

From a
GARDEN
to a
CITY

The story from
Genesis to Revelation

KOBUS GENIS

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DEDICATION

In memory of my father, Koos,
who instilled the love for the Bible in me. He suddenly died on December 31,
1999, but his legacy is still alive.

And to my mother, Malie, who is a living example of someone who
experiences the Bible as her Daily Guide.

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INTRODUCTION

When I was young, I often asked my father questions about the Bible. Many of my questions brought a smile to his face, as if his smile was an attempt to tell me something about God's greatness. Today, I still have questions. God's greatness astounds me.

Despite six years of theology studies at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa, reading the Bible had left me frustrated (probably because I was too young to appreciate theology). I had difficulty forming a complete picture of the Bible. I also did not always know how to apply the truths in the Bible to current issues, such as abortion and homosexuality.

I still had these frustrations when I joined the army for compulsory military training. Little did I know that while I was in the army, the way I understood and applied the Bible would change. This change took place as a fellow soldier and I polished our boots in the afternoons. Apart from the fact that he held a doctorate in theology, he also had the ability to channel my frustrations. So, while polishing our boots, he also polished my knowledge of theology. I'm grateful that to this day I can still depend on my friend for guidance.

I believe my frustrations were the impetus for my passion to help others understand the Bible and apply their understanding thereof. I am very grateful to my first congregation, the Port Natal congregation in Durban, South Africa, that gave me the freedom to equip members with this knowledge. For eight years, we engaged in studying the Bible on a weekly basis. I had the privilege to witness how the Holy Spirit (by means of the Word) addresses, frees and empowers people in their unique situations. It was there that I experienced how useful the Bible is on our journey through life.

According to Psalm 119:105, God's Word is a lamp to our feet and a light for our path. Our journey through life often leads us to unknown paths. We know that life can have rather sharp edges and that pain and sorrow are part of our existence. It is therefore not always easy to find our way in life. The Bible helps us to stay on course.

In reality, many people still believe in the gospel but do not *know* how to apply the message of the Bible on their life journey. So many people have told me that they started reading the Bible with great enthusiasm but that their enthusiasm did not last long because they found it difficult to understand. Some told me that they felt completely lost in the Bible. This is actually the last place you want to be lost—it is, after all, the Word of God!

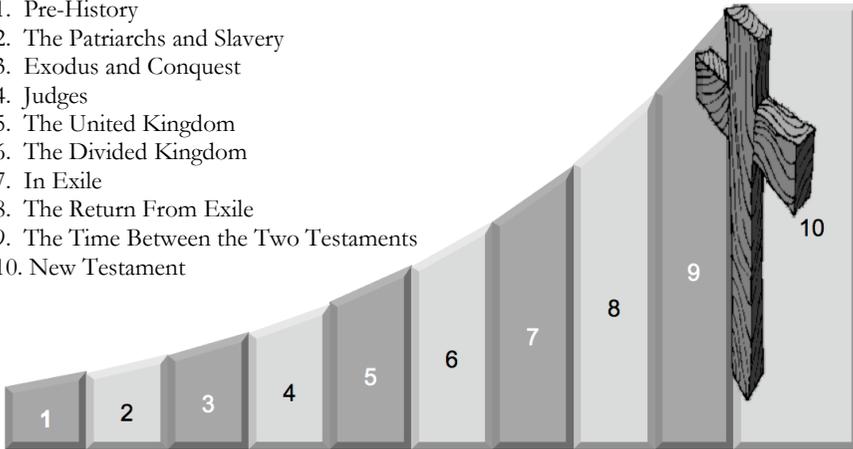
This devotional is structured in a way to help you use the Bible as your daily guide.

First, the daily readings indicate the form of writing used in a specific text. The Bible is written in *prose* form and in *poetic* form. It is important to determine the form of writing because you cannot read prose the same way you would read poetry.

Second, the way in which the journal is compiled will also help you to get a better picture of the Bible as a whole. The journal, with its 365 daily readings, starts at the beginning of Genesis and will accompany you through each book of the Bible right up to Revelation.

Note that the journal does not follow the sequence of books in the Old Testament. The books of the Old Testament are not divided according to a timeline but rather in main blocks such as the Law, Writings and Prophets. However, I have organized the books in such a way that they will follow a timeline. The journal’s contents is compiled according to the following schematic representation:

1. Pre-History
2. The Patriarchs and Slavery
3. Exodus and Conquest
4. Judges
5. The United Kingdom
6. The Divided Kingdom
7. In Exile
8. The Return From Exile
9. The Time Between the Two Testaments
10. New Testament



An ascending line represents the Old Testament because God’s revelation to us becomes clearer as we encounter the cross-referencing of events. The Old Testament starts in the Garden of Eden and leads us to Christ.

A horizontal line represents the New Testament because Jesus Christ, the culmination of God’s revelation has already come.

Third, every devotion starts with a relevant heading and ends with a relevant quote.

The Bible starts with a **Garden** in Genesis and ends with a **City** in Revelation. But there is one big difference—in Revelation, evil is destroyed forever. There will be no more tears or death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away (Revelation 21:4).

Writing this journal seemed like running a marathon. It was exciting, but at times also tiring because it took longer than I had anticipated. I hope you will rediscover the almighty God as your companion while reading this journal. God wants to join you on your journey through life. In this way, your own journey will become a story about God.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work is the result of a lifetime of learning from my family, friends, colleagues, counselors and teachers who invested their time, energy, wisdom and interest in my life. For this, I am forever grateful!

Here are just a few who made this work possible:

To my wife, Anne-Marie, and my three children, Cara-Mari, Elsjé and James, for all the sacrifices they have endured to see this book to completion. I am as relieved as you are!

To my first congregation, the Dutch Reformed Church Port Natal, located in beautiful Durban, South Africa. I will always be grateful for the opportunity you gave me to grow spiritually and to take risks (together) for the kingdom of God.

To the Presbyterian Churches in Wainwright and Chauvin in Alberta, Canada, for welcoming us to Canada with open hearts. You have helped me to add a Canadian touch to the book I started on African soil.

To my current congregation, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Calgary for allowing me to take risks and to grow together.

To my mentor, Prof Danie Veldsman, for his patience, integrity and wisdom.

To my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for his love, compassion and WORD.

Pre-History

1. PRE-HISTORY

(Genesis 1–11)

The events in Genesis 1–11 bear no date and are therefore known as pre-history. Five important events occur during this time:

1. Creation (Gen. 1–2)

Creation is God's announcement that He wants to accompany human beings on their life journey. The story of creation tells us who this God is who wants to join humankind on their journey through life. The rest of the Bible tells us how God wants to achieve this.

2. Adam and Eve (Gen. 1–2)

Human beings are the highlight of the creation. Created in the image of God, they have the position of power to reign over creation.

3. Cain and Abel (Gen. 4)

The tragedy is that due to their disobedience, they disappoint God. In the Bible, the dark side of human nature is revealed at an early stage. Cain murders his brother Abel.

4. Noah and the Flood (Gen. 6:5–18)

God regrets creating human beings (Gen. 6:6) and decides to use water to destroy them. God shows mercy by saving Noah and his family. After the flood, God makes a promise to never again repeat this event. The rainbow is proof of His promise. Yes, God is with us all the time.

5. The Tower of Babel (Gen. 11)

Human beings once again disobey God. They decide to make a name for themselves by building the Tower of Babel. They do not proclaim the image of God throughout the world but prefer to congregate near the tower. God ruins their plans by creating confusion in their languages. It is nevertheless clear that the majority is unwilling to follow God.

The first 11 chapters of Genesis describe how human beings miss the mark. The rest of the Bible tells us how God accompanies human beings on their journey through life in order to create a community of believers—a family of faith!

From a Garden to a City

January 1

You Could Not Have Wished for a Better Start!

The word “beginning” is a wonderful word because it contains elements of expectation, optimism and excitement. Think of a new day dawning, the first cry of a newborn baby, the opening chords of a music concert—or the beginning of a journey along the biblical paths. It is striking to note that the very first sentence in the Bible contains this word. It is here where our journey begins: the very first sentence in the Bible.

Genesis 1 (Prose: History) The Beginning

¹ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

² Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. (NIV)

The first sentence in the Bible is an announcement that proclaims God is the creator of all. Everything begins with God! God has no equal. He is the creator of all. However, we must remember that the universe did not always have its present order. It was without life. The earth was still uninhabitable, desolate and empty. The mass of water that would give rise to everything was wrapped in darkness. Uninhabitable and dark depths represent forces that frighten human beings and leave them feeling a sense of helplessness. Likewise, you might be starting this journey with the same feeling of helplessness—perhaps because of a child who has lost the way, a state of depression you are experiencing or even your deteriorating health. Helplessness about life can make you wonder if anyone is ever in control. You want to ask “where is God?” or even “is God truly God?”

Take comfort from the second part of Genesis 1:2: “The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” Imagine a bird hovering graciously, but secretly, over the chaos (mass of water), ready to intervene. This symbolizes God’s mysterious presence, which goes hand in hand with His creative power. It is this mysterious power that could equip a stutterer like Moses to lead his people, turn a defenseless widow like Naomi into a joyous grandmother, stop Saul in his tracks, or enable Jesus to rise from the dead.

On this journey, you will discover how God’s Spirit is still functioning. If you could only learn to recognize this! In short, this journey begins with God. You could not have wished for a better start!

**“Only God can turn a Mess into a Message, a Test into a Testimony,
a Trial into a Triumph, a Victim into a Victory!”**

Author Unknown

Pre-History

January 2

Does Genesis 1 Have a Message for Us?

The story of creation has given rise to much debate, but the question stands: Does Genesis 1 have a message for us? Let's take a look.

The schematic representation below shows that the story of the creation contains prose as well as poetic elements. It is a story containing repetition (a-e), which is characteristic of poetry. The schematic representation further shows that the first three days parallels the last three days:

God's Actions		God's Actions	
Day 1	Light and Time	Day 4	Sun, Moon and Stars
	a) And God said (3)		a) And God said (14)
	b) "Let there be light," (3)		b) Let there be lights (14)
	c) and there was light (3)		c) and it was so (15)
	d) God saw...was good (4)		d) and God saw...good (18)
	e) evening...morning day (5)		e) evening...morning (19)
	(NIV)		(NIV)
Day 2	Sky (Water above) Sea (Water under)	Day 5	Birds (sky) Fish (sea)
Day 3	Land and Plants	Day 6	Animals and Man

During the first three days, God thus tames the forces that struck fear into people in antiquity: darkness and barrenness.

During the last three days, God completes the cosmos in the same sequence as the first three days: the heavenly bodies (sun, moon and stars) to drive away the darkness; the birds to fill the air and the fishes to fill the seas; animals and human beings to live from its abundance. On the seventh day, God rests. This starts the cycle of work and rest.

The story of creation, which develops so wonderfully parallel, tells us *that* God created in an orderly fashion. The Bible does not tell us exactly *how* this came about—this is the concern of the natural sciences, which try to discover the secrets of creation. With the story of creation, God sets the table for *relationships* between God and human beings, between human beings themselves, and between human beings and creation. Shall we join God at the table?

“Treasure your relationships, not your possessions.”

Anthony J. D'Angelo

From a Garden to a City

January 3 [Boundaries]

The well-known story told in Genesis 3 illustrates something we need to respect each and every day.

Genesis 3: 1-24 (Prose: Narrative) Human Disobedience

Tension: The serpent tempts Adam and Eve (verses 1-5)

¹Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'' (NIV)

Release of tension: Adam and Eve sin (verses 6-21)

Result: Adam and Eve leave Eden (verses 22-24)

We all want to experience freedom. The reality is that your freedom stops where someone else's freedom starts. That is why houses have doorbells and countries have boundaries. People need to ask permission to enter your free space. Freedom entails boundaries that need to be respected.

Adam and Eve were not allowed to eat from the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden. The tree is a symbol of God's presence and therefore indicates that the garden belongs to Him. The tree therefore sets a boundary between God and human beings. We need to respect those boundaries. By choosing to respect the boundaries we are expressing our love and respect to God. Unfortunately Adam and Eve did not respect those boundaries by eating from the forbidden fruit. They realize that and hide from God. Fortunately God does not turn His back on them but calls to them: "Where are you?" (verse 9)

No matter what you have done, God will still be looking for you to show you how much He loves you.

“A lack of boundaries invites a lack of respect.”

Author Unknown

January 4
Can God Change His Plans?

We easily change our plans to suit ourselves. But can God also change His plans?

Genesis 6: 1-8 (Prose: Narrative) Human Wickedness

Tension: God is grieved

⁵ The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.

⁶ The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. (NIV)

Release of tension: God makes a decision (verse 7)

⁷ So the LORD said, 'I will wipe mankind, whom I have created from the face of the earth – men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds in the air – for I am grieved that I have made them.'

Result: God's grace triumphs (verse 8)

Shortly after God created everything good, the Bible tells us of humankind's failure - Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit and Cain killed his brother, Abel. Humankind's sins cause God tremendous pain because God loves them. The word "grieved" in this passage literally means that His heart was filled with pain. The same Hebrew word for "grief" is used in Genesis 3:16 to describe the pain women have to endure during childbirth and in Genesis 3:17 to describe men's toil to earn a living. By deliberately using the same word, the Bible says something remarkable: Our pain has spilled over to God. God is therefore not detached from what happens to us.

Because God is disappointed, God plans to wipe out humankind and even the animals from the face of the earth. But then something impressive happens, as the word "but" in verse 8 indicates: God changes his mind. God's love for humans is always stronger than His wrath. He is not a harsh, cold and clinical despot but a God who cares and understands. That is why He is prepared to give humankind another chance. Isn't that comforting to know – especially when we mess up?

“The will of God will never take you to where the grace of God will not protect you.”

Author unknown

From a Garden to a City

January 5

Ambition Can Be Dangerous!

“Live your dream!” “If you can dream it, you can achieve it!” “Reach for the stars!” Ambitious people are inspired by utterances such as these. Ambition is a good thing, but it can be dangerous. The well-known story of the Tower of Babel illustrates the danger of ambition.

Genesis 11: 1-9 (Prose: Narrative) The Tower of Babylon

Tension: Building the Tower of Babel

⁴ Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.’ (NIV)

Release of tension: God causes confusion (verses 5-7)

Result: The people are scattered (verses 8-9)

In the past, people believed that the gods lived on the mountain tops. Because Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) did not have high mountains, people built ziggurats to perform this function. Ziggurats, which were common in Mesopotamia were built in the form of stairways that decreased in size from the bottom to the top of the structure. The base of a ziggurat could be about 300 square feet and have a height of about 300 feet. The room at the top was used for religious practices. It served as the meeting place between heaven and earth—between the gods and human beings.

The story of the Tower of Babel was most probably told with reference to the ziggurats. The purpose of the Tower of Babel was for the people to “make a name” for themselves by creating a tower “that reaches to the heavens” (v. 4). They were very ambitious. There is nothing wrong with ambition. Unfortunately they used their ambition to compete with God and to exclude God.

Ambition should always take God into account, for this will prevent us from becoming arrogant and trampling on others. Arrogant people always think they are better than other people. Humble people are easily liked, very approachable and easy to get along with. Be humble and thank God for your accomplishments!

“...the image of the Lord had been replaced by a mirror.”

Jorge Luis Borges

The Patriarchs and Slavery

2. THE PERIOD OF THE PATRIARCHS AND SLAVERY

(±2000 – ± 1250 BC)

(Genesis 12–50)

God is grieved because He created human beings (Gen 6:6). Nevertheless, He wants to accompany them on their journey. The means by which He chooses to do this is to single out one man and his family and turn them into a nation that will have a very special relationship with Him. God wants to reveal Himself to them and they, in turn (as the bearers of His image), have to reveal Him to others. God promises Abraham land and offspring. He forms the new community of believers in such a way that it does not happen naturally but through God's direct intervention.

God does this in two ways. **First**, He chooses an old sterile woman (Abraham's wife, Sarah) as the mother of the community of believers. **Second**, He calls someone from the heathens to be the father of the new community. By doing this, God wants us to realize that the community of believers is not the result of human thought and effort. It is the work of God who wants to be reunited with us.

Abraham was the first father of the community. He and his descendants (such as Isaac and Jacob) are known as the patriarchs. "Patriarchs" is a Hebrew term that means "first father" or "ruling father." Joseph is another main figure. He was the favorite son of his father, Jacob. Genesis ends when Joseph and his family settle in Egypt, where they live for 430 years. During this time, they multiply in numbers and become slaves.

In these chapters in Genesis, we see the wondrous ways God goes about establishing a new community of faith.

From A Garden To A City

January 6

What Do We Do When Life Is a Dead End?

We often encounter situations in our lives when we feel trapped. These are times when it seems as if life has reached a dead end and there is no way forward. This episode might help us see the light!

Genesis 22: 1-19 (Prose: Narrative) God Commands Abraham to Offer Isaac

Tension: Abraham must offer his son (verses 1-11)

Release of tension: The Lord provides a lamb (verses 12-15)

¹³ Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. (NIV)

Result: The Lord promises blessing (verses 16-19)

The episode in which Abraham was to sacrifice Isaac must have made Abraham doubt God's logic. How could God ask him to do such a thing? Had not God promised him land and numerous descendants? And now he was to sacrifice his only son. Yet despite his inability to understand, Abraham obeys God. In the end, Abraham sacrifices a ram, not Isaac. Was it a coincidence that the ram was there? No, Abraham sees this as a sign that God provides. He calls the place "the Lord will provide." What seemed like a dead end to Abraham was actually a new beginning.

We often explain things that happen to us as coincidence. Yet this may be God's way of providing in our lives. We do not have to understand everything, but we should realize that God wants to provide everything for us.

Right now, things may be happening in your life that just do not make sense. You may be asking questions such as, "Why is this happening to me?" or "How will I ever escape this?" Wrestling with God in situations in which there seems to be no way out will give you the opportunity to be like Abraham and say, "The Lord will provide."

**"The pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity.
The optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty."**

Winston Churchill

The Patriarchs and Slavery

January 7

This Has a Detrimental Effect On Relationship!

Dreams play a crucial role in the story of Joseph. They also bring about movement in the story. We will therefore focus on the following dreams during the next few days:

- Genesis 37: Joseph's dreams in his home—which lead to humiliation
- Genesis 40: The cupbearer's and the baker's dreams in prison—which draw attention to Joseph
- Genesis 41: Pharaoh's dreams in the palace—which leads to Joseph's promotion

Joseph's first dream reveals a characteristic of him that causes him to fall into disfavor with his family.

Genesis 37: 1-11 (Prose: Narrative) Joseph and His Brothers

Tension: Joseph gossips (verses 1-3)

Release of tension: Joseph's brothers take a dislike to him (verses 4-10)

⁵ Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. (NIV)

Result: Tension in the family (verse 11)

Joseph's two dreams have a detrimental effect on his relationship with his brothers. The meaning of the dreams is very clear: Joseph will become a ruler and his father and brothers will be subservient to him. Joseph's arrogance makes his brothers blood boil. This is aggravated by the fact that he is their father's favorite child.

The way Joseph reports the dreams shows that he believes they will occur and that he is looking forward to their fulfillment. In those days, dreams were seen as revelations, and Joseph's dreams posed a threat to his brothers. This is why, in the next episode, they throw him into a cistern and sell him as a slave. This arrogant pet son learns the hard way that arrogance brings you into disrepute.

We have to listen earnestly to what is said in Proverbs 14:3: "A fool's talk brings a rod to his back, but the lips of the wise protect them" (NIV). The first dream leads to Joseph being thrown into a dry well and taken as a slave to Egypt.

"There's a thin line between Confidence and Arrogance... Its called Humility. Confidence smiles. Arrogance smirks."

Author Unknown

January 8

Sometimes It's Hard to Trust Others!

Experience teaches us not to trust everybody. Some people even say that it is impossible to trust anyone. What should we do? This next episode in Joseph's life, which takes place between the first and second dreams, will help us to understand *trust* better.

Genesis 39: 1-23 (Prose: Narrative) Joseph and Potiphar's Wife

Tension: Potiphar's wife tries to seduce Joseph (verses 1-11)

⁶So he left in Joseph's care everything he had; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate.

Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, ⁷ and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, 'Come to bed with me!' (NIV)

Release of tension: Joseph flees and lands in prison (verses 12-19)

Result: Joseph achieves success while in prison (verses 20-23)

Potiphar sees that he can trust Joseph, so he leaves his whole household in Joseph's care—except for his food (v. 6). "His food" is a euphemism to describe sexual intercourse with his wife. Potiphar has barely left the scene when his wife starts flirting with Joseph. After all, Joseph is muscular and well built. Potiphar's wife wants to hand her husband's "food" to Joseph on a platter.

Joseph does not taste it, but because of a lie Potiphar's wife tells, he ends up in prison. In terms of the Law, Joseph should have been executed, but Potiphar has him locked up instead. Perhaps he did not find his wife's story convincing enough. Even in jail, Joseph radiates such self-confidence that the warden puts him in charge of everything. Not many people have Joseph's self-confidence.

Sometimes it's hard to trust others! However, without trust, relationships cannot be formed—and a life without relationships deprives us of one of our biggest needs: intimacy. This story does not ask us to consider whether we can trust people, but rather if we be trusted. May the Lord help us to all be like Joseph!

"I know God will not give me anything I can't handle. I just wish He didn't trust me so much."

Mother Teresa

The Patriarchs and Slavery

January 9

Will We Escape from this Dark Hole?

You might be down in the dumps because you could not cope with a difficult situation and now feel trapped in a dark hole of despair. If so, Joseph's second dream might set your life on track. This episode deals with the king's confidants (the cupbearer and the baker) who end up in prison with Joseph.

Genesis 40: 6-23 (Prose: Narrative) Joseph Interprets the Prisoners' Dreams

Tension: Joseph must interpret dreams (verses 6-11)

Release of tension: Joseph interprets the dreams (verses 12-13)

¹² "This is what it means," Joseph said to him. "The three branches are three days. ¹³ Within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your position and you will put Pharaoh's cup in his hand, just as you used to do when you were his cupbearer.

Result: Joseph asks a favor (verses 14-23)

¹⁴ But when all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison. (NIV)

When Joseph interprets the cupbearer's dream, we learn something about Joseph's own emotions (vv. 14-15). Although he did nothing to deserve it, he was made a slave and prisoner for 13 years. He asks the cupbearer to think of him and to ensure that he is released from prison. The cupbearer is sympathetic towards Joseph when he hears how Joseph was abducted and thrown into the dungeon (prison) despite his innocence. The Hebrew word for "well" (cistern) also means dungeon (v. 15). This is a reference to his brothers who threw him into a dry well (cistern). Joseph's distress call of "remember me" expresses many people's call for help.

It is sad that the cupbearer forgets about Joseph (v. 23). Fortunately, the story does not end there. This dream paves the way for Joseph's release. In the same way, your own experience of distress in a dark hole may prove to be the way out of your difficulties.

"An arrow can only be shot by pulling it backward. So when life is dragging you back with difficulties, it means that it's going to launch you into something great."

Author Unknown

January 10

Where Should We Look for God?

God sometimes seems absent in our lives. Where should we look for Him? The story of Joseph's third dream tells us where to look for God.

Genesis 41: 8-41 (Prose: Narrative) Joseph Interprets the King's Dreams

Tension: Pharaoh is anxious (verses 8-13)

⁸ In the morning his mind was troubled, so he sent for all the magicians and wise men of Egypt. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but no one could interpret them for him.

Release of tension: Joseph is summoned from prison (verses 14-40)

¹⁴ So Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was quickly brought from the dungeon. When he had shaved and changed his clothes, he came before Pharaoh. ¹⁵ Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.' ¹⁶ 'I cannot do it,' Joseph replied to Pharaoh, 'but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.'

Result: Joseph is honored (verse 41)

⁴¹ So Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt.' (NIV)

Joseph's first dream caused him to be thrown into a dry well. Here, following the last dream in the story about Joseph, he is brought to the mighty pharaoh's palace and becomes second in command in the whole land of Egypt. Joseph progresses from a prison to a palace—without pertinent mention of God (except in Genesis 45:5-8 and 50:19-20).

Was God absent? Certainly not! The Bible shows us that God often achieves His goal with the world inconspicuously by using ordinary people and ordinary events. We should not always look for God in the sensational.

The story of Joseph also shows us that we should not to look for God in pleasant things alone. Joseph's story proclaims that God is not hindered by people's shortcomings and wrongdoings. It is comforting to know that despite all society's ills and all our "dry well" experiences, God constantly works in our lives.

"In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity."

Albert Einstein

Exodus and Conquest

3. FROM THE EXODUS TO THE CONQUEST OF THE PROMISED LAND

(±1250 – 1220 BC)

(Exodus to Joshua)

Genesis ends with Joseph and his family in Egypt. Exodus picks up the story 430 years later with Moses. As time went by, the Egyptians forgot how Joseph had saved them from starvation. During these 430 years, the Israelites multiplied in great numbers, even though the pharaoh forced them to do slave labor in the hope of keeping their numbers in check. The following are highlights from this time:

Moses leads his people from Egypt - the 10 plagues

The Passover (Jewish Easter) - celebrating the exodus from Egypt

The people wander in the desert

- God makes a covenant with the people at Mount Sinai
- A constitution is formed for God's new people
- God gave Moses the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20)
- The sad episode of the golden calf
- The people are led by fire and cloud columns
- The Tabernacle is built
- God sends provision of manna and quails

Offerings - The implementation of the offering system to help worshipers to approach God. Leviticus describes this in detail because the Levites are concerned with offerings.

Invasion of Canaan, the Promised Land

We can now see that God is starting to fulfill His promises made to Abraham.

January 11

Can I trust God with my problems?

We live in a world with so much hurt and distress that one wonders if God can still provide a way out. This episode in the book of Exodus helps us to better understand the workings of God in our lives.

Exodus 2: 1-10 (Prose: Narrative) The Birth of Moses

Tension: Moses is hidden (verses 1-8)

Release of tension: Moses' life is saved (verse 9)

⁹ Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you.' So the woman took the baby and nursed him. (NIV)

Result: Moses becomes the pharaoh's "grandchild" (verse 10)

The pharaohs were viewed as gods, and were therefore very mighty. After their 400-year stay in Egypt, the Israelites multiplied to such an extent that Pharaoh regards them as a threat. He orders that when Hebrew boys are born, they are thrown into the Nile. However, in this episode we see that women, who at that time had no real power, jeopardize the mighty Pharaoh's plans.

This starts with Moses' mother, who circumvents Pharaoh's decree by hiding her son in the reeds. Pharaoh's own daughter then comes to Moses' rescue and, by doing so, foils her father's plans. However, she does not want to take responsibility for his upbringing, so, without realizing it, she returns him to his own mother, who feeds him and takes care of him. The best part is that the princess pays Moses' mother to do this! God uses socially disempowered women to undermine the mighty Pharaoh's plans. Unbelievable!

Through this story, we learn that God can provide a way out in surprising and unpredictable ways. Yet human beings are not passive in all this. In this particular story, Moses' mother wove a papyrus basket and hid Moses in it while his sister looked out for him. God works in our lives so that we can take responsibility. For instance, it does not help to pray for a safe neighborhood without taking the responsibility to form a neighborhood watch or work closely with the local police. God can and will use our involvement to provide a way out.

“God provides the wind, but man must raise the sails.”

Saint Augustine

Exodus and Conquest

January 12

Why Do We Have to Suffer So Much?

People do not see much sense in suffering and, therefore, do as much as possible to avoid it. In this next episode, we find a refreshing perspective on suffering.

Exodus 16: 1-16 (Prose: Narrative) The Manna and the Quails

Tension: The Israelites in the desert complain to Moses (verses 1-3)

² In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron.

³ The Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.' (NIV)

Release of tension: Bread from heaven (verses 4-14)

Result: Every family has enough (verses 15-16)

If you page through the Bible, you will find that deserts are always part of a life with God. John the Baptist and Jesus literally spent time in the desert. Many others experienced deserts in a figurative sense as part of their lives. This happened to such an extent that the “desert” came to symbolize suffering.

The Israelites suffered greatly in the desert. Their desert experience was aggravated by the shortage of water and food. The desert was also extremely hot and filled with uncertainties. However, in this story we see that the Bible paints a different picture of the desert. For the Israelites, the desert was not only a place of starvation but also a place of manna and quails. The desert was especially the place where human beings could become aware of their vulnerability and dependence on others, on nature, on their circumstances and on the mercy of God.

In the desert, God frees Israel a second time. At the Sea of Reeds, God had freed them *externally*—in other words, from the danger of Egypt that threatened them. Now, God frees them *internally* from selfishness and worry and enables them to trust Him because they had experienced His care. In our busy lives, suffering forces us to pause. It might be that the Lord uses our own suffering to free us internally to look at ourselves, our fellow human beings and at God anew.

“Christianity has always insisted that the cross we bear always precedes the crown we wear.”

Martin Luther King, Jr

From A Garden To A City

January 13 **Can God Back Out?**

When entering into business contracts or work contracts—and yes, even marriage contracts—people normally ensure that they do not pin themselves down completely. They do this by including clauses to protect them and to keep their options open. The question is, Has God kept His options open where we are concerned? If He has, it means that He can still back out. Will He?

Exodus 19: 1-25 (Prose: Narrative) The Israelites at Mount Sinai

Tension: Will Israel be obedient? (verses 1-6)

⁵ Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶ you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.’ (NIV)

Release of tension: Israel is willing to listen (verses 7-25)

Result: Guidelines for the covenant (Exodus 20)

These six chapters in Exodus (19–24) tell the story of how God enters into a covenant with the Israelites. A covenant is an agreement into which the parties concerned enter to ensure that a shaky relationship becomes more steadfast and permanent. In this episode, we find that God is prepared to commit Himself fully to Israel. His aim is to regain sinful human beings by means of Israel. The Lord expects a commitment by Israel to obey Him. As a guideline and policy for the commitment (the covenant), He gives Moses the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20).

Why would the Lord expect this kind of commitment from His people? According to Exodus 19:5-6, He does this because He wants to establish a group (a nation) for Himself.

Back then, this was the Lord’s long-term plan with Israel. Today, the Church serves that same purpose. God did not keep His options open. God is fully committed to us. The cross is God’s way to say that He will never back out! God loves you too much!

“Think what a local church would look like if its people were radically devoted to Christ, irrevocably committed to each other, and relentlessly dedicated to reaching those outside God’s family with the gospel of Christ.”

Bill Hybels

Exodus and Conquest

January 14

Religion Is Not Only About God!

We tend to think of God when we hear the word “religion.” This is quite understandable, as the connection between God and this word have become inseparable. The following section, however, shows us that religion has another side to it as well.

Exodus 20 (Prose: Law) The Ten Commandments

¹² ‘Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³ You shall not murder.

¹⁴ You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵ You shall not steal.

¹⁶ You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

¹⁷ You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.’ (NIV)

From this passage, we see that religion does not only concern God but also people. This section is the well-known second tablet of the Ten Commandments, which deals with the relationship between human beings. If we read further than Exodus 20, we see that religion concerns even more than God and human beings—it involves the entire scope of life on earth. For example, Exodus 21 deals with good social order and with injuries and damages. Exodus 22 deals with theft, wildfires and goods left in the care of others. Religion, therefore, not only concerns elevated matters but also earthly matters.

John 3:16, perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible, proclaims, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son” (NIV). Our salvation in Christ is the result of the Lord’s love and earnestness with this world. After all, He is the One who created it. The famous Dutch theologian, A.A. van Ruler, makes a striking observation by saying that the Lord did not create us in the Old Testament so that He could turn us into Christians in the New Testament. According to van Ruler, the Lord makes Christians of us in the New Testament so that we can become human beings again—human beings in the way God intended us to be.

Martin Luther, the famous reformer, also understood religion in this way. He said that the Lord called him twice: the first time from the world to a monastery and the second time from the monastery back to the world.

“Preach the gospel at all times, and when necessary use words.”

Saint Francis of Assisi

January 15

Where Is the Best Place to Hide from God?

By nature, we tend not to obey demands. We like to hide from God and from the demands He sets for our lives. But where is the best place to hide from God?

Exodus 32: 1-5 (Prose: Narrative) The Golden Calf

Tension: The people want another god (verses 1-2)

¹ When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, ‘Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.’ (NIV)

Release of tension: The people take action (verses 3-4)

Result: Festivities (verse 5)

As Moses is experiencing a spiritual high on top of the mountain in the presence of God, the people are experiencing a spiritual low at the foot of the mountain. Because Moses stayed away for such a long time, they begin to believe that Moses has failed them. So they decide to make a golden calf to lead them into the desert.

Some scholars are of the opinion that they wanted to create an image of God and had no intention to worship another God, but we will never know for sure. Regardless, this request to Aaron meant that the Israelites were breaking the contract (covenant) that was still fresh in their memory. This is shocking!

In the second commandment (Exod. 20:4), God prohibited making images of Him. An image can never capture God’s greatness, because an image can be manipulated in any way—it can be moved anywhere, and can even be discarded. The Israelites wanted to use the golden calf to manipulate God and worship Him on their own terms.

This is what makes religion so dangerous—it is often a subtle way to use the Lord to achieve our own objectives. It is not about the Lord’s demands of the covenant but rather about what we demand from God. This is why Karl Barth, the famous Swiss theologian, said that the Church is the best place to hide from God’s demands. The Church is exactly the place to be religious and to put our demands to the Lord. May God save us from this!

“We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another.”

Jonathan Swift

Exodus and Conquest

January 16

What Does God Look Like?

Moses is given the opportunity to ask the question we would probably all like to ask God: “What do You look like?” What did Moses see?

Exodus 33: 12-23 (Prose: Conversation) Moses and God’s Glory

¹² Moses said to the LORD, ‘You have been telling me, ‘Lead these people,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me.’

¹⁸ Then Moses said, ‘Now show me your glory.’ ²² When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. ²³ Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.’ (NIV)

In order to grasp Moses’ question and God’s answer, we need to understand the background to the conversation. This episode takes place in the desert immediately after the episode of the golden calf. The Lord is upset because the people forgot Him so soon, and so He decides to wipe them from the face of the earth (Exod. 32:10). However, when Moses pleads with God on behalf of the people, the Lord abandons His plan. God also grants Moses his wish to send an angel ahead of the people (32:34; 33:1-2), since He does not see His way clear to accompany them. Then, when it seems that Moses has been given everything he asked for, he says the following: “Now show me your glory” (v. 18).

Why would Moses ask this question? Scholars are of the opinion that by asking this question, Moses wanted to establish whether God had forgiven the people for creating the golden calf and whether He was still prepared to accompany them to the Promised Land. Moses knew that if God were to travel with them and was willing to reveal Himself, the people would be forgiven.

It is interesting to note that the Lord only gives Moses the opportunity to see His back. Why is this? By revealing His back, the Lord upheld His freedom and sovereignty. Without saying it explicitly, it is clear that the people are forgiven, because the covenant is restored in the following chapter. Moses has the opportunity to see God’s back. Moses wants to know whether the Lord will go *along* with them, but God decides that He will *lead*.

It is wonderful to see God’s back, because we can then know that we are following Him. It is more important to obediently follow the Lord than to know what He looks like.

“In the faces of men and women, I see God.”

Walt Whitman

January 17

Are There Limits to God's Forgiveness?

Will God always forgive us everything? One would like to answer yes to this question. This episode in Exodus, in which God makes a second covenant with the people, gives us more insight into the question.

Exodus 34: 1-10 (Prose: Conversation) The New Stone Tablets

⁶ And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, ⁷ maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; ¹⁰ Then the LORD said: 'I am making a covenant with you. Before all your people I will do wonders never before done in any nation in all the world.' (NIV)

Exodus 34:7 tells us that God forgives everything (wickedness, rebellion and sin). However, the word "yet" in verse 7 gives us a serious warning: "Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished." We should treat God's forgiveness respectfully and not take it for granted. His forgiveness is always a privilege that we should appreciate.

Forgiveness is always necessary in order to mend a broken relationship. This is why God forgave the people for making and worshipping the golden calf. Forgiveness is the bridge across the gulf that separates people. Therefore, forgiveness never operates in isolation but always leads to the mending of relationships.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are inseparable; the one cannot exist without the other. God will always forgive us for everything if our intentions are sincere in trying to restore our relationship with Him and our fellow human beings. One of the most liberating thoughts must be to know that God's forgiveness is boundless. Indeed, the Lord Himself told Moses, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness" (v. 6).

"Forgiveness is the fragrance that the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it."

Mark Twain

Exodus and Conquest

January 18

Does God Expect Too Much of Us?

People will sometimes make unreasonable demands on us. God also makes demands on human beings. Are God's demands unreasonable?

Leviticus 1: 1-3 (Prose: Conversation) Offerings to the Lord

² 'Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'When any of you brings an offering to the LORD, bring as your offering an animal from either the herd or the flock. ³ "if the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he is to offer a male without defect. He must present it at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting so that it will be acceptable to the LORD.' (NIV)

The offering system made it possible for the Israelites to restore their broken relationship with God. The system of offerings and the way in which animals were sacrificed might seem repulsive to us, but this was not the case in those days. This innocent animal would act as the person's substitute in the eyes of God. The animal's blood replaced that of the human being—in other words, its life pays for the person's life.

Fortunately, we no longer have to sacrifice animals to God, because the sacrificial death of Jesus restored the relationship between God and human beings once and for all.

When love is involved you experience what you do not as a sacrifice. In his book *Written In Blood*, Robert Coleman tells the story of a little boy whose sister needed a blood transfusion. She had a rare blood type which she shared with her little brother. The fact that he had recovered from the same disease two years earlier made the chances of success even greater. The doctor carefully explained all this to the little boy, pointing out that without the transfusion his sister would die. "Would you be brave and give your blood to your sister?" the doctor asked. Johnny hesitated. His lower lip began to tremble. Then he smiled and said, "Sure, for my sister." The two children were wheeled into the hospital room – Mary, pale and thin; Johnny, robust and healthy. He smiled at his sister, she watched as the blood travelled out of his body, down the clear plastic tube. Johnny's smile faded, and as he lay there feeling weak he looked up at the doctor and said, "Doctor, when do I die?" Johnny thought that giving his blood to his sister meant giving up his life. Yet because of his great love for her he was prepared to pay the price.

"You don't just have to die for the people you love, you need to live for them too."

Author Unknown

From A Garden To A City

January 19 **Can God Really Use Us?**

At times, we might feel that we are of no real use to God because we have so often failed Him and our fellow human beings. The following section in Leviticus will help us to see this differently.

Leviticus 8: 1-36 (Prose: Conversation) Ordination of priests

¹ The LORD said to Moses, ² ‘Bring Aaron and his sons, their garments, the anointing oil, the bull for the sin offering, the two rams and the basket containing bread made without yeast, ³ and gather the entire assembly at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.’

³⁰ Then Moses took some of the anointing oil and some of the blood from the altar and sprinkled them on Aaron and his garments and on his sons and their garments. So he consecrated Aaron and his garments and his sons and their garments. (NIV)

The ordination of Aaron as high priest and of his sons as priests marked a special day in Israel’s history. A high priest had to perform very important duties. He was responsible for the daily offerings and functions in the Tabernacle. He was also responsible for conducting specific duties at the festivals at Passover and Pentecost and the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). During the Day of Atonement, only the high priest could enter the Holy Place to bring about reconciliation on behalf of the people. Someone in this position had to act extremely responsibly.

One would think that God would appoint an exceptional person to this position. Instead, God appointed someone with a less favorable record—Aaron. Aaron was the one who had made the golden calf while Moses met with God on Mount Horeb (Exod. 32–34). Aaron’s sins drove God close to forsaking His people. Yet despite this incident, Aaron was ordained as high priest, and his sons were ordained as priests.

Aaron was not appointed because of his inherent qualities. Rather, he and his sons were empowered by means of the system of offerings when they were sanctified by the blood at the inauguration ceremony. The blood served as proof that their sins had been paid for. The appointment of Aaron and his sons therefore involved a ritual of offerings to sanctify them.

From this, we see that God does not choose people because of their qualities and accomplishments. Our cleansing by the blood of Christ also makes us suitable candidates for God to use.

“Use me, God. Show me how to take who I am, who I want to be, and what I can do, and use it for a purpose greater than myself.”

Martin Luther King Jr.

Exodus and Conquest

January 20

The Lord Is Not Your Buddy!

The Lord wants us to have a relationship with Him, but any relationship has boundaries that should be respected. This next section in Leviticus shows us that the Lord also sets boundaries in our relationship with Him.

Leviticus 10 (Prose: Narrative) The Death of Nadab and Abihu

Tension: A wrong offering

¹ Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, contrary to his command.

Release of tension: A devouring fire

² So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.

Result: We must show respect for God

³ Moses then said to Aaron, "This is what the LORD spoke of when he said: 'Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored.'" (NIV)

What was intended as a joyous day ends in the tragic death of Aaron's two sons. They did not take the prescriptions of the system of offerings seriously and had to pay for it with their lives. This may seem cruel to us, but it serves as a reminder that God should always be taken seriously.

When I was a young student, one of my friends would often interrupt a respected professor during lectures by asking him questions, some of which were quite irritating. Once when this professor was about to conclude one of his lectures, my friend confronted him with the following question: "Professor, if the Lord is my friend, can I walk around on campus and talk to Him and tell Him that there is nothing like a pair of pretty legs?"

A dead silence fell over the lecture room, because this young man had once again dared to frustrate the distinguished professor. The professor answered with a loving, yet stern, expression: "Young man, the Lord is your friend but not your buddy." These words put an end to my friend's efforts to frustrate the professor. The professor instilled respect in all of us, and his life reminded us that we have to show great respect toward God.

"A true love of God must begin with a delight in his holiness."

Jonathan Edwards

January 21
Ceremonies Can Be So Boring!

Not everybody likes formal gatherings with rigid instructions. The whole book of Leviticus is about instructions and ceremonies. Leviticus 16, in which all the instructions are given, is the main focus of the book. It describes the day on which the high priest enters the Most Holy Place to make reconciliation for all the people. Why would God want reconciliation (the restoration of peace) to consist of so many ceremonies?

Leviticus 16: 1-34 (Prose: Conversation) The Annual Reconciliation

³ “This is how Aaron is to enter the sanctuary area: with a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering.¹⁷ No one is to be in the Tent of Meeting from the time Aaron goes in to make atonement in the Most Holy Place until he comes out, having made atonement for himself, his household and the whole community of Israel.” (NIV)

The ceremonies and rituals might seem senseless and even repulsive to us, but in those days they were considered part of daily life. The ceremonies were relevant to the culture and living conditions of the people. With these instructions, God connected Himself to the people’s world. The Lord used these ceremonies to reveal something of Himself and of human beings. Let’s look at a few aspects of this important day:

1. The high priest had to follow all the instructions for the ceremony carefully. This made the Israelites aware of the fact that they had to depend on God for reconciliation.

2. Only the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place once a year on behalf of the people. This restriction showed the people that God was holy and that access to Him was limited.

3. The annual sacrificial system showed that a substitute had to be sacrificed for reconciliation to take place.

4. The high priest had to sacrifice an animal before entering the Most Holy Place. This indicated that he, too, was sinful.

By introducing the Day of Atonement, the Lord created an opportunity to restore relationship with Him. This day, Yom Kippur, is still the most important day in the Jewish calendar. The Day of Atonement, with all its instructions, served to inform the people of God’s **holiness** and their **dependence** on Him. This is the message that echoes throughout the Bible and that we must reflect by the way we live!

“Holiness is doing God’s will with a smile.”

Mother Teresa

Exodus and Conquest

January 22

Where Does Sex Belong?

Sex is overemphasized and exploited in today's world. The question we should ask is: Where does sex belong?

Leviticus 18: 1-30 (Prose: Law) Unlawful Sexual Relations

⁶ “No one is to approach any close relative to have sexual relations. I am the LORD. ⁷ Do not dishonor your father by having sexual relations with your mother. She is your mother; do not have relations with her. ⁸ Do not have sexual relations with your father's wife; that would dishonor your father. ⁹ Do not have sexual relations with your sister ...” (NIV)

More and more teenagers and unmarried people today are sexually active than ever before, but this does not seem to satisfy the need for lasting relationships and intimacy. In fact, the contrary seems to be true: relationships are short-lived. Why? Because people buy into the lie that sex guarantees intimacy and true relationships. How many young people discover too late that sex is not the gateway to intimacy?

Fortunately, the Bible gives us guidelines to enable us to think about sex in the right way. There is much talk about whether or not premarital sex is wrong. This text in Leviticus 18 does not answer this issue, as it does pertain to premarital sex but rather with prohibited sexual activities. However, it is interesting to note that unmarried people are not mentioned. The warnings against illicit sex in Leviticus 18 seek to protect the close unity of the family.

Intimacy is only possible within a close relationship. A close-knit unit requires three elements: **mutual love, trust and commitment (longevity)**. Sex can flourish under these conditions! Common sense tells us that sex without love, trust and commitment can be self-destructive. If a strong electric current passes through a thin electrical wire, the wire will be damaged beyond repair. This is the case with sex. It is worthwhile to wait for a safe and intimate environment that is based on love, trust and commitment.

Marriage seeks to ensure this kind of environment. However, the sad truth is that many marriages lack love, trust and commitment. Sex can cause frustration in marriages, especially if the partners are incompatible. So, how is your relationship doing?

“The orgasm has replaced the cross as the focus of longing and the image of fulfillment.”

C.S. Lewis

January 23

Does Everything in Life Involve God?

During service on Sunday, the sermon and hymns make us aware of God's presence and that worship involves God. However, during the course of the week, we tend to focus on other things and forget about God. The question is: Does everything in life involve God? The following section will help answer this question.

Leviticus 19: 1-37 (Prose: Law) Various Laws

¹ The LORD said to Moses, ² 'Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.'

³ 'Each of you must respect his mother and father, and you must observe my Sabbaths. I am the LORD your God.' ¹⁴ 'Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the LORD.' ¹⁶ 'Do not go about spreading slander among your people. Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life. I am the LORD.' (NIV)

Nearly all of the warnings in Leviticus 19 are written in the form of commands (Do not . . .). In this section, God admonishes His people to be holy. This theme is of such importance in the book that the word "holy" is used 152 times. God wanted the Israelites to lead a holy life, because this would serve as a testimony to other nations that He was holy. But what does it mean to be holy? Thomas Carlyle said: "The old word for holy in the German language, heilig, also means healthy. And so heilbronn means holy-well, or healthy-well. You could not get any better definition of what holy really is than healthy—completely healthy."

But how were they to live in order to reflect God's holiness? Leviticus 17–26, known as the Law of Holiness, is the most important part of the book. These chapters contain instructions about how to dedicate oneself to God. For instance, Leviticus 18 refers to sexual relationships, while in Leviticus 19, God orders the Israelites to do things that will make them holy, such as show respect to their parents (v. 3), not curse the deaf (v. 14) and treat the elderly with respect (v. 32).

God asks us to act in good manner in all spheres of life. It is therefore clear that everything in our lives involves God.

"Holiness, not happiness, is the chief end of man."

Oswald Chambers

Exodus and Conquest

January 24

What Should Our Lives Reflect?

Every person's life reflects something. For example, a homeless person's life reflects poverty, despair and a bleak future. Young children playing in a park reflect innocence and pleasure. What should our lives reflect?

Leviticus 22: 17-33 (Prose: Law) Unacceptable Sacrifices

²⁹ “When you sacrifice a thank offering to the LORD, sacrifice it in such a way that it will be accepted on your behalf. ³⁰ It must be eaten that same day; leave none of it till morning. I am the LORD. ³¹ Keep my commands and follow them. I am the LORD. ³² Do not profane my holy name. I must be acknowledged as holy by the Israelites.” (NIV)

In this section, with its many do's and don'ts, the Lord warns the people to present Him only with the best offerings. The Lord only accepts the best. The reason for this is explained clearly in verses 31 to 33: God is a holy God. He is holy because He differs from the other gods. Because He is God, only the best is good enough for Him, and His holiness should be reflected in the quality of the offerings.

The offerings mentioned in Leviticus 22 were the private offerings of the people that were either brought voluntarily or by making a promise. However, it is important to note that the mere fact that these offerings were voluntary was not to be used as an excuse to give second best. The offering could in no way dishonor the Lord's name—the offerings had to reflect God's holiness.

Today, parents will not hesitate to give their children bills for entertainment and small change for the church service. By doing this, children are subconsciously taught from an early age that small offerings are good enough to give to the Lord. I make a special effort to sometimes give my children bills for the collection plate on Sundays. But the Lord wants more than our money. Paul puts this very clearly in Romans 12:1 when he says, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship” (NIV).

God asks us to give our whole lives as offerings. We should live our whole lives in service to God. In everything we do, we should ask ourselves: **Do I reflect God's holiness?** Thinking about this makes me tremble. We have to live more responsibly!

**“A holy life will make the deepest impression.
Lighthouses blow no horns, they just shine.”**

D.L. Moody

January 25

An Invitation Not to Be Refused!

The book of Numbers is a travel journal—a kind of diary—of the Israelites’ travels from the time when they prepared for their journey at Mount Sinai to when they entered the promised land of Canaan. This journal in which the memories and experiences of the Israelites in the desert are recorded gives us a special invitation—one we cannot refuse.

Numbers 2: 1-34 (Prose: Narrative) The Arrangement of the Tribal Camps

¹ The LORD said to Moses and Aaron: ² “The Israelites are to camp around the Tent of Meeting some distance from it, each man under his standard with the banners of his family.”

¹⁷ Then the Tent of Meeting and the camp of the Levites will set out in the middle of the camps. (NIV)

Before traveling to the Promised Land, the Lord gave the people a clear instruction that can be summed up by stating they had to set up camp in proper fashion. The camp was to be in the shape of a square, with three tribes on each side and the priests and Levites situated in the middle around the Tent of Meeting. The tribes were to be arranged in such a way that the Tent of Meeting was always visible.

The Tent of Meeting was symbolic of the Lord’s presence. The camp’s layout was symbolic of the central place of God in the people’s lives. By using this specific placement, the Israelites acknowledged the Lord as the central point of their journey.

The camp’s layout is, up to this day, an invitation to us to place the Lord in the center of our lives. I heard the other day someone said: “Don’t put God first in your life! Put God at the center of your life!” What a privilege and honor to receive such an invitation! May our lives bear testimony to the fact that we have received the invitation to have the Lord as our companion on our journey through life.

**“It is good to have an end to journey toward;
but it is the journey that matters, in the end.”**

Ursula K. LeGuin

Exodus and Conquest

January 26

The Characteristic We All Admire!

At one point, research was done to determine the one characteristic that people admire most in others. The following section describes that characteristic.

Numbers 6: 1-21 (Prose: Law) The Nazirite

¹ The LORD said to Moses, ² “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘If a man or woman wants to make a special vow, a vow of separation to the LORD as a Nazirite,

³ he must abstain from wine and other fermented drink and must not drink vinegar made from wine or from other fermented drink. He must not drink grape juice or eat grapes or raisins. ⁴ As long as he is a Nazirite, he must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, not even the seeds or skins.

⁵ During the entire period of his vow of separation no razor may be used on his head. He must be holy until the period of his separation to the LORD is over; he must let the hair of his head grow long.’”^(NIV)

A Nazirite was someone who made a vow to commit himself or herself fully to the Lord. This passage in Numbers 6 contains the specific instructions for someone who made this vow. A Nazirite vow, which could be taken for a limited period or for the rest of the person’s life, was not an easy one. It demanded that the person abstain from certain things, such as drinking wine and beer.

The items that the Nazirites had to give up were those that played an important role in the lives of the heathen and unbelievers. A person therefore had to be very committed to leading this kind of life. So, does this mean that only the Nazirites at the time were committed to the Lord? No, all the people had to be devoted to God, but the Nazirite was a visible symbol of devotion.

Devotion has a way of inspiring and motivating people. The Nazirites’ devotion served as a source of inspiration and moral support to motivate others to follow a life of devotion. The reason why such people’s devotion elicits so much admiration is because most people struggle to attain it. New Year resolutions are a good example of this. It’s a “to do” list for the first week of January. It is therefore important for us to associate with dedicated people. May their inspiration lead us to also become sources of inspiration and hope!

**“People often say that motivation doesn’t last.
Well, neither does bathing—that’s why we recommend it daily.”**

Zig Ziglar

January 27

Has God's Light Been Dimmed?

These days, I often hear people saying that we live in dark times. Thanks to Thomas Edison, we can use electricity to provide light during dark nights. But for dark times, God gives us His light. Yet so many people, even faithful ones, do not experience God's light and struggle to find direction in their lives. Does this mean that God's light has been dimmed?

Numbers 8: 1-4 (Prose: Law) Setting Up the Lamps

¹ The LORD said to Moses, ² "Speak to Aaron and say to him, 'When you set up the seven lamps, they are to light the area in front of the lampstand.' " ³ Aaron did so; he set up the lamps so that they faced forward on the lampstand, just as the LORD commanded Moses. ⁴ This is how the lampstand was made: It was made of hammered gold—from its base to its blossoms. The lampstand was made exactly like the pattern the LORD had shown Moses. (NIV)

The objects in the Tent of Meeting had symbolic meaning. The Ark, which was placed in the Most Holy Place of the Tent of Meeting, symbolized the Lord's presence. A priest could enter the Most Holy Place only once a year during the Day of Atonement to establish reconciliation for himself and the people of Israel. Before he could present himself to God, he first had to pass through the Holy Place of the tent. When he walked through the foyer to enter the Holy Place, he could see where he was going, because the lampstand with its small lamps lit up his way in the darkness. The priest saw this light as a symbol of God's light that lights up our lives.

The people experienced this in a physical sense as they traveled through the desert. God showed them the way by appearing as a column of cloud during the day and as a column of fire at night. Such columns of clouds and light are absent in our journey through life, but God has provided something else to guide us. The words of Psalm 119:105 say it all: "Your word is a lamp *to my feet* and a light *for my path*" (NIV).

God's light, the Word of God, has not been dimmed. His Word is written in the Bible. This devotional is my small attempt to help others to get a better understanding of the Bible. This task requires us to make regular stops on our journey through life and to check whether we are still on track.

"Reading the Bible without meditating on it is like trying to eat without swallowing."

Author unknown

Exodus and Conquest

January 28

What Eats Away at Relationships?

We all long for healthy, long-term relationships. However, in our search to form relationships and maintain them, we often fail because of a certain “cancer” that we do not always take into account. What could this cancer be?

Numbers 12: 1-15 (Prose: Narrative) Miriam and Aaron complains

Tension: Miriam and Aaron are jealous of Moses (verses 1-2)

¹ Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite. ² “Has the LORD spoken only through Moses?” they asked. “Hasn’t he also spoken through us?” And the LORD heard this.

Release of tension: The Lord intervenes (verses 3-9)

⁹ The anger of the LORD burned against them, and he left them.

Result: Miriam contracts leprosy; Moses’ reaction (verses 10-15)

¹⁰ When the cloud lifted from above the Tent, there stood Miriam-leprous, like snow. ¹³ So Moses cried out to the LORD, ‘O God, please heal her!’

¹⁴ The LORD replied to Moses, “If her father had spit in her face, would she not have been in disgrace for seven days? Confine her outside the camp for seven days; after that she can be brought back.” (NIV)

Jealousy is the cancer in relationships. Aaron and his sister, Miriam, were very jealous of their brother, Moses. The reason for their jealousy was Moses’ special position in Israel. Jealousy causes a person to be restless—to feel dissatisfied with their own lives and use criticism to trample on those around them. Many people like to hear that others have also failed, because this puts them all in the same boat. Jealousy wishes no one joy. We do not know for certain why Aaron and Miriam wanted to speak to Moses about the Cushite woman. It could have been a smoke screen for their jealousy. Moses’ answer to their jealousy was humility. He did not find their criticism threatening.

When Miriam later contracted leprosy, Moses did not take delight in it. On the contrary, he prayed for his sister’s recovery. Moses learned to use good to conquer evil. He left behind a good testimonial: “Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth” (Num 12:3, *NIV*).

“To cure jealousy is to see it for what it is, a dissatisfaction with self.”

Joan Didion

January 29

Love Is Not the Only Thing that Blinds!

Love can blind us to the faults of others. However, love is not the only thing that can do this. Fear also has the ability to blind. This section demonstrates how fear can blind us.

Numbers 13: 26-33 (Prose: Narrative) Report on the Exploration

Tension: The spies get cold feet (verses 26-29)

²⁷ They gave Moses this account: “We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. ²⁸ But the people who live there are powerful and the cities are fortified and very large.”

Release of tension: Two spies encourage (verses 30-31)

³⁰ Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, “We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.” ³¹ But the men who had gone up with him said, “We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.”

Result: Bad rumors do the rounds (verses 32-33)

³² And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. (NIV)

The 12 spies who explored the Promised Land to see what it had to offer drew different conclusions in their report to Moses and all the people of what they had seen. Ten of the 12 came to the following conclusion: “We can’t attack those people” (v. 31), while only two (Joshua and Caleb) said, “We can certainly do it!” (v. 30). Why was the minority report so radically different from the majority report? The reason was because of fear. The majority of the spies were scared of the big cities surrounded by thick walls and the gigantic Anakites. They were overwhelmed by fear, which made them forget God’s promise that He would give them the land to live in. By doing this, they failed to appreciate God’s plan for Israel. They did not so much fear that they would not survive as lack trust in God—even though the camp’s layout (see January 25) was supposed to be a constant reminder of His presence! Joshua and Caleb, however, did not allow overwhelming circumstances to blind them to God and His promises. May we follow their example!

“If you live in fear of the future because of what happened in your past, you’ll end up losing what you have in the present.”

Author Unknown

January 30

Will God Forgive the Sins We Commit Unknowingly?

Does God treat unintentional offences differently from intentional ones? This next section in Numbers clarifies this issue.

Numbers 15: 22-31 (Prose: Conversation) Unintentional Sins

²² “Now if you unintentionally fail to keep any of these commands the LORD gave Moses- ²³ any of the LORD’s commands to you through him, from the day the LORD gave them and continuing through the generations to come- ²⁴ and if this is done unintentionally without the community being aware of it, then the whole community is to offer a young bull for a burnt offering as an aroma pleasing to the LORD, along with its prescribed grain offering and drink offering, and a male goat for a sin offering. ²⁵ The priest is to make atonement for the whole Israelite community, and they will be forgiven, for it was not intentional and they have brought to the LORD for their wrong an offering made by fire and a sin offering. ³⁰ But anyone who sins defiantly, whether native-born or alien, blasphemes the LORD, and that person must be cut off from his people...” (NIV)

During their travels through the desert, the Israelites knew exactly what God expected of them (v. 22). The Lord severely punished those who were defiant, because they did not have the excuse of “not knowing” (v. 30). Intentional sin is a deliberate disregard for and a derision of the Lord’s name. But what happens if one acts unintentionally? Fortunately, God understands that unintentional sin is not intended to dishonor His name. The fact that the people could say “we did not know” explains their behavior, although this is no excuse. In the desert, the Israelites had the opportunity to bring offerings in order to reconcile with God.

In the same way, God’s Spirit wants to convince us and make us aware of unintentional sins. If we become aware of our sins and show remorse, the good news is that God forgives unintentional sins! He is also prepared to forgive us our intentional sins if we show remorse. This section serves as a serious warning that we need to stop doing those activities that we know are wrong. If we persist in being intentionally sinful, we create the impression that we do not take God seriously. God is serious about us! What is your position?

“God loves you even in your darkest hours. He comforts you even in your darkest moments. He forgives you even in your darkest failures.”

Jarrid Wilson

January 31

If Only We Could Start All Over Again!

If we are not satisfied with an e-mail we wrote, we can delete it and rewrite it. Unfortunately, the same does not apply to life. Fortunately, there is good news about this!

Numbers 29: 1-6 (Prose: Law) The Festival of Trumpets

¹ “On the first day of the seventh month hold a sacred assembly and do no regular work. It is a day for you to sound the trumpets. ² As an aroma pleasing to the LORD , prepare a burnt offering of one young bull, one ram and seven male lambs a year old, all without defect.” (NIV)

The first day of the seventh month heralded in the start of the New Year (Lev. 23:23-25). It was a festive day (Num. 29:1). The Israelites’ New Year celebrations were religious. On that day, they brought different kinds of offerings. Why did they do this? To answer this question, we should look at the purpose of the different offerings:

Offering	Purpose
Burnt offering (Lev. 1)	To seek God’s goodwill.
Grain offering (Lev. 2)	To show commitment to God and acknowledge that He provides food.
Sin offering (Lev. 4)	To be forgiven of unintentional sins (such as sins of negligence, irresponsibility and uncleanness).
Drink offering (Num. 15)	To remind of the abundance of God’s gifts and promises.
Fire offering (Lev. 1:9)	This is the name given to describe all the offerings that were burnt on an altar, completely or partially.

These offerings proclaimed that commitment, forgiveness and abundance were possible. This good news started the Israelites’ New Year. Although we do not bring offerings in the same way, we still approach God with forgiveness, remorse and honesty. We cannot start all over again by turning back the clock, but through forgiveness, remorse and honesty, we can start afresh. Thank God!

**“To forgive is to set a prisoner free
and discover that the prisoner was you.”**

Lewis B. Smedes

Exodus and Conquest

February 1

God's Heart-Lung Machine

The main purpose of a heart-lung machine is to keep someone alive by performing the respiratory function. However, the intention is not that the machine should be connected to the person permanently. We are not created to be kept alive, but to live. This is exactly what Moses wanted to tell the Israelites.

Deuteronomy 1: 1-8 (Prose: History) Introduction to Moses' First Address

¹ These are the words Moses spoke to all Israel in the desert east of the Jordan—that is, in the Arabah—opposite Suph, between Paran and Tophel, Laban, Hazeroth and Dizahab. ⁷ Break camp and advance into the hill country of the Amorites; go to all the neighboring peoples in the Arabah, in the mountains, in the western foothills, in the Negev and along the coast, to the land of the Canaanites and to Lebanon, as far as the great river, the Euphrates. (NIV)

Moses delivered this speech east of the Jordan River on the first day of the eleventh month of the fortieth year after the exodus. The twelfth and last month were a time of mourning following the death of Moses. The people entered the Promised Land during the next month (the first month of the forty-first year).

An 11-day journey eventually took 40 years. The distance was never the problem, but rather the Israelites' attitude. They were stubborn and rebellious, and their hearts were filled with doubt. God did not want them to enter the Promised Land with that kind of attitude, because such an attitude would not make a good impression about the God of Israel on other nations. So God decided to give them a "heart transplant," with the desert functioning as the operation table and the manna and quails as the heart-lung machine.

By having the Israelites wander in the desert for 40 years, God wanted the people to learn that He not only wanted to keep them alive but also that He wanted to prepare them for a life of service and devotion. Perhaps you, too, are on a spiritual journey through the desert. You experience life as difficult and painful. You do not always understand the workings of God in your life. This might be God's way of preparing you for something wonderful in your life. May you experience God's care (manna) on your journey through the desert.

"What makes the desert beautiful is that somewhere it hides a well."

Antoine de Saint-Exupery

February 2

Do We Fail if We Do Not Reach Our Goals?

It is always exciting to strive toward achieving an ideal. In reality, most people do not always achieve their goals, but this does not necessarily mean that they were at fault. The question is, should we be considered a failure if we do not achieve our ideals? This section might help to gain some insight into this question.

Deuteronomy 3: 1-17 (Prose: History) Division of the Land

¹² Of the land that we took over at that time, I gave the Reubenites and the Gadites the territory north of Aroer by the Arnon Gorge, including half the hill country of Gilead, together with its towns.

¹³ The rest of Gilead and also all of Bashan, the kingdom of Og, I gave to the half tribe of Manasseh. (The whole region of Argob in Bashan used to be known as a land of the Rephaites.)

¹⁴ Jair, a descendant of Manasseh, took the whole region of Argob as far as the border of the Geshurites and the Maacathites; it was named after him, so that to this day Bashan is called Havvoth Jair.)

¹⁵ And I gave Gilead to Makir. (NIV)

Moses witnessed the beginning of the fulfillment of God's promise to the people when they conquered the area east of the Promised Land. Moses allocated the good grazing area of Sihon to Reuben and Gad because they had big herds of cattle (Num 32:1-5). One half of the tribe of Manasseh received the area north of the Jabbok. However, Moses did not attain his goal to enter the Promised Land (west of the Jordan) because he had previously disobeyed God (Num. 20:12). Despite this, Moses was awarded the following titles:

- Man of God (Ezra 3:2)
- God's chosen one (Ps. 106:23)
- God's friend (Exod. 33:11)

With titles such as these, nobody could call Moses a failure. Unfulfilled ideals easily blind us to what has already been achieved. Hebrews 11:13 provides the right perspective on unattained ideals: "All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth" (NIV).

"Failure is a detour, not a dead-end street."

Zig Ziglar

Exodus and Conquest

February 3 **The Day When God Says *No!***

Parents sometimes say yes to their children after initially saying no. This often happens as a result of their children's pleas. But what do you do if God says no after you have pleaded with Him? Let's read how Moses experienced God's no in his life.

Deuteronomy 3: 21-29 (Prose: Conversation) Moses Denied Entry

²³ At that time I pleaded with the LORD:

²⁴ "O Sovereign LORD, you have begun to show to your servant your greatness and your strong hand. For what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do the deeds and mighty works you do?" ²⁵ Let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan—that fine hill country and Lebanon."

²⁶ But because of you the LORD was angry with me and would not listen to me. "That is enough," the LORD said. "Do not speak to me anymore about this matter. ²⁷ Go up to the top of Pisgah and look west and north and south and east. Look at the land with your own eyes, since you are not going to cross this Jordan. ²⁸ But commission Joshua, and encourage and strengthen him, for he will lead this people across and will cause them to inherit the land that you will see." ²⁹ So we stayed in the valley near Beth Peor. (NIV)

Moses' task to lead the stubborn Israelites through the desert was not an easy one. If there ever was a person who would have appreciated the Promised Land after 40 years of suffering, that person would have been Moses. In the desert, he had experienced the unparalleled greatness of God. He wanted to be part of the final destination: the Promised Land.

Moses dreaded the idea that after all the suffering he had endured as leader he would not be able to enter the Promised Land. For a long time, he pleaded with God to enter the land (v. 23), but God's answer was a clear no. Yet, as this prayer of Moses shows, he maintained his intimate relationship with God. His speech also confirms that he accepted God's answer.

Once a man was asked: "What did you gain by praying regularly?" The man replied; "Nothing.... but, let me tell you what I lost; anger, ego, greed, depression, insecurity and fear of death."

"Pray, and let God worry."

Martin Luther

February 4
How Can One Be Truly Happy?

There are many answers to this question, but one thing is clear: Happiness is only possible within the confines of loving relationships. We all look for happiness, but we often stumble in our quest to obtain it. Let us read what Moses said about this to the people of Israel.

Deuteronomy 5: 1-21 (Prose: Law) The Ten Commandments

¹ Moses summoned all Israel and said: Hear, O Israel, the decrees and laws I declare in your hearing today. Learn them and be sure to follow them.

⁶ “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

⁷ You shall have no other gods before me.

⁸ You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything ...

¹¹ You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God ...

¹² Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy,...

¹³ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁴ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work,

¹⁶ Honor your father and your mother,...

¹⁷ You shall not murder.

¹⁸ You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁹ You shall not steal.

²⁰ You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

²¹ You shall not covet...” (NIV)

Moses realized that there was only one way in which the Israelites would be happy in the Promised Land: if they, again, committed themselves to the Ten Commandments. The reason for this was because all the commandments concerned building healthy relationships.

In the same way, we should look for happiness in healthy relationships. The first four commandments concern our relationship with God, while the last six concern our relationship with other people. These guidelines are our freedom, not our constraint. In the same way that a fish is only free in water, a human being is only free within God’s 10 guidelines. This **commitment** to the Ten Commandments is indicated in verse 1 by three consecutive actions: hear, learn and follow. Happiness is not embedded in things, but is rather the result of righteous living.

**“Happiness . . . is not a destination: it is a manner of traveling.
Happiness is not an end in itself. It is a by-product of working,
playing, loving and living.”**

Haim Ginott

Exodus and Conquest

February 5

Good Theology is Always Good Counseling!

A dentist friend of mine who studied part-time for his theology degree wanted to specialize in counseling. He phoned his lecturer (also a good friend of mine) and asked him whether he thought that a different field of study might help him more in counseling. The lecturer's answer was simple: "Good theology is always good counseling." Wow, what a great answer! This important section that you are about to read confirms the value of this answer.

Deuteronomy 6: 1-10 (Prose: Law) Love the Lord Your God

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵ Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. ⁶ These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. ⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. ⁸ Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. ⁹ Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (NIV)

One could say that this passage contains the central theme of the book of Deuteronomy. It follows a pattern that could help us to apply God's Word in our daily lives.

First, we should love God. Jesus included the words of verse 5 in his answer about the most important commandment (Matt. 22:34-40).

Second, we should constantly think about His commandments. The sowing of good thoughts usually enables one to reap good deeds.

Third, we should impress the lessons and information in the Scripture on our children. It is important for us to realize that we cannot achieve this through Sunday school alone. While watching television we can, for example, teach our children what is morally right or wrong. We can show our children the consequences of violence and remind them of the sixth commandment: You shall not murder.

Fourth, it is important to teach by setting the example, because that will make us credible. Deuteronomy 6:8-9 has a figurative meaning: "Your hands" indicate what you do, while "your head" shows what you think. (Unfortunately, the Jews interpreted this literally by wearing phylacteries.) The theory that God wants to teach us is meant to be applied in practice.

"Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny."

Stephen Covey

February 6

The Most Important Decision to Make Every Day

The key of life is that you can make choices. Albert Camus, a French novelist, said that life is the sum of all your choices.

Within the first 10 minutes of waking up, we make a number of decisions. For many of us, the most important decision during those 10 minutes is what to wear! (and it drives moms nuts when kids cannot make up their minds.) But there is something more important than what to wear. In the hurly-burly of life, we often forget the most important decision. Moses tells us very clearly what this should be.

Deuteronomy 30: 11-30 (Prose: Law) The Offer of Life or Death

¹⁹ This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and *death*, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live ²⁰ and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. (NIV)

Moses tells us that the most important decision we need to make everyday is to choose life. We can become so fixated on our dreams (or a boyfriend or girlfriend) and so overwhelmed by our problems that we forget to choose life when we wake up in the morning.

But how do I choose life? Verse 20 states very clearly that a choice for life is a choice for loving God. Loving God helps you to realize that life is way more than the brand you wear or the car you drive. God is the giver of life and by loving Him you embrace the life God has in mind for you. God wants the best for you! May tomorrow's first 10 minutes be different!

“Life is a matter of choice. You can be a doctor who saves life. A lawyer who defends life. A soldier who protects life. Or just be yourself a person, who touched my life.”

Author Unknown

Exodus and Conquest

February 7

Does God Have Friends?

Before we answer this question, I would like to ask another: Do you have a really good friend? The answer many people have to this question is that they have many acquaintances, but not many close friends. Friendships are rare. Let us read about a very special friendship.

Deuteronomy 34: 1-12 (Prose: History) The Death of Moses

⁵ And Moses the servant of the LORD died there in Moab, as the LORD had said. ⁶ He buried him in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor, but to this day no one knows where his grave is. ⁷ Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone. ⁸ The Israelites grieved for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days, until the time of weeping and mourning was over. ⁹ Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him. So the Israelites listened to him and did what the LORD had commanded Moses. ¹⁰ Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, (NIV)

God and Moses shared a special bond. This is evident from the fact that Moses is called the Lord's servant (v. 5) and that he knew the Lord personally (v. 10). Exodus 33:11 confirms this special bond: "The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend" (NIV). It is interesting to note that Moses' age of 120 years has symbolic value: 40 years in Egypt, 40 years as a fugitive who fled from Egypt, and 40 years as leader of God's people until they reached the gates of the Promised Land. Not only was Moses a friend of God, but Matthew also draws a parallel between Moses and Jesus. Matthew viewed Jesus as a kind of second Moses. As children, both Moses and Jesus were threatened by mass murders instigated by the Pharaoh and King Herod, respectively. Both were put to the test in the desert—Moses by the people and Jesus by Satan. Both performed all kinds of miracles.

However, whereas Moses was the go-between between God and His people, Jesus Himself was the mediator. Fortunately, Jesus restored our relationship with God, which enables us to talk to God personally as Moses did. Through Jesus, we too have God as a friend. What is really wonderful is that this friend is also our Savior—a true friend who died to save us. That is why we sing the well-known hymn, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus!"

"To the query, 'What is a friend?' his reply was 'A single soul dwelling in two bodies.' "

Aristotle

February 8

Imagine Two Spies and a Prostitute in One Room

Spies and prostitutes have dangerous careers. What would happen if two spies visited a prostitute? Read this remarkable story!

Joshua 2: 1-15 (Prose: Narrative) Rahab and the Spies

Tension: Two spies and a prostitute in one room (verses 1-3)

¹ Then Joshua son of Nun secretly sent two spies from Shittim. “Go, look over the land,” he said, “especially Jericho.” So they went and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there.

² The king of Jericho was told, “Look! Some of the Israelites have come here tonight to spy out the land.” ³ So the king of Jericho sent this message to Rahab: “Bring out the men who came to you and entered your house, because they have come to spy out the whole land.”

Release of tension: The prostitute acts wisely (verses 4-6)

⁴ But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them.

Result: An agreement involving mutual trust (verses 7-15)

⁷ So the men set out in pursuit of the spies on the road that leads to the fords of the Jordan, and as soon as the pursuers had gone out, the gate was shut.

⁸ Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof ⁹ and said to them, ...

¹² Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you... ¹⁵ So she let them down by a rope through the window, for the house she lived in was part of the city wall. (NIV)

Mutual trust is the last thing one would expect when two spies and a prostitute end up together. As a prostitute, Rahab was only good enough to be used for the pleasure of others. However, in this instance, she encountered two men who did not lust after her body but instead sought her goodness. She experienced kindness during the invasion of Jericho when the Israelites protected her and her family. It is wondrous that she also experienced God’s goodness when she was included in the genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:5). She is also honored for her faith (Heb. 11:31) and for her good deeds (Jas. 2:25). Her life changed after she showed kindness. Be kind to others!

“Goodness is the only investment which never fails.”

Henry David Thoreau

Exodus and Conquest

February 9

What Do I Do About My Sorry Past?

Unfortunately, it is not always that easy to get rid of a sorry past. We all do things that we are ashamed of and would rather forget, and many of us are tormented by guilt about our past. There is also another factor that we cannot always control: other people's gossip. Gossip is a cruel way to keep the past of others alive. Have we not become masters at this? Yet do not despair. Read the following extract!

Joshua 5: 1-9 (Prose: Narrative) Circumcision and Passover at Gilgal
Tension: The Israelites are uncircumcised (verses 1-6)

Release of tension: The people of Israel are circumcised (verses 7-8)
7 ... They were still uncircumcised because they had not been circumcised on the way.

Result: The dawning of a new era for Israel (verse 9)
9 Then the LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you." So the place has been called Gilgal to this day. (NIV)

After the Israelites had traveled in the desert for a period of about 40 years, they were ready to enter the Promised Land. But one thing remained to be done before they could do this: they had to be circumcised. The previous generation had been circumcised, but the current generation had neglected this practice during their sojourn in the desert.

The previous generation's disobedience caused a short journey of 11 days to turn into one that lasted for 40 years. Their stay in the desert earned them a reputation of shame and embarrassment. The entry of this generation into the Promised Land would now signal the start of a **new period** for the people of Israel. Because the Lord wanted to start afresh, Joshua was told to circumcise the people at Gilgal to mark the end of their life of reproach. Gilgal means to roll some object away. The reason for naming the place Gilgal is because they obeyed God by literally rolling away the flesh (circumcision).

Many centuries later, the scene at Gilgal changed to the one at Golgotha when God brought an end to our sins and disgrace. Express your shame in prayer, and thank the Lord for the end brought about at Golgotha!

"The heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of being a beginner again, less sure about everything. It freed me to enter one of the most creative periods of my life."

Steve Jobs

From A Garden To A City

February 10 **God and War?**

War! War! War! This is how we can summarize the book of Joshua. No other book in the Bible contains more about death, destruction and violence than this book. To some, this is proof of God's cruelty and unfairness. But before we draw all kinds of conclusions, we should pay attention to the next section.

Joshua 6: 15-27 (Prose: Narrative) The Fall of Jericho

Tension: What will happen at dawn? (verses 15-19)

¹⁶ The seventh time around, when the priests sounded the trumpet blast, Joshua commanded the people, "Shout! For the LORD has given you the city!"

Release of tension: The walls collapse! (verse 20a)

²⁰ When the trumpets sounded, the people shouted, and at the sound of the trumpet, when the people gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed; so every man charged straight in,

Result: Destroyed city and a prostitute set free (verses 20b-27)

and they took the city. ²¹ They devoted the city to the LORD and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it—men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys. ²⁵ But Joshua spared Rahab the prostitute, with her family and all who belonged to her, because she hid the men Joshua had sent as spies to Jericho—and she lives among the Israelites to this day. (NIV)

Although war and death are often featured in the book of Joshua, it is the meaning of Joshua's name, "the Lord saves," that triumphs. In this case, it is Rahab and her family who experience the meaning of Joshua's name in that their lives are saved. The book of Joshua does not condone violence but stays in touch with the realities of life. The book is marked by a tension between God's actions of fulfilling His promises on the one hand and his punishment of disobedience on the other. However, the meaning of the name Joshua directs the story throughout.

God keeps His promises to the people in a concrete way. By doing this, He demonstrates His love toward His people. Therefore, we cannot consider Him to be harsh and cruel. Should we not lay the blame for war and cruelty at the door of human beings and their greed?

"Those who are at war with others are not at peace with themselves."

William Hazlitt

Exodus and Conquest

February 11

A “Dog” that Took the Place of a Giant!

A promise is binding and should not be broken. The following story tells us about a “dog” that took the place of a giant 45 years after a promise was made.

Joshua 14: 6-15 (Prose: Narrative) Caleb Requests His Land

Tension: Caleb asks Joshua for land (verses 6-12)

⁹ So on that day Moses swore to me, “The land on which your feet have walked will be your inheritance and that of your children forever, ...” ¹¹ I am still as strong today as the day Moses sent me out; I’m just as vigorous to go out to battle now as I was then. ¹² Now give me this hill country that the LORD promised me that day.

Release of tension: Joshua blesses Caleb (verse 13a)

¹³ Then Joshua blessed Caleb son of Jephunneh

Result: Caleb receives his promised land without a fight (verses 13b-15) and gave him Hebron as his inheritance. ¹⁴ So Hebron has belonged to Caleb ... ever since, because he followed the LORD, the God of Israel, wholeheartedly. ¹⁵ (Hebron used to be called Kiriath Arba after Arba, who was the greatest man among the Anakites.) Then the land had rest from war. (NIV)

Where is this dog? Caleb is the “dog,” because that is what his name means. He came to Joshua to remind him of a promise that had been made to him 45 years before. At that stage, the Lord had promised Caleb and his offspring the land of Hebron. This promise emanated from the fact that Joshua and Caleb were the only 2 of the 12 spies who believed that the Israelites could conquer Jericho (Num 13). The other 10 spies had feared the giants (Anakites) and the big cities.

After all these years, Caleb did not lose faith in the Lord. His loyalty was eventually rewarded when Joshua gave him Hebron. It is interesting to note that Hebron was once named after the feared giant Arba—namely Kiriath Arba, or city of Arba (Gen. 23). This was also the giant who struck fear into the hearts of the 10 spies. Ironically, a “dog” would take the place of a dreaded giant—which was only possible because Caleb had put his trust in a loyal God.

“All I have seen teaches me to trust the creator for all I have not seen.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

February 12

The Big “J” that God Would Like to See on Earth!

God’s desire is that human life should not be treated indifferently. In order for that to happen, we need God’s big “J”!

Joshua 20 (Prose: Conversation) The Cities of Refuge

¹ Then the LORD said to Joshua: ² “Tell the Israelites to designate the cities of refuge, as I instructed you through Moses, ³ so that anyone who kills a person accidentally and unintentionally may flee there and find protection from the avenger of blood.

⁴ When he flees to one of these cities, he is to stand in the entrance of the city gate and state his case before the elders of that city. Then they are to admit him into their city and give him a place to live with them.” ⁷ So they set apart Kedesh ..., Shechem ..., and Kiriath Arba (that is, Hebron)

⁸ On the east side of the Jordan of Jericho they designated Bezer ..., Ramoth ..., and Golan ... (NIV)

It is a common practice for people to seek asylum at embassies. People ask to be protected from persecution by another authority. This practice is also found in the Bible. After the land was divided between the tribes, God instructed Joshua to identify six cities of refuge. A “city of refuge” was a place where a person who had unintentionally committed a murder could enjoy safety from the acts of revenge by the relatives of the deceased.

It is interesting to note that the three cities of refuge west of the Jordan are mentioned from north to south, whereas the cities east of the Jordan are mentioned from south to north. The cities were, therefore, situated in such a way that everyone could reach them within a day. The cities of refuge were under the control of God’s servants, the Levites. By doing this, God ensured that His servants could see to it that justice prevailed.

God seeks justice for everyone. Justice is of the utmost importance to God, which is why He sent us the High Priest, Jesus Christ, who brought about our final freedom when He died. Believers should do everything possible to create a just society. We should have the courage of our convictions to act against all forms of injustice and inequality.

“Justice is truth in action.”

Benjamin Disraeli

Exodus and Conquest

February 13 **Don't Miss this Trip!**

Joshua delivered his last speech on the eve of a new beginning. The conquest (Josh. 1–12) and division (Josh. 13–22) of the land were complete. Joshua now took the people on a trip down memory lane. At each resting point, he pointed out something special in their past that they had to take with them on their journey into the future. Let's read about this.

Joshua 24: 1-15 (Prose: History) The Lord's Covenant Renewed

¹ Then Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem. He summoned the elders, leaders, judges and officials of Israel, and they presented themselves before God.

² Joshua said to all the people, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshiped other gods. ³ But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the River and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants.

¹³ So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant. ¹⁴ Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness...

¹⁵ But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.'" (NIV)

At each halt in their past, the name of God was written in capital letters. Joshua wanted the people to remember that God was with them when their history unfolded. It began when God called Abraham while he was worshipping other gods. From then on, God walked with Isaac, Jacob and their descendants up to where they were right now in the Promised Land. Their past had to be kept alive, because that would help them to be loyal to God.

Joshua feared that the exposure to other gods would affect their loyalty to God. To prevent this from happening, he urged them to choose God without delay. It was the best time because God's care and trust were still fresh in their minds. Joshua unequivocally told them where he and his family made their choice. Joshua realized that taking time to stop and remember the past could help the people keep on believing.

"Memory is the only paradise from which we cannot be driven."

Jean Paul

February 14

The Last Chapters Reveal So Much

The last chapters of the book of Joshua end with the deaths and funerals of two prominent figures: Joshua and the high priest Eleazar. The death of Joshua and Eleazar indicated the end of an era in the history of Israel—the period of the patriarchs—and ushered in the next phase in the history of Israel—the time of the judges. It is interesting to note that this period started at the time of Abraham at Shechem (Gen. 12) and ended at Shechem with Joshua. A death notice can hardly be considered pleasant reading, but the last chapters of the book of Joshua contain so much food for thought that it would be worth our while to read it. Let's take a look.

Joshua 24: 29-33 (Prose: History) Buried in the Promised Land

²⁹ After these things, Joshua son of Nun, *the servant of the LORD*, died at the age of a hundred and ten. ³⁰ And they buried him in the land of his inheritance, at Timnath Serah in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash.

³¹ Israel served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had experienced everything the LORD had done for Israel. (NIV)

The book of Joshua starts as follows: “After the death of Moses, *the servant of the Lord*, the Lord said to Joshua, son of Nun, Moses’ aide . . .” (NIV). In the last chapters of Joshua, we read that Joshua was also called the servant of the Lord. Through his actions, Joshua ensured that he would grow to the stature of Moses in all spheres. Joshua completed what Moses had started with honors. The exodus from Egypt and the conquest of the Promised Land took place under the leadership of these two great men. During this time, Joshua’s actions inspired those around him to trust in God.

Someone once observed that a saint is someone who makes it easy for others to believe. A little boy was asked, “What is a saint?” He replied, “A Saint is a person who lets the light shine through.” Evidently he got this idea by watching the sun shine through the prophets of God in the stained-glass windows of his church. C.S. Lewis said: “Don’t shine so that others can see you. Shine so that through you others can see Him.”

The words “Israel served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua” (v. 31) confirm that Joshua was such a person. May the way we live also make it easier for others to believe in God!

“Aspire to inspire before you expire.”

Author unknown