

# The Bible Challenge

## Meditations Week 1 (January 6-12)

### **Day 1: Genesis 1-3, Psalm 1, Matthew 1**

*By Scott Gunn*

Today is all about beginnings. It's a new year, and also the start of our great adventure reading the Bible. Even the texts set beginnings before us. Genesis famously opens with "In the beginning..." Chapters 1-2 tell the story of creation. Here we encounter a God who brings into being a world that is wholly good.

But humanity as we know it comes into being in Chapter 3. In the sixth verse, the newly created woman and man both eat forbidden fruit. The rest of the Bible is the story of God's relentless love for a people who never quite manage to live as God intended. As you read the sweeping narrative of the Bible, it's startling how many times and how many ways God reaches out to humanity in love.

Many Christians will regret what we now call "the Fall", that time when humanity first sinned against God. But there is a medieval English carol about the Fall, which ends, "Blessed be the time / That apple taken was. / Therefore we may singen / *Deogratias!*" Why would we bless this disobedience? Because it is precisely our disobedience which brought about the need for our redemption through Jesus Christ. No apple, no Jesus.

And this brings us to Matthew. Chapter 1 is the genealogy of Jesus and his birth. It would be tempting to skip past the genealogy, but that would miss an important point. Even a casual glance at the list of names reveals what is for me an inspiring picture. The Incarnation of Jesus Christ was brought about through a rogue's gallery of imperfect people. While Jesus himself did not sin, his forbearers certainly did. If God can work through ordinary, flawed people to bring about extraordinary things, then God can work through us.

## QUESTIONS

- As you read the Bible, how do you see yourself in this vast, sweeping story of God's love for humanity?
- Look up a few people in the Matthew 1 genealogy (e.g. "the wife of Uriah"). What does it say about God and about us that God could use ordinary people to bring about the salvation of us all?

## PRAYER

*God of light and life, open my mind and my heart to your gracious love, and use me for your saving purposes; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

## **Day 2: Genesis 4-6, Psalm 2, Matthew 2**

*By Scott Gunn*

With today's readings, things start to go awry in a big way. We encounter the Bible's first murder. As people multiply on the face of the earth, their evil deeds increase. But we also get our first real hero, as Noah follows God's commandments.

In our New Testament, our curtain opens on the scene with the wise men visiting the child Jesus. The message is clear: this savior is not just for a few people in one particular nation, but for the whole world. But that same fact represents a threat to the established order; Herod's fear runs to epic proportions. Puzzling out the murder of innocent children is enough to keep a reader up at night. How could God allow this? Why do the pages of the Bible contain these grim stories? Where is God in great tragedy? Of course, these questions are not just for the pages of the Bible. The front page of any newspaper reveals a world of violence, fear, and exploitation. Where is God in *our* world?

As we read the Bible, we have an opportunity to step back to see a God whose saving purposes for humanity are evident over the sweeping range of the biblical story. This same God gives humanity the freedom to worship, to love God. And God leaves us the choice to disobey, at great cost to ourselves and to our world.

We do well to read very difficult passages in the context of the wider narrative. This will not excuse or minimize every terrible act. But we can see a loving God, who at the very least weeps with us and with all those who suffer. Seeing God at work in the Bible can help us see God in our world too.

## QUESTIONS

- Do you find the violence of some biblical stories disturbing? Is this more or less troubling than violence in a newspaper? Why?
- We don't focus on the flight into Egypt and the slaughter of innocents much at Christmastime. How might our image of Jesus be different if these parts of his life's story were more prominent?

## PRAYER

*God of love, reveal yourself to me even when it seems that the world has turned far from you, through Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. Amen.*

## **Day 3: Genesis 7-9, Psalm 3, Matthew 3**

*By Scott Gunn*

A few years ago, I asked a group of church leaders to name their favorite story from the Bible. As we went around the table, over half of the people said "Noah's Ark." Certainly it's a story rich with visual imagery. Walking through a large hardware store at Christmastime not long ago, I saw an inflatable lawn decoration. It depicted the ark, with some cute animals. Over the ark was a large banner. "Joy!"

Joy? Really? I wonder if people who love the story of Noah and the ark have read the story. It is fundamentally a story about God drowning almost every living creature on earth. Noah and his family would have heard the screams of women, men, and children.

It's not a very joyous story. And yet this tale of a fresh beginning for God's creation has a hold on us and our culture. Aside from the potential to paint cute murals, the story also concludes with

God's promise to spare humanity this fate in the future. God, it seems, was also horrified by how things turned out.

Most biblical scholars agree that the story of the flood is not history in the sense of scientific fact. Rather, it is a story about God's care for creation and God's desire to covenant with us. It is a story of *meaning*, teaching us something about ourselves, our world, and our God.

It is ironic that in the same day we read about water used as a means of death, we also read about John the Baptizer, who used water as a sign of new life. But in both cases, water brings about new beginnings, new life. It cleanses us and our world, making us ready for a fresh start.

### QUESTIONS

- Do you think the story of Noah's Ark is a story of joy? Why or why not?
- How would a man such as John the Baptist be received by today's church? Are his startling words about Jesus relevant today?

### PRAYER

*Cleanse my heart and my life today, Lord God. Make me ready for fresh starts with each day's grace. Amen.*

## **Day 4: Genesis 10-12; Psalm 4; Matthew 4**

*By Walter Brueggemann*

These readings strike me as an honest acknowledgement of the force of ambiguity before which we live out our faith. Even Jesus, at the outset of his ministry, faced ambiguity, whatever his specific experience might have been. He is tempted by the devil, but before he finished, "Angels waited on him" (Matthew 4:11). This strange mix, I suspect, is an epitome of his life, for he was sustained in amazing ways by the God, yet endlessly at risk.

Jesus is no exception to the rule of faith. The same mix is voiced in Psalm 4. The Psalmist in confidence will lie down and "sleep in peace" (v. 8). But this same person is vexed by social shame (v.

2) and is disturbed at night (v. 4). That is how our sleep may be...disturbed and at peace. In the Genesis reading, the long genealogies or place and continuity are disrupted by the narrative of Babel (11:1-9). So it is with our certitudes and our routines, interrupted by foolish yearning.

In these readings faith seems to have two fronts. There is honesty about lived reality, a candor about how it is. But faith promises to override our conflictedness through trust in God's good gifts. Either feature without the other makes faith thin. It is not a bad way to begin the new year in faith...honest about the life we live, at the same time on the receiving end of gifts that bring us to well-being, even in the face of such vexation.

#### PRAYER

*In our can-do society, make us grateful receivers. We do not doubt your gifts, but we manage often to live without them. Give us freedom to match your generosity with our own gratitude. Amen*

#### **Day 5: Genesis 13-15; Psalm 5; Matthew 5**

*By Walter Brueggemann*

Faith is a summons to be different, to have a different buoyancy and to live a different ethic. That difference is visible in Psalm 5. After the Psalmist details all kinds of ignoble conduct on the part of the wicked and evil-doers (such as being bloodthirsty and deceitful) (vv. 4-6), then comes, "But I" (v. 7). The "I" of faith acts from the assurance of God's loyal love (v. 7) and is led by God to a straight, safe path (v. 8).

Father Abraham is described in these Genesis narratives as being different and making a difference. In 13:8-9 he commits an act of uncommon generosity by letting his nephew, Lot, choose the land he wants. In response, Abraham receives sweeping promise from God to receive the land of promise (13: ). That divine promise, moreover, is verified in the remarkable covenant-making ritual of chapter 15. Abraham and his family are marked as carrier of difference that is grounded only in God's promise.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs his disciples on making a difference by loving one's enemies. That difference is the vocation of the church. The church faces two temptations; one is to give up difference and fade into the social landscape along with everyone else. The other is to separate from all the others to be safe, pure, and unvexed by social reality. Neither is faithful. Rather this community is dispatched to be engaged in transformative, reconciling generosity, the only difference that finally matters.

## PRAYER

*We pray for courage to be different. In our self-indulgence we do not want to be different. In our fearfulness we cringe from our vocation. Give us hearts shaped by courage and resolve that persists. Amen.*

## **Day 6: Genesis 16-18; Psalm 6; Matthew 6**

*By Walter Brueggemann*

These texts ponder what the disciplines are for women and men of faith. Principle among such disciplines them is prayer, the opening of one's life in honesty in the presence of God. Our classic prayer is found in Matthew 6. Many interpreters believe the prayer pivots on debts to be forgiven in a bold practice of Jubilee. In any case, it is a prayer that eagerly awaits the full rule of God in the world.

Psalm 6, also filled with petition, is a zealous complaint to God in a context of deep need. The key imperative is "turn" in verse 4; the Psalmist urges God into transformative action. Remarkably, the prayer ends in confidence that "God has heard" (v. 9). This is a God who hears, answers, and acts. The boldness of the prayer in its demand is anticipated in Abraham's exchange with God in Genesis 18. Both Abraham and God are vigorous bargainers in this text. Such prayer is more than just pious recital of familiar innocuous mantras. It is rather down and dirty engagement with God.

In our society where we imagine we may be (or must be!) on our own, prayer is the core acknowledgement that in fact our lives are

referred beyond ourselves. It is for that reason that Matthew 6 can end in an invitation to move out of anxiety and into glad obedience (vv. ). Such prayer that moves us beyond anxiety is sometimes submissiveness to God and sometime defiant insistence upon one's own need. Father Abraham knew what he wanted and insisted upon it.

## QUESTIONS

- What bold petition to God have you not yet voiced?
- What might you make of prayer that is engaged dispute with God?