by revealing His power through this name: I AM. In these two little words, God reminds us that He is in absolute control of the universe, the world, and our own personal lives. God is able, even when we are not. God makes things possible even when they seem insurmountable. God working through us ... that's the key to our spiritual lives.

DAY 33

EXODUS 20 God's Top Ten

So much has been said about the 10 commandments and they have even become a topic for political banter surrounding the issue of making religious icons public. There is actually a truckload of commandments in the Old Testament, but these were God's Top Ten because they were broad enough to cover a lot of ground.

The word "commandment" conjures up images of strict, narrow religion. But this impression doesn't parallel God's good and free nature. So, a little insight into the reason for the commandments might be helpful to better express God's heart of the matter.

When parents build boundaries in the lives of their children, the motive

is love and protection. “Hold my hand when we’re crossing the street” may sound limiting to a child, but the reason is obvious to the parent. Teaching our kids to love each other is not driven by a cause to make them nicer (although that would be great), but when they learn to treat other people with respect, they will enjoy relationships and have deeper friendships in life.

And so it is with God’s commandments. They are born out of love and protection. When you read through these ten laws of God, read them through the eyes of love. When we take a Sabbath, a rest, we enjoy God and life. When we honor our parents, we make better parents ourselves and the respect we learn will be the respect we earn. When we don’t put other gods (things, people, self) in front of God, we enjoy a richness that is missed when God takes back seat.

When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment in the entire Old Testament, He gave a 2-part answer; and both parts had to do with love - love God, love others. So the Ten Commandments are not a fence to keep us in, but a set of guides that point us to a more fulfilled and satisfying life.

1 SAMUEL 17

Giant Slayer

DAY
34

We find another story of an unlikely hero. The nation of Israel was in a standoff against their archenemy, the Philistine army. To make things worse, the Philistines had a world-class heavyweight by the name of Goliath. Even the most seasoned soldiers in Israel were petrified of this oversized warrior.

So everyone was doing what we normally do when we are faced with something bigger than ourselves: *nothing*. We often shut down when we face opposition, especially if the hurdle seems taller than we are.

But a shepherd boy named David, the youngest of a large family of strong boys, stepped up to the plate to become the world’s most famous giant

slayer. It was as if David felt no fear. But the secret was found in David's strategy that was disclosed when he addressed Goliath:

"I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will hand you over to me."

Sometimes we strategize and agonize over solutions to the giants in our lives. But David teaches us the secret. We give the giants to God and let Him fight them for us and through us. It's funny that we would agree that God can begin and end the universe, but our problems seem out of the reach of His powers. God is able and He can hand over the giants in our lives with no problem at all.

David slayed Goliath that day in the power of God. But take note of what he used: a simple, little stone. God often uses the most simple things in our life to give us the win. Relax. God is in control.

DAY 35

2 SAMUEL 11 The Slip of a King

As David grew as a king, he grew in his relationship with God. Of all the people in the Bible, David was considered by God to be a man that pursued His heart more than any other. In all the history of the many kings of Israel, David is repeatedly regarded as the best of the best.

But great reputation, strong skill, and even a relationship with God don't remove from us the possibility of slipping into a place of error.

This is the story of a strong king in a weak moment. The story opens by telling us that it was the time of year when kings led their troops to battle. But David stayed behind. The key of the story is found right here. When we enter the spiritual world, there is a battle, a struggle that we all face. We are inundated with temptations that would endeavor to steal our walk with God. Enticement happened thousands of years ago in a garden with Adam and Eve and it still flows downstream to humanity today.

The key to the battle is not letting our guard down. This was David's first step to slipping. He should have been engaged in the battle, but he relaxed. Whether we

realize it or not, the time we spend with God in His word, in prayer, gathering with other God-followers - these interactions are keeping us in shape for the battle.

As they say, one thing leads to another and as the story unfolds, things went from really bad to really worse. Once David became entangled in a web of deception through adultery, he took further measures to cover his tracks. Instead of stopping the bleeding of his error, he went deeper to a dark place where a first degree murder plot became the solution - not a really great option.

The power of temptation is strong and we cannot face it alone. David found himself alone and that is often when temptation wins the game. God knows our private life and wants to help us overcome the battle. God gives us this promise: *No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.* 1 Corinthians 10:13

Most likely, David thought that he had masterfully covered his actions. But when we make these choices, there are always two that know the truth: God and us. Keep strong in the battle against temptation: stay close to God and to His people.

2 SAMUEL 12

The Truth and Nothing but the Truth

DAY
36

Seeing our own failures and weaknesses is sometimes more difficult for us than it is for others. We can justify our actions through a maze of reasoning. So at times, it takes someone to illuminate the things that we have buried beneath the surface.

Once David's plot, which started with adultery and ended with murder, had been accomplished, he kept his actions private. But nothing is ever hidden from God. Because David was not willing to face the music, God was forced to send a man named Nathan to extract the truth.

Once David came to understand the severity of his actions, he experienced the consequences. But through the pain of his mistakes, God ultimately showed compassion. David teaches us a critical lesson: tell the truth and nothing but the truth to God. And through our honesty, God will be loving and merciful. Although it may be challenging to be honest with people, we can always be honest with God.

DAY 37

PSALM 51 An Honest Conversation

Wouldn't it be great to eavesdrop on a prayer of someone like Moses or David? Well, we can. In fact, there are many prayers that are recorded in the Old and New Testament that were offered by the greatest to the smallest. There's no religious plastic with these prayers; they are real. All dimensions of the human experience are expressed in the prayers that are found in the Bible: happiness, sorrow, discontent, frustration, anger - you name it, it's all there.

Psalm 51 is a great example of an honest conversation with God. What we find are the words that David offered after being confronted by Nathan about his acts of adultery and murder. We can track David's emotion from the starting place of being completely broken for his sin. As the prayer progresses, the words turn to confident praise because of God's compassion.

Prayers like this teach us that we can be completely transparent before God. Whatever we need to say, God wants to hear it - He knows our heart anyway!

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:9

1 KINGS 18 Will the Real God Stand Up?

DAY 38

As history of the human race unfolds, it's no secret that we follow the pattern of past generations and invent gods - some religious, some material, but *all* worthless. These inventions of objects, whether imaginary or real, require God to reveal Himself to remind us that He is the only God of the universe, the world, and our own personal lives.

At one point in history, a god was invented and the name Baal was given to it. To the demise of many people, this god was worshipped even

though it didn't exist. It was time for God to intervene. Elijah was chosen as the one who would be used to prove that Baal was imaginary.

The setting was chosen where God would reveal Himself. 1 Kings 18 records this dramatic event where God proves that He is real, He is powerful, and He is the one and only God. A couple of notable things about God can be seen here.

First, God reminds us that He has power over creation's elements: water, fire, and earth. When God revealed Himself through Jesus, this power became quite evident with miracles like water being turned to wine, walking on water, and calming raging storms.

Then God teaches us through Elijah that it is simple faith and prayer that release God's power. No deep theology or words of eloquence here. We don't have to be complicated to reach God's heart. In fact, God *wants* to reveal Himself to us. He is often just waiting for us to ask, simply and authentically.

DAY 39

JOB 38 Mind-Blowing

The story of Job is about a man who has the bottom drop out of his life, losing everything he owned and even losing his own family. But what follows these tragic events is the real essence of the book.

Job has three friends that turn out to be not-so-great friends at all. After disaster strikes Job, these men surround Job and through a series of unconvincing monologues, they confidently declare that Job's misfortune is due to some secret sin in his life.

Even though Job begged to differ, these opponents became more persistent in their opinions.

Dogma is a dangerous thing. When we think we have the unquestionable answer, we ignore the possibility (as remote as we might think) that we

could be mistaken. This is especially true when we judge another person's internal life: their motives, their heart, their relationship with God.

When all the arguments are exhausted God shows up to straighten things out - He's really good at that. He asks a string of mind-blowing questions that no human could possibly answer. Checkmate. God's vast knowledge positions us in a place of humility and teaches us that it is okay to claim that we often don't have all the answers to life's toughest questions.

ISAIAH 40

Call In Advance

DAY 40

The book of Isaiah has been called the little Bible. The reason is because there are some unusual correlations to this single book and the entire Bible. For example, there are 66 chapters in Isaiah and 66 books in the Bible. The Old Testament has 39 books ending with Malachi, which makes the first book of the New Testament the 40th book of the Bible.

So it is quite interesting to see that Isaiah 40 opens with the exact words of John the Baptist, one of the first messages of the New Testament book of Matthew (the 40th book of the Bible).

This is a message of hope, that all things will become new when the promised Messiah arrives. On one hand, we are told that He will come in power (v. 10), and on the other hand, we see the tender side of Jesus in v. 11:

"He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart." Isn't that the perfect picture of God? Powerful, yet a heart that is tender.

And then the message of hope continues. A typical, logical progression in life is to be faced with a challenge and then finding a solution. But here in Isaiah 40, instead of starting with the challenge and concluding with the solution, the logic of the second half of this chapter is reversed.

First, the magnitude of who God is lays a foundation (the solution)

and what follows is a reminder of our challenge, our weakness and need for a matchless Creator.

There is no one like God. As clear and simple as this may seem, the challenge is to remember this when we are in our weakest moments. We have a God that is powerful beyond imagination, but more loving and caring than we could ever know.

A perfect combination and perfectly what we need.

DAY 41

DANIEL 6 Standing Up for God

When we read stories in the Bible of those who had great faith in the face of adversity, we know the outcome because we are reading history. But when you put yourself in the place of these God-followers, you have to imagine that they didn't know the conclusion ... they weren't reading history, they were *making* it.

Daniel was a man of great character. Character stands in the face of adversity, influence, and persuasion. Even though a law had been decreed that allowed no one to pray to anyone except the king, Daniel prayed anyway. The penalty for breaking the law was stiff: free overnight lodging in a lion's residence. It was certain death. Well, almost certain.

Daniel's loyalty to God was far too strong to be swayed by human regulation. There is no indication at all that Daniel expected anything from God. He walked into that terrifying situation simply knowing that even if he lost his life, he would be faithful in following God.

We may not be faced with something as dramatic as facing ravenous felines, but we do face situations that would call us to step off the line from God. It is in those moments that character will prove itself strong or weak. What happens *before* those moments in our consistency with God is the key to facing the unexpected.

ISAIAH 53

A Portrait of the Prince

DAY
42

One of the amazing things about the Old Testament is the portraits of the future that are clearly painted. There are many portions of the Bible that tell us what is going to happen before the event takes place. The Bible is often challenged for its authenticity and this element alone is one of the greatest confirmations of its credibility. For any human to predict the future with such accuracy is simply impossible.

Among the prediction foretelling of major events, vividly specific descriptions about Jesus flow through the Old Testament, hundreds of years before His arrival. If you stop and think from God's perspective for a moment, wouldn't you give some images of the one and only Savior who would impact the world? This would provide validity to the Messiah when He finally arrived and help us recognize the true Savior of the world.

Isaiah 53 is one of the most detailed of pre-portraits of Jesus. This chapter gives us a snapshot of His physical appearance. We see the brush strokes that create the image of those who rejected Him. But more than anything, we get a full picture of why Jesus came: *for us*. He "took up," and "carried," and "was pierced," and "crushed," and "oppressed," and "afflicted;" ... all for us.

This chapter is a harbor of refuge and freedom for all that can see the painting. This is the very key that makes Jesus the one and only Savior of the world:

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Who else can make this claim? Who else was predicted with such precision? Who else has sacrificed for the human race?

Just one. His name is Jesus.

Where to go from here ...

Now that you have spent some time on the highlights of the Bible, it would be a good idea to begin to read entire books. Here is a quick and easy overview of the Bible:

The Bible is made up of 66 individual books.

The first 39 cover the time before Jesus came to earth and are called the Old Testament.

The remaining 27 books cover the time Jesus walked on the earth and afterwards, including the future.

The first 4 books of the New Testament - Matthew, Mark, Luke & John - were written by 4 men who lived during the time that Jesus was on the earth.

John was Jesus' closest friend. If you want to know about a person, the best person to talk to is their closest friend. ***So begin with reading the book of John.***

You won't understand everything you read. That is okay. In fact, it's expected. When you have a question, write it down. We can connect you with someone who can talk about your questions with you.

Remember, each time you read, begin with prayer. Say something like, "Help me to see and understand what you want me to know today."

Along with your reading in the New Testament, you could read 1 chapter a day in the book of Proverbs and 1 chapter from the book of Psalms (both found in the Old Testament).

After this, the book of Acts and then Romans through 3 John would be a great next step.

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