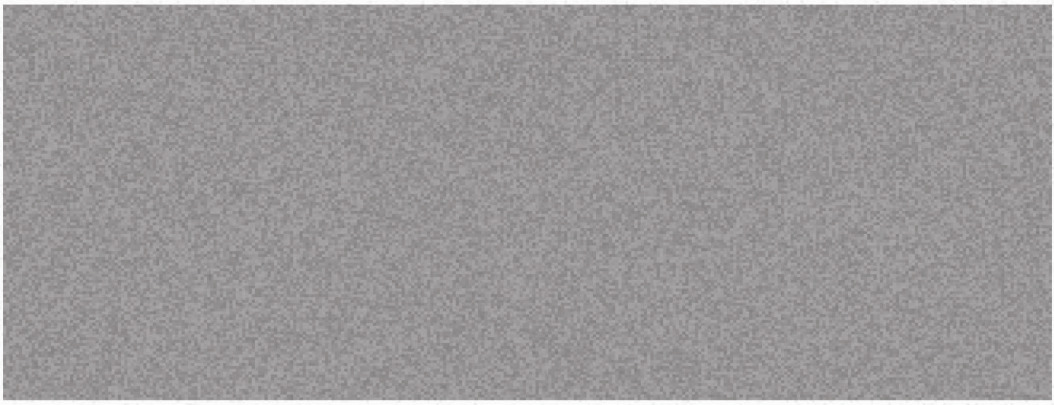
HELLO NEW my name is



31 Reflections on Names That
Were Changed in the Bible

Joshua Combs

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For the one whose name I would change to Abigail,
for that is who you have been and are to me.
Thank you for loving a Nabal.

INTRODUCTION

NAMES ARE IMPORTANT

For some reason, names have always been important to me. That may seem strange, but it's true. When my family moved to Dallas, Texas (actually Duncanville, just south of Dallas) at the beginning of first grade, we began to meet our neighbors and get acquainted with our new home. Two doors down from our church parsonage was a Hispanic family with a little boy about my age whose name was Jesus. I remember, even 30 years later, the feeling I had of utter disgust. I asked my parents, "How could anybody name their kid Jesus? There's only one Jesus!" I was completely unaware that many Hispanic families do, in fact, name their sons Jesus. However, nothing could prepare my judgmental heart for the next revelation. I did not realize at the time that years later I would discover that my name, Joshua, was the Hebrew form of Jesus. I had no idea, but basically my parents had named me Jesus. My Hispanic neighbor and I had the same name.

When my wife, Jennifer, and I began to be blessed with children, preparing to name each of them was a big deal. We served in children's ministry for nearly 10 years, so many of the names we considered had already been, well, tainted by some less-than-well-behaving children (Actually, some were just plain wicked). We have been blessed with five children (four daughters and one son). Giving them names that had great meanings and honored our family heritage was really important to us. Here are their names, meanings, and family roots.

Claire-Anne Combs

I woke up one morning after we had learned we were having a girl and the first word out of my mouth that day was "Claire." My wife looked at me and simply said, "Yup. That sounds good." Claire means "light" and Anne is my mother-in-law's first name and my mother's middle name. You also might be wondering why Claire's name is hyphenated. My wife's first name is actually

Jennifer-Anne. She officially has no middle name. So we choose to honor that family heritage.

Belle-Anne Combs

I love the animated movie Beauty and the Beast. We were set to name our second daughter Mabel, but I began the filibuster to name her Belle. At the end of the day, I "out-stubborned" my wife. Belle is French for beauty. And once again we hyphenated with Anne to honor our mothers.

Maverick Tedder Combs

When we found out we were having a boy, a family crisis ensued. Jen admittedly knew nothing about boys, and I wanted to name him after my dad. After some intense family discussions, we began to pray for a name that would be after my dad but not my dad's name (no joke). A few days went by and we stumbled upon the name Maverick. Instantly we knew it was an answer to prayer. Maverick means "independent." For a middle name we chose Jen's maternal grandmother's maiden name. That grandmother's father, Harvey Tedder, was a police officer who was killed in the line of duty exactly one month prior to Jennifer's grandmother's birth. So we wanted to honor her, her father's sacrifice, and give my son a name filled with rich family history.

Ruby-Sue Combs

We were honestly hoping our fourth child would be a boy. Two girls and two boys sounded like a nice balance. But God had other plans and blessed us with a third daughter. Both Jen and I have always loved the named Ruby and had some special ladies in our lives named Ruby. However, it took a 3,000-mile road trip for us to settle on Ruby. For an entire week, with just Jen and me in the car, we created a detailed grid to determine our third daughter's name. Ruby is a precious jewel and Sue is the

name of Jen's maternal grandmother who has had a profound impact on my wife's life. You'll also see, once again, the peculiar, hyphenated first name and no middle name.

Mavis Merrill Combs
Once again the Lord blessed us with a daughter. Mavis means "joy," but let me just say, for those first couple of years, she was not much joy. Her middle name is my mother's maiden name and the last name of my maternal grandmother, who has been a saint of the Lord for many years. She took my mother and her two sisters to a little Southern Baptist church, where they met the Lord. We wanted to honor her grit and dedication to the Lord. She also offered $500 to any of her grandchildren who would name their children after her or her husband. Yes, we sold the naming rights to our fifth child for $500.

Naming a child can bring some big pressure, but Jen and I enjoyed giving our children names with rich meaning and family heritage. Our hope was that names that mean light, beauty, independence, precious stone, and joy would point our children and others to the name above every name, Jesus Christ.

Throughout the Scripture, names are incredibly important. Extensive genealogies are given in both the Old and New Testaments of who "begat" whom and so forth. Within those family trees are some stories that we know and others that have been lost to history.

But throughout the whole of Scripture, there are fascinating examples among both men and women, major characters and minor players, of names that are changed or nicknames that are given, which eclipse the person's birth name. Please understand, their names were not mixed up, but—clearly and for a purpose—changed. Years ago,

I began to stumble upon the many name changes that occurred in the Bible and have been fascinated with them ever since.

Culturally, even today, we often see names being changed. Traditionally, in Western culture, beginning with population growth in Europe, women have changed their surname (last name) at marriage. Historically, this was to identify the "oneness" (see Genesis 2:24) of the marriage covenant, but it was also used to suppress and rob women of any independent legal status.

Names are given at birth, but there are times when they are changed. This book is all about that phenomenon. This book will provide four study guides on four specific name changes, as well as 31 devotions that will overview the name changes of characters in the Bible. Hopefully, these will help you to better understand the power of names and identity in God's Word.

A GOOD NAME

DAY 1

"A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold." Proverbs 22:1

In 1 Kings chapter 3, the Lord appears to newly crowned King Solomon in a dream. Solomon, who had just inherited the throne from his father, David, and the divine right to build the temple in Jerusalem, was asked by God (and I'm paraphrasing), "Whatever you want, ask Me, and I will give it to you." In that moment, everything in the universe lay before Solomon like a feast, yet he was limited in his choice to only one thing. Would he choose riches, victory in battle, long life, prosperity, or health? Which of all God's splendid gifts would he choose? The Scripture records Solomon petitioning the Lord for ***"an understanding mind"*** (1 Kings 2:9). He did not choose riches or long life, but wisdom.

Years later, King Solomon, the wisest man to ever live, penned the words of Proverbs 22:1, ***"A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold."*** Far more valuable than great wealth is a good name and a good reputation. Many people have soiled their name and reputation in pursuit of wealth, power, and pleasure. Solomon is simply saying that they have chosen the object of lesser value. The great Bible commentator Matthew Henry wrote, "We should be more careful to do that by which we may get and keep a good name than that by which we may raise and increase a great estate."

One of my favorite country songs is *"My Last Name"* by Dierks Bentley. In the song, he talks about honoring the last name he was given and the joy of giving his wife his last name. In the chorus of

the song, he sings, *"I'll never bring it shame; it's my last name."* I have, sadly, brought shame to my first and last names. It pains me to think about what I have chosen before a "good name." The real tragedy of this unwise trade is that, as a Christian, I have ultimately defamed the name of Jesus. In 2 Timothy 2:19, Paul writes, ***"Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity."***

Our goal and aim ought to be to have a good name and reputation so that our association with Christ, rather than detracting people from the Gospel, will actually draw people to the Lord. The Scripture says, ***"Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ."*** (Philippians 1:27)

Today's Bible Reading: Ecclesiastes 7:1

ROTTEN NAMES

DAY 2

"The name of the wicked will rot." Proverbs 10:7

"His name is mud" is an expression you may have heard. It entered the American lexicon in the 1860s following the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. John Wilkes Booth shot Lincoln at Ford's Theatre while Lincoln watched the final performance of Our American Cousin on Good Friday, April 14, 1865. As soon as Booth delivered what would be the death blow to Lincoln using a .44 caliber derringer, he leapt from the Presidential Box toward the stage, but according to historians, his right spur became tangled (ironically) in the flag hanging from the box, causing Booth to haphazardly fall to the stage, breaking his left leg. When onlookers realized that Booth, who was an actor from an acting family, had actually perpetrated one of history's most heinous crimes, both the chase and the escape ensued. Booth would attempt to flee to the sanctuary of the South, but his efforts were greatly hindered by his broken left leg. He made his way to the home of Dr. Samuel Mudd, who housed and, using his medical training, set and splinted Booth's broken leg. Mudd would contend that he did not recognize Booth, but the riding boot that Mudd had to remove and which was found in Mudd's home, was clearly marked "J. Wilkes." Dr. Samuel Mudd would be found guilty and sentenced to life in prison. His name was Mudd.

Like Benedict Arnold before him, and Lee Harvey Oswald (the JFK assassin) after him, Booth's name is infamous. Mudd may be forgotten, but the expression, "His name is mud," is not. There are names throughout American and world history that are forever ruined. They have been dragged through the mud.

The Scripture simply says, ***"The name of the wicked will rot"*** (Proverbs 10:7). The names of those who rebel against God's laws and standards become a stench. What is true of something that rots is that it only gets worse. The smell becomes unbearable. In your workplace, school, neighborhood, hometown, church, or family, is your name rotting? When your name is read, brought up in conversation, or pops up on someone's phone, does it smell? Is it mud? The beginning of Proverbs 10:7 says, ***"The memory of the righteous is a blessing…."*** May your life and memory be a blessing and not a rotting stench.

Today's Bible Reading: Philippians 1:27; Matthew 26:20-25

Sources:

The Assassination: Death of the President by Champ Clark, 1987, Time-Life Books, Alexandria, Virginia

Killing Lincoln: The Shocking Assassination That Changed America Forever by Bill O'Reilly and Martin Dugard, 2011, Henry Holt and Company, New York, New York

SECTION 1

PATRIARCHS: DESTINY CHANGE

ABRAM BECOMES ABRAHAM

DAY 3

"No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations." Genesis 17:5

At 99 years old, Abram's life was far from finished. God still had great plans for him. Twenty-four years earlier, Abram and his wife, Sarai, had left the pagan lands of Mesopotamia, journeying to a country that God had yet to show them. The Lord had promised Abram, ***"I will make of you a great nation, and…make your name great"*** (Genesis 12:2). But how? More than a decade would pass and Abram and his wife were still childless. Where was the great nation? Where was the great preservation of the family name?

Abram decided to take matters into his own hands. He and his wife agreed that her servant Hagar would bear Abram an heir (a culturally accepted practice). Hagar gave birth to a son, Ishmael, and instantly a difficult situation became worse. Thirteen years later, God appeared to Abram. Abram was nearly a century old, but God was about to make a radical change. God confirmed the covenant with this great saint and then proclaimed, ***"No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations"*** (Genesis 17:5). Abram simply means "exalted father," while Abraham means "father of a multitude." Abram's longing was to be a father, but God's plan was beyond what he could even imagine. No longer would Abram be simply a wealthy, successful father of one son. God was going to make him, now called Abraham, the father of a multitude. Abraham had acted within the range of his limited human scope, but God was impacting the centuries to come, changing Abram's destiny. He would forever be Abraham.

This was not only a name change, but a completely new identity—and the plan of God was further revealed.

This is the power of God that leads to radical transformation. Abram has become Abraham. He was a childless man of Ur, who is now the father of a multitude and in covenant with the one true God. The Creator of the universe may not come and change your name, but He does, in fact, want to change your destiny, particularly your eternal destiny. God called Abram out of spiritual darkness, just like He calls to each of us. The Scripture tells us that Abram ***"believed the Lord, and [God] counted it to him as righteousness"*** (Genesis 15:6). Abraham had the faith to believe the word that God had spoken and the courage to follow the command that he was given. We are called to do the same. We are called to leave our sinful lives behind, which is repentance, and then to believe the Word of God. God changed Abraham's name to symbolize the complete transformation that was taking place. ***"If anyone,"*** the Bible says, ***"is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God"*** (2 Corinthians 5:17-18).

Today's Bible Reading: Genesis 11:26–17:21

JACOB TO ISRAEL

DAY 4

"Then He said, 'Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.'" Genesis 32:28

Jacob was a scoundrel, a con man, a liar, and a trickster. Sadly, he had learned all these skills at home and from family members. His mother had taught him how to lie (Genesis chapter 27) and his father-in-law, Laban, had run a 14-year con on him (Genesis chapter 29). In Genesis chapter 32, we find Jacob facing a reckoning from his twin brother, Esau. Jacob had conned his brother out of the birthright (Genesis chapter 25) and then later, out of a special blessing reserved for the oldest son. Jacob had masqueraded as Esau and deceived his elderly, nearly blind father, Isaac (Genesis chapter 27). Born with a serious amount of sibling rivalry, these twins are about to have a bit of a showdown. As the sun sets, on Jacob's orders, his wives, children, and slaves are positioned between him and his presumably violent and vengeful brother. Jacob is preparing for a very unhappy reunion the following morning. A life filled with deception and trickery appears to be coming to a violent end. Esau is camped across a little stream with 400 men who comprise his own private militia and the Scripture simply says, ***"And Jacob was left alone"*** (Genesis 32:24).

Jacob is desperate because he is facing the consequences of his scheming ways. His whole world seems to be crashing down. In the lonely, anxiety-filled darkness of that night, Jacob meets God. A physical and spiritual wrestling match ensues. In desperation, Jacob holds onto God, crying out, ***"I will not let you go unless you bless me."*** Jacob was looking for a way out, a solution, and a rescue from the impending judgment coming in the morning. So in the

blackness of night, God asks him, "What is your name?" And Jacob, unwilling to relent, responds. God, in glorious, transforming fashion, says, ***"Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel."*** In an instant, Jacob, the con man, is transformed into Israel, meaning "God's fighter." The next morning, Jacob crosses the stream and is a completely different man. He is humble, truthful, and generous. Jacob is gone. Israel, a new man, is born.

Proverbs 28:1 says, ***"The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion."*** When we repent of our lies and deception, God, through the Holy Spirit, transforms us. We cease to be sneaky and conniving. We begin to live bold, truthful, and humble lives before the Lord and our fellow man.

Today's Bible Reading: Genesis chapters 32-33

JACOB TO ISRAEL - PART 2

DAY 5

"And God said to him, 'Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.'"
Genesis 35:10

Jacob had wrestled with God and held on for dear life (Genesis 32:24-32). The Lord had blessed him and transformed him from a deceitful con man into Israel, the namesake of a great nation. Yet, years later when Israel returns to the sacred place of Bethel, Jacob the deceiver, seems to have returned as well. As he and his family approached this sacred ground, this patriarch of the family begins instructing his household to ***"Put away the foreign gods that are among you…"*** (Genesis 35:2).

Bethel was the first place that God had revealed Himself to Jacob. God had confirmed the Abrahamic covenant to Jacob, reminding him, ***"In you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed"*** (Genesis 28:14).

As Israel and his household approached Bethel, where he planned to build an altar to the Lord, the Scripture simply says, ***"Jacob hid them,"*** referring to the idols of his household. The trickster has returned and, rather than destroying the idols, he has hidden them before arriving at Bethel. When God appears to him, He says for the second time, ***"Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name."*** Once again, the Lord reminded this patriarch not only of Bethel, but of the night God completely transformed his destiny and rescued him from the vengeance of Esau, his twin brother. Israel was the new man and Jacob was the old man. God simply says, stop being a Jacob; I've called you Israel.

In Galatians chapter 5, Paul writes, ***"Walk by the spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do"*** (verses 16-17). Inside each Christian are two natures: the old and the new. The Scripture calls them ***"the flesh"*** and ***"the Spirit."*** We have a Jacob and an Israel. We have the sinful ways of thinking that refuse to relent, fulfilling the phrase, "Old habits die hard." But Christ purchased victory for us on the cross of Calvary. We thank God for the victory that He has given us over the flesh, our old self, our Jacob. Today, walk in that victory, submitting and surrendering yourselves to the control of the Holy Spirit.

Today's Bible Reading: Genesis 35:1-15

BEN-ONI TO BENJAMIN

DAY 6

"As [Rachel's] soul was departing (for she was dying), she called his name Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin." Genesis 35:18

Jacob loved Rachel. He had worked 14 years to marry her. She had given him Joseph, his favorite child. And here on the journey from Bethel, she went into labor. It would be the last journey Rachel and Israel (Jacob) would take together, because Rachel would die in childbirth. The truly miraculous birth of her second son would also be an unspeakable tragedy. As death approached, her final act was to call her newborn son Ben-oni, which means "son of my sorrow." Rachel, in her death, had placed her grief upon her child. Forever, tragedy would define the name of this man. But, Israel, his father, intercedes. Rather than allowing his son to be defined by sorrow, grief, and the loss of his mother, he instead calls him Benjamin, meaning "son of my right hand." The right hand was a symbol of blessing. His father refused to allow brokenness to define his son and insisted that he was, in spite of circumstances, a blessing.

Have you ever considered what defines you? What triumphs and tragedies have formed who you are? In light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Rachel becomes symbolic of brokenness, sorrow, and death defining us. Israel, however, becomes symbolic of the Father defining us. In 2 Corinthians 5:21, the Apostle Paul writes about Jesus, ***"For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."*** We were dead in trespasses and sin, defined as slaves to unrighteousness. Yet, the heavenly Father interceded on our behalf, reaching out to us (son of my right hand) in the person of Jesus Christ and calling us each Benjamin—sons and daughters of blessing.

Maybe an unspeakable tragedy has defined you throughout your life, or a catastrophic mistake haunts you. Whatever the case may be, in Christ we are redeemed and transformed. Someone may have called you a mistake, a bastard, a loser, or worthless, but in Christ, the God of the universe says, "You are My child. Sit here at My right hand. All that I have is yours."

Today's Bible Reading: Genesis 35:16-21

JOSEPH TO ZAPHENATH-PANEAH

DAY 7

"And Pharaoh called Joseph's name Zaphenath-paneah." Genesis 41:45

Joseph was dragged from an Egyptian prison and brought before Pharaoh, the most powerful man on Earth. The almighty leader of the world's greatest empire had had a series of dreams and was extremely troubled. Joseph, who was gifted by God with dream interpretation, was remembered by an old cellmate and brought to the palace. What happens next is the biblical equivalent of a Cinderella story. Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dreams, which warned him and all the kingdom of a coming famine. Instantly, this 30-year-old Hebrew slave is exalted to the highest ranks of Egyptian society. He is given the signet ring of Pharaoh, royal robes, a chariot, authority over all the kingdom (second only to Pharaoh), a princess as a wife, authority over preparations for the impending food crisis, and a new name: Zaphenath-paneah.

John MacArthur writes, "This name probably means 'The Nourisher of the Two Lands, the Living one.' It could also mean 'God speaks and He lives.'" Joseph, by contrast means, "May the Lord add."

Joseph's name was given to him by his mother, Rachel, who was his father's favorite and beloved wife. Joseph was without question his father's favorite child and all his siblings knew it. Joseph now stands before Pharaoh, who without any hesitation changes this young slave's name. But what Pharaoh couldn't change was Joseph. This incredible man of integrity had endured the abuse of his brothers, had been sold into slavery, was falsely accused of sexual assault, and then was imprisoned and forgotten. Through each trial, the Scripture simply says, ***"The Lord was with him. And whatever he did, the Lord made it succeed"*** (Genesis 39:23).

Years later as Egypt and the surrounding countries fall into the grip of a devastating famine, Joseph's family comes to Egypt for food. They have long since forgotten about their brother, whom they had sold into slavery. Yet, when they arrive to Egypt, Joseph hadn't forgotten them, and he immediately recognizes them. They, however, don't recognize their brother, Joseph, who is now second in charge of all of Egypt. What has the makings of a Count of Monte Cristo-type revenge story becomes an extraordinary story of forgiveness. When Joseph finally reveals his true identity, through loud weeping he says, ***"I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?"*** (Genesis 45:3) His brothers, unable to speak and certainly filled with terror, hear their brother gently say, ***"God sent me before you to preserve life"*** (Genesis 45:5).

Through the living nightmare he had endured, Joseph continued in love towards his father and trusted that God had a plan. Trials and difficulties had tested the mettle of this young man and he had remained true to the God of his fathers. Joseph did not excuse the evil that his brothers had done. Rather, he acknowledged God's sovereignty even in the face of evil. ***"You meant evil against me,"*** Joseph said to his brothers, ***"but God meant it for good"*** (Genesis 50:20).

You and I can let difficulties, trials, and the Pharaohs of this world give us our identity, or we can place our lives in the hand of almighty God and trust that whatever comes, He will carry us through (Romans 8:28).

Today's Bible Reading: Genesis chapters 37 and 39-50

HOSHEA TO JOSHUA

DAY 8

"And Moses called Hoshea the son of Nun Joshua." Numbers 13:16

For 400 years, everyone in Hoshea's family and the entire Hebrew nation has been in slavery. Ruthless and abusive, the Egyptians have forced the Hebrews to build store cities, attempted to slow their birth rates by aborting all the male children, and strictly limited their freedom to worship their God. Imagine four centuries of merciless, unending slavery. Hoshea's name makes perfect sense for one born as the son of slaves. It means "desire for salvation." Hoshea's name was the embodiment of his parents' and his people's desire for freedom. God had promised Abraham, the father of the Israelites, a great nation and a promised land. However, those promises seemed far from reach. But God sent a deliverer.

Moses is used by God to bring the greatest nation on Earth to its knees. Pharaoh frees the people and Moses leads approximately two to three million Jews out of slavery to the base of Mount Sinai. Once there, God begins laying the groundwork and providing structure to a people who know nothing of civilization or government. They have known only slavery for generation after generation. As the nation prepares to leave Mount Sinai and journey to the long-promised land, a leader from each family group (tribe) is chosen to go and spy out the land. Among the tribal leaders chosen is Hoshea.

In Numbers chapter 13, the names of the twelve spies are given, along with their family group and their father's name. Moses, the leader of God's people and the author of the Pentateuch (first five books of the Bible, which includes Numbers), changes Hoshea's name. Hoshea was not an orphan or Moses' child, but Moses

nonetheless makes a dramatic change to this spy's name. The Scripture says, ***"Moses called Hoshea the son of Nun Joshua"*** (Numbers 13:16). In English and in Hebrew the pronunciation and spelling change may not be dramatic, but the meaning is a monumental change. The name Hoshea was undoubtedly given to reflect the state of Israel's longing to be free: "desire for salvation." Joshua, ironically, does the same. Joshua means, "The Lord is salvation." The Hebrews had been set free by the power of almighty God. No Egyptian military might or mystical magician could match the spectacles with which God freed His people.

In Christ, Hoshea to Joshua is our story. We once longed to be free from sin, guilt, shame, and the eternal sentence of Hell. We were unable to free ourselves from slavery to sin, but God acted. He sent the deliverer, Jesus Christ, to free us from our sin and purchase us through His sacrificial work on the cross of Calvary. Whereas we once longed for salvation, we now praise the Lord Jesus, who is our salvation. If you have not believed on Jesus and repented of your sins, my prayer is that you would right now and experience the reality that the Lord is salvation.

Today's Bible Reading: Exodus 17:8-16; 24:13; 33:7-11; Numbers 11:28; Numbers chapter 13, Joshua chapter 1

GIDEON TO JERUBBAAL

DAY 9

"Therefore on that day Gideon was called Jerubbaal, that is to say, 'Let Baal contend against him,' because he broke down his altar." Judges 6:32

Plucked from obscurity, Gideon would be transformed by God from the most easily forgotten and most likely to go unnoticed member of his family to a national hero who couldn't be ignored. When the Scripture introduces Gideon, he is farming in secret, because the food supply for his people has been stolen year after year by a raiding army. Poverty and starvation were real issues. The nation of Israel had rebelled against God and the Midianites oppressed them with ruthless force. But the fundamental issue was not primarily food or the invading Midianite armies; it was mass worship of the idol Baal. The people had abandoned fidelity to God and pursued worthless pagan idols. Gideon is instructed by God to tear down the community altar to Baal, which ironically belonged to his father.

Overcome by fear of family and community backlash, Gideon tore the altar down under the cloak of night. When morning came, Gideon became a hunted man. The mob assembled and they were intent on killing this rabble-rouser who had insulted Baal. Gideon's father intervened and simply stated, if Baal ***"is a god, let him contend for himself, because his altar has been broken down"*** (Judges 6:31). And that is when the people decide no longer to call him Gideon (meaning "great warrior"), but Jerubbaal, essentially meaning "enemy of Baal." The people collectively agreed Gideon had a death wish and Baal was going to be the one to bring down judgment. Little did the people realize that God had declared to Gideon, ***"The Lord is with you…"*** (Judges 6:12). Baal was powerless to derail the mighty plans God had for this nobody from nowhere. God

had made him a great warrior and had sent him on a divine mission and nothing could stand against the Lord and His man.

We too have an enemy, and his name is Satan. He is the accuser of the brethren, a liar, a thief, and a murderer (John 10:10). The enemy, according to 1 Peter 5:8, is ***"a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour."*** Yet the Scripture is undeniably clear, ***"He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world"*** (1 John 4:4). The enemy has it out for us and works day and night to destroy us, but Christ has given us the victory. The cross of Calvary and the empty tomb stand as trophies of Christ's victory that is applied to believers. If you belong to the Lord, the victory is yours. The Lord has called you a great warrior and dispatched you on a divine mission.

Today's Bible Reading: Judges 6:11–8:35

SOLOMON TO JEDIDIAH

DAY 10

"So he called his name Jedidiah, because of the Lord." 2 Samuel 12:25

Adultery, a murder, a dead baby—and that was just in the first nine months of David and Bathsheba's relationship. There are few marriages that begin as tumultuous and rocky as this. David had committed adultery with Bathsheba. She had become pregnant. David sought to cover up his sin, but his efforts failed. So rather than repent, he conspired to murder Uriah, the husband of the woman carrying his child. What is astonishing about this story is that David, even through his heinous crimes, was able to maintain his appearance as the hero. When news arrived that Uriah had died at the front lines of battle, David brought his widow into the palace as his wife. David appeared to be merciful, generous, and selfless, when in reality he was cruel, covetous, and manipulative. He had what he wanted. In stark contrast, Uriah was dead.

A valuable lesson is learned from 2 Samuel chapter 12. It begins with Nathan the prophet confronting King David for his wickedness. The message of God delivered from the lips of Nathan pierces David's hard heart and he repents before the Lord. In spite of this genuine restoration, God's judgment comes. ***"Because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord,"*** Nathan says in verse 14, ***"the child who is born to you shall die."*** Months later, the baby is born and dies shortly thereafter. David is devastated, but consider for a moment Bathsheba. Within the course of a year, her loving husband has died and now her newborn child is dead.

In the midst of this chaos, God is gracious. Time would pass and David and Bathsheba would be blessed with another son. David,

the Scripture says, ***"called his name Solomon"*** (2 Samuel 12:24). The Bible says, ***"the Lord loved [Solomon] and sent a message by Nathan the prophet."*** This new message from Nathan conveys God's grace and mercy on full display. The message comes to Nathan to call Solomon, ***"Jedidiah, because of the Lord"*** (verse 25).

Solomon means "peace." Jedidiah means "beloved of the Lord." God revealed through this altering of Solomon's name that he was God's chosen heir to the throne and would be an honored part of the lineage of Jesus Christ. What began as sinful and broken had now been made new.

What we call broken, God sees as ready to be rebuilt and restored. In David's psalm of repentance, he prays, ***"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, you will not despise"*** (Psalm 51:17). When we come to God in our brokenness with zero pretense of stability or righteousness, offering only our mess, God is ready to do the miraculous. Paul, speaking of his own brokenness, writes God's response to his repeated requests for relief. ***"My grace is sufficient for you,"*** Paul hears from the Lord, ***"for my power is made perfect in weakness"*** (2 Corinthians 10:9). The power of the Gospel is God's divine authority over our sin. He transforms repentant hearts and lives, which become displays of His love and mercy.

Solomon would be king, restoring the brokenness of both his father and mother. God would know him not simply as a wise and powerful king, but as a symbol of something so much more profound and beautiful. His name was Jedidiah. He was beloved by God as a type and shadow of the One to come: The King who would

ultimately restore brokenness and make all things new, the One of whom God would say, ***"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased"*** (Matthew 3:17).

Today's Bible Reading: 2 Samuel 11:1–12:25; Psalm chapter 51; Matthew 1:6-7; 2 Corinthians 10:7-10

SECTION 2

THE WOMEN: BROKEN AND BEAUTIFUL

WOMAN TO EVE

DAY 11

"The man called his wife's name Eve…" Genesis 3:20

God came looking for Adam and his wife in Genesis chapter 3, but they were hiding. ***"Where are you?"*** God asked. ***"I was afraid,"*** Adam responded, ***"because I was naked, and I hid myself."*** God then asked Adam, ***"Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"*** It is at this moment that Adam, who already made a terrible choice, makes another. Rather than accept responsibility, Adam blames both God and his bride. ***"The woman whom you gave to be with me," he complains, "she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate."*** And just like that the spotlight of shame shines solely on the woman. She had been deceived by the serpent, who charged that God was holding something back from them. The woman had believed this lie, rebelled against God, and led her husband to do the same. She now stood before the Creator of the universe completely bare, covered only in a quickly assembled, shoddy fig-leaf loincloth and her overwhelming shame. She stood condemned and cursed for her sin.

In the midst of this guilty verdict, God's grace and redemptive plan is previewed. Ironically, this glorious plan is prophesied in the very name change that occurs. In Genesis chapter 2, when God creates a partner for Adam and brings her to him, Adam states, ***"This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man"*** (verse 23). Her name is Woman, but after the fall, Adam changes her name. The Bible says, ***"The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living"*** (Genesis 3:20). Woman, meaning "out of man," was her original name. Eve means "life." Adam had shamed his wife, whereas now, he honors her and the Lord.

God had pronounced that the offspring of the woman would be at war with the offspring of the serpent (Satan), and that the offspring of the Woman would conquer the enemy, crush the head of the serpent, and be the ruin of the devil and his kingdom. Adam changes his wife's name to reflect his faith in God's promised Savior. Bible commentator Matthew Henry wrote, Adam "called her Eve, that is, life. Adam bears the name of a dying body, Eve that of the living soul." Eve, meaning "life," was the symbol of hope—that from her would come the Savior of the world.

In 1 Timothy, Paul writes, ***"The woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self- control"*** (verses 14-15). The promise is not eternal salvation if a woman bears children, but that each woman is a beautiful symbol of life and hope for the world. Jesus was the seed of the woman, who came ***"to destroy the works of the devil"*** (1 John 3:8).

Today's Bible Reading: Genesis chapters 1–3

Sources:

Expositor's Bible Commentary: "Her first named pointed to her origin ('out of man'), whereas her second name pointed to her destiny ('the mother of all the living')."

Matthew Henry Commentary and Gills Commentary

SARAI TO SARAH

DAY 12

"And God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of people shall come from her.'" Genesis 17:15-16

In Genesis chapter 17, God includes Abraham's wife Sarai into His covenant with Abraham, His promise that ***"in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"*** (Genesis 12:3). As God had done with Abraham, the Lord now changes Sarai's name. Sarai becomes Sarah. With a dramatic announcement, the Lord reveals to Abraham, who was 100 years old at the time, that he and his 90-year-old wife are going to have a child. The reaction that both Abraham and Sarah have can only be described as human. They both laugh (Genesis 17:17; 18:12). The physical impossibility of this older couple having a biological child of their own is a hope that had died long ago. Sarah has ceased to have her menstrual cycle, so her childbearing years have come to an end.

Sarah overhears this news during a conversation between her husband and the Lord. She laughs to herself, but this was no laughing matter. Sarah later denies laughing at this extraordinary news, but she did laugh and God knew it. The Almighty simply asks, ***"Is anything too hard for the Lord?"*** (Genesis 18:14). A year later, Sarah and Abraham are the proud parents of a baby boy named Isaac, which means, "He laughs."

Sarai's name change and introduction into the covenant is of incredible significance. God was not simply shortening her name or making it easier to pronounce; He was changing her life and

legacy. Sarai means "my princess" and a princess she was. She was beautiful, wealthy, and married to one of the most powerful men in the known world. Yet, she was childless, and bore the stigma that, even today, comes with infertility. She was simply Abraham's princess. But God had grander plans for this 90-year-old woman. He changes her name to Sarah, which eliminates the "my" and simply means "princess." She became not only Abraham's princess, but a princess and a pivotal part of the promise of God. Hebrews 11:11 says, ***"By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised."*** God gave her a son, but more than that, she was mother to royalty and part of the lineage of Jesus Christ (see Matthew chapter 1).

The principle is basic: don't laugh at God, no matter how impossible circumstances may be or how beyond reach His promises may seem. He is faithful, and in a moment He can make the impossible possible. Jesus said, ***"With God all things are possible"*** (Matthew 19:26).

Today's Bible Reading: Genesis 11:27-32; chapters 12, 16, and 20

NAOMI TO MARA

DAY 13

"Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara…." Ruth 1:20

Naomi's journey begins with great promise. She and her husband, Elimelech, and their two sons have decided to leave their home country and travel to Moab, in hopes of escaping the devastation of a famine. While in Moab, tragedy strikes and Elimelech dies. The Scripture does not record how Naomi's husband died, but the event was certainly devastating. Naomi has two sons who rise to the occasion and begin caring for their widowed mother. Naomi's sons marry Moabite women named Ruth and Orpah. After a decade as a widow, catastrophe strikes again, and both of Naomi's sons die. The Bible simply says, ***"The woman was left without her two sons and her husband."*** With a broken heart, Naomi begins the journey back to her home country of Judah.

She is in such anguish she tries to send her daughters-in-law away: ***"Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me?"*** She has become so depressed, sad, and angry that she tries to push everyone away. She sees herself as bad luck and cursed by God. Her daughters plead with her, and yet her response remains the same, ***"No, my daughters,"*** she says, ***"for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me."*** Naomi is not only bitter for her sake, but also on behalf of her daughters-in-law. Orpah returns to her home, but Ruth refuses. As Naomi and Ruth journey toward Bethlehem, Naomi is returning as a completely different woman than when she left. She returns as a childless widow, culturally viewed as the most pitiable of people.

When these broken widows arrive, the Bible says, ***"The whole town was stirred because of them."*** The women of the village are thrilled to see their friend and relative return, until she speaks. They greet Naomi, but realize she isn't the same. ***"Do not call me Naomi,"*** she says, ***"call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi…"*** (Ruth 1:20-21). Naomi means "sweet and pleasant," while Mara means "bitter." No more is she sweet and pleasant company. Naomi changes her own name to reflect the dramatic change of circumstances. She's too old to marry and too old to bear children. She is a bitter, broken woman.

Job was a hero of the Old Testament that faced similar catastrophes. When Job found himself broke and childless, he simply said, ***"The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord"*** (Job 1:21). Life can and will bring great testing and trials. The decision lies before each of us whether to become bitter towards the Lord or to bless the Lord. The choice to bless and honor the Lord is not contingent on external circumstances but the condition and commitment of the heart. The choice to bless the Lord is not contingent on the state of our emotions but on the condition of our faith in the flawless character of Almighty God. ***"I will bless the Lord at all times,"*** David writes, ***"his praise shall continually be in my mouth"*** (Psalm 34:1).

Today's Bible Reading: Ruth chapters 1–2

MARA TO NAOMI

DAY 14

"A son has been born to Naomi." Ruth 4:17

The book of Ruth could just as well be called the book of Naomi. The tragic and triumphant story that unfolds begins and ends with her. This widow and the mother of two deceased sons has returned home childless and with her foreign-born daughter-in-law Ruth in tow. Without protection and a financial provider, these two ladies are in serious danger of starvation. Ruth, as a young foreign woman, is in imminent danger of being sexually assaulted. But God, in the midst of this seemingly merciless catastrophe, is doing something extraordinary for the ages. A beautiful love story unfolds between Ruth and a wealthy close relative of Naomi named Boaz.

This union, however, was not unopposed. Boaz was forced to negotiate with another relative who had a greater, closer claim on the widow and all that she owned. Boaz redeemed (bought back) Naomi and Ruth, making this young Moabite widow his wife. Naomi and Ruth's future is secure, their needs are provided for, and their safety is made sure. Yet, God's redeeming plan isn't over. God makes Naomi a grandmother. It is in that moment that the town no longer calls her Mara or sees her as a bitter old woman. She is once again Naomi.

The women of the town, while celebrating, exclaim, ***"Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him."*** Naomi becomes a grandmother and the neighborhood celebrates, ***"A son has been born to Naomi!"***

(Ruth 4:14–17). Naomi's life had truly been redeemed. She would become the great-great grandmother to King David and part of the lineage of Jesus Christ. Naomi's name was once again sweet.

This small book of the Bible is a story of redemption—a woman crushed by unspeakable tragedy brought back to a life of sweetness. This is what God does for us in Jesus Christ. Followers of the Lord Jesus can confidently proclaim, ***"I know that my Redeemer lives"*** (Job 19:25). Boaz serves as a type of Christ. Jesus redeems us from our sin, securing our eternal home in Heaven, providing all of our needs according to His inexhaustible riches, and protecting us through the gift of the Holy Spirit. The bitterness of sin had devastated our peace and joy, but in Christ we have been given ***"the peace of God which surpasses all understanding"*** and a ***"joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory"*** (Philippians 4:7; 1 Peter 1:8). Naomi is a testimony to God's redeeming power and hope in the midst of tragedy.

Today's Bible Reading: Ruth chapters 3–4

HADASSAH TO ESTHER

DAY 15

"Hadassah, that is Esther…had neither father nor mother. The young woman had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at…" Esther 2:7

Orphaned, exiled, and now the "winner" of a kingdom-wide search for a new queen is how we are introduced to Hadassah. Following the death of her parents, she would be raised and cared for in the home of her cousin Mordecai. They were Jews living in exile in the land of Persia. Hadassah, meaning "myrtle," would be brought to the palace, where she would find favor with the king and be crowned queen. The previous queen had been deposed for refusing the command of her husband, Ahasuerus (Xerxes in Greek). When Hadassah, a Jew, now known by her Persian name of Esther, reaches the heights of power, she is soon informed of a plot to annihilate her native people.

Esther had been plucked from obscurity and powerlessness to a place of luxury, privilege, and authority. Her cousin states very plainly, ***"Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"*** But to intercede on behalf of her people, she will have to tread on extremely thin ice. The previous queen had displeased and embarrassed the king and was removed. If she dares to approach the king without a royal invitation, will she suffer the same fate? Will all the Jews then be exterminated? A choice lies before this beautiful woman. Either she must embrace her new Persian identity as queen, which affords her safety and privilege, or put all that on the line, sacrificing herself and her life of luxury for the sake her people. Hadassah chooses sacrifice rather than safety. God intervenes and rescues the Jews, Mordecai, and the Jewish-born Persian queen.

The name Esther comes from the Persian word for "star" and probably is homage to the chief Babylonian (now Persian) goddess, Ishtar. This goddess of love and fertility was, according to one source, "fearsome, often violent…known as the 'Lady of Battles.'" Hadassah on the other hand, as noted, means "myrtle." The myrtle "is an attractive evergreen shrub or small tree…. [Its] leaves, bark, and berries are also fragrant. Manufacturers use them in making perfume." Sacrifice is a beautiful perfume—dare I say, the most fragrant to the Lord.

From prison, the Apostle Paul writes to the church at Philippi thankfully telling them, ***"I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God"*** (Philippians 4:18).

When you and I sacrifice our comfort, privilege, time, money, resources, and ultimately ourselves, we offer to the Lord what amounts to an intoxicating aroma that is pleasing to the Lord. It is the perfume of sacrifice. Conversely, what does selfishness or self-preservation smell like to the Lord?

Hadassah was a myrtle. More than just attractive, she was used by the "manufacturer" to make a stunning perfume.

Today's Bible Reading: The whole book of Esther

Sources:

The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Mythology

World Book Encyclopedia

SECTION 3

THE EXILES: GOOD TO BAD

LUCIFER TO THE DEVIL

DAY 16

"How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!"
Isaiah 14:12 (KJV)

The angel Lucifer was created by God to be a guardian of the glory of God. Being part of a unique class of angels, He was given the privilege of being near to the throne of God. Ezekiel chapter 28 details the exquisite array of jewels with which Lucifer was adorned. ***"Every precious stone was your covering,"*** the prophet writes, including the ***"sardius, topaz, and diamond, beryl, onyx, and jasper, sapphire, emerald, and carbuncle; and crafted in gold were your settings and your engravings"*** (verse 13). The breathtaking relationship between this angelic being and Jehovah God is mind blowing. The image that is being described portrays Lucifer as being adorned with priceless jewels, which when illuminated by the light of God, reveal the extraordinary being that Lucifer was, while simultaneously reflecting the magnificent glory of God back to the Lord and all of Heaven.

The name Lucifer means "light bringer." Yet, Lucifer was not content to reflect both the light and praise of Heaven back to God. Lucifer desired to be the center of attention. He longed to ascend above the throne of God, seizing the worship of Heaven and the throne of the universe for himself. The Scripture says of Lucifer's fall, ***"Your heart was proud because of your beauty"*** (Ezekiel 28:17). Lucifer became filled with pride, which led to his destruction and expulsion from Heaven.

C.S. Lewis calls pride "the complete anti-God state of mind." That's precisely what Lucifer had. The sin of pride utterly ruined his created purpose and transformed him into a monster.

He ceased to be named the light bringer and became Satan, which means “adversary.” Pride changed him.

The same is true for you and me. The sin of pride changes us. Pride blinds us to truth, wisdom, and common sense. Pride even creeps into our spiritual life, robbing us of gratitude toward Christ when we’ve begun to believe we earned or deserved salvation or God’s blessings in any way. That reflection of gratitude back to Christ is lost when we become prideful. Our worship, rather than being all-consuming, becomes a slight periodic nod to God’s superiority. Like Lucifer, we have been created to reflect God’s glory, but in doing so, we see how special, unique, and splendid God has created us. Within God’s holy light, our gifts, skills, and talents are most beautifully shown. Our beauty and purpose are illuminated in God’s presence, which brings glory back to the Creator.

I often consider the moon. I walk out into our dark backyard sometimes to look out and see the moon nearly illuminating the field where I’m standing. Yet the moon in and of itself produces no light. The moon merely reflects the sun. Without the sun, we would be unable to see the moon and appreciate the incredible celestial rock that it is. Again, the same is true for us. Without the Son, we and others are unable to see how special and unique we are. Without standing in the Son, others are unable to see the glory of God.

We’ve been designed by God to stand in His light, reflect His majesty, and see His extraordinary creation in ourselves.

Today’s Bible Reading: Isaiah 14:12-15; Ezekiel 28:12-19; Proverbs 15:25; 16:5, 18; 21:24

ELIAKIM TO JEHOIAKIM

DAY 17

"And Pharaoh Neco made Eliakim the son of Josiah king in the place of Josiah his father, and changed his name to Jehoiakim."
2 Kings 23:34

Nearly 600 years before Christ would come to Earth, more than 200 years before the birth of Alexander the Great, and centuries before the rise of the Roman empire, Babylon and Egypt were two of the greatest empires in the world. Sitting nearly right between them was the nation of Israel, which had at this point in history become two nations, one being Israel and the other Judah. In 722 BC, the Assyrians had decimated Israel and taken them into captivity. Judah, however, would survive as a nation until around 586 BC.

The rival kingdoms of Babylon and Egypt would each conqueror nations, tax the people, take natural resources, and turn citizens into slaves, all for the purpose of building their empires. As these two kingdoms grew and the spiritual rebellion of Judah persisted, Egypt captured the King of Judah, Jehoahaz, removed him from power, and took him to Egypt, where he died. In his place, Pharaoh Neco II placed Jehoahaz's older brother in power.

His name was Eliakim, which means "God has established." And truly, God had established this royal line. The Scripture says of his father Josiah, ***"There was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses…"*** (2 Kings 23:25). But Josiah's son Eliakim ***"did what was evil in the sight of the Lord"*** (2 Kings 23:37). Not only did he do evil before the Lord, but his very name was changed as a demonstration of his change in allegiance.

The Pharaoh of Egypt, rather than allowing this new king's name to continue to reflect God's authority in establishing kingdoms, changed his name to Jehoiakim, meaning "the lord has established." In a different context that name could mean the Lord of Heaven, but in this case it refers to the lord of Egypt, Pharaoh Neco II. The ruler of the Egyptian empire wanted this puppet king's name to reflect the glory of Pharaoh and Egypt's power. However, rather than disdaining this dishonor to God, he embraced his power. The king of Judah's allegiance had changed, his lord had changed, and now his name change demonstrated those facts.

Who is your lord? Where does your allegiance lie? Those are crucial questions to answer. In closing the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, ***"On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord….' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you'"*** (Matthew 7:22-23). The lordship of Christ is a fundamental facet of salvation. Jesus must be both our Lord and our Savior. He will not be our Savior if He is not our Lord. Nor will He be our Lord without saving us from the consequences of our sin or eternity in Hell. Romans 10:9 is crystal clear: ***"If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved"*** (emphasis added).

Today's Bible Reading: 2 Kings 23:31-24:6; 2 Chronicles 36:1-4

MATTANIAH TO ZEDEKIAH

DAY 18

"And the king of Babylon made Mattaniah, Jehoiachin's uncle, king in his place, and changed his name to Zedekiah." 2 Kings 24:17

As the kingdom collapsed, the glory days of David and Solomon were faint and distant memories. To the citizenry of Judah, those days of safety, prosperity, prominence, and glory must have seemed like an impossible and implausible fairy tale. From approximately 590 BC to 586 BC, the nation of Judah had been ransacked by Babylonian forces. More than a century earlier, the nation of Israel had succumbed to the Assyrian Empire. And now the nation of Judah has been crushed by the supreme empire on the planet, Babylon. The final king of Judah was Mattaniah. He was the youngest son of King Josiah and uncle to the former king, Jehoiachin. Although the legitimacy of the nation and the role of monarch is questionable, historically, he would be the final Jewish king. His predecessor (uncle) had rebelled against the Babylonian tyrant Nebuchadnezzar, only to be quickly removed from power and taken away as a captive and prisoner.

To demonstrate his sovereignty and rule over the puppet kingdom and king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar placed Mattaniah on the throne and, as was common in these cases, changed his name. In 2 Kings 24:17, the author matter-of-factly states, ***"The king of Babylon made Mattaniah, Jehoiachin's uncle, king in his place, and changed his name to Zedekiah."*** As every baby truly is, Mattaniah means "gift of the Lord." However, as was rare in the case of name changes, the pagan king did not change his new subject's name to reflect a Chaldean deity. Mattaniah was able to maintain a Jewish name rooted in Yahweh. Zedekiah means "righteousness of the Lord."

But rather than being a righteous leader of his people, he continued the pattern of idol worship and rebellion against God. ***"And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord,"*** the Bible says, ***"according to all that Jehoiachin had done"*** (2 Kings 24:19). His name may have meant "righteousness of the Lord" but his life, leadership, and actions were anything but in line with God's holy standards. His name meant one thing, but his life was something completely different.

This reminds me of when Jesus confronted the religious leaders in the temple. In Matthew chapter 23, Jesus' final sermon to the scribes and Pharisees reveals the truth of their genuine character and motives. They pretended to be righteous for the crowds, but, Jesus said, ***"Within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness"*** (verse 28).

The irony of these two accounts is that God's impending judgment is at the proverbial door of the nation. Nine years after Zedekiah took the throne, he too would rebel against Babylonian rule, only to suffer a worse fate than his nephew, the previous king. Nebuchadnezzar, the Bible says, ***"Slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, and put out the eyes of Zedekiah and bound him in chains and took him to Babylon"*** (2 Kings 25:7). Roughly 40 years after Jesus' appeal to the religious leaders, the Roman empire would decimate the nation of Israel in AD 70. God's unrelenting judgment would not stand by as idol worship, hypocrisy, religious abuse, and open rebellion against God's Word went unchecked.

Proverbs 14:34 says, ***"Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people."*** Throughout the world, America is regarded by many as a Christian nation. Yet so often wickedness remains unchecked. The role of the church, of God's people as leaders, is to shine the light of the Gospel, but not by simply claiming

the name of Christ or self-labeling as Christians. We are called to live truly righteous lives before the Lord, our neighbors, and our world. Jesus despised the hypocrisy of the religious leaders and the Lord is still disgusted by our hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is not inconsistency, but acting or pretending. Zedekiah's name meant righteousness, but his life didn't match. We claim the name of the risen Lord Jesus. Does your life match?

Today's Bible Reading: 2 Kings 24:17–25:7; Matthew chapter 23; Proverbs 14:34

PASHHUR TO MAGOR-MISSABIB

DAY 19

"And it happened on the next day that Pashhur brought Jeremiah out of the stocks. Then Jeremiah said to him, 'The Lord has not called your name Pashhur, but Magor-Missabib.'"
Jeremiah 20:3 (NKJV)

(Good luck pronouncing this name change! But please don't let the difficult name keep you from grasping the very important truth contained here.)

The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah was known as "the weeping prophet." The message and ministry entrusted to this great preacher was a weighty emotional burden. Jeremiah was eyewitness to the depravity and idolatry that was destroying his country. He wept at both the abandonment of God's law and the consequences for sin that were coming because of it. ***"Oh that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears,"*** Jeremiah writes, ***"that I might weep day and night for the slain of…my people"*** (Jeremiah 9:1).

God's judgment was coming, but the people refused to listen. As the religious leaders listened to Jeremiah's passionate pleas for repentance, they scoffed at his holy warnings. A priest named Pashhur, who was in charge of the temple police, dispatched his cronies to arrest Jeremiah. Worse than simply imprisoning the prophet, he ***"beat Jeremiah…and put him in the stocks that were in the upper Benjamin Gate..."*** near the temple (Jeremiah 20:2). The faithful servant of the Lord was whipped, shackled into the stocks, which forced the body into unnatural and painful positions, and placed in a highly public place to be mocked and shamed. The unfaithful religious leaders physically harmed God's

man and displayed him for a thorough public rebuke. Not until the next day was Jeremiah released.

Upon the prophet's release, the God of Heaven had a short sermon with a massive message for Pashhur. Jeremiah turned to his tormentor and oppressor and said, ***"The Lord does not call your name Pashhur, but Magor-Missabib"*** (Jeremiah 20:3). Pashhur means "ease" or implies the idea that "deliverance is all around." However, Magor-Missabib means "Terror on every side." In an instant, God changed this priest's name from ease, comfort, and security, to a name meaning "You are surrounded by terror." The prophet concludes this power-packed proclamation with this:

> ***"You, Pashhur, and all who dwell in your house, shall go into captivity. To Babylon you shall go, and there you shall die, and there you shall be buried, you and all your friends, to whom you have prophesied falsely"*** (Jeremiah 20:6).

No escape remained for this false prophet. He, his friends, his family, and his followers were all doomed. God declared it through Jeremiah as an indisputable, unchangeable fact. In 586 BC, God's judgment came. The nation of Judah and the capital city Jerusalem would, shortly thereafter, be decimated and Pashhur's greatest fear realized. Terror literally surrounded the city he called home.

The reality of God's righteous judgment is not to be ignored. Without question the good news of Jesus Christ must be the center of all our preaching and teaching. But fully understanding the Gospel (good news) is impossible without coupling that with from what we have been rescued. God's holy justice for sin and the reality of Hell must be proclaimed.

The Apostle Paul warns Timothy that ***"the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths"*** (2 Timothy 4:3-4).

If you are reading this and do not know Christ, stop reading this, open a Bible, and read John 3:16. God loves you and has made a way of escaping His righteous wrath. He sent His Son Jesus to die on the cross for our sins. Jesus was buried, but He rose from the dead. His sacrificial act on the cross pays the penalty for our sins and His resurrection gives us the hope of eternal life. To receive this free gift (Romans 6:23), we must repent of our sin and believe in what Jesus did for us (Romans 10:9, 13).

If you are reading this and you know Christ, when is the last time you wept over the judgment of God upon people that you love? And not just people we love, but people we have never met, who have yet to hear the Gospel? What about our enemies? Jeremiah writes, ***"If you will not listen, my soul will weep in secret for your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly and run down with tears…"*** (Jeremiah 13:17). The Gospel of Mathew simply says, ***"When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless…"*** (Matthew 9:36). Our hearts must be filled with both joyous gratitude to the Lord for the judgment we have escaped and deep, sorrowful grief for those who have yet to come to Christ.

Today's Bible Reading: Jeremiah 20:1-6; Revelation 19:1–20:15

Sources:
The MacArthur Bible Commentary

DANIEL TO BELTESHAZZAR

DAY 20

"And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar…" Daniel 1:7

Taken from his family, his home, his country, his culture, his position, and from everything familiar, Daniel and his friends were exiled into the kingdom of Babylon. The intention was to take children from noble families, who had a certain level of knowledge, skills, and competencies, and completely reprogram them. In a sense, the goal was to Babylonian-ize them and use them as ambassadors, governors, leaders, and messengers of the great King Nebuchadnezzar. The process was relatively simple. First, bring them to Babylon and give them new names. Second, give these gifted young people new diets, new customs, new culture, new language, new literature, and new history through an intense, three-year reeducation program. Lastly, these now-Babylonian citizens would be presented before the king for assessment.

Daniel feared the Lord, but understood the new reality where he was living. His name was no longer Daniel, which means "God is my judge." He was now known as Belteshazzar, which was a petition to the false god Bel, asking him (the false god) to protect the king. In these circumstances, Daniel put himself on the line. He made a request to his Babylonian supervisor for a change in diet. The Bible simply says, ***"Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself…"*** (Daniel 1:8). Because of the idol worship, behavior, and diet that was being encouraged, Daniel determined that he could not participate. He knew full well that this conviction could lead to his death, but he boldly made the request anyway.

What followed was God's overwhelming blessing to Daniel and his Judean friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. They were noticeably healthier than their counterparts, who were under the Babylonian diet. God blessed them with ***"learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams"*** (Daniel 1:17). When the time came to present the newly educated "Babylonians," the Bible is clear that "none were found" like these young men. The Scripture says the king ***"found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom"*** (Daniel 1:20).

What is clear here is exactly what Daniel's name means: "God is my judge." Daniel and his friends realized that the Babylonian king was going to assess them in due time, but God was the judge that they must ultimately be committed to pleasing. This must be true of our lives as well. The world will point us to earthly authorities, but God's Word always points us to His ultimate authority. Ephesians chapter 6 challenges employees (slaves in the New Testament context) to ***"obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart"*** (verses 5-6). We honor our earthly authorities because we are ultimately committed to honoring ***"the righteous judge"*** (2 Timothy 4:8).

Today's Bible Reading: Daniel chapter 1

HANANIAH TO SHADRACH

DAY 21

"And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: …Hananiah he called Shadrach…" Daniel 1:7

As the book of Daniel begins, we are specifically introduced to four young men among the thousands who have been taken into Babylonian captivity. Each from the tribe of Judah, their given Hebrew names are Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. The boldness with which we see Daniel speak in chapter 1 is supported by his three friends. And God, as we've noted, blesses them with incredible favor with King Nebuchadnezzar. As the years pass, God in His divine providence elevates Daniel to the role of prime minister. From this position of great influence and power, Daniel makes another request of the king. This bold Jewish exile requests that his friends Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah be appointed ***"over the affairs of the province of Babylon"*** (Daniel 2:49). The king grants this request and these young exiles are each elevated to great positions of privilege, prestige, and power as regional governors in Babylon. However, trouble and great spiritual testing lay ahead.

King Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian monarch, had commissioned the construction of a nearly 100-foot statue in the plain of Dura. His plan was to invite every person within his government to a special celebration of his glory and the dedication of this immense statue. The Scripture details that the invitation to Dura was sent to ***"the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces…"*** (Daniel 3:2). As these officials arrived, they were each commanded that at the sound of the music, they were ***"to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up."*** Compulsory worship is what the

king was commanding. To ensure that dissension was either absent or minimized, the Babylonian herald added, ***"whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace."*** The next word in the Scripture summarizes the actions of the majority of people: ***"Therefore."*** The Bible explains that as soon as the first note was played, people ***"fell down and worshiped the golden image"*** (verses 5-7).

Yet amongst the crowd, three officials could not participate in this idol worship. When this disobedience is brought to the king's attention, he is furious and immediately summons these local governors. Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah make their way to the throne room. Nebuchadnezzar seems perplexed by their actions, to the point of offering a second round of worship just to correct this "issue." He once again commands, this time without the help of or potential distortion of a herald, that these men bow down and worship the statue that he has established. He finishes with the threat of the fiery furnace and the dare, ***"Who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?"*** (verse 15).

The command was clear from this earthly king. But to these three Hebrew exiles, the real command was coming from the King of glory. God had said through the mouth of Moses in Exodus 20:3-5:

> ***"You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them…."***

This was an idol and they could not worship it. Now, it's unlikely that the king had forgotten the native land of these men. More than likely, he believed the Babylonian reprogramming process had worked.

As they appeared before the king, he did not call Hananiah by his Hebrew name. That name meant "the Lord is gracious." Rather, he called him the name given to him upon entrance into Babylonian exile. He called him Shadrach, which means "Command of Aku," a false, Chaldean deity.

Nebuchadnezzar assumed that the command and control of their lives was no longer in the hands of a distant deity named Yahweh. He was confident that the command of their lives was purely Babylonian and by default under the king's control. The confused Babylonian sovereign asks, ***"Is it true…that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up?"*** (verse 14). He is stunned. What he didn't realize was that the commander of their lives was not Aku, but Jehovah.

In the book of Acts, Peter and John are commanded by the religious leaders to cease preaching in the name of Jesus Christ. They simply answer, ***"We must obey God rather than men"*** (Acts 5:29).

Who is the commander of your life? Who makes the ultimate decision? Who makes the final call? Is Jesus Christ the Commander and Lord of your life? For Hananiah (now called Shadrach), a name change did not change his Commander. He was, as we'll see, a "good soldier" committed to the commands of his Master. Centuries later, Paul, writing to his son in the faith Timothy, challenged him to ***"share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him"*** (2 Timothy 2:3-4).

Today's Bible Reading: Daniel 3:1-15; Romans 10:9, 13

AZARIAH TO ABEDNEGO

DAY 22

"And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: …Azariah he called Abednego…" Daniel 1:7

With a "furious rage," Nebuchadnezzar commanded that the rebellious government officials be brought immediately to the throne room. The scene of Daniel chapter 3 is tense, as three young Hebrew exiles stood before the most powerful man on the planet. King Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian dictator, dared these defiant Jews to further test his patience. ***"If you do not worship,"*** the king warned, ***"you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?"*** (Daniel 3:15). The king had set up a grand idol in his honor, and these men had defied his command, challenged his authority, and, by default, confronted his prideful actions.

Standing before the king were three exiled Hebrews: Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Upon arriving in Babylon, each of their names had been changed to reflect their new identities and supposed new allegiances. Azariah's name was changed to Abednego, which means "Servant of Nebo," the Chaldean god of vegetation. But here in this moment of crisis, no false god of vegetation was going to provide any help or courage. Azariah's given, Hebrew name meant "The Lord is my Helper" and that is exactly what these men needed. In an extraordinary display of dedication and courage, they respectfully spoke to the king:

> ***"Oh Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out your hand, O King. But if not, be it known to you,***

> ***O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up"*** (Daniel 3:16–18).

Upon hearing this, the Scripture says the king ***"was filled with fury and the expression of his face was changed…"*** (Daniel 3:19). The word anger and any of its synonyms seem to fall desperately short of describing the emotional state of this scorned royal. Consumed with rage, he commands the furnace to be ***"heated seven times more"*** (verse 19) and these three rebels to be immediately thrown into the flames for what promises to be a swift, excruciating, and hopeless execution. Nebuchadnezzar is going to make an example of these men and send a clear message to the Babylonian kingdom: "Serve me or die."

Because of the irrational order of the king, the heat of the furnace became uncontainable. The men marching Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah to their death were overtaken by the flames and perished in the power of the inferno. As the three God-fearing and God-serving men fell into the furnace, the rage of the king seemed to subside.

But what promised to be a certain and swift execution was the exact place where God intervened and "The Lord is my Helper" rang true. Nebuchadnezzar abruptly rose from his throne, counting not three men in the flames, but four. In his blind rage, he sought the confirmation of a nearby counselor, asking, ***"Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?… I see four men, unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt…"*** (3:24-25). The God of Azariah was present.

If we are the servants of Christ, we can be assured of the same hope. We can endure the fiery trials of this world, knowing that the Lord promises in Hebrews 13:5, ***"I will never leave you nor forsake you."*** But please take note of the response to that promise

in verse 6: ***"So we can confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?'"***

During trials is one our greatest opportunities for fellowship with the Lord. Our Helper is present in our pain. He is near in the nightmares. He is close in catastrophes. Do not shun difficult seasons, because ***"the testing of your faith produces steadfastness"*** (James 1:3). So, ***"let steadfastness have its full [life-giving, faith-growing, trust building] effect"*** (James 1:4).

Today's Bible Reading: Daniel 3:16-25; Hebrews 13:5-6; James 1:2-4, 12

MISHAEL TO MESHACH

DAY 23

"And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: …Mishael he called Meshach…" Daniel 1:7

Nebuchadnezzar couldn't believe his own eyes. To confirm his sense of sight, he spoke to these men who were walking around in the flames. ***"Servants of the Most High God,"*** he called them, ***"come out, and come here!"*** For the first time (not the last) in Babylon, God's men ***"came out from the fire"*** (Daniel 3:26) escaping what for everyone else would have meant certain doom.

Ironically, both the God of Heaven and Nebuchadnezzar had had similar ideas for these three Hebrew men. The Babylonian king intended to use their public execution as an example and display of his power. God too was using these three Hebrew men as a public example of His unmatched power. The Bible clearly states that ***"the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king's counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men"*** (3:27). Both the king and the audience that was gathered to worship the great idol were perplexed.

Only one truth could explain this miraculous escape. The God of these men had rescued them. This served as a two-fold testimony. First, the king and his pagan counselors realized their powerlessness in the face of Yahweh. Second, and this is the most troubling, the exiled Hebrews who had compromised by worshipping the great statue were reminded that the one true God was not limited by national boundaries. He was God in Jerusalem, in Babylon, and the entire world.

To return His people to this truth and the worship of the one true God, three Hebrew men had to courageously face their death. But what followed was a testimony of God's promises and faithfulness to His servants. The Babylonian king made a bold decree:

> ***"Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way"*** (Daniel 3:29).

Upon arrival in Babylon, Mishael's name had been changed to Meshach. Mishael means "Who is like the Lord?" whereas Meshach means "Who is what Aku is?" There the conflict was unavoidable. In Babylonian (Chaldean) culture, Aku was the supreme deity. In the flames of Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace, God proved that He was supreme ruler of the universe, unmatched by any fabricated Babylonian deities, and sovereign over all the affairs of men.

The proverbial fork in the road of this story begins all the way back in Daniel chapter 1. Thousands of Hebrews were exiled into Babylon and yet only four remained faithful to God's standard and steadfast in their worship of God. In our world, are we the compromisers or the champions of God's standards?

When we compromise, we miss out on seeing the grand display of God's unique, unmatched glory in our lives. When we champion His unique, inimitable character, we personally experience His presence, protection, and provision, and we also call His people back to faithful worship of the Lord.

Today's Bible Reading: Daniel 3:26-30; Romans 12:2

UNKNOWN TO LEGION (SPIRITUAL EXILE)

DAY 24

"My name is Legion, for we are many." Mark 5:9

"What is your name?" Jesus asks him. And the response that comes back is bone chilling. Through the mouth of this man speaks a wicked horde of fallen angels. ***"Legion, for we are many,"*** they say. Standing before Jesus was a man that the world couldn't control. The people of the Gerasenes region had tried and failed. They had shackled him, attempted to subdue him with human strength, and even resorted to chaining him up like an animal, but nothing worked. He would break free and resume his howling, self-mutilation, and screaming throughout the night, living among the dead. He was truly a monster lurking in the cemetery, living in the crypts.

Now Jesus and His disciples have arrived on the eastern shore of the sea of Galilee, following an extraordinary trip across the sea (see Mark 4:35-41). In the midst of a raging storm, the Lord woke up and simply commanded, ***"Peace! Be still!"*** As the storm ceased, the disciples sat in amazement at Christ's divine power. But the thrill of escaping a potentially fatal storm quickly evaporates when Legion shows up, naked, bleeding, screaming, and running towards them and Jesus. But the power that Jesus had demonstrated over nature was going to be matched by His authority over demons and over the torment that this man was experiencing. Jesus gave a clear, unavoidable command in Mark 5:8, ***"Come out of the man, you unclean spirit."*** And the legion of demons was gone, dispatched into a nearby herd of swine.

As for the man, the Scripture says he was sitting with Jesus, ***"clothed and in his right mind"*** (Mark 5:15). Jesus would commission him to go to his family and tell them ***"how [the Lord] has had mercy on you"*** (verse 19). And that is exactly what he did. He traveled throughout the Decapolis, proclaiming the power of Jesus.

But I wonder, what was his name? It certainly wasn't Legion. His identity had been stolen, lost to demonic powers. He had become a monster, a horror, a true "thing that goes bump in the night." Now Jesus had returned him to his right mind, redeemed him from the power of darkness, and restored him back to his family and friends.

Oh, the power of Jesus! This is what He does. He takes what the enemy has hijacked and rescues, restores, redeems, and renews. A name that had been lost, and replaced by evil, was given back once again. Evil was dismissed. Life was made new.

What Jeremiah said to the Lord is true: ***"Nothing is too hard for you"*** (Jeremiah 32:17).

Today's Bible reading: Mark 5:1-20; Matthew 8:28-34; Luke 8:26-39

SECTION 4

NEW TESTAMENT: I SEE IN YOU WHAT YOU DON'T SEE IN YOURSELF

ZECHARIAH TO JOHN

DAY 25

"And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, 'No; he shall be called John.'" Luke 1:59-60

Strangely enough, the first miraculous conception recorded in the Gospel of Luke is not that of Jesus. Before the angel Gabriel announced the coming birth of Jesus Christ to Joseph and Mary, he visited a much older man named Zechariah. He was a priest, married to a woman named Elizabeth. Luke records a very succinct but thorough biography of the couple. He writes, ***"They were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren and both were advanced in years"*** (Luke 1:6-7). A great stigma and shame was placed upon both of these God-fearing and God-serving people simply because they were unable to have children.

While serving in the temple, Gabriel announces to Zechariah that he and his wife are going to be blessed with a son. Shocked, nearly beyond words, the faithful priest responds, ***"How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."*** Seeing the situation through only human eyes and with human limits, Zechariah is doubtful. Gabriel pronounces judgment: ***"Behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words…"*** (Luke 1:18-20). Zechariah exited the temple and made his way home in complete silence, because God had taken away his ability to speak. He was truly left speechless.

In the days that followed, this elderly couple was blessed with the birth of their newborn child, their firstborn son. As news of this miraculous conception and birth spread, the neighbors and community began to gather together to celebrate. The Bible says, ***"And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father"*** (verse 59). Culturally the expectation was to name the child after the father, honoring his and his wife's faithfulness to the Lord during those barren years.

For a moment, make the cultural jump to our time. The cake had "Zechariah" printed on it. The invitations welcomed people to Zechariah's party. Every present and card was addressed to little Zechariah. "Happy Birthday" would be sung to "Zechariah."

But with a mute husband, Elizabeth speaks up. She boldly exclaims, ***"No; he shall be called John."*** The festive atmosphere quickly turns to confusion and the people become inquisitive. The neighbors, rather than accepting this, approach the baby's father. Their rationale is sound: "None of your relatives is called by this name." Unable to speak, the father of this precious little miracle writes, "His name is John." The Scripture says simply, ***"And they all wondered"*** (verse 63). John means "God has been gracious."

What those gathered for a celebration didn't know was that God had revealed through Gabriel not only the name of the child, but the anointing and calling placed upon his life.

> ***"He will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the***

> ***hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."*** Luke 1:15-17

This faithful couple embraced the purpose and plan God had for their son, John. Immediately, as Zechariah did that, God restored his ability to speak.

We too must embrace God's plan, not only for our sons and daughters, but for our own lives as well. The long years of sorrow and brokenness that Elizabeth endured only brought greater glory to God and greater joy to her heart, because she remained faithful. We often associate faithfulness and the opportunity to bring glory to God with only blessings, but the hand of God is seen in trials most clearly. Although we may feel pain, sorrow, fear, or anxiety, when we stay faithful to the Lord, we are declaring His glory by embracing His sovereign will. In 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul writes, ***"Let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him and to which God has called him"*** (7:17).

Today's Bible Reading: Luke chapter 1; Proverbs 16:9

SIMON TO CEPHAS/PETER

DAY 26

"Jesus looked at him and said, 'You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas' (which means Peter)." John 1:42

Two thousand years before Dwayne Johnson changed his name and identity to The Rock or before Sylvester Stallone became Rocky, someone beat them to the punch (pun intended). The Gospel of John records what appears to be the first words Jesus ever spoke to the man we know as Simon Peter. Simon's brother had met Jesus and been brought to the divine discovery that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. Andrew immediately sought out his brother and exclaimed in verse 41, ***"We have found the Messiah."*** But Andrew was not satisfied to only announce this discovery to his brother; he wanted his brother to experience the life-changing power of Jesus for himself. So Andrew took Simon to meet Jesus. As they approached the Messiah, the Scripture says, ***"Jesus looked at him and said, 'You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas' (which means Peter)"*** (John 1:42).

It's unlikely that either Simon or Andrew realized the significance of what was occurring. Andrew had just introduced one of the most pivotal characters in all of Christian history to the Christ. Simon had just experienced the prophetic power of Jesus over his life. Simon, most likely a modern spelling of the Old Testament character Simeon, means "hearing." Cephas, or Peter, as we most often refer to him, means "rock." Jesus had looked at this career fisherman and dubbed him "Rock."

But Peter's life had been spent on the waves of the incredibly unpredictable Sea of Galilee. Almost poetically, Simon's life was equally unsteady. Even after following the Lord, we find Simon Peter

as a virtual roller-coaster of emotional and spiritual highs and lows. Matthew records Peter in one moment courageously confessing, ***"You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God"*** (16:16). Yet, in the very next moments, Peter takes Jesus aside, scolding the Lord for talking about the sufferings He would experience. In another occurrence in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus comes to the disciples' aid by walking across the water. Peter, in an incredible act of courage, requests to join the Lord on the open sea. Yet moments after joining Jesus in His walk across the water, he is overwhelmed with fear and begins to sink. Even up to the very night of Jesus' arrest, Peter confidently states, ***"Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away…Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!"*** (Matthew 26:33-35). Hours later, Peter would, in fact, deny the Lord three times. The unsteady, unpredictable waves of Galilee certainly seemed to resemble the personality of Simon Peter.

But the Lord Jesus saw in this son of John a canvas upon which God could create a masterpiece. Following the resurrection, Simon was no longer ***"a wave of the sea…driven and tossed by the wind"*** (James 1:6). He was Rock. Acts records the extraordinary boldness of Peter. He faced prison, persecution, and physical punishment from the religious leaders. In the middle of those trials, he remained unmoved. He was Rock. The resurrection power of Jesus Christ had given him an unmovable anchor and in doing so, had transformed this unsteady, up-and-down fisherman into a formidable rock in the foundation of Christ's church. This is the power of Jesus. This is the power of the Gospel. God transforms the unsteady into pillars of stability.

What made Peter unstable was his mindset. When Jesus rebuked him in Matthew chapter 16, Jesus said, ***"You are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man"*** (verse 23).

The Scripture is clear: ***"A double minded man is unstable in all his ways"*** (James 1:8 KJV). Like Peter, when we set our minds on heavenly, eternal things, the power of God transforms our lives. We cease to be unstable, restless, and uncertain people, and become anchored in the steadfastness of Jesus Christ.

Today's Bible Reading: 2 Peter 2:3-9; 1 Corinthians 15:58; Colossians 1:21-23; 1 Timothy 6:11; Hebrews 6:13-20; James 1:2-4, 12; 5:11

JAMES AND JOHN TO THE SONS OF THUNDER: PART 1

DAY 27

"James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder)." Mark 3:17

Like children fixated on the petty and unimportant, James and John among the other disciples often served as discouraging distractions to the Lord. Whereas the eyes of the Lord were fixed on Calvary's cross, these ambitious followers of Jesus were angry at a perceived slight by the Samaritans. Racial and cultural tensions between Jews and Samaritans were too great to be ignored or escaped. In the several interactions Jesus had with the Samaritans recorded in Scripture, or the parable He told that we know as "The Good Samaritan," Jesus encounters, addresses, and at times corrects this racial strife. Jews hated Samaritans and Samaritans returned the sentiment.

In Luke chapter 9, as Jesus is traveling towards Jerusalem, He and His disciples find no welcome in an unnamed Samaritan village. Accents, dress codes, various customs, and dietary restrictions would quickly reveal a Jew to a Samaritan. Equally, Samaritans would be identified and despised by Jews. A Samaritan woman, whom Jesus encounters at a well, honestly asks, ***"How is it that you, a Jew, asked for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?"*** (John 4:9). John adds, ***"For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans."*** Even the religious leaders, in their barrage of attacks on Jesus, reveal that calling a Jew a Samaritan had become, in their minds, a vicious insult. ***"Are we not right,"*** they snarled at Jesus, ***"in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?"***

(John 8:48). In the hearts of these religious leaders, Samaritans and demon-possessed madmen were in the same category of deplorable, disposable people.

When Jesus and the disciples found no hospitality or warm welcome, the disciples were incensed. They felt personally insulted and provoked to come to the defense of Jesus. He was their miracle-working Master, who had healed and ministered to Samaritans. But now all the guest rooms were supposedly full, schedules packed, and no food available. So rather than moving past the town and traveling further, two angry siblings have a plan. These men were raised in the cutthroat world of the Galilean fishing industry. They knew retribution, retaliation, and how to send a message.

Jesus had called these two brothers, James and John, to follow Him. The Lord, according to Mark's Gospel, had even given these brothers a nickname that seems quite fitting: ***"Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder"*** (Mark 3:17). These men were no choir boys. John is a long way from being known as "the beloved" or viewed as the tender, effeminate disciple of Davinci's "Last Supper." He and his brother are harsh, foul-mouthed, vindictive fisherman.

Upon seeing this cold welcome, James and John petition Jesus to do something ruthless. ***"Lord,"*** they ask, ***"do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"*** (Luke 9:54). With the image of Sodom and Gomorrah ablaze in their eyes, these disciples are ready to, literally, burn it down. Jesus would later give instructions on how to respond to the cold shoulder. Essentially Jesus would instruct them to preach, leave the judgment to God, and walk away. But for now, James and John want justice. They want the holy judgment of God to fall from the sky and strike

down an entire village of men, women, and children. They certainly don't appear to be tempered or patient men. They are "the sons of thunder." Here comes the boom. They have embraced the role of God's executioner. Jesus is disgusted. He rebukes their cruelty. The Scripture in its brevity conceals the severity of the rebuke. We can assume with some confidence that the words of Jesus were piercing. Jesus wasn't concerned about destroying this village; He was concerned about saving it. Years later and with significantly greater understanding, John would record these words of Jesus: ***"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him"*** (John 3:17).

What ***"the Sons of Thunder"*** failed to see was that the patient love and mercy of Jesus for that unwelcoming village was the same longsuffering love the Savior had extended and was extending to them in that moment. Praise God for His mercy. May we extend that same mercy and love to everyone, even those who reject us and our Lord.

Today's Bible Reading: Luke 9:49-56; Mark 3:17

JAMES AND JOHN TO THE SONS OF THUNDER: PART 2

DAY 28

"James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder)." Mark 3:17

Matthew chapter 20 is a portion of Scripture with incredible amounts of tension-filled anticipation. For the third time in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus has revealed the reality of His impending arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection. Yet none of the disciples seem to grasp what Jesus is attempting to explain. They seem obsessed with busying themselves with parade preparations. They know their geography. They realize they are within hours of Jerusalem. They are hearing and probably participating in the rumors of Jesus entering Jerusalem as a conquering King. Expectations in the hearts of Jesus' followers could not have been higher. The miracle-working, death-defying, buffet-bearing King is traveling towards the city of David. The Messiah has arrived and they have a front seat. More than just a personal connection to the King, they can claim to be His most loyal and long-time followers. They wrongly assume the nature of Jesus' kingdom and totally misunderstand His kingship. They are clueless as to the true nature of Jesus' purpose for entering the sacred city.

The Sons of Thunder, among other characteristics, had abysmal timing. While Jesus is grappling with the terrors of the cross, James and John are picturing themselves sitting upon thrones. These members of Jesus' inner circle have devised what, in their minds, appears to be a clever plan for securing their spot in the royal pecking order. Without any hesitation, they enlist the help of their mother. Kneeling humbly before Jesus, she asks, ***"Say that these two sons***

of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom" (Matthew 20:21). James and John have gone for broke. The remaining ten disciples, according to Matthew's Gospel, are ***"indignant at the two brothers"*** (Matthew 20:24). Jesus kindly explains, ***"You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?"*** The Sons of Thunder are quick to clamor, "We are able." C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* writes, "Pride is in competition with everyone else's pride. It is because I wanted to be the big noise at the party that I am annoyed at someone else being the big noise." In 1940s British vernacular, Lewis reveals the exact heart of James and John. They wanted to be the "big noise." After all, they were the Sons of Thunder.

Their selfish ambition and their itch "to execute judgment" as MacArthur dubs it, was erased after the resurrection of Christ. These two men who were noisy, judgmental, vindictive, ambitious, and conniving abandon everything for Christ. History notes that James, even when marching towards the executioner, was found to be boldly proclaiming Christ. His faith was so convincing that the early church fathers testified that the very guard escorting this great apostle converted to Christ on the spot and was beheaded alongside James.

John, his brother, would write much of the New Testament. He would be the longest surviving apostle of Christ. Sentenced to hard labor on the island quarry of Patmos, John was given the vision we see recorded in the book of Revelation. He would pen the Gospel of John, uniquely and for all time proclaiming the love of Christ.

These Sons of Thunder truly made some noise. They left an indelible mark on the entirety of humanity. When Jesus met them, they were boisterous, empty noisemakers. When Jesus changed them, they

were the thunder echoing the one whose ***"appearance was like lightning"*** (Matthew 28:3).

Today's Bible Reading: Matthew 20:20-24; Mark 3:17

JOSEPH TO BARNABAS

DAY 29

"Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement)." Acts 4:36

The numbers are stunning. At the outset of the book of Acts, ***"the company of persons was in all about 120"*** (1:15). That was the entirety of the church Jesus had established throughout His earthly ministry. But on the day of Pentecost, 3,000 were added to that number. And then days later, the Scripture says ***"many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand."*** The exponential growth was staggering. As the ***"apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus"*** (Acts 4:33), more and more people were coming to Christ to be saved. One of the earliest converts in this massive revival was a man named Joseph. He was a Levite from the island of Cyprus. Being a Levite meant that he had an incredible Old Testament education and was extremely dedicated to Judaism. We do not know exactly when Joseph became a follower of Jesus, but he heard the gospel, possibly even at Pentecost (Acts chapter 2), repented of his sins, and believed on Jesus for the salvation of his soul.

As persecution increased against the early church, voluntary socialism became increasingly important. Newly converted Christians were losing their jobs, homes, families, and in some cases even their lives. The church's responsibility to share their resources became more than just a charitable exercise. Sharing food and finances became a necessary act of the church to support persecuted and poor believers. Joseph, having been born again, joined in. The Bible says, he ***"sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet"*** (Acts 4:37).

This was a freewill gift for the care of the church and the furtherance of the Gospel message.

Because of this act of generosity and certainly others, the apostles decided that the name Joseph failed to exemplify all that this man was. So the apostles called him Barnabas, which means "son of encouragement." Joseph had such a gift of encouraging others that the church changed his name. Whether he always had a somewhat uplifting spirit or this was a dramatic change that was part of his salvation experience, he was now officially the son of encouragement, Barnabas.

According to *Webster's Dictionary,* encouragement means to inspire with courage, spirit, or hope. To encourage is to spur on or to give help. This was not only the character quality he possessed, but who he was. He was Barnabas. In Romans 15:5, Paul calls the Lord, ***"the God of endurance and encouragement."*** Barnabas was created by God and now indwelt by the Holy Spirit with the gift of encouragement. We ought to strive for that same encouraging spirit. People around us ought to feel inspired, more hopeful, and strengthened after spending time with us. If we serve "the God of encouragement," we ought to be very encouraging.

We also need people in our lives to encourage us. Life can be extremely discouraging. We can become hopeless, negative, and cynical. God has imparted to certain people an extra dose of encouragement. Find those people. First, be encouraged by them. Secondly, thank them for their words and acts of encouragement. Lastly, learn to be like them by finding someone else to encourage.

On a personal note, I thank God for the Barnabas' that He has placed in my life—people who inspire, give hope, lovingly challenge, and

give help. My wife Jennifer has become the greatest encourager in my life. I also know two men that, in spite of whatever personal difficulties or challenges they may be facing, always make time to encourage. They inspire and spur me toward being a better person. Thanks Chris. Thanks Russell.

Today's Bible Reading: Acts 4:32-37; 9:26-30; 11:22-26

Sources:
Webster's Dictionary

SAUL TO PAUL

DAY 30

"But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him." Acts 13:9

Arguably the most dramatic conversion recorded in all of the Scripture is that of Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus. Saul was, in his own words, ***"advancing in Judaism beyond many of [his] own age…"*** (Galatians 1:14). He was a Roman citizen, an extremely well-educated Jewish scholar, and bore the name of the most prominent member of his tribe, King Saul of the Old Testament. What appears to rocket Saul to fame among his Jewish colleagues was his vicious hatred for Christians. Saul's first appearance in Scripture portrays him as the authorizing force, standing watch over the brutal execution of a Christian named Stephen. "Saul," the Bible says, ***"approved of his execution"*** (Acts 8:1). It is as if Stephen's execution was blood in the water for a shark. Immediately following Stephen's death, Saul is even more aggressively persecuting the church. ***"Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison"*** (8:3).

On a mission to hunt, arrest, and imprison more Christians, Saul's life was completely changed. A blinding light encompassed Saul, and the voice of Jesus from the glory of Heaven spoke to the early church's most vicious enemy. ***"Saul, Saul,"*** Jesus said, ***"Why are you persecuting me?"***

"Who are you?" Saul responds.

"I am Jesus," the Lord replies, ***"whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city and you will be told what you are to do"***

(Acts 9:4-6). For the next three days, Saul was blind and refrained from eating or drinking anything. God graciously sent a Christian to Saul to pray over him. Saul regained his sight and was immediately baptized. From that encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, Saul was never the same. He boldly began proclaiming Jesus. With the same passion and dedication that Saul had in persecuting the church, he would now become its greatest proponent. Saul became the global emissary for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Decades later, while beginning the first of his four missionary journeys, the Bible says, ***"Saul, who was also called Paul…."*** And with those simple words, he is never called Saul again. He is henceforth known as Paul. Saul was his prominent Jewish name, which means "asked for" or "demanded." Paul was his Roman name.

The significance of this transformation is extraordinary. Paul, who had once pursued success, power, prominence, and position within Judaism had abandoned it all. He no longer demanded to be addressed by the name of a king. His Roman name, Paul, was sufficient. Paul means "little." In his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul writes, ***"I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord"*** (Philippians 3:8). What he recognized as valuable had completely changed. He goes so far as to call his previous achievements "dung." The Gospel transformed Saul, a power-hungry religious leader, into Paul, a man who didn't mind being little. He embraced this dramatic change in his goals and dreams.

The Gospel continues to transform dreams, desires, and pursuits. When we lay aside our selfish ambitions in exchange for "knowing

Christ Jesus," we trade in the temporal for the eternal. Martyred missionary Jim Elliot once said, "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Jesus simply said, ***"Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it"*** (Matthew 10:39). Saul of Tarsus found his life as Paul, slave of Jesus Christ.

Today's Bible Reading: Acts 9:1-25; Galatians 1:11-24; Philippians 3:2-11

{INSERT YOUR NAME HERE} TO TBA

DAY 31

"To the one who conquers…I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it." Revelation 2:17

The Greco-Roman imagery that Jesus uses here in His message to the church at Pergamum can't be ignored. When an athlete achieved victory, he would be given a white stone with his name carved upon it. This white stone would serve as his entrance pass to a victors' banquet and celebration of athletic achievement.

The church at Pergamum was engaged in a brutal contest on enemy turf. They were "playing" their fiercest rival in the most difficult "stadium" around. They were on the road, facing the ultimate away game. As John records the direct message from Jesus, the Lord clearly states, ***"I know..."*** Christ acknowledges that these Christians are working near "Satan's throne," that they have experienced brutal persecution and personal loss, and are under attack from false teachers. Not only is the domain of darkness surrounding them, but wickedly vile "preachers" have brought the fight into the church. The struggle is real. The game is on and Jesus wants to strengthen, challenge, and encourage His church. The word picture that Jesus paints is that He is waiting at the finish line with a trophy and a personal invitation to a victory celebration for those who conquer.

The Christian life has often been compared to a race with a grueling course but a glorious, long-looked-for finish line. The writer of Hebrews states, ***"Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus…"*** (Hebrews 12:1-2). The apostle

Paul challenges the Corinthian church to ***"run that you may obtain"*** the trophy (1 Corinthians 9:24).

What awaits the victorious believer at the end of the race is our heavenly Father with the prize and an endless "victory parade." The Scripture is very specific that this is not a generic prize, but something personal and uniquely special that the victor is given by the Lord. The reason for this is that, as Hebrews teaches, there is a unique race set before each of us. That individual course is fraught with peaks and valleys, obstacles, distractions, trials, and triumphs. What Jesus says is crucial for each athlete (believer) to hear. Jesus says, ***"I know where you dwell…."*** William Newell, writing about this passage says, "There is a personal character in all trials, through which the overcomer (that is, the true believer) will be brought to know the Lord in a peculiar way shared by no other." This is why we speak of a personal relationship with Christ. Because our trials in this life are deeply personal, we are assured by the Lord that our victory and reward will be deeply personal as well.

The white stone given has upon it our new name, encompassing in it the victory that the Lord has carried us. That name, which will be unique to each believer, is given directly by the Savior. The old will be set aside and eclipsed by the new identity that the Lord eternally imparts to each of us. A new name that we will instantly recognize, know, and embrace will show us that the Lord knew the whole time the difficult race that we were running. Just as a trophy or medal identifies the event, so will this new name.

One day our name will be changed by the Lord Jesus. This new name will reflect the fiery trials we endured in life, while giving us entrance into eternal life. So let us run our race, looking to Jesus, knowing He holds a glorious prize.

Today's Bible Reading: Revelation 2:12-17; Hebrews 12:1-2; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

CONCLUSION

JESUS TO ??? (ONLY HE KNOWS)

"And he has a name written that no one knows but himself." Revelation 19:12

The final name change in the Bible may come as a great surprise to you. As the Apostle John records the return of Christ, the fierce imagery of Jesus is stunning. John writes,

> ***"Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself"*** (Revelation 19:11-12).

John is seeing the righteous vengeance of Christ. Jesus has returned not to save the world, but He has come in judgment. When He is finished His robe will be covered, not with His own blood like at Calvary, but with the blood of the nations He has crushed. The image of Jesus from Revelation chapter 19 isn't one you'll find hanging in any church nursery. In John's vision of the apocalypse, the Lord has been called many things: King of kings, Lord of lords, the Word of God, the Alpha and the Omega, the Almighty, the Christ, the Lamb, and the Lord Jesus.

Here John mentions a great mystery. He reveals that Jesus has a name that is known only to Himself. The name, as we understand it, is yet to be revealed. All speculation about the identity of the name is fruitless, because the Bible is clear that ***"no one knows but himself."***

The name and character of Christ have been insulted from the very beginning. The religious leaders of Jesus' time called Him a liar, crazy, demon-possessed, empowered by Satan, an illegitimate child, and defamed Him as being cursed of God. Sadly, even today the name of Christ is assaulted. "Jesus Christ" has become a curse word, paired together and used separately. "For Christ's sake" has become a derogatory comment. The very thought of these should grieve Christians. The insult to the Savior should be seen as exactly what it is: blasphemy.

I recall with great pain the first and only time I used "Jesus" as a curse word. During the summer between high school and college, I worked construction. My final week on the job before leaving for college, something happened (I can't remember exactly) and in response, I exclaimed the name of Jesus as a curse word. I was stunned. I remember the construction site going quiet as each guy heard me, knew I was a professing Christian, and was shocked. I'll never forget that moment. My heart aches to think about the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and my sickening disrespect for Him.

The Scripture tells us though, that there is a name that is known only to God that has been reserved and protected for eternity. It has never been used in vain, mocked, derided, disparaged, or misused in any way. Jesus will be who we worship for eternity, but His true name is yet to be revealed. As believers we long for that day when His eternal name will be revealed and will be praised with pure hearts and mouths. ***"Come, Lord Jesus"*** (Revelation 22:20).

Today's Bible Reading: Revelation 19:11-21

STUDY GUIDES

ABRAM BECOMES ABRAHAM

SECTION 1: STUDY GUIDE

I love names. I enjoy meeting people and asking them what their name means. Occasionally, people will know and joyfully share. However, more often than not, I will ask someone what their name means, and with a blank stare, they will admit, "I have no idea." I remember going through the drive-thru at McDonald's years ago. Jen and I were expecting and we knew that it was a girl, so we were on the lookout for girls' names. As we pulled to the drive-thru window, I noticed that the employee's name tag said, "Gidget." I instantly thought, "Wow! What a cool name." I said to the lady, "I really like your name. What does it mean?" She appreciated the compliment but hesitantly explained that it just meant "girl midget." Needless to say, I felt awkward, she felt awkward, and we didn't name any of our daughters Gidget.

Name Challenge

What is your full name?

First _____
Middle _____
Last _____

What does it mean?

_____
_____
_____

What are the roots of your last name?

_____
_____
_____

Anything particularly unique about your name (i.e., Are you a Jr, III, hyphenated, family history)? _____

_____

_____

Maybe you have changed your name. What was the occasion or purpose? _____

_____

_____

Throughout the Scripture, we encounter unique name changes. Often, God is the source of the change. Other times, individuals alter their own names or the names of others. In many cases, their social standing, citizenship, and destiny are thereby changed as well. The first major male character in the Scripture to experience name change—and therefore a change in destiny—is the father of faith: Abraham. Abraham is introduced in Genesis chapter 11 as a son of Terah, the brother of Nahor and Haran, and the husband of Sarai (Genesis 11:26-30). The Scripture very succinctly explains that the family made a move from Ur of the Chaldeans, heading to the land of Canaan, but stopped in Haran (11:31-32). The journey, according to archeologists, was somewhere around 600 miles into northern Mesopotamia. Renown archeological professor Joseph Free describes Ur as a place of extraordinary education and commerce. Specifically addressing the religious culture of Ur, Free writes:

> "The archaeological excavation of Ur…has shed much light on the pagan religion which flourished at Ur in the days of Abraham. The chief deity of Ur was the moon-god named Nanna, whose temple and ziggurat were in the large area measuring twelve hundred by six hundred feet. Other evidence has been brought forth concerning private worship, which included the worship of

idols placed in niches in the private house shrines" (*Archaeology and Bible History* by Joseph P. Free, 1950).

In his closing farewell address to the nation of Israel, Joshua, Moses' successor, proclaimed, ***"Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor, and they served other gods'"*** (Joshua 24:2). Abram, as he was known in Ur, was raised in an educated but pagan, false-deity-worshipping society.

It is into this mindset and upbringing that God speaks to Abram. Read Genesis 12:1-9.

What did God promise Abram? _____

_____

_____

Look at the extraordinary blessing, assets, and power that Abram already had.

Genesis 12:5 _____
Genesis 12:5 _____
Genesis 12:12 _____
Genesis 13:3 _____
Genesis 14:14 _____
Genesis 14:16 _____

Abram is incredibly wealthy, with flocks, slaves, a household militia to protect his family, a beautiful wife, gold, and silver. But despite all this, he has no children. His heir is Eliezer of Damascus (15:2), yet God has repeatedly promised Abram that He would make him "a great nation." The Lord repeats in chapter 13, ***"I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the***

dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted." In chapter 15, God again says, ***"Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them. So shall your offspring be"*** (verse 5). Yet Abram and his wife grew both older and more impatient. According to historians, a culturally accepted practice, particularly in Babylonia, was for a wife to give her servant to her husband as a "second wife." So in chapter 16 of Genesis, Sarai gives Hagar to her husband. The slave conceives and gives birth to a son named Ishmael. At 86 years old, Abram finally becomes a father, but to do so, he had to return to the practices of Ur, from which God had called him.

Once again, God appears to Abram. This time, He is not only going to call Abram physically out of Ur and its pagan practices, but God is going to cement the destiny change for Abram.
God speaks:

> ***"Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you"*** (Genesis 17:4-6).

Whereas Abram means "exalted father," Abraham means "father of a multitude." But Abram, now known forever as Abraham, had sinned.

1. Abraham tried to fulfill God's promise in his own strength (Genesis 16:1-2).
2. Abraham dishonored marriage and accepted pagan practices (Genesis 16:3:24).
3. Abraham created long-lasting family turmoil (Genesis 16:5, 7-12).

God intervened and changed Abram's name and his destiny. Abraham became more than just a physical father. He became the father of faith. Galatians 3:7 says, ***"Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham."*** What is extraordinary about Abraham is not that he didn't sin or fail God, but that he believed God and that his faith is counted as righteousness by God (Genesis 15:6). That is the Gospel (Galatians 3:8) that Abraham heard, believed, and by which was saved. He was an idol worshipper and the God of the universe reached out to him.

NAOMI

SECTION 2: STUDY GUIDE

Throughout history, people for various reasons have had their names changed. Athletes, actors, religious leaders, writers, activists, kings, and slaves have all exchanged their names given at birth for something different. Here is a pop quiz. Can you identify (without googling) which given name and better-known name go together?

Quiz

Pope John Paul II	Walker Smith
Muhammad Ali	Allen Stewart Konigsberg
Billy the Kid	Isabella Baumfree
Calamity Jane	Terry Gene Bollea
Sojourner Truth	Jerome Silber
Butch Cassidy	Caryn Johnson
Bill Clinton	Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili
Gerald Ford	Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr.
Joseph Stalin	Erik Weisz
Gene Wilder	Karol Wojtyla
Kareem Abdul-Jabbar	Marion Robert Morrison
Hulk Hogan	Robert Leroy Parker
Sugar Ray Robinson	William Blythe III
Harry Houdini	Martha Burk
Woody Allen	Ferdinand Lewis Alcindor Jr.
Tom Cruise	Eric Bishop
Mark Twain	Leslie Lynch King Jr.
John Wayne	Frances Ethel Gumm
Jamie Foxx	Reginald Kenneth Dwight
Judy Garland	Samuel Clemens
Whoopi Goldberg	Thomas Mapother IV
Elton John	Henry McCarty

Answers on Page 137

Source: famousnamechanges.net

Now imagine completely changing your name. What would your new name be? _____
_____
_____

WARNING: REAL, NON-SUPERFICIAL, ZERO-SMALL-TALK QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSIONS AHEAD.

The book of Ruth introduces us to a lady who changes her own name to reflect the dramatic life changes she had experienced.

Let's begin by reading Ruth 1:1-5.

What terrible events had transpired in Naomi's life? _____
_____
_____

What are some of the worst events of your life? _____
_____
_____

In her brokenness, Naomi attempted to send both of her daughters-in-law away. Her daughter-in-law Orpah left her, while Ruth stayed.

In times of difficultly, why do we send people away? _____
_____
_____

In tough circumstances, did you have Orpahs (those who left)? ____
_____
_____

Did you have Ruths, who refused to leave, even when you told them to? _____
_____
_____

Throughout the book of Ruth, Ruth is a type of Christ. Read Joshua 1:5 and Hebrews 13:5.

What is God's promise to us? _____
_____
_____

When Naomi and Ruth arrive back to Bethlehem, the famine of chapter 1 is over, but the dryness and hardness of the land has been replaced with the dryness and hardness of Naomi's hurt heart. Naomi means "sweet," but when she is welcomed back home, she refuses to be acknowledged as sweet. She demands to be called Mara, which means "bitter."

How much control did circumstances have over Naomi/Mara's life?
_____
_____
_____

Have difficulties and trials shaped you in a way to completely change your personality, attitude, and outlook on life? _____
_____
_____

Read Philippians 4:10-13.
What secret had the apostle Paul learned?

_____

_____

_____

The prayer of Proverbs 30:7-9 seems out of step with today's American, more-is-better, prosperity culture. Here is what the writer prays:

> ***"Two things I ask of you; deny them not to me before I die: Remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God."***

Read Ruth 4:13-17.
What changed Mara's name back to Naomi?

_____

_____

_____

God redeemed the brokenness and bitterness of Naomi and Ruth through a redeemer and the amazing birth of Obed. See Matthew 1:5-6 for Obed's lineage. Whatever circumstances you are facing, have faced, or will face, Jesus has promised to redeem them. Read Romans 8:28. If you are ***"in Christ"*** then you can be confident that ***"all things"*** will be redeemed and used by God for His glory and your good.

LUCIFER BECOMES THE DEVIL

SECTION 3: STUDY GUIDE

Throughout the Scripture, there are incredible stories of God's transforming power being displayed in the lives of simple and, in some cases, broken people. As we read these inspiring stories, the Bible is clear that one of their purposes is to be ***"an example… written down for our instruction"*** (1 Corinthians 10:11). Conversely, there are other stories of tragedy, disappointment, failure, and epic falls from grace. No biography of a disastrous fall is more impactful and haunting than that of the being named Lucifer. Pastor-teacher John MacArthur writes, "Lucifer, son of the morning…literally means 'shining one,' but translators have often rendered it 'morning star.'" The Scripture gives us the name Lucifer in Isaiah 14:12, while Ezekiel chapter 28 lays out an exquisite description of this angelic being described as the "light bearer."

Read Ezekiel 28:12-15.
What portion of this extraordinary description stands out most to you? _____
_____
_____

Yet for all his amazing beauty, purpose, and privilege, we no longer refer to this being as the "light bearer" or Lucifer. We call him the Devil or Satan.

When you think of Satan (the Devil), what is the first image that comes to your mind? _____
_____
_____

From where did that image (good or bad) come? _____

_____

_____

Whether you view Lucifer (the Devil) as fictitious, a medieval myth, a spiritual being, the rival of God, the anthropomorphism of evil, the evil cat from Cinderella, or a goat-legged man with horns and a pitch-fork, the Bible explains that he is a real, alive, and an extremely active being.

What are some of the names and activities of Lucifer now?

Matthew 4:1

_____

_____

John 8:44

_____

_____

John 10:10

_____

_____

Revelation 12:3-4, 7-9

_____

_____

1 Peter 5:8

_____

_____

1 John 5:19

_____

_____

1 Thessalonians 3:5, James 1:13

_____

_____

John 12:31

_____

_____

Revelation 12:10

_____

_____

1 John 3:8

_____

_____

2 Corinthians 4:4

_____

_____

Ephesians 2:2

_____

_____

John 17:15

_____

_____

1 John 5:18

_____

_____

Revelation 9:11

_____

_____

Read Isaiah 14:12-15.

Lucifer's ambition was no longer to lead the host of Heaven in praise of God, but, in fact, to become the focus of the worship of Heaven. His perfection was destroyed when ***"unrighteousness was found in [him]"*** (Ezekiel 28:15). Pride entered his heart. Until several months ago, the seriousness of this connection eluded me.

One of my heroes in the Christian faith is a man name Chuck Colson. I did not have the privilege of meeting him before he went to Heaven, but the more I read his books and stories about his life, the more I find myself inspired and challenged. My journey with this man, once called "Nixon's hatchet man," began with our prison ministry. As our prison ministry has continued to expand throughout the Midwest, I began an in-depth study of prisons and prison ministry in America. Any book I could find on prison construction, riots, escapes, gangs, tattoos, industries, reforms, and the like I would read and try to gain a broader perspective on the opportunities and pitfalls of the correction system. Naturally, I picked through my library and found the autobiographical book written by the founder of Prison Fellowship, Chuck Colson. If you ever have a chance, buy the book Born Again and read it immediately. Without exaggerating, the Lord used this book to transform my life.

As I settled in one day to read this story that I already knew much of, I came to a chapter where Colson is lovingly confronted by the gospel. Colson recounts the story of going to a potential client's home and getting way more than he expected. Tom, the man he was visiting, had been radically changed by the Lord, and Colson was curious about the clear transformation in the man's life. As Tom and Chuck talked, Tom gave a gift to Chuck, a book written by C.S. Lewis entitled *Mere Christianity*. Before handing him the book however, Tom decided to read a single, brief chapter aloud. As I read this story, I thought "I have *Mere Christianity* in my library, but I've never read it before." So I hopped up from my seat, walked

down the hallway to the library, grabbed *Mere Christianity* and walked back to the living room. I didn't expect much. I just thought I would gain a greater insight into Colson's thought process. What transpired in the next 10 minutes has become a watershed moment for me. As I read the chapter entitled "The Great Sin," the Lord leveled me. I wasn't reading about Colson anymore. The Lord was illuminating the pride in my own heart. One quote in the chapter has resonated with me since that day. Lewis writes, "Pride is spiritual cancer: it eats up the very possibility of love, or contentment, or even common sense."

The lone audiobook on my phone is *Mere Christianity*. I will often listen to this chapter when I feel the need to go into a meeting or other setting and demonstrate my authority. Whenever the urge comes to puff up my chest, the Lord, C.S. Lewis, and Chuck Colson call me back to the pursuit of humility.

Over the last year or so, the Lord has opened my prideful eyes to see the abundance of biblical connections between the work of the Devil and the destructive sin of pride. Often when the disciples were feeling sure about themselves, Jesus would warn them about the dangerous ground upon which they treading. Peter, Paul, and James (the half-brother of Jesus), would later warn the church in their epistles about the poison of pride and the direct connection it has to the enemy of our souls. C.S. Lewis even writes, "It was through Pride that the devil became the devil."

Following are nine passages of Scripture that will reveal a clear Biblical connection between pride and the devil. Find the context and the narrative situation first. Then see the act of pride and connect the dots, so to speak, to the very present enemy of our souls.

	SITUATION/ CONTEXT	PRIDEFUL MOMENT	CONNECT TO SATAN
GENESIS CHAPTER 3			
MATTHEW 16:21-23			
LUKE 22:31-33			
MARK 14:31			
LUKE 10:17-20			
1 TIMOTHY 3:6			

	SITUATION/ CONTEXT	PRIDEFUL MOMENT	CONNECT TO SATAN
JAMES 3:14-15			
JAMES 4:6-7			
1 PETER 5:6,8			

Pride is sin. Pride is directly from Satan himself. It is crafty, sneaky, and will weasel its way into every single area of our life. The Apostle John writes, ***"For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and the pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world"*** (1 John 2:16).

Over 30 years ago, I was given a trophy at Trinity Baptist Junior Camp in Texas. As I begin writing this story, I've walked across my study, opened up a cupboard, and pulled that trophy out. It is currently sitting on my desk in front of me. Now, you may think I'm silly for keeping a trophy for over 30 years (and I might be), but that week in 1989, I was the "Camper of the Week." I remember being one of the youngest campers in the entire camp, yet I took home the "gold." I memorized the most Scripture verses and completed the Bible study book. I can vividly recall sitting in the first seat in

the front row on the final evening of camp. The director brought the trophy up and announced that I was the winner. To this day I can remember the overwhelming pride I felt as I rose from my seat, walked toward the podium, and up the stairs.

But I didn't make it. I face-planted on the steps. The entire camp (that's what it seemed like to me) burst into laughter and the camp director said, "Well, we can't give you the award if you can't walk up steps." I turned and walked back to my chair dejected. The director of course was kidding, but pride had done its job. There I was, eight years old, drowning in pride.

Pride is not a sin isolated to or from any specific group of people. Pride is a tactic, a cancer that Satan is seeking with which to infect every person. Pride is what keeps us from getting help when our marriage is on the precipice of disaster. Pride keeps us from asking for help during a tough time. Pride is why we can "look down" on other people and eviscerate them with our gossip. Pride makes us unteachable. Pride is why we are unwilling to listen to counsel or advice. Pride is why we demand that the world bends to our plans and desires. Pride is why we are disrespectful to authority and allow our kids to be the same. Pride is why we are harsh in our words and interactions. Pride makes our heart hard. Pride has been, as Lewis so wisely says, "The chief cause of misery in every nation and every family since the world began." And we as Americans, specifically Christians in the American church, are so diseased by pride we don't often even realize we are spiritually sick and dying.

Here's a challenge. If you wonder if you're prideful, ask your spouse, your kids, your friends, and the Lord. Then take "The Pride Test" that follows and read the chapter "The Great Sin" from *Mere Christianity.* Colson, even after being born again, wrote, "The process of ego slaying was still going on."

The Pride Test: Read 1 Samuel 25:1-42. Specifically look at verse 11, and count the number of times "I" and "my" are used. Then compare that number to the amount of times you see these words in Isaiah 14:13-14. Be ready to be shocked (I was).

Rank each of these on a scale of 1-10:

How harsh am I?

How disrespectful am I to authority? My boss, my teachers, my parents, the police, and others?

How self-centered am I?

How often do I use the words "my, mine, or I?"

How ungrateful am I?

How teachable am I?

How good of a listener am I?

Now ask someone who really loves you to take the test for you and see how it compares.

SIMON BECOMES PETER

SECTION 4: STUDY GUIDE

My wife and I have made some poor life choices. I say that half joking. At the outset of these decisions, things sounded great, but in the process and at the end, we realized the clear insanity of the chosen direction. Early in our marriage we built a brand-new custom home. Four years later we decided a repossessed home built originally in 1850 sounded better. Upon completion of remodeling that home, we decided we should upgrade to an extremely dated farmhouse originally built in the 1870s that appeared to be added onto annually. The phrase "Work smarter, not harder" never seemed to click for us. Keep in mind, I'm about as handy as a rock. Demo day is fun, but I'm pretty helpless after that.

Have you ever set out on a major home renovation project? _____

_____

_____

What was the low point? _____

_____

_____

Before we purchased the homes that we remodeled, we had the homes inspected. There are certain facets of a home you just can't fix. Well, you can, but you're going to go broke doing so. The foundation of the home is, without question, the most important part of the home. Strangely, it is the most unseen, but if it's cracking, sinking, or uneven, you'll eventually know. Absolutely everything is affected by the foundation of a home, because, literally, everything rests on it.

Read John 1:35-42.

It is possible that Jesus and Peter had met before, but this encounter, even if it wasn't the first, was entirely different. The revelation of Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah had struck Simon's brother Andrew with such significant force that he immediately sought to tell the good news to his brother. But Andrew wasn't satisfied to simply impart knowledge; he longed for his brother to experience Jesus for himself. Andrew, the Scripture says, ***"brought him to Jesus"*** (John 1:42). Andrew had just introduced Peter to Jesus. And in human terms, Andrew had introduced Jesus of Nazareth to Saint Peter. Certainly on a level of different significance and maturity, this is like Han Solo meeting Chewbacca, Shaggy meeting Scooby, Ernie meeting Bert, Buzz meeting Woody, or Fred meeting Barney. Actually, it's nothing like that, but hopefully you get the point. This is a monumental moment in the Bible and for the history of the church.

In those next few moments, Jesus changes Simon's name. With five simple words the destiny and legacy of Simon the son of John is transformed. Jesus, with divine authority, simply says, ***"You shall be called Peter."*** Peter means rock. Jesus was going to transform this impetuous fisherman into a steady rock. Jesus was going to use the courageous testimony and proclamation of Peter and the other apostles to lay the foundation upon which Christ would build His church. Jesus would be ***"the chief cornerstone"*** (Ephesians 2:20) with which all the other rocks, Peter included, would align themselves, find square, and establish a plumb line. This was the foundation on which the true church of Jesus Christ would rest.

But before that could be done, three years of Simon-to-Peter reshaping, remodeling, and repairing was going to take place.

Reshaping – Demo Day(s)

Read Matthew 14:22-33.

Peter knows the water. He's grown up fishing and embraced the trade inherited from his father. He can swim (John 21:7), but this whole idea of walking on the water with Jesus is something totally new. With extraordinary spontaneity that characterizes classic Peter, he jumps out of the boat to join the Lord on the waves.

But His eyes are quickly distracted from pure fellowship and joy of the Lord to the present circumstances of the raging wind and the rising waves. Peter begins to sink like a rock. Jesus' gentle rebuke is a demolition of Peter's greatest spiritual weakness. Peter needs to cease to be self-reliant. ***"Oh you of little faith,"*** Jesus says in Matthew 14:31, while taking hold of Peter. ***"Why did you doubt?"*** the Lord asks. Peter was used to being dependent on only himself. He was a self- made man. Jesus is calling Simon to become Peter, resting not on personal success or skill, but settled in complete dependence on Christ.

Would you consider yourself to be self-reliant? Self-sufficient?
_____
_____
_____

Do you find it difficult to trust others? To trust the Lord? _____
_____
_____

Is this an area of your life that needs to be demolished? _____
_____
_____

What are some areas of your life that need a demo? _____

_____

_____

Remodeling

Read Matthew 16:13-23.

Whether or not this is the moment of Saint Peter's conversion is unclear. What is clear is that Simon, the son of John is changing. Progress is being made. Jesus is transforming this courageous and bold fisherman. He isn't destroying Peter's personality entirely, because this is a man made by God. He is redirecting, or shall we say, remodeling or reforming his passion. Peter is the first to confess in Matthew 16:16 that Jesus as ***"…the Christ, the Son of the living God."***

What are some areas of your life where the space is cleared and you are ready to rebuild or find a fresh start? _____

_____

_____

How about the last five years? _____

_____

_____

How about since being born again? _____

_____

_____

For Simon, the total transformation into Peter, the rock, was full of great spiritual leaps forward, then followed by embarrassing stumbles back, seemingly, to square one. But ***"…He who***

began a good work in [Peter] will bring it to completion" (Philippians 1:6). Jesus had to demo some areas of Peter's life and remodel them. The Lord also, at times, had to circle back to previously addressed areas, for some repair work.

Repairing

Read Matthew 26:30-35, 69-75; and John 21:1-19.

Simon, son of John, had abandon Jesus and returned to his trade. But Jesus hadn't abandoned him. The Lord had called him Peter (Rock). The Lord was going to repair and restore what had been broken.

What are some areas of your life that have fallen into disrepair?

_____

_____

_____

What are some things that used to work that need to be fixed?

_____

_____

_____

Years later, in Peter's letters to the church, he would speak on several occasions about being stable and steady in the Lord. The power of the resurrection had transformed this shaky, uncertain man into a pillar (Revelation 3:12) of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Peter calls the church to resist the devil ***"…firm in your faith."*** (1 Peter 5:9). He cautions against losing our ***"…own stability…"*** (2 Peter 3:17) by following after false doctrine. Simon becomes Peter.

We are called to be ***"…steadfast, immovable…."*** (1 Corinthians 15:58). As if the case of Simon the son of John, to be steadfast in the Lord is going to take some serious work.

Thankfully, our Lord is committed to doing a thorough and quality job.

I recently felt the Lord gently asked me three questions.

Do you trust me?
Is this my church?
Is the gospel enough?

I had to do more than give the Christian pastor answer. I had to lay down my obsession with control, my pride of ownership, and my false belief that God needs gimmicks. I realized that the Lord was calling me, like a wise builder, to simply build on Him. On Christ and on Christ alone is where stability is found. He transforms the weak, frail, and spiritually manic into mighty warriors. He humbles the "strong" and "wise," drawing them to total dependence and trust on the Rock.

Psalm 112:6-8 says, ***"For the righteous will never be moved; he will be remembered forever. He is not afraid of bad news; his heart is firm, trusting in the Lord. His heart is steady; he will not be afraid, until he looks in triumph on his adversaries."***

APPENDIX 1

ANSWERS FROM SECTION 2 QUIZ | PAGE 115

Pope John Paul II	Karol Wojtyla
Muhammad Ali	Muhammad Ali Cassius
Billy the Kid	Henry McCarty
Calamity Jane	Martha Burk
Sojourner Truth	Isabella Baumfree
Butch Cassidy	Robert Leroy Parker
Bill Clinton	William Blythe III
Gerald Ford	Leslie Lynch King Jr.
Joseph Stalin	Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili
Gene Wilder	Jerome Silber
Kareem Abdul-Jabbar	Ferdinand Lewis Alcindor Jr.
Hulk Hogan	Terry Gene Bollea
Sugar Ray Robinson	Walker Smith
Harry Houdini	Erik Weisz
Woody Allen	Allen Stewart Konigsberg
Tom Cruise	Thomas Mapother IV
Mark Twain	Samuel Clemens
John Wayne	Marion Robert Morrison
Jamie Foxx	Eric Bishop
Judy Garland	Frances Ethel Gumm
Whoopi Goldberg	Caryn Johnson
Elton John	Reginald Kenneth Dwight

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OUR MISSION

Matthew 28:19-20: ***"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."***

REACH

At The River Church, you will often hear the phrase, "we don't go to church, we are the Church." We believe that as God's people, our primary purpose and goal is to go out and make disciples of Jesus Christ. We encourage you to reach the world in your local communities.

GATHER

Weekend Gatherings at The River Church are all about Jesus, through singing, giving, serving, baptizing, taking the Lord's Supper, and participating in messages that are all about Jesus and bringing glory to Him. We know that when followers of Christ gather together in unity, it's not only a refresher it's bringing life-change.

GROW

Our Growth Communities are designed to mirror the early church in Acts as having ***"all things in common."*** They are smaller collections of believers who spend time together studying the Word, knowing and caring for one another relationally, and learning to increase their commitment to Christ by holding one another accountable.

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