



PEOPLE OF GOD

40 DAYS OF FASTING & PRAYER

THE EXPERIENCE COMMUNITY, CROSSLAND CHURCH,
AND NORTH BOULEVARD CHURCH OF CHRIST

Preface

"I pray not only for these, but also for those who believe in me through their word. May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me. I have given them the glory you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one. I am in them and you are in me, so that they may be made completely one, that the world may know you have sent me and have loved them as you have loved me." - John 17:20-23, CSB

Jesus prayed that His Church would be united. If you've ever experienced division within a church, you probably either chuckled or sighed when you read that. Between denomination splits, church in-fighting, and Christian cancel culture, sometimes the Church can feel just as divided as the political world. This isn't how it's supposed to be! Shouldn't we be bonded together, united, perhaps even family? But families aren't uniform. Jesus isn't the same as the Father, and yet They are one. Similarly, within the Church there is a great diversity of traditions and yet we worship one God.

This year's fast is, in part, a step towards the unity that Jesus prayed for. The Experience Community Church, Crossland Church and North Boulevard Church of Christ are partnering to dedicate forty days at the beginning of 2022 to God through fasting, prayer, and study. We're not only fasting together, but we've also jointly produced the following forty devotionals, one for each day of the fast. Each devotional explores an idea that expresses the diverse unity of the Church: the People of God. Every day we'll explore a different person in the Bible to see how God has worked through many different people in many different times, all for one common purpose: His glory through the redemption of His people. Even though these people lived thousands of years ago, there's something we can learn from their successes and their failures. Their failures are perhaps where we learn most about how to live together as one body of believers. Christ's Church is not yet perfect, but it is one and it is His.

As we go through these next forty days together, our prayer is that you seek and see God in everything that you do. When hunger pains set in, remember the Israelites in the desert and how God provided food for them. When you feel tired, remember how Paul found encouragement in God's word. When faced with temptation, remember how Jesus said, "Not My will but Yours." Give all your heart, all your mind, and all your strength to God, and love your neighbor as yourself. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

**THE EXPERIENCE COMMUNITY CHURCH, CROSSLAND CHURCH
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Before You Begin

BASIC HOW-TO GUIDE

For each of the 40 days of this fast, we have composed a devotion for you to read. Each one was written by a different member of our churches, and they cover a different Biblical character. Before reading the devotion daily, get out your Bible and read the Scripture reference at the top of the devotion. Doing so will give you the proper context for what is written in the devotion. Take time to contemplate the portion of Scripture and the devotion as you read them. Try not to rush! After you've read each devotion, take time to pray for 10 minutes. Communicate back to God what He's told you through your reading and tell Him how you feel about what you've read. Most importantly, leave room for the Holy Spirit to speak to you. Don't forget, we are doing this because the Holy Spirit has led us to fast together, just as He led Jesus into the wilderness to fast for 40 days. There is power in us collectively removing distractions and focusing on God. We want to always be growing as a community, and that doesn't just mean numerically. Our community is large in number, but we want our spiritual depth to be even greater than our numerical attendance. If we devote ourselves to reading the Scripture, reading each devotion, and spending time with God in prayer, there's no limit to what God can and will do in this community!

What is Fasting?

To fast means to voluntarily abstain from certain foods, eating and/or drinking, certain activities, or from items for an extended period of time. Biblical fasting is a discipline of voluntarily denying one's self in order to be available for prayer and communion with God. Since it's an ultimate act of self-denial, you are entering into an intense training in righteousness.

Why Fast?

There are many reasons why people fasted in the Bible, and all of them are good. Some wanted wisdom and power, while others were repenting of their sins. However, there was one aspect of the fasting experience that each had in common: a personal encounter with the living God. As you begin to consider reasons for your fast, there is one that will

override all other reasons and that is to have a powerful, life-changing encounter with God.

Why Give Up Food?

What is the number one thing you trust in for your survival and existence? Jesus said in Matthew 6:33, "Seek first the kingdom of God." If food is a higher priority to you than Him, you are placing it as an idol in your heart.

Why Give Up Secular Media?

As followers of Christ, we are the temple of the Holy Spirit (see 1 Corinthians 6:19). Just as nothing unclean was allowed to enter the temple, we should be careful with what we allow to enter our hearts through our eyes or ears. As Christians, we are called to discern what we watch, what we listen to, and what we think about (see Philippians 4:8).

What Will We be Fasting?

Besides what we are fasting as a church listed in the snapshot below, we also encourage those participating to ask and listen to the Holy Spirit about giving up other things for the duration of the fast personal to them; such as social media, caffeine, video games, etc.

40 DAY SNAPSHOT & BASIC INFORMATION

1/17 - 1/26	NO SECULAR MEDIA, MEATS, OR SWEETS
1/27 - 2/5	NO SECULAR MEDIA / 1 MEAL A DAY
2/6 - 2/15	NO SECULAR MEDIA, MEATS, OR SWEETS
2/16 - 2/25	NO SECULAR MEDIA / 1 MEAL A DAY

PREPARE SPIRITUALLY

Ask God to help you make a list of your sins. Confess every sin that the Holy Spirit calls to your remembrance and accept God's forgiveness. Seek forgiveness from all whom you have offended, and forgive all who have hurt you as the Holy Spirit leads you.

PREPARE PHYSICALLY

Eat smaller meals before the fast and avoid food high in fat and sugar. If you have a chronic ailment or are on prescription medication, consult your doctor and consider modifying your fast.

Practical Tips and Guidelines

Exercise Moderately

- During the days when we're fasting a meal or only eating one meal, avoid strenuous exercise and excess physical activity.

Stay Hydrated

- Make sure to drink plenty of water while fasting.
- Drinking fruit juice during the fast will decrease your hunger pains and give natural energy.
- The best juices are made from fresh watermelon, lemons, grapes, apples, cabbage, beets, carrots, celery, or leafy green vegetables. In cold weather, you may enjoy a warm vegetable broth.
- Mix acidic juices (orange and tomato) with water for your stomach's sake.

Rest and Prepare Mentally

- Rest as much as your schedule will permit.
- Prepare yourself for temporary mental discomforts, such as impatience, crankiness, and episodes of anxiety.
- Expect some physical discomfort, especially on the second day. You may have hunger pains and dizziness.
- Withdrawal from caffeine and sugar may cause headaches.
- Physical discomforts may also include weakness, tiredness, or sleeplessness.

Breaking the Fast

- Begin ending the fast by eating certain foods gradually. Suddenly reintroducing your stomach and digestive tract to foods you haven't eaten in 40 days will likely have negative, even dangerous, consequences.
- Practice moderation and wisdom in what media you introduce back into your life after the fast is over.

Four Things to Consider

1. Be Content Throughout

Avoid complaining about what foods you can't eat, movies you can't watch, etc. Avoid appearing gloomy for people to feel sorry for you or think how spiritual you are. On the contrary, do what Jesus says and "put oil on your head and wash your face" (Matthew 6:17, CSB)! Act normal and carry on. We have the privilege and honor of giving things up for Christ, knowing He gave everything up for us. Complaining negates the very purpose of this fast. We don't have to fast, we get to.

2. Avoid Viewing the Fast as a "Diet Plan."

Some people will see the chief benefits of these next 40 days as getting a little slimmer, getting off caffeine, or not taking desserts for granted. But if we look at scripture, we see it as a time set aside for deep spiritual urgency, when God's people really wanted Him to show up in a big way.

3. Replace Sacrifice With God

Sometimes we can get caught up in the "whats" of fasting without thinking about the "Who." For these next 40 days, there are things we should want to give up in our lives so that we might replace them with God. As Jared Wilson says in his book *Gospel Deeps*, "the soul has a palate and a throat, else Jesus would not bid us drink." John Piper says, "It is not just our

bodies that are built for enjoyment, but our spiritual senses, the insides of our insides." The problem of course is that we are bent on thinking our insides will have joy when our outsides do. But it doesn't work that way. It's actually the other way around.

Food and drink will not truly satisfy our bodies until the bread and wine of Jesus's body satisfies our souls. For the next 40 days, we get to savor and enjoy Christ without any distractions. If we just give up food and don't replace it with the presence of God, it is of no benefit to us. We'll only be unnecessarily hungry people. Let's all take a moment to breathe in, slow down, and remember not just what we're about to do, but Who we are doing this for.

4. Fasting Successfully

If you sincerely humble yourself before the Lord, repent, pray, and seek God's face, you will experience a heightened awareness of His presence (see John 14:21). A single fast, however, is not a spiritual cure-all. Just as we need fresh infilling of the Holy Spirit daily, we also need new times of fasting before God. It takes time to build your spiritual fasting endurance. If you fail to make it through your first fast, do not be discouraged. As soon as possible, undertake another fast until you do succeed. God will honor you for your faithfulness.

Fasting, Sabbath, and “Digital Babylon”

WHAT IS “DIGITAL BABYLON?”

In the book, *Faith for Exiles* by David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock, the authors describe our society’s obsession with digital media. They called the effects and culture of this new way of living “Digital Babylon.” Biblically, Babylon was a place where the Israelites were in exile from their home, Jerusalem, for seventy years. Whereas Jerusalem was known as a place of faith in the true God, Babylon was a pluralistic, fast-paced, hedonistic culture where anything went, and everything was always changing.

Sounds a lot like today, doesn’t it? That’s why Kinnaman and Matlock call today’s culture Digital Babylon. But Digital Babylon isn’t a place like the biblical Babylon. It’s an idea, a movement, a culture. And we’re all in it. Anywhere you go online, Digital Babylon is pushing its values to you. “You’re perfect the way you are.” “Buy our product, and then you’ll be happy.” “Only you can decide what’s true and what’s false.” So our goal, living in the culture of Digital Babylon, is to view ourselves as exiles, not of this world but in this world.

WHAT DO WE DO ABOUT IT?

Kinnaman and Matlock prescribe five practices for building resistance to Digital Babylon, which you can read about in their book. During this 40 day fast though, our urge to you is simple: establish routines of digital sabbath. “Digital sabbath” means intentionally removing yourself from Digital Babylon for a set amount of time. Taking digital sabbath doesn’t mean you can’t even look at a screen until the end of the fast. But it does mean intentionally determining the beneficial or detrimental uses of your devices and eliminating the detrimental uses.

Maybe for you, this means removing yourself from social media, the news cycle, and digital games for the next 40 days. Or you could need to set aside an hour a day where you don’t look at your phone and are exclusively and wholly present with your family. Whatever you need to do, do something. These 40 days’ whole goal is to focus our attention on God, so remove yourself from a culture doing everything it can to pull you away from Him.

Day 1

ADAM

Read Genesis 2:4-25

Adam gets a bad rap. Our first thought about him is usually, “That’s the guy who screwed everything up.” Here’s something we think about less often: Adam was the first of all creation to bear the image of God. Genesis 1:26-27 tells us that mankind is made in the image of God, according to His likeness. And since Adam was the first man, he was the first-ever created being who bore God’s image and likeness.

Subsequently, every human being after Adam also bore the image of God, including us! But what does that mean, the image of God? It has many different aspects, but one of those aspects is that we share the relational quality of God. We serve one God who exists in three Persons. This is how God can be love. He has always had perfect relationships within Himself. So when God created us in His image, He made us to have relationships with others and reflect His relational nature. We weren’t made to be lonely. When God paraded the animals before Adam, Adam hoped one of them would make his loneliness go away. But in the end, none of them would work. Nothing but another human being would satisfy Adam’s loneliness. So then, God provided Adam with Eve. God gave Adam community with another human being.

The fact that Eve was his wife doesn’t mean that only marriage can satisfy you. Paul speaks against that in 1 Corinthians 7. But it does mean that when we feel loneliness setting in, we shouldn’t seek things like movies, shows, social media, or any other substitute. When we feel lonely, we should seek the community that God provides to us. So what kind of community do you have? Do you have believing friends who can hold you accountable in your walk with Jesus? Do you have unbelieving friends you can reach with the gospel? If you don’t have both, pray for God to send you people to share life with. And then go and find them!

By Jonathan Ciecka, The Experience Community

Pray for 10 Minutes

Day 2

ABRAHAM

Read Genesis 11:31-12:9

Abraham is one of the most influential people in human history. Three world religions consider him their founding father. He was born 4000 years ago in the town of Ur in modern-day Iraq, a city famous at that time for its worship of the moon. Abraham may have been one of the first people of his day to reject this worship and to instead believe in one, supreme, creator God. He is famous for his faith that led him to leave behind his relatives and the comforts of Haran and follow God's call to travel south into Canaan. He enters the biblical story right after Genesis has made it clear that the prospects for humanity are pretty bleak when left to our own devices. Abraham was not a perfect person either. He made mistakes, but because of his willingness to keep following God, God continued to refine him and mature him into the father of the Israelites.

In our passage we see that God calls Abraham to leave what he has known with the promise that if he does, God will make him wealthy, famous, great, blessed, and the father of a great nation of people. We don't really know if Abraham was more attracted by the chance to obey God and be part of God's plan or by the promises He made. However, we know that Abraham had enough faith in God's goodness and power to follow the call immediately.

Has God ever called you to leave your comfort zone? Have you followed that calling? Would you do it if He calls you in the future? Are you ready to obey immediately when He calls? Does it give you hope that God still used Abraham even though he was not perfect?

By Bobby Blaylock, North Boulevard

Pray for 10 Minutes

Day 3

SARAH

Read Genesis 20:1-21:7

Sarah (Sarai) was the mother of Isaac and the wife of Abraham, who was known as the “father of the faithful.” Sarah, who was childless until she was 90 years old, did not believe God’s promise to Abraham. Actually, I find it funny! The promise is that she would be called “a mother of nations” through conceiving and bearing a son, aiding in God’s faithfulness to Abraham.

Sarah knew that her husband had faith in God. She even went along when Abraham wanted to uproot her and move towns so he could follow his passion of serving God. But it seemed that Abraham went too far when his leadership of their household resulted in awkward scenarios for Sarah, such as risking her safety to save him.

Abraham pursued a promise that was physically impossible for Sarah; a baby. “A mother of nations” at age 90? Yes, that made her laugh. So that is what she did. Up until the point her pregnancy was undeniable, she had to laugh. Although a son was promised to Abraham through Sarah, they both laughed at this promise; it was too extraordinary for them to accept. When God did what He said He’d do, they did what God told them to do. They named the baby Isaac, which means “he laughs.”

Have you ever found it hard to take God seriously? Have your life situations been so ironic that they are laughable? Or even just found it hard believing the Father knows what He is talking about? In our laughter, we often forget God does not fail. We must be submissive and obedient to God in our journey, even when it does not make sense or seem possible. The reliability of God’s promises to us is just as dependable as His promises to Abraham. They may feel just as impossible, but they are just as faithful.

By Regina Collins, North Boulevard

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 4

HAGAR

Read Genesis 21:8-21

Hagar was an Egyptian slave who helped serve Abraham's wife, Sarah. At Sarah's encouragement, Hagar gave birth to Abraham's first son, Ishmael. But 14 years later, when Sarah gave birth to Abraham's second son, Isaac, Hagar and Ishmael found themselves demoted to second-class citizens in their own home. So after Ishmael mocked and mistreated Isaac, Sarah took the opportunity to have Hagar and her son kicked out of the family.

Just as Hagar's plight seemed hopeless, The Angel of the Lord (who many believe to be the pre-incarnate Jesus) lovingly intervened. Where there was fear, He spoke words of comfort. Where there was hopelessness, He promised the hope of a future. Where there seemed to be death, He offered life-saving water, just as Jesus would later come to offer us Living Water. God promised Hagar that her son would live and be the start of a great nation. Just as in Genesis 16 when Hagar called God "El Roi"—which means "the God who sees"—God saw this "nobody," this foreign slave girl and her child, and He did not overlook their distress.

Hagar's story gives us a glimpse into God's character and love for His children. Yes, God allowed Hagar and Ishmael to be sent away, which at first may be hard to understand, but then we see that He never abandoned them, He continued to provide for them during their difficult circumstances, and He kept His promises to them. God stepped into their situation and provided for their needs because He still had a plan for Hagar and Ishmael. Just as God saw Hagar, He sees you and has a plan for you. God loves you and wants to comfort you and provide for you in difficult times. When things seem to be hopeless, turn to Him.

By Amanda Keener, The Experience Community

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 5

MELCHIZEDEK

Read Genesis 14:1-20

Melchizedek is a mysterious biblical character who is described as both a king and priest. After Abraham had defeated several other kings to rescue his nephew Lot, Melchizedek blessed him. Abraham gave a tenth (tithe) of all he had to Melchizedek (see Genesis 14:17–20). Melchizedek is only mentioned one more time in the Old Testament, in Psalm 110:4, where it says, “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.”

With such scant mention, it may be surprising that Melchizedek features prominently in the book of Hebrews. Why would such an obscure character get this attention? It is all about Jesus. Because Melchizedek appears “out of nowhere” in the life of Abraham, the Hebrew writer in chapter 7 says he is “without genealogy” and a “priest forever.” Just as Melchizedek’s superiority was shown when Abraham made tithes to him, so Christ is superior to the priests in the law of Moses. Melchizedek came long before Levi, whose tribe served as priests in the Law of Moses. Levi’s great-grandfather, Abraham, had already submitted to his priest, Melchizedek. Thus, Abraham’s line (Israel) had already recognized the superiority of Melchizedek to the Levites. Rather than seeing Jesus as a Levitical priest, we should respect him as a priest of the Melchizedekian order. The Scriptures do not report Melchizedek’s death, so the Hebrew writer playfully builds on Melchizedek’s “non-death” to point to Jesus’s eternal priesthood. “Now there have been many of those priests since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood” (Hebrews 9:23-24).

All institutions under heaven, even the law of Moses, are inferior to Jesus, and all will ultimately submit to Him. No government entity, military power, or state institution deserves our devotion, but Jesus does. The Bible even says that the most fundamental of institutions, the family itself, does not supersede Jesus’ claim on our lives. For Christ to be our Melchizedekian priest means that we love Him most and kneel only to Him.

By Michael Strickland, North Boulevard

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 6

ISAAC

Read Genesis 26:1-33

As the son of Abraham and Sarah in their old age, Isaac surely witnessed much in his life regarding how God interacted with his parents. Like others in the Old Testament, we can see Isaac as a “type” of Christ in that he exhibited similar attributes. The parallel is seen between Isaac bearing the wood for the sacrificial fire (Genesis 22:6) and Christ carrying His cross. Growing up the way he did, Isaac surely understood the covenants God made with his father, Abraham.

We see in Isaac that, as with most children, kids learn from the examples of their parents. Isaac no doubt heard the accounts from his father about his experiences in Egypt; for example, Abraham portrayed his wife as his sister to Pharaoh’s officials (see Genesis 12:11-13), and Isaac used the same ruse with his wife and Abimelech (see Genesis 26:7-9). His father also had dealings with Abimelech and Phichol in the region of Gerar. Abraham often chose negotiation over direct conflict, and Isaac in this passage seems to do the same. He kept moving further away from Abimelech in order to find a peaceful place to settle. He finally got to a place where God confirmed to him by saying, “I am the God of your father Abraham; do not fear, for I am with you” (Genesis 26:24).

As Christians, we often expect the world to leave us alone and accept our stance of faith in Christ Jesus. What we find in these passages is that jealousy was the driving force behind the conflict. This is often true today. The world cannot comprehend the “peace” we should exhibit in its chaos. The world loves conflict, fear, and power. We, however, are to pursue these: “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law” (see Galatians 5:22-23).

By Joe Brown, The Experience Community

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 7

JACOB

Read Genesis 29:1-30

Jacob was the grandson of Abraham, the son of Isaac, and the one who would be named Israel. He would later have twelve sons who would give birth to the nation of Israel. Jacob was also an imperfect follower of God, but a follower, nonetheless.

In order to fulfill God's promise to Abraham to make his descendants like the uncountable stars, Jacob needed a wife. Isaac sent Jacob to Rebekah's family, to her brother Laban, to find a wife. Laban had two daughters, but Jacob loved the younger one, Rachel, and agreed to work seven years for her hand in marriage. Because Jacob loved Rachel, verse 20 says that those seven years "seemed like only a few days." At the end of seven years, Jacob got a wife (Leah and not Rachel!), but he later got Rachel (for another seven years of work) plus each of their slaves through whom his children would come.

We seem to be wired so that when we have an intense desire for something, we'll do whatever it takes to get it, sometimes even if it risks our freedom and health. In fact, we love stories of seeing people overcome barriers such as doors being slammed in their faces, being rejected over and over, and still being able to come out on top. When we treasure something, it becomes our heart's obsession (See Matthew 6:21). The problem isn't that we treasure things, but that we treasure the wrong things, which have no real temporal worth and no eternal worth. Many people pursue things that will only leave them empty once obtained. We need our hearts rewired so that we seek the One who is our ultimate treasure, Jesus. This rewiring must be a supernatural work through the Holy Spirit in the gospel of Christ. Jesus becomes our treasure, and "the things of earth grow strangely dim." One day we'll see Jesus face to face, receive resurrection bodies, and see all that Jesus has prepared for us. On that day, our suffering and struggles on earth will seem "like only a few days." What are you treasuring?

By Mike Lee, The Experience Community

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 8

LEAH

Read Genesis 29:15-35

Leah was the first-born daughter of Laban. She was Rachel's older, unattractive sister, the unwanted first wife of Jacob, and the mother of six sons who made up half of the twelve tribes of Jacob. Her fourth son, Judah's bloodline, is significant in the lineage of Christ.

Leah's story does not make for a great Hallmark romance movie since she was the wife that was not wanted! Her father tricked Jacob into marrying her, and Jacob was very disappointed when he found out what had happened. He wanted her younger sister, and now he was stuck with a wife he didn't want. So, where does this whole situation leave Leah? Leah was stuck in a loveless marriage and had no control of her situation. She could have been angry at God for putting her in this position, but she chose to cry out to Him, and God faithfully showed that He was with her. He blessed her with six sons, which she faithfully raised to follow God. Her son, Judah's bloodline, produced King David, King Solomon, and then Jesus, the Savior of the world! You can see Leah's faithful journey with God each time she gives birth to her sons. She names them in honor of God: Reuben - behold a son (God blessed her), Simeon - hearing (God heard her), Levi - joined (God joined her to Jacob), Judah - praise (God blessed her).

All of us want to control things in our lives. We want to control our jobs, friendships, and circumstances. As we go through our lives trying to control everything, it is easy to get frustrated and disappointed when God doesn't go along with what we are trying to control! Leah's submission to the Lord was a blessing to her, and in the end, to the world! We can learn from Leah. God has amazing blessings planned for you. Letting go of controlling your life and fully submitting to the Lord will allow Him to do what He has planned for you. Are you ready to see His plans for you?

By Amy Sain, North Boulevard

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 9

RACHEL

Read Genesis 31:4-35

Rachel was the wife of Jacob, daughter of Laban, and the mother of Joseph and Benjamin. She was known for her great beauty, and that Jacob worked many years to marry her. When the Lord told Jacob to return to his father's land, Rachel stole her father's household gods (idols). These were probably small figurines. We don't know why Rachel stole them. We only know that she thought they were important enough to be worth risking her relationship with her father and husband. When her father Laban came looking for them, Rachel hid them from him.

See how much these small figurines nearly cost her and those around her! At that time, Rachel had not yet given birth to Benjamin. Benjamin was one of the twelve "patriarchs" of Israel, a leader of one of the 12 tribes. The tribe of Benjamin was one of the smallest, but significant people came from it, like Saul, the first king of Israel, and the apostle Paul, who wrote 13 books of the New Testament! All this would've been lost if she had been discovered, all for a few wooden figurines. Her idols gave her nothing, and she nearly gave everything for them.

What idols do we carry with us? Maybe our cell phones have become idols to us, or social media, exercise, perhaps even our children. Our God is abundantly clear that He is to be first in our lives and that we should have no idols; that is, we should worship nothing other than Him. An excellent way to decide if you have idols is to look at where you spend your time and money. Do you spend as much time in prayer and reading the Bible as you do on social media or TV or whatever could become an idol in your life? What things in your life have become an idol? Spend time in prayer asking God to point out to you any idols in your life.

By Julie Young, North Boulevard

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 10

JOB

Read Job 40:1-9; 42:1-17

Job was a wealthy man, blameless and upright, always careful to avoid doing evil. This story starts in heaven when Satan appears before God. God boasts to Satan about Job's goodness, and Satan argues that Job is only good because God has blessed him abundantly. Satan then challenges that Job will curse God if he's permitted to test him. God allows Satan to torment Job to test this bold claim, but He forbids Satan to take Job's life in the process.

"Why would God allow good people to suffer?" is asked all the time. I know that seems hard to understand, but the Bible teaches us that God's thoughts and ways are not like ours and that He knows what's best for us. Life consists of "ups and downs" and "highs and lows" or what some people call "the process." Now, when God allows "the process" or Satan to test us, and we pass that test, God gets the glory, and in return, He blesses our lives richly. Here's the truth, God wasn't concerned about the suffering Job was experiencing; after all, He allowed it. It was about Job's response. How we respond to trials reveals the true intent of our hearts. Job teaches us the difficulty of this lesson as well as the importance of it.

We could reject the God who allows suffering; most people do. Or we could trust the God of the Universe who remains in control over all evil and all suffering. Here's the reality, suffering doesn't make sense, and faith during suffering makes even less sense, but placing your life in the hands of a loving God who can take care of you is the only reasonable response a person can ever take. It's called a sacrifice of praise. This act of worship (yet difficult) always brings us closer to a faithful and merciful God, but only if we choose it. The sufferings and disappointments of life will eventually find you; it's inevitable. Will we humble ourselves before an all-powerful God and trust Him during times of suffering? Will we remain faithful to God?

By Joshua Jamerson, Crossland Church

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 11

MOSES

Read Numbers 20:1-13

If you were to make a list of the most memorable people in the Old Testament, it would be difficult not to think of Moses. He met with God at the burning bush, parted the Red Sea, and it was through Moses that the Ten Commandments were given. These are just a few of the miraculous events that Moses took part in as he led God's people to the Promised Land.

Moses was God's representative to the people as they wandered for forty years in the desert. Time and again, the people would come to Moses with a problem that needed to be solved, and this is one of those times. We can all agree that a lack of water is a serious need that should be addressed, and yet Moses goes beyond what is asked of him by God and allows his emotions to get the best of him. The consequence for Moses was not being able to go into the Promised Land. At first glance, this may seem harsh, but we must remember that we are talking about disobeying the Creator of the Universe.

In this passage, God's definition of obedience is "complete" obedience. This means not adding or taking away from what God has asked of us. How do we do this? Simply put, by being obedient to what He has "already" shown you, by pursuing to know God more, and when he asks something of you...say yes. The struggle comes in when we let our emotions and feelings take control. We end up twisting what God has said because we think we know better. If we would only realize that the best thing for us is to live in "complete" obedience, then we would be able to share in the peace that only comes from God. Take time today to ask God if you are living in partial obedience to Him, and if so, ask for forgiveness and commit in your heart to live in complete obedience from this day forward!

By Karl Williams, The Experience Community

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 12

AARON

Read Exodus 32:1-35

Aaron was the brother of Moses, one of history's most famous leaders. To be a sibling in such a situation can be challenging, intimidating, or even annoying. Aaron was assigned to help Moses lead, That means he clearly understood the vision and challenges. He had a close-up view of every great victory God had given his people, including the plagues on their oppressors and parting the waters for a multitude to escape to Mount Sinai.

Moses disappeared on his ascent up the mountain to meet with God for further instructions. As he did, Aaron became the second-in-command and was responsible for maintaining order among the people. Unexpectedly, days turned into long weeks with no sign of Moses returning. A spirit of uncertainty and fear fell on all the people. So in search of something familiar for reassurance, Aaron made an idol shaped like gods of their former oppressors in Egypt. The action unified the unsettled population and brought a period of celebration. Aaron attempted to dedicate the festivities and worship to the true Lord, but idolatry had taken everyone's attention away from God. We cannot clearly understand what Aaron thought when he made the golden calf. But we do know he was not only distracted from his focus on the one true God, but he was distracted from his responsibility to call others to faithful living, and distracted from the opportunity to provide leadership in a time of need. He was preoccupied by the pressures of pleasing the people around him.

Similarly, Satan's greatest victory is to distract your attention from the true God and his power to work in your life. When you focus on following the desires of the crowd around you, then some form of idolatry will creep into your life and substitute for your worship of God. The results are devastating for you and all others who are influenced by your life. Recognize how the Lord has blessed you up to this point and keep your faith focused. Only then can you keep from turning to idols.

By Glenn Robb, North Boulevard

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 13

MIRIAM

Read Numbers 12:1-16

In Israel's journey from Egyptian captivity to the land God promised them, Miriam was an important figure. She was the older sister of Moses, the man whom God chose to lead the people out from Egypt. The Bible also describes her as a prophet in Exodus 15, clearly an influential leader of her time. But despite the many good things she did for the people, she sometimes let her position and status drive her to make much of herself and lose sight of the authority given to others.

When Miriam disrespected her little brother Moses by calling into question his place with God, the consequences for her disrespect were severe. Not only did a skin disease physically threaten her health, but it also isolated her from the community and placed her outside their protection. Being outside camp was dangerous, not to mention lonely. This demonstrates for us how important it is to respect any authority granted by God. Disrespecting our parents, slandering our government officials, ignoring the wisdom and guidance of our spiritual leaders, all of these things are as equally dangerous for us as they were for Miriam.

Ultimately, Miriam's disrespect wasn't scandalous because Moses was such a great guy. It was scandalous because she looked at God and told Him "no." Her actions said, "I don't really trust the choice you made, and I'm sure I could do better. Let me handle this." If we reject the authority God has granted others, that's a wholesale rejection of God. We have to guard against attitudes that tell us we know better than God. Don't let the mistakes of authority figures around you or what you perceive to be your relative competency blind you to the will of God. Remind yourself that you can trust in His plan and the work He's doing. When you live in that trust, you'll stay within the safety of the structure and community God has built.

By Emily Harmon, The Experience Community

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 14

RAHAB

Read Joshua 2:1–21; 6:22–25

Rahab was a harlot whose house formed part of the town wall of Jericho in the late Bronze Age. Rahab is assuredly the same Rahab identified in Matthew 1:5, making her an ancestor of David and including her in the genealogy of Jesus. The author of Hebrews names her as an example of faith in God (see Hebrews 11:31), and James calls her righteous for her efforts in allowing Joshua’s spies to lodge with her and protecting them by sending the spies pursuers on a false trail.

Joshua sent out the two spies to “spy out the land” as part of the final preparations to conquer Jericho. The fidelity of a harlot saved the spies’ lives. Indeed, Rahab saw Joshua’s spies as representatives of the God of Israel. Her faith was firm yet simple, and she was obedient.

Rahab risked her life by taking the spies into her home and protecting them. Had the king uncovered Rahab’s betrayal, he would have had her killed for treachery. Instead, she protected the spies from the king’s grasp and even gave instructions to the spies on how to evade their pursuers. The spies were not the only people of God who were saved in this story. Rahab believed in the God of Israel and knew the Hebrews would conquer the city. Rahab depended on the spies for the preservation of her family as much as they depended on her. When Jericho was destroyed, the Israelites spared Rahab and her family.

Today, the enemy is coming after God’s people. Some of God’s people are being “cancelled,” some are drowning in litigation for their beliefs, and others are being attacked through job loss, family issues, and more. Indeed Jesus says we will have trouble in this broken world, but He has overcome the world! Will you protect God’s people from harm? Will you risk it all and tie the scarlet cord to your window to protect and preserve your church family?

By Russell Rigsby, North Boulevard

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 15

DEBORAH

Read Judges 4:1-24

Most Old Testament judges seem very different from our modern concept of judges. Rather than arbitrate between right and wrong, they were more likely to be military leaders, delivering Israel from some foreign oppressor. Deborah, the only woman judge, seems like our modern judges. People came to her for her wisdom and to settle disputes. Israel's military leadership should have been provided by its top general, Barak, but Deborah led when Barak failed to do so.

Israel had forsaken God again, so the Lord sent the Canaanites to oppress His people and turn them back to Him. It appears that God commanded General Barak to lead the Israelites against the Canaanite army and their iron chariots led by Canaanite General Sisera (v6). But there were those iron chariots, and Barak was afraid. Deborah, as a prophetess, reminded Barak of his commission to lead, but he was unwilling unless Deborah accompanied him. Because of his lack of faith, the glory of the battle would not go to Barak but to God first and then to women (Deborah and Jael).

What do you do when someone in a position of leadership fails to lead? Deborah's first step, moved by the Spirit of God, was to remind the positional leader of his responsibility. Still, Barak refused to move unless Deborah went with him. How many Godly women wish their men would lead as husbands and fathers? How many children wish their parents, either of them, would lead? How many Christians wish their shepherds would lead? Deborah's example is first to remind and then to accompany the weak leader, leading alongside them. Remember that Deborah is not concerned about her glory or credit but rather about accomplishing God's mission. Don't ignore a failure to lead God's people in the church, the family, or elsewhere, but honor the positional leader by accompanying them and reminding them that it is ultimately the Lord who is accompanying them.

By Kimball Bullington, North Boulevard

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 16

J A E L

Read Judges 4:1-24

Jael and her husband, Heber the Kenite, lived in Kedesh, far from the rest of their tribe. Historically, the Kenites acted as Israel's allies, providing refuge for Moses when he fled from Egypt and guiding the Israelites on their journey to the Promised Land. But Heber's family had an alliance with Israel's enemy, King Jabin of Canaan. When Sisera entered Jael's tent, she found herself caught between conflicting loyalties – should she help Israel or their oppressors?

Throughout the Old Testament, the Israelites struggled with the decision to remain loyal to God. They continually chose to do "evil in the Lord's sight" rather than live as God instructed them (4:1). But God repeatedly used people like Jael to bring about Israel's repentance and redemption. When Jael killed Sisera, "Israel saw God defeat Jabin, the Canaanite king" (4:23). This victory was long-awaited and much celebrated. Afterward, Israel lived at peace for forty years (5:31). Even so, the Israelites might have saved themselves considerable trouble if they had obeyed God and driven the Canaanites out of the Promised Land 120 years earlier.

Too often, we live like the rebellious Israelites. We procrastinate when what we're asked to do sounds difficult or painful. We put off the hard work of becoming like Christ, and though it may bring us temporary comfort, it ultimately leads to deeper heartache and unrest. Jael's actions teach us that we shouldn't hesitate to deal with things that are opposed to God. This doesn't mean we're called to drive a tent peg through someone's head, because our war is not against flesh and blood but spiritual forces (see Ephesians 6:12). So, how do you deal with the spiritual opposition you face? Do you put it off like the Israelites? Or, like Jael, do you do what it takes to remove the opposition? Though that work may not always be easy, we can draw strength and courage from God, Who will be present with us wherever we may go.

By Sarah Wiggers, The Experience Community

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 17

RUTH

Read Ruth 1:1-5; 4:13-22

Ruth was a Moabite woman married to an Ephrathite man. The man and his family moved to Moab from Bethlehem in Judah, where Ruth lived. Several years after moving to Moab, Ruth's husband, father-in-law, and brother-in-law died, leaving behind Ruth, her sister-in-law, Orpah, and her mother-in-law, Naomi. Ruth and Naomi, both now widows, stayed together and traveled back to Judah.

Instead of returning to her own father and mother, Ruth became like a daughter to Naomi and stayed by her side caring for her. Ruth was a woman of faithfulness and obedience. Even in the tragic loss of her husband, she was showing loyalty to those she loved. Returning to her own mother may have been the easy or comfortable thing for Ruth, but she chose loyalty over comfort and followed Naomi to Bethlehem in Judah. In Judah, while collecting grain for herself and Naomi, Ruth met a wealthy man named Boaz. Boaz was related to Ruth's father-in-law, Elimelech. When Boaz met her, he told her he had heard of her faithfulness to Naomi, and he wanted to reward her by showing her favor and taking care of her. Boaz and Ruth later married and gave birth to a son.

Just like Ruth, many of us face tragedy in which we have a choice to stay faithful to the Lord and what He has called us into or to walk in self-comfort. When we are drowning in doubt or anxiety, do we run to the Prince of Peace, or do we sit in self-pity and fear? When we lose someone we love, do we doubt the Lord's goodness or trust in his faithfulness? When everything in our culture tells us to follow our hearts by fulfilling our own desires, we will miss our assignment as followers of Christ if we are not careful. God *always* proves Himself to be faithful, and if we do not choose to be faithful to Him, we will miss an infinite amount of blessings.

By Emma Miller, The Experience Community

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 18

HANNAH

Read 1 Samuel 1:1-28

Hannah was despondent. She had remained childless for so long that her husband's other wife had given birth to several sons and daughters. Though her husband was good to her, Hannah was determined to become a mother herself. When the family traveled for their yearly pilgrimage to make sacrifices in the holy town of Shiloh, Hannah begged God through fervent, silent prayer to give her a son. If the Lord delivered, she promised to give the child back to God.

God was faithful, and Hannah bore a son. She named him Samuel because it means requested of God. When Samuel was three years old, she brought him to the priest to begin his service to the Lord. Samuel would devote himself to listening and obeying God from an early age, and Hannah would visit and bring him a new robe as he grew.

At first glance, it would seem that Hannah came out on the losing side of her bargain with God. She had pleaded with the Lord to help her conceive, and though she was granted her ultimate desire, Hannah was compelled to relinquish her toddler and allow him to be raised by Eli, the priest. According to the arrangement, Hannah had her precious child in her arms for only three short years. But Hannah knew what many of us so often forget—all of what we have belongs to God, both before it was given to us and long after we received it. 1 Chronicles 29:14 tells us, "For everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your own hand." If we begin from a place of devoting all we have to God, then we can hold people and possessions with a looser grasp, avoiding the distractions of a worldly attitude that shouts "Mine!" and replace it with a gentle voice whispering "His."

By Abby Rosser, North Boulevard

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 19

SAUL

Read 1 Samuel 13:1-22

Saul, the first king of Israel, was God's chosen to lead the scattered nation. Even though Saul won many battles, he often lacked confidence in God. Saul's disobedience to God was the primary source of his problems, especially as it brought heartache and trouble into the lives of those close to him. Saul's life ended tragically during battle. After being wounded, he took his life by falling on his sword.

There's a famous saying, "If you want something done right, do it yourself." The problem with that statement is sometimes God instructs us to wait on others. Patience is a tricky thing, especially in this busy world. In these moments, our sinful human nature takes over, and we fail. Often. Much like Saul, we think we have the ability to fix the problem on our own. Saul could see the battle slipping away with every soldier that fled. At that moment, all the pieces were there: the time appointed by the high priest Samuel, the battle, the burnt offering, and the fellowship offering. There was just one thing missing, God. Saul makes a decision not to wait on Samuel, as instructed, but instead offers the burnt and fellowship offerings himself. Saul allowed the fear of failure and the noise around him to distract him from what God had planned. This act of disobedience led to Saul's disconnection from God.

Our decisions have consequences. Thankfully, we have the Bible to guide us. Psalm 130:5 shows us how to proceed in moments like the one Saul experienced, it says "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits. And in His Word, I hope." Our obedience to God is more significant than our sacrifices to God. Next time we find ourselves in a moment of trial, let's not be like Saul. Let's take a minute, breathe, and focus on the Lord. Let's remember his past promises and actions and wait. He will meet us there.

By Travis Summers, The Experience Community

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 20

DAVID

Read 2 Samuel 12:1-23

David was a shepherd who tended sheep. He famously defeated Goliath and earned the reputation as a hero for his people. King Saul grew increasingly jealous of David and even asked his son to kill David. Eventually, out of fear for his life, David went into hiding to avoid being murdered. After King Saul was killed in war and the threat to David was no more, David, at the age of 30, was appointed King of Israel.

King David sat on the throne for 40 years. We remember David as a righteous man who wanted to please God. After all, in his instructions to his son Solomon before he died, David told his son to observe all the Lord requires. Not only was David seen as a hero in battle, but he was also known as a strong and powerful King of Israel. In so many ways, King David seems to reach the pinnacle of success. What do we have in common with such a valiant leader?

During his reign, we see in a previous scripture that King David had an affair and took for himself a wife that was not his. In this text, God sends Nathan to King David to hold him accountable for his sins. It was a humbling moment for King David when Nathan pointed out that he was just like the rich man who stole the poor man's sheep. The message from the Lord in this passage causes us to ask a powerful question. Why do we still find ourselves following our own hearts and desires when God has given us every reason to listen to him? Sin destroys what God created. Sin destroys families. Sin destroys people. Sin always requires a high price to be paid. In King David's case, his child had to die because of his sin. We all need forgiveness, and similarly, none of us can hide from the cost of our sin. King David reminds us that while we might receive forgiveness from God, there are still consequences because of sin.

By Trey Jones, North Boulevard

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 21

BATHSHEBA

Read 1 Kings 1:1-40

Bathsheba's relationships initially identified her importance within Israelite history. Of David's seventy "mighty men," Bathsheba claimed one as husband, one as father, and one as grandfather; she was well acquainted with loyalty as witnessed through each of these. Later, as the wife of King David, hers was the voice called upon to boldly speak truthful reminders and God's will to her husband and king.

With a throne takeover attempt already in progress by David's son Adonijah, urgency was necessary. Her "beloved wife" status was being called upon to rally King David to action...her voice was the reasoning reminder that the prophet Nathan sought to appeal to an uninformed, yet still reigning, king. Not only was the throne in jeopardy, but so were the lives of Bathsheba, Solomon, and those loyal to their cause. King David had made a promise to her that Solomon would succeed him on the throne. A promise to her, to all Israel, and to God. And now, if he did nothing, that promise would be meaningless and God's will unfulfilled. She humbly yet boldly reminded her King of his own words and promises, and he remembered that promise declared years before. Israelite history was forever changed because of her willingness to whisper a reminder.

As humans, we unwittingly forget things. If you are a parent, you are aware that your children will hardly let you forget even the small stuff, such as a promised ice cream cone or a new toy. But on the big hand-to-God promises...those are the ones we may need help fulfilling. And should our own minds temporarily overlook, forget, or even ignore them, we need to surround ourselves with people, our "beloveds," who will speak truth gently yet boldly regarding our promises, hold us accountable, and are not willing to maintain "status quo," but rather exhort and motivate us. Find your promise-whisperer and nurture their influence and interaction in your life.

By Cindy Perry Patton, North Boulevard

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 22

SOLOMON

Read 1 Kings 11:1-13

Solomon was king of Israel, succeeding his father, David. After taking his place on the throne, God gave Solomon the chance to ask Him for anything. In humility, he asked for the wisdom to rule over God's people justly. God was so pleased with Solomon's request that He gave him not only more wisdom than anyone in Solomon's lifetime but also a vast amount of wealth and honor. God had one request, "that you walk in My ways and keep My commands" (1 Kings 3:14).

Solomon did many great things during his 40-year reign; however, he chose to abandon God's instruction and use the gifts God had given him for his own agenda and selfish desires. Solomon ignored God's command not to intermarry with surrounding nations. This is not an indictment on interracial relationships because God plainly states the reason for His edict; He says it is because "they will turn your heart away to follow their gods" (1 Kings 11:2).

That is exactly what happened in Solomon's life. Despite all the wisdom he was given, he gave in to the worldly influences around him. This brought him to a place where he was extremely far from the God he once humbly and fully depended upon.

I don't think anyone wakes up and says, "Today, I am going to completely wreck my life and ignore all the wisdom God has offered me." Our lives can slowly unravel when we forget to carefully guard our hearts (see Proverbs 4:23) and when we carelessly choose who we want to develop close friendships with. We must realize that those we allow to be close to us will affect our minds as well as our souls. They can either usher us into a deeper relationship with God or they can lead us astray and deceive us.

By Jeremy Smith, The Experience Community

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 23

THE SHUNAMMITE WOMAN

Read 2 Kings 4:8-37

The Shunammite woman, a notable God-fearing woman from the village of Shunem, welcomed the prophet named Elisha to her home for a meal every time he passed by. Through these interactions, she came to know Elisha as a true prophet and a holy man of God. Being a generous woman and wanting to do something more for the prophet, she petitioned her husband to allow her to build a room in their home for the sole purpose of giving the prophet a place to stay during his travels. Elisha was moved by her generosity and asked her if he could use his influence with the King on her behalf.

She explained she was not looking for favor and that she was content among her own people. Elisha's servant explained that the woman had no son and her husband was old. Elisha called the woman to him and prophesied over her that she would have a son by this time next year. The prophecy was fulfilled, and the woman gave birth to a son. Sometime later, the boy became sick and died. The Shunammite woman knew at once she needed the holy man of God to intervene on her son's behalf. She journeyed to where he was and pleaded for him to save her son. Elisha came to Shunem and restored her son to life.

The Shunammite woman showed Elisha great respect. She honored him with her hospitality and did not ask for anything in return. When we invite God's people into the intimate parts of our lives, we exhibit the love of Christ. We do this not to serve our own needs and desires but to honor the Lord. We are told to love our neighbor as ourselves. Are we showing neighborly love to our brothers and sisters in Christ? If so, are we doing it for recognition or immediate reward? Is our hospitality glorifying God? Take time today to spread the love of Christ to another brother or sister.

By Denise Rapier, The Experience Community

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 24

HEZEKIAH

Read 2 Kings 18:1-12

Hezekiah was only 25 years old when he became king. Remembered as one of the greatest kings of Judah, he trusted God and kept his commandments. He tore down all idolatry across the nation, removing the high places, breaking the pillars, cutting down the Asherah, and even breaking the bronze serpent Moses had made because the people were making offerings to it.

When Hezekiah ascended to the throne, Assyria was sweeping across Mesopotamia. And they were no ordinary military power. With their superior abilities in siege warfare and their reliance on sheer, unadulterated terror, the Assyrians made examples of those who resisted them, including deportations (at best) and horrific physical torture (at worst). The northern kingdom of Israel had just been conquered and deported by Assyria, and upon becoming king, Hezekiah must have considered immediately bolstering his military. But he didn't. Hezekiah knew he must put first things first. Without God, all the military might on the earth was useless. So, in the first year of his reign, Hezekiah put Israel's spiritual house in order. He reopened and repaired the temple. He consecrated the people of Judah to their God in repentance, sacrifices, and worship. He tore down all the idols. Scripture is clear about the connection between King Hezekiah's actions and God's response. "And the LORD was with him; wherever he went out, he prospered" (2 Kings 18:7).

None of us is facing a physical army like Assyria today, but each of us is faced with spiritual forces of evil. Will we succumb to the darkness around us and exchange the truth of God for lies? Or will we tear down our idols of acceptance, success, and entertainment to be fully devoted to God? "For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God and take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:4-5). Show us, God, the strongholds in our lives, and through the strength of your Holy Spirit, help us demolish them.

By Renée Webb Sproles, North Boulevard

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 25

HOSEA AND GOMER

Read Hosea 1:1-11; 3:1-5

The story of Hosea and Gomer's marriage contrasts the faithfulness of God with the faithlessness of Israel in forsaking the God who loved them, cared for them, and provided for them. In Hosea's relationship with Gomer, Gomer continues to reject the love of her husband, abandoning him to remain promiscuous.

God is so faithful. In fact, he cannot be unfaithful (see 2 Tim. 2:13). He asks us to be people of faith, but the truth is, you and I are fickle. At times our faithfulness depends on so many variables. I will be faithful if it fits into my schedule. I will be faithful when things are going my way. I am always faithful when God works in the way I expect. Can you imagine, however, receiving the instruction to marry someone who was incredibly promiscuous? Pray for the hurting, give to the poor, sacrifice your time to help others; I can get on board with any of those. However, being asked to marry a woman whom everyone knows lives with a scarlet letter? Wait just a minute! Hosea received just such a message. Even through her unfaithfulness, he continually pursues her to exhibit his love and faithfulness to her, and she discards it like yesterday's leftovers.

When I read this story, I wonder why Hosea keeps going back for her? Why does he continue to love her? Why is he so faithful? I want to tell him, "Cut her loose! She's not worth it!" I mean, I get that he wants to do God's will but isn't there a limit? The answer to that is, of course, "no." There is no limit to faithfulness. Andy Stanley says, "Too many Christians have a commitment to convenience. They'll stay faithful as long as it doesn't involve risk, rejection, or criticism."

We are called to faith. We must be faithful. There is no option. Friend, faithfulness becomes a contradiction when we think we have a choice in whether or not to be faithful.

By Gregg Sowards, The Experience Community

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 26

ISAIAH

Read Isaiah 6:1-13

The book of Isaiah is filled with prophecy, yet it was written in a very poetic way that can be both confusing and inspiring. Isaiah was certainly a great prophet. His prophecies included major events such as the coming of Jesus and the restoration of Israel.

Isaiah struggled with the same issues we struggle with today when considering our role in God's kingdom. Upon seeing the Lord and hearing His voice, Isaiah immediately knew he and the people around him were unworthy of God's presence. We know that we alone are not worthy of God's mercy and love. In Isaiah's case, one of the seraphim flew to him with a lump of burning coal and touched it to his lips to clean his lips and atone for his sins. Only after Isaiah's guilt had been taken away through that cleansing act was he able to respond fully to God's call to him.

It is important to remember that, just as Isaiah was a sinner that needed atonement, we too need the atonement for our sins. Fortunately, we have a much easier way to cleanse ourselves through Jesus. Jesus has already placed that coal on us to provide the cleansing ember to our souls. God still uses each of us, despite our sins. The reason He does this is pretty simple. Jesus has already provided the cleansing ember for us. We are made ready to work in God's kingdom the moment we accept Jesus. Our past transgressions no longer have any bearing on our worthiness for His kingdom. He doesn't use us because He needs us. He uses us because we need Him to use us. Those moments come in big splashes, like when you cross paths with someone eager to hear the Word, and in small moments, like reflecting Jesus' love by buying the coffee for the person in that car behind you in the morning. We are all called to shine the love of Jesus regardless of our past. Jesus has touched our lips with the burning coal so that we can fulfill our role in God's plan.

By Eric Clements, North Boulevard

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 27

DANIEL

Read Daniel 1:1-21

Nebuchadnezzar's decisive victory over King Jehoiakim of Judah led to a series of deportations of the best and the brightest. Being a strong, handsome young man of royal lineage, Daniel was a prime candidate to serve the great Babylonian king. Likely only a teenager, Daniel was among the first to be deported from his homeland in Judah across hostile foreign lands to Babylon, where he would undergo an expedited form of cultural assimilation.

During his time in Babylon, Daniel was renamed in homage to a pagan god, received training in astrology and magic, and was offered the king's finest wine and choicest meats. It was at the king's table where Daniel and his friends drew the line. Indulging in a non-kosher meal sacrificed to pagan gods would signify a shift in allegiance. To indulge would be to cut ties with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, leaving the Law of God in the rearview mirror. Daniel ("God is my judge") would truly become Belteshazzar ("Bel will protect") all in the name of status and pleasure. Risking his career and even his life, Daniel resolved not to eat from the king's table and chose instead to follow the food laws of his God. In exchange for Daniel's allegiance, God granted Daniel strength and wisdom far above that of his peers. Despite the strong seduction of the palace on the one hand and the very real threat of death on the other, Daniel refused to compromise on his convictions. He refused to realign his allegiance.

In one sense, life is a series of tests—tests to determine your ultimate allegiance. At times you will be among believers in Christian settings reading the Bible, singing praises, and testifying to God's greatness. On other occasions, you will be among unbelievers, tempted to gratify your desires and desperate to raise your status and promote yourself. Over the course of your life, will you discover that circumstances dictate your decisions? Or will your allegiance to King Jesus win out in the end?

By David Hunzicker, North Boulevard

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 28

ESTHER

Read Esther 4:1-17

In his providence, God chose one nation from which the Messiah would come and bring redemption to the world: the Jewish nation. It's no surprise that the enemy attempted, time and time again, to wipe out this nation—hoping to stop the arrival of the promised Messiah.

The story of Esther is a glimpse into one of these destruction plots. Esther was an orphan girl living in the pagan land of Susa. She was raised by her cousin Mordecai. After an unusual turn of events, Esther was crowned Queen of Persia. Though Esther was given one big title, she had one equally big secret: she was a Jew. Now, the king had a favored advisor named Haman who, not-so-secretly, hated the Jews, and he convinced the king to annihilate the whole people group. Mordecai noticed an opportunity for Esther to partner with God for deliverance. He pleaded with her to approach the king on behalf of her people. Esther knew her task required a posture of complete dependence, so she implored the Jews to fast and pray—to intercede before God for protection. God gives us the opportunity to be used as his vessels, but we can only do that if we are anchored to Him through relationship. Relationship comes through spiritual discipline.

Fasting is a spiritual discipline where we abstain from food for a time in order to seek the Lord and reorient our focus back on Him. When we feel the hunger pang, we are reminded to pray over the issue that requires intercession. Fasting demonstrates our humility and admission that he is God and we are not. This expression of dependence pleases the Lord and shows that we trust in our all-knowing, all-powerful, covenant-keeping God. Interestingly enough, the book of Esther never makes mention of God's name, but his fingerprints are all over the story. We see God provide redemption for His people through the providential placing of Esther in her royal position "For such a time as this."

By Malorie Porter, The Experience Community

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 29

EZEKIEL

Read Ezekiel 3:16-27

Ezekiel was a prophet who came from a priestly family. He was acquainted with the laws and customs of the Tribe of Levi. God called him to warn the people exiled in Babylon of the coming destruction of the city of Jerusalem. It was because Israel fell into corruption and idolatry that they ended up in captivity. Though they were hundreds of miles away from the Promised Land, God sent Ezekiel to minister to the exiles and let them know that they were not forgotten.

When God spoke to Ezekiel, He told him that he was a watchman for the house of Israel. The purpose of a watchman is to stand at the gate or wall of a city and warn the inhabitants of impending danger. If he failed to do so, the blood of the people he was tasked with guarding would be on his hands. God explained the consequences of one that refused to give warning to those who were wicked. God would destroy them, and whoever knew to warn the wicked of the coming destruction and didn't say anything would be found guilty with blood on their hands. The same principle applies to those who were righteous and turned to sin. One would be found guilty if they did not warn the righteous man and he dies in his sin.

Many of us are taught from a young age to stay away from the wrong crowd. We are taught not to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. We know that we should strive to stay out of trouble, but what about those around us? If we see others headed down a path of destruction, do we say anything? What if our communities, families, neighborhoods, and workplaces are affected by our silence? We all share the responsibility as watchmen to sound the alarm to those around us.

By Kris Bitten, Crossland Church

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 30

JONAH

Read Jonah 3:6-4:11

To some, Jonah was a fleeing prophet. To others, he was a mythical prophet, but Jesus did not think Jonah was mythical. Jesus declared that Jonah was a miraculous sign to describe His death, burial, and resurrection (see Matthew 12:40-41), depicting God's great mercy on all people.

What do you do when God tells you to preach against people you don't even like? No one wants to be the bearer of bad news, which is true in Jonah's case but for reasons that are out of step with the heart of God. In scene one, Jonah defies God's calling, and God's discipline follows, which leads to prayer and deliverance for Jonah in scene two. We then find Jonah in scenes three and four reluctantly obedient to the Lord's second calling to preach to Nineveh. A beautiful thing happens in scene three because of preaching God's message: the gentiles of Nineveh repent, from the greatest to the least, humbling themselves, receiving the beautiful compassion and mercy of God. But in scene four, the bearer of God's message is so angry he could die concerning Nineveh's response. Jonah knew about the heart of the Lord (see Jonah 4:2; Exodus 34:6-7); he had experienced God's mercy and salvation, yet regretted that Nineveh would receive this same love, mercy, and salvation. It is a challenge to love your enemies enough to desire their repentance and salvation.

Love extends to all in the Lord's economy, including our "enemies" (Matthew 5:43-48). After all, are we not all sinners saved by the grace and mercy of God (see Romans 3:23; 5:8)? Perhaps we have forgotten that Satan is our enemy and not the people of different nations, tribes, languages, and even the people of Nineveh. They are captives to sin just like you and me who need a Savior. We all have the same mission as Jonah (see Matthew 28:18-20), one sinner telling another sinner how they can be set free. Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32).

By Joe Roberts, North Boulevard

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 31

ELIZABETH

Read Luke 1:10-45

A relative of Mary, Elizabeth is the wife of Zechariah and mother of John the Baptist. She and Zechariah were obedient to God's laws and "righteous in the sight of God" (Luke 1:6). Their prayers were answered when she gave birth to a son at an old age. Elizabeth felt as though her pregnancy took away her disgrace among the people at being labeled childless.

It is important to note that the angel Gabriel appeared in visible form and spoke audibly to Zechariah and then later to Mary delivering special messages to them both. Elizabeth would give birth to John the Baptist, the man who would prepare the way for Christ, and Mary would conceive a child by the Holy Spirit and give birth to Jesus, the Son of God. Gabriel goes on to explain to Mary, "For nothing shall be impossible with God" (v. 37).

Elizabeth stayed in seclusion until she was five months along, and in her sixth month, she was visited by Mary. Upon hearing Mary's voice, the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy, and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth calling her young relative "the mother of my Lord" (v. 43) was certain to have strengthened Mary's faith. Elizabeth's own faith, trust, and love for the Lord was shown in how she rejoiced in Mary's condition. Instead of being envious of Mary carrying a son who would be greater than her own, she was filled with joy and felt blessed that "the mother of my Lord" would visit her.

Have you ever been jealous of someone that God used for a special purpose? Or perhaps you were envious of a blessing that someone else received? The best way to cure envy is to celebrate, rejoice, be excited for that person, and consider that God uses people in ways that work for His purpose.

By Crystal O'Neal, The Experience Community

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 32

MARY

Read Luke 1:26-38

Descended from the royal family line of King David, in the tribe of Judah, Mary was a young Jewish peasant girl from Nazareth in the region of Galilee, in modern-day Israel. During Mary's time, girls were not always trained in the Holy Scriptures, but as evidenced by her praise of God in her "Magnificat" in Luke 1:47-55, Mary was well versed in the Scriptures and had hidden portions of it in her heart.

The message the angel Gabriel brought must have been a complete shock to young Mary, especially considering she was a virgin, only just engaged to be married to Joseph. Mary's response, "See, I am the Lord's servant, may it happen to me as you have said," is not only a beautiful example of humble submission to God's will, but it also secures her position as the instrument of God's earthly presence. As much as Eve's exercise of free will in Genesis cooperated with the fall of man, Mary's exercise of free will, here in Luke, cooperated with the redemption of mankind. She made it possible for God to come to earth as a fully human man, experience everything humans experience, and ultimately be crucified, buried, and resurrected to redeem and save the entire human race. She illustrates for us a model of Christian virtue, faith, and obedience.

We may not be asked to be the earthly mother of Jesus Christ; however, we are asked to follow His Word, take up our crosses daily, and make disciples of Christ. Just as Mary likely did not understand everything she was being asked to do or the ramifications of it all, we will not always understand every detail of what God asks of us. Sometimes we may not understand it all, and that is okay. God did not give us the ability to understand everything he does or says. What we can do is follow Mary's example of knowing and loving God enough to humbly submit our own will to His will. The more time we spend with Him, the easier this becomes.

By Alice Clements, North Boulevard

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 33

PETER

Read Matthew 14:22-33

Peter was a commercial fisherman living with his wife in the lakeside town of Capernaum, in the region of Galilee. His brother, Andrew, was apparently Jesus' first disciple, but Andrew quickly brought Peter to Jesus, making Peter one of the earliest followers of Jesus, too. Peter subsequently became a pillar in the Jesus movement, and his influence for Jesus remains deep even to this day.

After the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus sent the disciples ahead of Him to cross the lake in a boat. Peter must have spent countless hours on the lake, but he had never seen anything like he did that night. In the hour just before dawn, as they struggled against the wind, Peter and the others saw Jesus—walking across the water! The Bible doesn't explain why Jesus decided to walk across the lake, but Peter's response is remarkable: despite his fear, Peter stepped out of the boat and walked with Jesus. Peter expressed, even if only for a moment, profound courage in the presence of Jesus.

Courage is not the absence of fear. Nor should it be confused with swagger—the stunts of fools. Rather, courage is a steely resolve to do the right thing regardless of the risk. Courage doesn't demand that we discount our fears. Instead, courage demands that we push through them. Courage is the decision to stay faithful to your vows, even when it hurts. Courage is the refusal to compromise at work, even when it costs. Courage is the willingness to share the gospel with your neighbors, even when it's weird.

So what about you? In what storm do you find yourself? Can you find your courage? Through his courage, Peter stepped out of the boat and into history. Now it's your turn. Get out of the boat!

By David Young, North Boulevard

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 34

BARNABAS

Read Acts 15:36-41

Dynamic duos have a certain awe about them. Batman and Robin, Doc and Marty, Han Solo and Chewbacca, so what about Paul and Barnabas? If there is one thing a dynamic duo needs, it's encouragement. Well, Barnabas' name translates as "Son of Encouragement," and as we see from his appearances in Acts, he was quite the encourager. Early on in Acts, we see that he sold his field and donated the proceeds to the church to inspire and encourage others to do the same.

So, if Barnabas and Paul had come so far as to risk their lives for the sake of Jesus and the Gospel, how could these men who were essentially brothers have such a sharp disagreement that would lead them in opposite directions? These men had set a blazing trail that would set a figurative fire to many others sharing Jesus in a radical fashion. Sometimes as we read this, we forget that these men were such powerhouses for the Gospel that they were human. Paul may have been rough around the edges and hard to get along with at times. Barnabas may have seen something that Paul did not or vice versa. Regardless, these two refused to let a quarrel extinguish their calling of sharing Jesus with others and continued their own journeys, multiplying their efforts!

We will experience conflict with other believers, but we must not allow it to lead to disunity. What is great about this story is that in the book of Colossians, we see that Paul reconciles this relationship by giving gratitude to John Mark! Consider those you may have written off because a divisive altercation has tainted the contact you once had with them. Do you feel like they are too far gone? Do you feel like God cannot be glorified through that relationship? Once again, we need to remember that if we love Jesus, we should be working for the Kingdom despite our disagreements.

By Sean Laberer, The Experience Community

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 35

MARY MAGDALENE

Read Mark 16:1-8

Mary (from the Galilean town of Magdala) had her own reasons for loyalty to Jesus. The gospels reveal her forging a friendship with Jesus after he cast out seven demons from her, relieving her of her suffering. Imagine Mary's gratitude for being freed from her affliction. Her entire life from then on overflowed with thankfulness towards her Savior. Afterward, she joined the Twelve as they followed Jesus from town to town, and she supported the group with her own money. Mary remained with Jesus until the end of the crucifixion and also witnessed His burial. She was the first to find the tomb empty and the first to see the risen Christ.

Despite all Mary must have known about Jesus, her reaction to the angel's news of His resurrection was fear. After the Golgotha scene she'd witnessed, the story was no doubt hard to digest. She initially ignored the angel's instructions, fled, and kept quiet (Mark 16:8). But further on in Mark 16, after Jesus appeared to Mary, we read that she hurried away to tell the disciples. She was both afraid and overjoyed at the news.

Our own reactions to the Good News might also fall into one of these categories. Although today we may not be as likely as Mary and the disciples to be imprisoned for allegiance to Christ, do you find that your neighbor's perception of you dampens your gratitude and eagerness to share the story? Or are you so overwhelmed with joy at the greatest act in history that you "hurry to tell" others? Jesus could have risen in a loud, bold blaze of glory, marking the event convincingly for all time. Instead, the gospels tell it almost quietly, like a secret that begs to be whispered from one person to the next. Do you think God might've had a reason for this? Do you think you might be part of that reason?

By Bonnie Blaylock, North Boulevard

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 36

THOMAS

Read John 20:24-29

Our rational minds can send us on wonderful fact-finding missions or can lead us to great peril. For Saint Thomas, one of Jesus' 12 apostles, it was both. After Jesus defeated death and brought forth the new creation, the other disciples saw Jesus and were filled with joy. Since Thomas wasn't there for this incredible encounter, he said he didn't believe them. In fact, he wouldn't believe it unless he saw it with his own eyes! Yet, when Jesus showed up again, Ole' Doubting Thomas would have to eat crow. Jesus was alive! And He confronted Thomas' doubt.

When I was young, if someone made a bold claim, my natural reaction was to respond: prove it! In high school, I had a co-worker we'll call Alex, who was skeptical about another co-worker we'll call Justin (who had one missing arm). Justin was adamant his dad could do 100 push ups in 1 minute. Alex didn't believe him and wanted me to call it into question. After much pestering, I relented and questioned Justin, and it didn't go well. It turns out Justin's dad had no arms. Not only was Justin offended, but he was convinced Alex would have never told me to ask that. I wanted to crawl in a hole and die.

After Thomas sees Jesus with his own eyes, he then makes one of the most profound proclamations: My Lord and my God! Saint Thomas submitted to Jesus as King of the Universe. This was indeed a bold claim for a first-century Jew. This submission only came because Thomas still hung around. His doubt didn't lead him away from God; it kept him there long enough to see the Truth revealed. As we wrestle with our doubts and fears, are we allowing it to drive us further away from God or closer to the truth of Jesus? Are you remaining around long enough to see your doubts turned into great joy? Oh, and just so you know, my co-workers busted out laughing after I sheepishly walked away. It turned out to be a prank. One I will never forget.

By Isaac Escobar, The Experience Community

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 37

MARTHA OF BETHANY

Read Luke 10:38-42

Martha lived in Bethany, a small suburb located at the foot of the Mt. of Olives about a mile and a half east of Jerusalem. She shared a house with her sister, Mary, and her brother, Lazarus. They were a Jewish family who were friends and followers of Jesus. The town of Bethany, and the home of Martha and her siblings, proved to be an important place of rest for Jesus away from the chaotic crowds and was only a short walk to Jerusalem.

On the day that Jesus and His disciples came to dine in Martha's home, she quickly became overburdened by her duties as the hostess. Becoming cross with her sister, she spoke rather abruptly to the Lord: "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" In this brash statement, Martha implied that Jesus did not care about her, and she demanded that He force Mary to assist in the household chores. Distracted by her busyness, Martha took her eyes off Jesus and was missing the blessing of a lifetime. "Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things, but only one thing is necessary..."

What stresses and worries distract you from precious time with Jesus? Life is busy. A million things vie for our attention, maybe more than ever before. But there will always be tasks to complete, chores to do, and business to tend to. Our earthly checklists are unending. Martha could only think about the things she had to do, and it took her focus off the only important thing. Looking into her soul, Jesus gently and lovingly reminded her that sitting at His feet and listening to His word is always the better choice. What do you need to do to ensure that you have quality time with Jesus every day?

By Jane Herring, North Boulevard

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 38

PAUL

Read Acts 26:24-32; Romans 8:38-39

Paul was perhaps one of the most influential leaders of the early church. He was responsible for authoring 13 books of the New Testament and planting at least 14 churches. Before Paul met Jesus, he was a Pharisee and a notorious persecutor of Christians. After his dramatic conversion to Christ, Paul devoted his entire life to preaching the gospel and making disciples of Jesus across the known world.

Paul was convinced of the reality of the gospel. From the moment he was converted, Paul proclaimed Christ to anyone and everyone he met (see Philippians 1:13). Over the course of his life, he traveled extensively on missionary journeys, wrote exhaustive treatises on Christian doctrine, and devoted himself to discipling men and women in the faith. Paul was often imprisoned, beaten, shipwrecked, and lived under the constant threat of death for the sake of the name of Jesus. Yet, there was a steady, calculated tenacity that marked his life and ministry. Paul's perseverance was grounded in a commitment to something he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt to be true.

As we study Paul's life, we become aware of our need for a faith that is deeper than simply a surface-level admiration of the example of Jesus. We find that the only kind of faith that is able to truly persevere in the face of real suffering is a faith that is convinced of the reality of Jesus—who He is, what He's done, and who we are invited to become because of His work for us on the cross. When we behold Jesus in His glory through encounters with Him in His Word and through His presence in prayer, we become convinced of the indescribable, unfathomable, never-ending love He has for us. We become convinced that nothing we will ever go through in this life will be able to separate us from that love. And we become convinced that the only response to that love that makes any sense at all is a life lived out of a daring, bold, tenacious, radically obedient faith to His commands.

By Joshua Brooker, The Experience Community

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 39

ZACCHAEUS

Read Luke 19:1-10

For some who grew up going to church, perhaps the story of Zacchaeus has been stuck on the “flannel board” of your brain. Zacchaeus was a tax collector who so desperately wanted to see Jesus that he climbed a tree in order to see Him when He passed by. I was sharing his story at church camp years ago. I chose the smallest kid to play the leading role and a reluctant counselor to provide the branches from which our little Zach could perch. I picked a Jesus. The drama unfolded. Jesus came to town. Zacchaeus came down. I closed with a question: “What would have happened if Zacchaeus hadn’t climbed the tree that day?” I’m not sure what I expected, but what I got was a dose of first-grade theology. An 8-year-old girl answered: “His song wouldn’t be nearly as much fun to sing!” Some of you will remember the song but imagine had he *not* made the climb:

“Zacchaeus was a wee little man
A wee little man was he
He started to climb in a sycamore tree
But he didn’t...”

That little girl was on to something. We spend much of our lives completely oblivious to those whose “songs” are “not much fun to sing” because their faith is too small, the crowd is too tall...and they have no sycamore to climb. For years I noticed only three characters in this story—Jesus, Zacchaeus, and the crowd of distractions. I forgot about the sycamore tree. The sycamore tree is you or me. Our job is to lift others above the crowd so they might see the approaching Savior. “When Jesus reached the spot...” Jesus doesn’t stumble upon the tree. This meeting was no accident. He goes “to the spot” as though it’s His destination that day. The story is not about a curious tax collector but about a seeking Savior. Luke eventually tells the story of another tree. Zacchaeus climbs a tree to get the attention of Jesus. Jesus climbs a tree and dies to get ours.

By David Skidmore, North Boulevard

Pray for 10 minutes

Day 40

JESUS CHRIST

Read John 13:1-17

We live in a very self-centered culture, and this shouldn't surprise us much considering this was the original temptation from Satan. Do what you want regardless of God's commands and you will be like God. That's the lie that we have been force-fed ever since, well, we have existed. It seems like the lie has been amplified though, doesn't it? Promotion and elevation of self seems to not just be a loud voice, but the prevailing voice of our people. We are told that true freedom comes from doing it our way, that we must be more focused on self-care than anything else, and that we can not only choose but also create our realities. And if you disagree with my way and choices? Well, you must be small-minded, bigoted, and full of hate.

Of course, this affects how we treat each other. If life is all about me, I will only go so far with others as to not inconvenience myself. If I do something for you, there still must be something in it for me. So, what is the result? We are seeing the result in real-time, are we not? Have you noticed the brokenness? The aggression? The confusion? If not, maybe we are looking too much at ourselves as well.

In a society based on self, we lose all connection to a God that modeled the complete opposite approach. In the Gospel of John, we get many examples from Christ of how to live a life that honors God. One of the most famous examples is the humble act of washing His followers' feet. The act is a literal sacrifice of pride, but the metaphor runs much deeper than just a one-time act of cleaning the dirt off of a friend's feet. It is a recipe for a life that honors God. We are to lower ourselves in servitude, even to places of self-deprecation, for the sake of those around us. Jesus said, "I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done for you." Because God has humbled Himself to serve us, we should do the same for everyone around us.

By Corey Trimble, The Experience Community

Pray for 10 minutes

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Sincerely,

Jonathan Ciecka

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