



The Big Picture

(Journey 2)

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About Through the Word

Through the Word is a 501c3 nonprofit ministry dedicated to equipping people around the world to read the Bible, understand it, apply it, and make it a habit. We provide simple yet powerful tools via the web and mobile apps that lead users on a journey to understand the entire Bible, one chapter at a time. TTW combines clear, balanced, and relatable teaching with direct accessibility. Our purpose is God's calling: to make disciples, equip the saints, and preach the word. (Mat. 28:19, Eph. 4:12, 2 Tim, 4:2)

Understand the Bible in 10- minutes a day with clear and concise plans for every book and audio guides for every chapter of the Bible.

“Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked. “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” Acts 8:30b- 31a

The Big Picture Day 1 | Psalm 1

Hello friends, and welcome to Through the Word - Journey number two. This is - The Big Picture - a bird's-eye tour of the grand story - the epic saga that is - the Bible.

My name is Kris Langham, and I'll be your guide today - as we begin this brief survey of the entire Bible. Over the next few weeks, we'll cover the major stories, people, themes, and messages of the best selling book - of all time. And perhaps - the most controversial as well.

Now in our other journeys - we'll take one book off of the Bible bookshelf at a time - and read every chapter, the way books are normally read. But here in The Big Picture, we'll pick out key chapters - spanning the entire Bible - to give you a look at the whole forest before you venture through the trees. We'll also give you the lay of the land - explaining the various sections and books of the Bible and how they all fit together.

The Bible is an amazing book. Amazing sixty-six books really. The stories and wisdom contained on these pages have been loved - and also hated - celebrated by some, banned by others. They've been studied - and argued, challenged - and defended. Some pick it up - and put it down unaffected. Others read it - and say it's life changing. Eternal life changing.

I myself can say - I've had both experiences. And wherever you stand or whatever your experience with the Bible, you are welcome here, and I want to thank you for taking us with you.

Now let's get started. We begin in the book of Psalms - which is a collection of songs and worship in the middle of the Bible. Today we'll read Psalm 1, beginning at verse 1.

"Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked - or stand in the way that sinners take - or sit in the company of mockers,"

The first word in the Psalm - is blessed. Great word. It's similar to our word happy - but much stronger. Blessed is a joy not from circumstance, but a gift of God. And here in Psalm 1, the opening words exclaim the blessed-ness of that one in a thousand who "does not walk in step with the wicked," but chooses a separate path.

Path is a key concept in the Bible - and it's at the very heart of Through the Word as well. Through the Word is not a reference tool, nor an encyclopedia of Bible facts. Rather, it's a journey through the Bible. In fact, nineteen journeys. Because life is a journey - and your steps today determine your destination tomorrow. And here in Psalm 1, who you keep in step with - affects your character, your compass, everything.

And watch the progression - he/she - doesn't walk with the wicked, so he doesn't end up standing with sinners - or sitting with mockers.

But far from that path is this one - look at verse 2 -
"...whose delight is in the law of the Lord..."

The Hebrew word for delight indicates will, desire, affection - every motive of the heart - fixed upon God's word.

Back in verse 2: "and who meditates on his law day and night." The Hebrew for meditate means focus on - spend time thinking about. They use the same word for a cow chewing the cud. Cows chew for a long time - then swallow - then bring it back up to chew some more. Four times - with four stomachs. So meditating on the Bible - means thinking - digesting - and thinking again.

And the result? Verse 3:

"That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.

That's a beautiful picture. A tree planted by streams. The roots of the tree - find a water source that does - not - fail. Always nourished. As a result - the tree's fruit - also doesn't fail, and it's leaf doesn't wither.

The tree in that picture - is a life. And the fruit - well that's another important Bible concept. Fruit is the product - what the tree makes. Leaves and shade and oxygen are nice too - but if you plant an orange tree - you probably want oranges. In the Bible, fruit means the product of your life. You're the tree, and the fruit - is what you create - spiritually speaking. So - be honest. What's your life producing? Here in Psalm 1, if your roots take in God's Word, then your branches bear fruit: like love, joy, peace, goodness, kindness - the good stuff.

Now if that just got too spiritual for you - you need to know, the Bible is a spiritual book. It's about God - and godly people - and godless people. Life, death -judgement, forgiveness - Heaven, Hell, eternity - it's all in here.

Now on that note, I want to pause our study to set a couple ground rules for the journey ahead. Rule number 1: I respect you. I respect your right to believe as you choose. That doesn't make you right, and it doesn't make me right - but if God gave you the freedom to choose your belief, then I will respect it. Still, what you believe - does have consequences - and how you feed your beliefs - will bear fruit.

Second: you respect me. Understand that I - like all our teachers - am human. We sit on the same planet trying to figure out life same as you, and we open the same Bible. And one of the first things the Bible taught me - is that I am not God, and I am not the Bible. I may be a guide, but I'm on this journey same as you, and I will make mistakes - same as you.

Third - respect the Bible. For a lot of us - these words - are sacred. That word Holy on the cover pulls a lot of gravity. The Bible will hit controversial topics head on. I won't tell you what to believe, and I'm not here for an argument, but I will share what I think - and let you decide what you think. But you should know - that I believe the Bible is God's Word - and I'll share it that way. I also believe - that this stuff is life and death.

In fact it's right here in this Psalm. After the fruitful tree - look back in verse 4. "Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away."

Another powerful Bible image. When grain is harvested, the stalks produce good grain - and useless chaff.

The chaff is lighter - so to separate the two, the harvester tosses the grain up into the air - and the wind blows the chaff away. And that pictures the fate of the wicked. Verse 5:

"Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction."

And there in the final verse, the writer comes back to two distinct paths - and this time, where those paths lead. Throughout the Bible, we are reminded - to consider not only our steps - but where they take us.

And that's a fitting reminder - as we begin our trek through the Bible. The road ahead is a long one. There is much to discover, and much to be learned. Some chapters will encourage and strengthen you; others will challenge and correct you.

The Bible is a book of history, philosophy, poetry, theology, and most of all stories - many of them considered among the greatest epics in ancient literature. But woven into this grand journey, you just might find - your story. That's how it worked for me - and I'll share some of my story as we go.

The paths described here in Psalm 1 - are not just abstract concepts. They describe real choices for real people. Because the Bible is about life - in all its glory - and all its grime. Love and hate, joy and sorrow, good and evil - it's all here - the best and worst of mankind. We will read - of the love of God - and the wrath of God, God's mercy - and justice. And we will see - the road to destruction - and the opportunity - to change direction. For the Bible - is a book of hope.

Read Psalm 1. And as we prepare for our grand tour of the book, stop to consider the road ahead - and what it means to you. "It's a dangerous business, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to." At least, that's what a Hobbit told me.

The Big Picture Day 2 | 1 Samuel 3

Hello everyone, and welcome back to The Big Picture.

It is day 2, and our chapter is 1st Samuel 3 - a story about the Word of God, and about a boy named Samuel - who heard God's word for the very first time.

Which begs the question - what does it mean to hear from God? People say it all the time - but how do you know - if the Lord of all creation is actually communicating with you? Christians seem to think it happens regularly. But - how do you know?

Now that's a big question - and I don't intend to give you a definitive answer - but I do believe we'll get some insight here in our story. After all - a lot of us think we hear from God - when we read the Bible.

This chapter is also a great way to share the heart of Through the Word. It's about a boy - and the word of God.

Now - lets start in at verse 1:

"The boy Samuel ministered before the Lord under Eli."

The story here takes place in Israel - about 1100 BC, with Samuel - a young Jewish boy, and Eli - the high priest in Israel. Samuel grew up with Eli, and they lived in a town called Shiloh, serving the Lord at the Tabernacle - which was a temple of God - in tent form.

So you can think of Samuel as a church kid. He lived with priests, and his whole life was centered around serving God. But the second half of verse 1 has a key insight on life in that time, "In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions."

In other words - Samuel's life was all about God, but God didn't seem to talk much. Verse 2:

"One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called Samuel.

Samuel answered, "Here I am." And he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

But Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." So he went and lay down.

Have you ever tried to respond to someone calling you - only they weren't calling you, and you both end up confused? Basically that's happening here. Samuel hears his name and goes to Eli - but Eli's not calling.

Verse 6:

"Again the Lord called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

"My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down."

Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord: The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him."

Stop there. Did you catch that? Samuel didn't know God - not yet. Oh he worked at the temple, and he went through all the motions - but he didn't know the Lord. Why? Because the word of the Lord - had not - yet - been revealed to him.

This is key to the story. It's also my story. I grew up going to church. I didn't live there - but I went a lot. But I didn't know God. Why? Look at the verse.

"The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed..." Revealed - means "made known" - or "uncovered." God's word hadn't been uncovered to Samuel. He probably studied it - even memorized a bunch of it. But revealed is different. Think of your friendships. Revelation is how we get to know each other. At first we're all surface, "What's your name, what do you do?" But as I trust you and you trust me - we reveal a little more, open the door, get real and talk about personal stuff. A good friend knows you. That happens through life together, and it happens through words.

And that's how it works with God too. Right there in verse 7 - Samuel didn't know the Lord - because God hadn't revealed his Word. Not yet.

In verse 8, God calls a third time - and again Samuel goes to Eli - because Eli's the only one around. But more than that - Samuel has always learned about God - from Eli. He never heard from God directly.

But when God calls again - and Samuel goes to Eli - the old priest figures it out. In verse 9:

"So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'"

I love that phrase. It's a great way to start your Bible reading. "Speak, Lord - I'm listening."

And that's what this story is about. God speaking to you and to me. Personally.

Samuel goes back to lay down - and the Lord calls again. Samuel responds, and sure enough - the Lord begins to speak - to Samuel. Now what he speaks - was not easy.

Actually... - I'm not gonna get into that. You'll find that I often skip some of the details, but that doesn't mean they're not important. That means you get to read them. I focus on the forest - so that you can check out the trees - and see how they fit the big picture. That way, I keep this short - and you get to hear directly from God. Just - like - Samuel.

See Samuel knew about God - from Eli. That's good - but ultimately, he needed to know God - directly. And whatever your reason may be for opening the Bible - you should know - that this is what the Bible is all about. It's about you hearing from God - about knowing God - personally. Teachers like me can guide you along the way - but this journey is about you and God. So please read for yourself.

Now I realize that you may not even believe in this God - or this Bible. That's okay. I didn't believe when I started the Bible, and nobody forced me. And nobody here will force you. Remember the ground rules - respect.

Well back in Samuel's story, the Lord gives Samuel a word for Eli - and Samuel delivers it faithfully. And Samuel grows up to be a prophet - someone who delivers God's word to God's people.

Then verse 21 - captures the heart of the whole story"

"The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word."

In other words - God kept showing up - He kept speaking - He kept revealing.

That verse is marked in my Bible - with a date. July 22, 2009. It's the day I got the name Through the Word. It's what we're all about. We go through the Bible - but what we really want - is for God to reveal Himself - through His word.

So - go ahead and jump in. Read chapter 3 - or play the Bible audio and listen. Speak Lord, your servants are listening.

The Big Picture Day 3 | Genesis 2

Hello world! Welcome back to the journey, and day 3 of The Big Picture. Thus far we've talked a lot about the Word of God - but today we begin an overview of the Bible itself - an introduction to the story, the scope, and the essential themes of this holy book: the Bible.

I should point out - that there is sometimes a danger in summarizing. In school we summarized and analyzed books, but the side-effect of all our dissection was that we often killed the book - not to mention the joy of reading. I do not want to do that here. The Bible is too good. So rather than dissection, think of this as helping you find Bible keys. Keys are used to unlock doors. I give you the key - so you can open the door and explore the room.

And our first key is in Genesis 2. Creation. Back to the beginning. The Bible is a history book - among other things. If you want to understand where the story is going, you must first understand where it began. Genesis is like the origins movie for humanity, for the world, for the universe - for everything. It starts "In the beginning, God." Everything starts there. Chapter 1 is God creating everything - in just six days. How did He create it? He spoke. God's Word is a running theme here - in God's Word.

We'll hit the details and discuss some of the challenges of science in the Bible when we journey through Genesis, but for now, chapter two opens on the seventh day. God has finished His work, and He takes the seventh day to rest. And in verse three, God calls the 7th day holy. God picked a day - every week, and made it different. Holy means set apart - unlike anything else.

Holy can also mean whole or complete - not missing anything. Actually the word holy is a real Bible key. God is holy - like nothing else in all creation, and not missing anything. And the Bible is Holy. It's not just another book - it's set apart. And later in the Bible, God calls His people - to live holy. Set apart. You know the old "which one of these is not like the other" game. The answer is - God's people. They - are to be - holy.

And speaking of people - Chapter 2 focuses in on God's creation - of man and woman. Us. The Bible is about God - and mankind - and our story together. So the story backs up and zooms in - on day 6 of creation, beginning at verse 7:

"Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being."

So God made the first man - from topsoil. Interesting to consider - when the Bible says that the Word of God is like a seed - that our hearts really are made of dirt. And it's true - check the periodic table - we're made of the same stuff. Now it's pretty phenomenal what God can do with dirt, but it's not the dirt that makes us special.

Back in chapter 1, God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule."

Two keys here. First, man and woman are made in God's image - a reflection of God himself. Not a replica - a reflection. Why? "So that they may rule" - have dominion - over the fish, the birds, the animals. Keep in mind - a godly rule does not mean tyranny - but rather - responsibility. A godly rule is justice and righteousness. So - take note of these two essentials of mankind from our very foundation - made in God's likeness - and made to rule. These two themes will return throughout the Bible: image - and kingdom.

And notice back in verse 7 - God made the most complex machine in the known universe - the human body - out of dirt - but he wasn't alive until God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life." Then the man became a living being. It was God's breath.

The Bible describes something else as being breathed by God. In 2nd Timothy, "All scripture is God breathed..." (2 Timothy 3:16). The same breath that turned dead dirt into the first live man - breathed into this book. The Bible is holy.

Back in Chapter 2, after God makes the first man, there are three things to note that God gives to mankind. Pay attention as you read these - as they tell you a lot about God's plan and purpose - for us.

In verse 15, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." So God's first gift to man - is work. Work is a blessing. Work gives a man's life a purpose - outside of himself. Work the garden - take care of it. Later in Genesis 3 - we will see that work - was cursed - it became frustrating as a result of sin. Listen to our guide on chapter 3 for that one, but here we see work at it's origin. Fruitful, successful work - is a gift from God. We are made - to work.

Gift number 2 is in verse 16:

And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free - to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die."

So here we have the very first "don't." Don't eat the bad fruit. But there's more to it. Before the don't, the command starts with the words "You - are - free" - free to eat all the good stuff. This is another Bible key. We are going to find a lot more don'ts in the Bible, but understand that God's plan for us - is freedom - and this freedom comes with responsibility.

Some might say freedom should have no rules - but that's a childish notion. Freedom without rules is anarchy, not liberty.

So God's second gift to mankind is a will. Our life has freedom - freedom to choose good, and freedom to choose evil - real choices with real consequences. Free will.

Then gift #3 is in verse 18:

"The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

After looking over all creation and all it's goodness - God sees just one thing that is not good - aloneness. And so God's third gift to Adam was a wife. God gave us - each other. Others to work for, others to choose right for. We were

made for each other. There are many things that the Bible tells us about how to live, but Jesus sums it up in two great commandments: love God and love others.

Now if you're wondering why man came before woman - or if that means the man is better - listen to our Genesis 2 guide for some insight. And keep in mind - the first woman came from the body of a man - but every man since came from the body of a woman. Nice way to even the score.

So God gave us work to have purpose, a will to have freedom, and he gave us each other - that we might have love.

And the chapter ends with two simple words. No shame. Shame is that awful feeling that you have something to hide, that you need to cover up, conceal the real you. God made us to be free, and to live without shame.

Sadly, that didn't last long. In chapter 3, Adam and Eve sinned. God said don't, but they did. They chose evil. And when God showed up, they were ashamed. Genesis 3 - is known as the fall - a pivotal story in the Bible. God cursed mankind - and it affected the work - the will - and the relationship with each other. But He also made - a plan.

The rest of the Bible - is God's plan to redeem. Now there's a Bible key. Redemption means bought back - purchased and set free. Restored to original purpose. See Genesis 2 is a brief picture - of what that original purpose looked like.

As we read on, we'll see that God's big plan - the reason Jesus came - is to renew us - to remake us into His image once again, to work with purpose, to restore our will - and set it free from sin, and renew our love for God and love for others. Never again alone - and never again ashamed.

We'll dig deeper into Genesis - the fall - and the plan for redemption - when we read through the rest of Genesis on our next Journey called Foundations. But for now, read Genesis 2, and meet me back here tomorrow, as we continue our journey - Through the Word.

The Big Picture Day 4 | Genesis 12

Welcome back to Through the Word - I hope you're enjoying the journey. Genesis 12 today, and I want to introduce you to someone. The Bible is a book of history - and heroes. Men and women who lived out their faith.

But the strange thing in the Bible is - most of the heroes - and most of the history - come from just one family line: the descendants of Abraham - a people called Israel.

Now you have to ask - why doesn't the Bible tell the story of the whole world? Why so much focus on one family? Well, the Bible is about God's plan for the whole world, but God chose to bring about that plan through one people: Israel.

Don't misunderstand - this isn't about favorites, and it's not about good guys and bad guys - it's about God's plan. If you want to understand the big plan - you must understand Israel. And since Genesis is all about origins - today we go to Genesis 12 for the origin - of Israel.

Israel starts with just one man - Abraham. Now there are three things to know about Abraham: Faith, covenant, and God's big plan to save the world.

Our story begins in verse 1:

The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you"

Now if you paid close attention - you may have noticed that the name was different. Abram - not yet Abraham. Why is that? Well, encountering God changes a person - Bible heroes don't leave the way they came. So a name change is fitting - albeit subtle in Abram's case.

And God's first word to Abram is "go." Leave your country - leave your people - and go. We don't know much about where Abram came from. We just know the God told him to leave it.

The Bible is full of journeys - crossing deserts, parting seas, climbing mountains - it seems that God's people are destined for a life of journey.

And I love it. There's something about a road trip. Something happens on the road. We find ourselves; we grow together. God called Abram to journey - with Him. Look in verse 1 - "go to a land I will show you." No road map - just God's promise that He will show the way. I think that God loves a journey - because a journey takes faith.

Remember - faith is what made Abram special. Now - faith does not mean believing in things that you have no evidence for. When my wife says, "I have faith in you" - that doesn't mean that I'm her make-believe boyfriend. It means she trusts me, she believes in me, and she follows me. And that faith means a lot. It means a lot to me - it means a lot to God. Abram - had - faith.

God called him to leave home for a land he had never seen before - and Abram took God at His word. See faith is trusting the God you know - on a path you do not. Abram trusted, believed, and followed. Faith.

Hebrews 11 defines it this way, "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen."

So number one is faith, and number two is covenant. That's where Israel comes in. In verse 2. God says to Abram -
"I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing."

Now we're getting somewhere. God's plan is bigger than just Abram. Abram's descendants would become a whole nation: Israel. His son is Isaac, and Isaac's son is Jacob - who's name is changed to Israel. Most of the Bible centers on his descendants - the Israelites - also known as Jews. But why is Israel important?

Well, take a look. In verse 2, the Israelites would become a great nation - a people - God's people. Throughout the Old Testament, God says to Israel, "You will be my people, and I will be your God."

It was a relationship. A covenant. That's an important Bible word. A covenant - is a relationship - bound by a commitment or promise. Like a marriage. Abraham had more than belief - he had a covenant with God - and that covenant was passed on to his descendants - Israel. This is essential. Life with God is more than a belief, just like marriage is more than a feeling - life with God is a commitment, a covenant between God and man. In fact, the Bible is a series of covenants.

So what was the covenant between God and Abraham - and what was God's plan for his descendants, the Israelites? That brings me to number three - faith, covenant - and God's big plan to save the world.

In verse 2, God promised to bless Abram, but much more than that, he promised that Abram would be a blessing. Blessing is a gift from God - a kindness - a bit of His grace given away. I think the only thing better than being blessed by God, is to be God's blessing to others. And in verse 3, God promises Abram:

"I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you."

Now that is about as big as it gets. A blessing to the whole earth. Abram doesn't get all the details - but we have the rest of the Bible.

Three things for you to remember about God's purpose for Israel:

Purpose One: Israel would be a picture of God's ways. Exodus 19 calls them a kingdom of priests - that means people who represent God and His ways - holy and set apart. Read the Old Testament - and Israel did sometimes good - sometimes terrible at this.

Purpose Two: Israel would be keepers of His Word. Romans 3 says that the Jews - have been entrusted with the very words of God. They did an amazing job with this one!

And Purpose three: Israel would bring God's Savior for the whole world. God explains later in Isaiah, in a prophecy about one particular descendant of Israel - one called Messiah, "I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring My salvation to the ends of the earth."

That's Israel: Picture of God's ways, Keepers of God's Word, and family of God's Savior.

All part of God's big plan - to save the world.

Now back here in Genesis 12, that's all in the future. For Abram, the journey is yet ahead. In verse 4:

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him.

Simple obedience. A few steps of faith - leaving the old life behind, and pressing on to what's ahead.

And to be honest that's my hope for you. Open your Bible, take some steps - leave what must be left, and go to what God has for you ahead. God doesn't send us on a journey without a plan. The Bible is more than just wandering - it has a destination.

In verse 7, after Abram had traveled quite some distance:
"The Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land."

It is - a land of promise. That's another big Bible theme. Abram, his son, and several generations after - will live in tents - waiting for the land of God's promise. Hebrews 11 explains that they were "looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God."

And watch how Abram responds here.
"So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him."

An altar is a place of sacrifice. An animal was killed. But do not confuse the Bible's altar with a pagan animal sacrifice to appease some angry or sadistic god - lowercase g. For Abram - the altar was a place to acknowledge - my life - is in God's hands. My life - is altared.

Go ahead and read Genesis 12. Now as your read - it might strike you - that Abram talks with God - and hears back. We call it prayer. You and I might not hear God in quite the same way - but the concept is the same: talking with God. Prayer is an essential part of knowing God. After God speaks to you in the Word - speak with Him.

And don't forget to read Genesis 12 - and get to know my friend Abraham. Actually he's my great grandfather. Well, very great - but that's ... another story.

The Big Picture Day 5 | Genesis 28

Welcome back to our Big Picture journey on Through the Word. Today we move to one of the great epics in the Bible, and a personal favorite of mine: Jacob. His life provides a vivid illustration of what it means to journey with God and be in covenant with God.

Now you might think, we just talked about covenant. It's a relationship bound by promise. God made the promise to Abraham, so it's done, right? Not so fast. Yes, God sealed the covenant with Abraham, but ending the story there would be like ending a marriage story with the wedding vows. The promise is only the beginning. The story of "I will be your God and you will be my people" will span generations, the Bible, and all of time.

Today we jump two generations to Abraham's grandson Jacob. The covenant was passed to Isaac, and as we open Genesis 28, old man Isaac gives his son Jacob a blessing. In verse 4:

"May (God) give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now reside as a foreigner, the land God gave to Abraham" (Genesis 28:4).

The blessing of God is being passed to the next generation, but the circumstances here are rather complicated. I'll do my best to summarize. Jacob has a twin brother, Esau, and because Esau is technically older, the blessing is supposed to go to him. In fact Isaac thinks he's blessing his son Esau in this moment. Jacob deceived his blind father into thinking that he is Esau in order to get God's blessing. He switches the younger for the older. Pretty twisted, right?

And in the midst of that deception, there's a very telling phrase back in 27:20. When Jacob talks to his father about God, he refers to him as "The Lord your God" (Genesis 27:20). Not my God but yours. Jacob has inherited faith, but it is not his own. Not yet. He's a fascinating character. He knows about God, and he wants God's blessing, but he consistently calls him the God of his father and grandfather. He doesn't have the same faith.

Yet before Jacob was even born, God had a great plan for Jacob. As for how that plan comes about, well, it's rather messy. This is a story about family, and family is messy. But it's amazing what God can do with our mess.

Jacob does get his father's blessing. The deception works. He also gets his brother's wrath, and here in Genesis 28 as Esau plots to kill Jacob, Isaac sends the younger son five hundred miles away to find a bride in Paddan Aram. Jacob sets out, and along the way—about hundred miles from nowhere in a place called Luz, verse 10:

"When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it" (Genesis 28:10-12).

So Jacob has a vivid dream—a stairway or ladder connecting earth to heaven, with angels going up and down. Tuck that image in your memory, we'll see it again. For now, watch verse 13:

"There above it stood the Lord, and he said: "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying" (Genesis 28:13).

There he is—the Lord. And notice that he calls himself "the God of your father." Not yet Jacob's God, but he makes a promise to Jacob. The same one he made to Abraham: to bless him with descendants and land, and that his offspring would be a blessing to the whole world. His descendant. And in verse 15:

"I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (Genesis 28:15).

Those four words always get me: I am with you. This is the God of the journey. He goes with us. He watches over us. He brings us back. And watch Jacob's response. He wakes up in awe.

"Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it" (Genesis 28:16b).

He names the place Bethel, the house of God. And in verse 20:

"Then Jacob made a vow, saying, 'If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's household, then the Lord will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth'" (Genesis 28:20-22).

Did you catch that? The Lord will be my God. Jacob makes it personal. Those are covenant terms.

To get how important this is, think of this way. What's the difference between me saying, "Look over there, those are people", or saying "Those are my people"? Or if my wife says, "There's a man over there" or instead says, "That's my man over there." The difference is belonging. We belong to one another because our relationship is bound by covenant.

So that's it, right? Jacob's in. End of story. Happily ever after here we come! Wrong. Covenant is founded in promise, but it's lived out on the journey. Over a lifetime. The story of God forming covenant with his people will weave through the whole Bible. And the road won't always be happy. Some stories are downright heartbreakingly.

The story of Hosea begins with Hosea marrying an unfaithful wife as a picture of God's relationship with an unfaithful people. When his wife gives birth to a child that isn't his, he names the girl Lo-ammi, not loved. The next child is Lo-ruhammah, not my people. Now that's a messed up name to grow up with. Some people inherit their parent's faith, some inherit their parent's mess. We'll come back to that story.

As for Jacob, notice here that he doesn't quite commit. "If God will be with me... ." God's promises are unconditional. Jacob adds an escape clause. And we won't see him use that phrase my God for a very long time.

But here's the interesting thing: God meets Jacob where he is. Deceiver. Runaway. Lost soul. God finds him. But he's not content to leave Jacob there. The road ahead will be an epic journey—for Jacob, and for you and me. See a journey is more than just time spent before the destination. The journey changes us. And along the way we develop relationship with the folks who travel with us. All the more staggering that the Lord tells Jacob, I am with you.

Speaking of Jacob, his journey takes him at last to Paddan Aram, and the home of Laban. Laban has two daughters, and Jacob falls for a young beauty named Rachel. He strikes a deal with Laban, and sets to work for seven years in order to earn the hand of Rachel as his bride.

Chapter 29 tells us "they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her." It's a sweet story. Until it's not. The wedding comes, and Laban tricks Jacob. He switches the older for the younger, and Jacob marries Leah. Pretty twisted, right? But don't miss the irony.

The deceiver has been deceived. And with his own tricks. The years that follow are hard ones. Jacob works seven more years to gain Rachel's hand. Now he has two brides. And before you think the Bible supports polygamy, read the story. It's recorded, but it's not supported.

Leah the older bears children, but Rachel doesn't, and she gets jealous. That jealousy poisons the water for the whole family, and Jacob is caught in the mix. Time passes. More kids, more family, more complicated, more strife. Rachel finally has a son, but the half-brothers do not get along.

Now if that doesn't sound like life what life with God should be, read closer. God never promised Jacob an easy road. He promised to be with him. And he is. He also promised descendants, and those are adding up quickly! By chapter 31 he has two wives, two sort-of wives (sorry, even messier story), eleven sons, one daughter, teams of servants, and plenty of flocks and herds.

But he still lives right next to father-in-law. And Laban drives him a little nuts. And in 31:3

“Then the Lord said to Jacob, “Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you” (Genesis 31:3).

There's that promise again: with you. And when Jacob tells his wives that it's time to go, watch his words:

“He said to them, ‘I see that your father's attitude toward me is not what it was before, but the God of my father has been with me’” (Genesis 31:5).

He knows God is there. But he's still his father's God. There's more journey yet to come. And what will happen when Jacob returns to the brother who wants to kill him? We'll meet you back here in Genesis 32.

The Big Picture Day 6 | Genesis 32

Welcome back to the Big Picture. We left off with Jacob preparing to head back home. He's been away for twenty years now. Started a family. Big family. Persevered through strife and struggle with his wives, his kids, and especially his father-in-law. It's... complicated.

So complicated that Jacob takes his whole family and leaves without telling Laban! A couple days pass, Laban finds out, and it all comes to a head at the end of chapter 31 when father-in-law confronts him, and Jacob finally lets it all out:

“This was my situation: The heat consumed me in the daytime and the cold at night, and sleep fled from my eyes. It was like this for the twenty years I was in your household. I worked for you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flocks, and you changed my wages ten times. If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been with me, you would surely have sent me away empty-handed” (Genesis 31:40-42a).

That anger has been pent up for a long time. Amazing through all that strife, Jacob still knew that God was with him. But hold on. Notice what he calls God. The God of my father. The Fear of Isaac. Still not personal.

Well, Jacob leaves Laban there, and takes his family with him. But like the saying goes, out of the frying pan, and back to a brother who wants you dead. Going home means facing Esau. And as far as Jacob knows, nothing has changed.

Chapter 32 begins with Jacob on the road home, where the angels of God meet him. Amazing. As he gets closer to home, he sends messengers ahead to Esau hoping for a good report. But in verse 6:

“When the messengers returned to Jacob, they said, ‘We went to your brother Esau, and now he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him’” (Genesis 32:6).

Aw, crud. Four hundred men is not a good sign. No turning back now. Verse 7:

“In great fear and distress Jacob divided the people who were with him into two groups, and the flocks and herds and camels as well. He thought, “If Esau comes and attacks one group, the group that is left may escape.” (Genesis 32:7).

It’s not a good sign when your best case scenario is half of your family getting attacked so the other half can escape. Verse 8:

“Then Jacob prayed, ‘O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, Lord, you who said to me, “Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper”’ (Genesis 32:8).

Pause there. Did you catch it? Yep. Still his father’s God. And he tells God this was your idea. But hold on. Give Jacob a chance. Verse 10:

“I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps. Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau” (Genesis 32:10-11a).

So faith glimmers through. Through all his strife, all the deceiving and being deceived, Jacob recognizes that God was with him.

Prayer sent up, and Jacob decides to send ahead a large gift of goats, lambs, cattle, donkeys, and camels. Anything to appease his brother’s wrath. I will pacify him. In verse 21:

“So Jacob’s gifts went on ahead of him, but he himself spent the night in the camp. That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions” (Genesis 32:21-23).

So now everyone is ahead of Jacob, and for the first time in so very long, he is a man alone. Here on the same road that saw him alone twenty years ago. Only he wasn't alone then, and he's not alone now. Verse 24:

"So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak" (Genesis 32:24).

Wait hold one. What just...? Who is that? A man wrestled with him till daybreak!? Do you know what it's like to feel all of your pent up frustrations with life and family and everything _ reach a breaking point? Do you know what it's like to just want to fight someone? Anyone. For Jacob, this is it. He may not know who this is, but he's ready. He wrestles til daybreak. Verse 25:

"When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome." (Genesis 32:25-28).

Wow. Now what was that about? The man can't overpower him, but he touches his hip and it's wrenched? It takes superhuman strength to wrench a hip out of socket. And Jacob won't let go without a blessing. It's all he wanted as a child—his father's blessing. But why this man? And the man changes Jacob's name. Israel. Because he struggled with God and with man. Who is this? Verse 29:

"Jacob said, 'Please tell me your name.' But he replied, 'Why do you ask my name?' Then he blessed him there" (Genesis 32:25-29).

It's almost as if the man says, "You know who I am. You know who you've been striving with all these years. You know whose blessing you really crave." And suddenly, it clicks. In verse 30:

"So Jacob called the place Peniel (the face of God) saying, 'It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared'" (Genesis 32:30).

Jacob finally understands it was God all along. It was God whose blessing he craved. It was against God that he sinned when he lied to his father, and tricked his brother. It was God who guided him through all that strife. And when all the fight in him pent up and he just had to let it out on someone, it was with God that he needed to wrestle.

And amazingly, God came down to his level. Fought him at his own strength. Oh he left Jacob a clear reminder who was the stronger man. Jacob walked with a limp the rest of his days.

Or should I say, Israel walked with a limp. His name is changed remember. Name changes in the Bible are significant. They represent a change in character, in life direction. Speaking of which, remember Hosea's kids? Or should I say, not Hosea's kids. The ones named not-loved and not-my-people.

Well, God changed their names as well. In one of the most powerful declarations in all the Bible, God takes the word *lo* from their names, and names the girl loved, and the boy, my people. In fact Paul refers back to that very declaration in the New Testament to tell us this is what it's like to follow Jesus. It's like your name is changed from not-loved to loved. In Romans 9:

"In the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' there they will be called 'children of the living God.'" (Romans 9:26).

Now there's a lot more to that story, and to this one too. But this is just the big picture, remember? An overview. So how does it work out for Jacob? And what about his brother? Does he still want to kill Jacob.

Well, Jacob does meet Esau, and it's surprisingly uneventful! All that pent up fear, and nothing happens. In chapter 33, he tells Esau that seeing him is like seeing the face of God. It's like Jacob's whole perspective on life has changed, and now God is everywhere. After a short reunion, Jacob and Esau part ways, and Jacob moves to a city called Shechem, and for the first time, buys some land to settle down. And in chapter 33, verse 20:

"There he set up an altar and called it El Elohe Israel" (Genesis 33:20).

What does that name mean? It means, God is the God of Israel." After all his journeys—all his wrestlings with God and man—Jacob accepts the new name that God has given him, and he declares that God is his God.

There's a big difference between saying those people and saying my people. There's a big difference between saying my father's God and my God.

For Jacob, the difference is covenant. Now have we finally arrived at happily ever after? Pay attention. The journey with God has just begun.

The Big Picture Day 7 | Ecclesiastes 3

Welcome again my friends - we turn today to one of my favorite books - and a little something different in the Bible: Ecclesiastes. I know, I know. Sounds like a bunch of librarians got together and invented a new word for boring: Ecclesiastes. But do not be fooled by its commonplace appearance. This one is a diamond in the rough.

It's in the middle of your Bible - a section known as the wisdom books. A little overview on the wisdom books - Job is first - a heartbreaker story, but rich in philosophy - about pain, grief, and finding God through the hurt.

Then Psalms is a book of worship - full of emotion, heartache, rejoicing, and hearts pouring out to God. Then Proverbs - simple, concise wisdom - with down-to-earth street smarts on life, work, relationships, communication, money - all that stuff that just requires wisdom.

And the last one is Song of Solomon. A marriage story - a romance. Beautifully poetic, and more than a little PG-15. Yes, the Bible has a sexy book.

But just before that - we find this little book called Ecclesiastes. It's unique in the Bible. The philosophy here is deep. Like Mariana Trench deep. But it's not obtuse like reading weird poetry in AP English Lit. It is quite simply, an honest look at life - and death - and meaning - here under the sun. And in chapter 3 - a thoughtful perspective on the power of time.

Time just keeps moving forward, and not even 1.21 gigawatts can send you back.

I'll admit - I'm an 80s kid, and I love my music. But now it's on the oldies station. And it makes sense. As old as the 50's were then - that's how old the 80s are now! That's heavy! Either something is wrong with the space time continuum, or I'm getting old!

And every once in a while I get nostalgic. Not so much missing the glory days - as wondering - what does it all add up to?

And that's the heart of Ecclesiastes. Solomon is old, and he looks back - at a life gone by - full of toil, study, chasing success, chasing pleasure, but in the end, just chasing the wind. And he asks the question - what was gained? For all that dreaming and toil, what did he get?

Throughout Ecclesiastes, death looms large - ready to take away whatever little gain you've got.

And here in chapter 3 - well - it's a little like... have you ever tried to clean out a closet - and got lost in a shoebox full of old photos? Reelin' in the years over old friends. forgotten dreams. Chapter 3 is like that. Solomon looks back on life, and in verse 1:

"There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens:
a time to be born - and a time to die,
a time to plant - and a time to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,"

Solomon goes on - looking again and again - at the times of life. It's amazing the variety that comes in one life - and the contrast.

"a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,"

But in verse 9, it's as though Solomon sets down the shoebox of memories - and tries to piece it all together. Sometimes life feels like a puzzle without a boxtop - some pieces go together beautifully, some just don't fit.

I should point out here - that Ecclesiastes is different from the rest of the Bible. It offers more questions than answers. And its perspective is limited - almost entirely to this world - and this life. It was written by Solomon - who knew God but didn't really live for God.

And the perspective here doesn't say there is no Heaven, but sort of forgets about Heaven, and looks at life as if this is it - as if this is as good as it gets.

So with the pictures of life all laid out - verse 9.

"What do workers gain from their toil?"

In other words - what do you get - what do you have to show for all - that - work? Verse ten.

"I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end."

This is the crux of it. Every season - every tear, every laugh - every beginning, every end - God has given it a beauty - in its time. But then - its time is done. It is - vanity.

Important Bible word. Vanity means fleeting - like a breath. But the heart - the heart longs for something that lasts.

But why? Why can't our stubborn hearts just be satisfied with the now? I'll tell you why. Verse 11. God - set eternity - in our hearts. That longing comes from our Maker. There is a hole in every heart the size of eternity, and nothing on earth - can fill it.

Now Solomon's solution - is good - but not quite complete. Remember - the view is limited. But the lesson from it is essential. Verse 12:

"I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God. I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear him."

And here we return to the place that wisdom brought us back in Proverbs: the fear of God. Fear as in respect. Awe. All of our works have a beauty in their time - but only God's work is eternal.

And now that God is in the picture - Solomon considers another dilemma of life on earth: justice.

As you consider the pictures - the works of mankind on earth - some are good - but many are evil. So in verse 15,
God will call the past to account.

And I saw something else under the sun: In the place of judgment—wickedness was there, in the place of justice—wickedness was there.

I said to myself,
“God will bring into judgment
both the righteous and the wicked,
for there will be a time for every activity, a time to judge every deed.”

To make sense of the big picture in life, Solomon says - there must be a time - for judgment - for God to call the past - to account.

Then verse 18.

“I also said to myself, “As for humans, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. Now don’t misread this. The Bible clearly tells us that mankind is different from animal - uniquely made in God’s image. But here - God tests us - puts us through trial - so we will see - that we still die - same as the animals.”

And what happens after death?

Well - Ecclesiastes doesn’t go that far. Remember, the viewpoint is stuck here on Earth. It seems that God wanted to use this book - to let us consider. On those days when we toy with that idea - that maybe this life really is the whole story. Maybe I should just live for this moment and forget eternity.

Look back at all the pictures - something in here’s gotta be enough to satisfy. Oh - but the heart longs for more.

And you might think - this is the part where the preacher gives you all the answers. But not this time. Because answers easily gained are just as easily lost. This one is worthy of a little more thought - and a little more time.

I have to tell you - while I was writing this I was in the passenger seat of our van - my lovely wife driving highway 101. I was looking out at the great wide Pacific Ocean - as far as the eye can see - stirring up that longing for eternity. We passed a campground along the beach where we had camped as newlyweds. My wife was pregnant back then... Now - our baby is twenty. And as we drove past - no kidding - Adele was on the radio - singing "When We Were Young." I about passed out from nostalgia. Back in the present, we had just visited with my wife's brother, his toddler son, and our sweet sister-in-law, battling cancer, in the fight of her life - for just a little more time.

Read Ecclesiastes 3. Consider your box of photos, and your perspective - on time - and how you respond - to the eternity in your heart.

The Big Picture Day 8 | Proverbs 2.

Hey you guys - Proverbs 2 today - and we begin - with a question. How would you define - wisdom? Now before you go ask Google - I'm not talking about a dictionary definition. I mean in your life. What does wisdom look like?

Is it a set of knowledge from a book - or is it something gained along a journey - the lessons of experience? Or perhaps - is wisdom what you learn from those with you on that road? Or maybe this is one of those all of the above questions. However you define it, the Bible sets a high premium - on the value of wisdom. And the road to get it - is a road worth taking.

We'll get there in a minute - but let's start in on Proverbs chapter 2, at verse 1:

“My son, if you accept my words
and store up my commands within you,
turning your ear to wisdom
and applying your heart to understanding—
indeed, if you call out for insight
and cry aloud for understanding,
then you will understand the fear of the Lord - and find the knowledge of God.”

I love this passage. King Solomon wrote it - as instruction from a father to his son. Now it applies just as well to moms and daughters - but rather than write a unisex greeting card from a generic parent - this passage was personal.
“My son..”

The first thing to see here is that the Bible has different genres (see Mr. Rooney - I told you I was paying attention in English class). The Bible has genres of history, poetry, law, prophecy, personal letter - and I love how God speaks uniquely through each one. But here in Proverbs, we find a book dedicated entirely - to wisdom.

And for me - this is the one that really caught my attention first. Long before I was on an app - before I was a pastor or even a Christian - I was a science geek. Got my degree in engineering. Even worked on rockets. As far as faith goes, I called myself -agnostic.

Basically it means, “I don’t know.” And for me - it was accurate. I didn’t know. But what I claimed was - “I can’t know.” I had decided that real truth was somehow beyond human knowledge.

But sometime later I happened to open Proverbs - and this one really spoke to me. Check out verse 1 -

“My son, if you accept my words
and store up my commands within you,
Solomon’s direction starts with listening - accepting wisdom - and storing up wise commands.

Verse 2,

“turning your ear to wisdom
and applying your heart to understanding”

What gets me here is the physical action required. Turn the ear. Quiet the noise - and move your attention - toward wisdom.

Then apply the heart. Move it - toward understanding. Finding clarity requires work from both mind and heart.

Then Verse 3,

“Indeed, if you call out for insight
and cry aloud for understanding,”

The words here are adamant - call out - “God, I don’t see. Give me insight.” Cry aloud, “I don’t get it. I need understanding.”

Verse 4,

“and if you look for it as for silver
and search for it as for hidden treasure,”

I love this part. It’s about how you value wisdom. Proverbs tells us repeatedly - that wisdom is to be valued above all riches. - And this Father tells his son - to search for it - like hidden treasure. And don’t give up. Goonies never say die.

And speaking of things from my youth - you may wonder what happened to that self-assured agnostic science geek?

Well, long story short - I always claimed that I can't know truth - but at some point, I had to admit - that I had never tried. I had never searched, or even asked.

So I did. I asked a God I didn't even believe in. And lo and behold - He answered. And God didn't force me to do a truffle-shuffle to get an answer - all I had to do - was ask.

There's more to that story - but it can wait. I shared that much - because that's what you do on a journey together. You share stories and learn from each other.

And I also shared because I want you to understand my role here. I am not the know-it-all preacher with slick shoes who gives you the answers so you don't have to search. One of my favorite quotes from A.W. Tozer, "How tragic that we in this dark day have had our seeking done for us by our teachers." So if I'm not the know-it-all, what am I then? Well - I'm a guide - but I'm also a seeker, on the same journey as you. I'll have some answers - but I may have more questions - because I want both of us - to think.

But what's the reward for all that effort? Do you find every answer - understand every mystery? Well... Not exactly, but look at verse 5, "then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God."

This is the true reward. And this is my story too. When I started asking God questions - and started reading the Bible - I got answers. But I didn't get all of them. A lot of things made sense - but some I still can't figure. But above all that - what I came to understand - was the fear of the Lord. He is God - and I am not. He is awesome, beyond all words, beyond all imaginations.

So what is the fear of the Lord? Well - it means respect - but if it was something I could simply define for you - then you might never go on the journey for yourself. Chester Copperpot.

And back in verse 5 - you will “find the knowledge of God.” Not just head knowledge - personal. I know Him. It’s like I went on a grand expedition to find some great lost treasure - but what mattered in the end - was not the rich stuff - and not even the cool waterslides randomly placed at the end - it was the One taking the adventure with me.

That’s it for today - now it’s your time - Read Proverbs 2, and we’ll be back for more tomorrow.

The Big Picture Day 9 | Exodus 3.

Kris: Welcome back everyone. We move to the book of Exodus in our big picture journey through Scripture and one of the Bible's epic stories, Moses and the Burning Bush. Moses is one of the great Bible heroes, but today we find him alone on the far side of the desert, his people in slavery back in Egypt. And with that, we hit some big questions. Does God see what I'm going through? Does he have a plan? Does his plan include me and can he rescue? Also today you have two guides for your journey. Payton Jones is joining us here in Exodus. Payton, where did we leave off?

Peyton: We left Genesis with Jacob. Now Israel as a small clan. Genesis ends with Israel's family, about 70 strong, moving to Egypt to escape the famine. At first, Israel was welcomed in Egypt, but their numbers grew quickly. 400 years passed by and now the Israelites are a nation.

Kris: But that nation still lived in Egypt and Pharaoh wanted them under control. He enslaved the Israelites, and worse, he set out to kill every baby boy.

Peyton: One of those babies escaped right into Pharaoh's household. His name was Moses. As you read Moses story, you can see in him a desire to rescue his people. But he tried and failed and ran.

Kris: We fast forward several decades, and Exodus three finds Moses on the far side of the desert on Mount Horeb, called the Mountain of God. He is on his own, but not alone. At verse two, there the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire, it did not burn up. So Moses thought, I will go over and see this strange sight. Why the bush does not burn up. When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush. Moses, Moses. And

Moses said, here I am. Do not come any closer. God said. Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. Then he said, I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. At this Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God.

Peyton: So Moses finds a bush on fire, but not consumed. And he hears the voice of God. There are a lot of insights we could dig into here, but I think our first reaction should be like Moses, awestruck and afraid even to look. But the Lord speaks again.

Kris: What the Lord says here tells us a lot about who God is. Remember, this is one of the main reasons we read the Bible. God reveals himself through His Word and what he reveals here is crucial.

Peyton: Verse seven the Lord said, I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering.

Kris: For a people in slavery, God says he sees for a people crying out, he hears and he cares. And greatest of all in verse eight, so I have come down to rescue them. And here we arrive at perhaps the greatest theme in all the Bible, the scarlet thread that weaves it all together. Redemption. God makes a promise to rescue his people out of slavery, out of Egypt, and into a spacious land of promise.

Peyton: The word redemption means the purchasing back of something that has been lost by the payment of a ransom. Redemption is used especially for the purchasing of a slave in order to set them free. Here in Exodus. That is

happening quite literally. God tells Moses he has come to rescue. To set the slaves free.

Kris: As the story unfolds, it is worth noting that freedom for the Israelites will come at a price. A ransom, you might say. But it's a price that the Israelites don't pay for themselves. In a story known as the Passover, God redeems the Israelites from slavery by the blood of a lamb.

Peyton: There's a lot more to that story, but we want you to see the big picture first. The story of redemption carries throughout the Bible, and particularly here in the first five books of the Bible known as the Torah. In Genesis, we get the backstory on creation, the fall, and God's plan of redemption, beginning with Israel.

Kris: Here in Exodus, the Israelites begin the story in slavery. Now slavery is bad, but in the Bible it's also a picture of what sin does. Sin enslaves us, becomes a master like meth to an attic, like a parasite to its host. Sin controls us, uses us, and destroys us. In Exodus, God rescues his people from slavery and calls them to a journey into a promised Land.

Peyton: Now the journey to the Promised Land took some years, and along the way, God gave the Israelites the law, starting with the Ten Commandments in Exodus and many more into Leviticus and with the law. Instructions for a tabernacle and sacrifices.

Kris: Like is an essential Bible theme for the Israelites. It was a set of rules to live by, to get along with each other, and more importantly, to do right by God. But the law also poses a great question can law make a person good? Can

rules on paper, or even carved into stone change a person? Ultimately, it's a redemption question. If sin enslaves us, can the law set us free?

Peyton: The Israelites Journey to the Promised Land is recorded in a book called numbers, and with it a powerful picture on what it means to follow God.

Kris: Then, in Deuteronomy, the Israelites come to the edge of the Promised Land, and Moses gives them a clear choice follow God to life or turn away back to slavery, back to death.

Peyton: So the Torah, the first five books, are truly a journey from slavery to freedom. And in that story, a picture of all mankind, of the journey to redemption.

Kris: But back here in Exodus three, that journey is all future. Slavery is the present reality for Moses family back in Egypt. But Moses has a promise from the burning bush, from the voice of God Himself. And with that promise, a calling. Verse ten. So now go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.

Peyton: So God sends Moses. But Moses feels thoroughly unqualified. Who am I? God doesn't seem too concerned about Moses pedigree or skill, though. In verse 12, God gets to what really matters. I will be with you.-

Kris: Moses still has some trouble with this calling. And in verse 13 Moses said to God, suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, The God of your fathers has sent me to you. And they ask me, what is his name? Then what shall I tell them? God said to Moses, I am who I am. This is what you are to

say to the Israelites. I am has sent me to you. And here one of the great revelations, the name of God It.

Peyton: In the Bible, a name often represents something of character. God is attributed with many names, always revealing something about who he is. Here God's name is I am who I am. Theologians will spend centuries unpacking meaning from this one, but for now understand this that the name of God, the I am, is bigger than any word could possibly capture. Bigger than all comparison or description as big as existence itself. What can you possibly compare to God other than himself? I am who I am.

Kris: Well read Exodus three. Take some time to reflect on who God is and his calling on your life, and we'll see you in judges 21.

Speaker3: Join us next time as we continue the journey, one chapter at a time. And remember, faith comes by hearing and hearing through the word.

The Big Picture Day 10 | Judges 21.

Kris: Welcome back to Through the Word, everyone. And today one of my least favorite stories tell me why we're doing this again.

Peyton: Because you wanted to.

Kris: I wanted to.

Peyton: Well, if you'll recall, we were talking about how the Bible has a lot of really difficult stories in it, along with all the amazing ones, and how it's only fair for our readers to know what they're in for. And you said that we should help them understand how to read the tough stuff by picking one of the craziest ones right up front.

Kris: Ah, I get it. Actually. You know, that's a pretty good idea.

Peyton: Yes. I'm so glad you like it.

Kris: And what are you doing here, Peyton?

Peyton: You asked me to.

Kris: Oh, that's right, yet another great idea.

Peyton: Are you done?

Kris: Hmm. Yes.

Peyton: So today we look at one messed up chapter. And with that, we do have to issue a pg13 warning. The content in this chapter is not for kids. This one is not so much disturbing as it is wrong. So parents, you can decide if you want your kids to listen.

Kris: We'll do that sometimes. Not often. But if the content is not for kids, we'll let you know up front so you can decide. Now, before we get to the fiasco of judges 21, let's do a little overview of the story thus far. We left off at the end of Deuteronomy with the Israelites at the edge of the Promised Land. The next era in Bible history is found in Joshua, judges, and Ruth.

Peyton: Moses died just before the Promised Land, and God called Joshua to lead the Israelites. In the Book of Joshua is a story of entering into God's plan and God's promise, but it's also a story of war against a wicked, perverse, and cruel people.

Kris: Speaking of difficult things in the Bible, this is a tough one. I hate war. But the history of mankind is full of war. And so it's recorded in the Bible.

Peyton: Next is the Book of Judges. As Israel lives in the land for several generations, ruled by a series of men and women known as judges.

Kris: Unfortunately, things aren't working out so good. The Israelites begin doing the same wicked things the previous occupants had done. And judges is chock full of wrong. I mean, straight up wrong.

Peyton: There are a few glimmers of hope, including the story of Ruth. The next book, Ruth, is a romance story that goes very wrong before it gets very right. In fact, it's the redemption story. In this dark time in the Bible you will find dark days, but keep your eyes on the light. The Bible is always a book of redemption.

Kris: And apart from the history lesson. There's a message from this era in the Bible that speaks to all of us. Entering into the Promised Land was no cakewalk. It was battle. It was struggle and hardship. And in the Bible, the physical truth gives us a picture of spiritual truth. Following God is a battle.

Peyton: Hey, Kris, what's a cakewalk.

Kris: Huh? I don't know exactly, but apparently it's easy. And entering the promised Land was not.

Peyton: Fair enough. But what about all the wrong stuff in judges? Why do you think the Bible records all of that?

Kris: Well, let's dive into judges 21 to take a look at what we've got. Verse one. The men of Israel had taken an oath at Mizpah. Not one of us will give his daughter in marriage to a benjamite.

Peyton: The story here is rather convoluted, so I'll try to summarize. It began back in chapter 19 with the phrase in those days Israel had no king. That's important. The story that follows is disturbing. A whole series of bad events culminating in a horrific murder.

Kris: Dude, I read that story. It's messed up.

Peyton: Seriously? And the bad thing that happened was perpetrated by an entire town of people in the Jewish tribe of Benjamin. Now, pretty much all of the Israelites were not following God at this point. But when word got out.

Kris: I read how the word got out. It's messed up.

Peyton: Seriously. And when it did, the Israelites wanted justice. So they went to war against all of Benjamin. And here in chapter 21, they all took a solemn oath. Nobody will allow their daughter to marry a benjamite.

Kris: Right. But just a few verses later, they realize something. If no one marries a benjamite, no benjamite kids, and pretty soon no Benjamites carrying on the tribes of Israel was key, but they took an oath. And even though everyone is living their lives totally immorally, apparently they wouldn't dare break an oath, suddenly regret crying out to God in verse three. Why should one try be missing from Israel today?

Peyton: Not to worry though. The people came up with a plan. They can't break the oath, so they can't give bribes to the benjamites, but instead allow the Benjamite men to take them away without permission. And that somehow makes it okay.

Kris: Dude, that's messed up.

Peyton: It gets worse.

Kris: Seriously?

Peyton: Seriously? They find out that one particular town is having a festival where there will be a dance. So they tell the Benjamite men to wait in hiding until they see the women go out to dance, and then run in and grab a bride and run away.

Kris: Dude.

Peyton: Seriously.

Kris: Why is this stuff in the Bible.

Peyton: Because it happened. It's history.

Kris: Terrible history. And the funny thing is, the Bible hardly makes any commentary on it here. As if God just says, I don't even know what to tell you. It's just so messed up.

Peyton: But there is one very important comment in the very last verse. Read carefully in verse 25. In those days, Israel had no king. Everyone did as they saw fit. A more literal translation says, in those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

Kris: And that is the key to understanding all of this mess. Read carefully. Everyone did what was right. Sounds great, doesn't it? Everyone did the right thing. But who defines right? In judges, right was defined by each one in their own eyes. Not right by God, right by self. It's the ultimate relativism, and I believe that the Book of Judges is a blunt commentary on what life looks like when everyone defines their own right.

Peyton: In the Bible, right and wrong are key concepts. The word righteous essentially means right with God, right in God's eyes. That's important because here in the Bible, righteousness is the only way to heaven. You must be right with God, right in God's sight.

Kris: And don't miss the phrase that both started and ended this crazy story. In those days, there was no king in Israel. King is another key Bible concept, and here everyone defining their own version of right had everything to do with the fact that they had no king because they were supposed to serve God as king. Instead, every man was his own king. When your king is yourself, grabbing a bride is right. Not for her. Certainly not for God, but for yourself. King. Totally right. But when God is your king, right and wrong looks different.

Peyton: The whole sweep of the Bible leads us to the kingdom of God, with Jesus anointed as the King of kings. Jesus calls us to seek his kingdom and his righteousness.

Kris: So what do we take away? Well, first off, just because the story is in the Bible doesn't make it right. God allows bad things to happen and plenty are recorded here. So use wisdom to discern what you read.

Peyton: And make sure you read the whole story. Context makes all the difference. And this story really doesn't deliver its lesson until the final verse.

Kris: And when the Bible doesn't make sense to you, get some help. That's what we're here for. We'll guide you through. But we really want you to take this journey not only with us, but with friends or family. So talk about it. If you have questions, share. You may be surprised at the insights God gives you through your friends.

Peyton: That's all for today. Read judges 21 for yourself. Share some questions with friends and don't be surprised if God answers.

Kris: We'll see you back here tomorrow, everyone, as we take a look at second Samuel seven, when God gives Israel a king.

Kris: You know, I always sort of pictured a cakewalk as walking around with a cake on each foot, like cake boots, or maybe walking through a field of cakes, neither of which seem particularly easy.

Peyton: Seriously?

The Big Picture Day 11 | 2 Samuel 7

Welcome back to Through the Word. Today we come to the crossroads - of three of the Bible's biggest themes: Kingdom, Temple, and Covenant.

The temple is an interesting one. A house - for God. As if God could fit inside a house. As if man could build a house big enough.

And yet here it is. The temple is one of the Bible's most consistent themes. Now temples are quite common around the world - most every deity that man worships gets a temple - with altars for sacrifice and statues to show everyone how awesome the deity looks.

But the God of the Bible is different. He insists on no statues - no image or idol. That made God's temple strikingly different from every other temple in the world - because the Creator of the universe cannot be captured in stone or wood. But if God is so big - why would He want a temple at all?

II.(Era of Kings)

Well, back in our story - several generations have passed since our mess of a story in Judges, and we arrive at the turn of the millennium - 1000 BC - and a new era in Israel's history — the age of kings. And with that - our next Bible mega-theme: kings and kingdoms. Back in Judges - Israel had no king- the judges led the people.

Well, the last judge was a prophet named Samuel - we met him before. In 1st Samuel, the people decided - they want a king - like all the countries around them. They told Samuel - "Give us a king."

Samuel was not happy. And for good reason - God was their king. But the people didn't quite get that - and God told Samuel - give the people a king - but warn them - human kings come with a price. They raise taxes, they demand servants - and soldiers. But the people asked for it - so God gave them King Saul. Saul started humble, but then pride crept in - and things got bad.

So God raised up another - a humble shepherd, only a boy when he was chosen - but one whom God would call, "a man after my own heart." David is one of the great Bible heroes - his story is quite the adventure, here in Samuel, in Chronicles, and Psalms. David was a musician, a poet, an extraordinary warrior, a leader, a man of close friends and dangerous enemies, a man of incredible faith - and destructive failings. For better and for worse - David was - the king of Israel.

Now here in 2nd Samuel chapter 7, we find King David - in a time of rest. David's life up to this point had been mostly battle. Israel had many enemies - but verse 1 says that the Lord gave the king rest from those enemies. And in verse 2:

"(David) said to Nathan the prophet, "Here I am, living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent."

In other words - David is living in a palace - a nice one - and he realizes - that his house was nicer than God's house! At least - nicer than the Tabernacle where the ark was.

Which brings us to today's second Bible mega-theme: Temple. Wait - I thought you said Tabernacle. A little explanation.

Back in Exodus, God gave instructions for a Tabernacle - which is a temple - only in tent form. Because in the Exodus, it had to be portable. At the Tabernacle, the Israelites gathered to worship - and God promised - to dwell with them.

And that is really the heart of the temple throughout the Bible. Not so much a house so God will have a place to live - but a physical representation of God's desire - to dwell - to be at home - among His people. God - with - us.

The God of the Bible is not aloof, nor afar off - He is present, He is near - He is with His people. Now the Bible tells us that God is everywhere - but it also spends a great many pages on this curious idea of a Temple - a specific place for God to dwell.

Well - the curious part of it to David - was that God's house was still a tent. After all, they're not traveling any more.

So he got it in his heart to build - a glorious Temple. The prophet Nathan agreed - sounds like a great idea. Verse 4:

"But that night the word of the Lord came to Nathan, saying: "Go and tell my servant David, 'This is what the Lord says: Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling.'"

So God doesn't want David to build Him a house. And He reminds David - of where he came from, and how far God has brought him, and then God makes David a promise. And here - we find Bible mega-theme number three in this chapter: covenant. You should remember this one from Abraham's story.

Remember that a covenant is a binding agreement between two parties that provides the foundation for a relationship. The entire Bible is punctuated by covenants - between God and man - and each one is pivotal to the greater story. In fact, the word testament means - covenant.

This one is known as the Davidic Covenant - the promise of a King - and a Kingdom - forever. But that king was not David himself - but one of his descendants.

God makes several promises beginning in verse 9 - to make David's name great, to provide a place of safety for Israel, and rest from their enemies - and then read halfway through 11,

"'The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.'

That's a huge promise. David's offspring will build a house for God - and God will establish his throne and his kingdom - forever. Don't read that word lightly. Forever. And in 14:

"I will be his father, and he will be my son."

That should stop you in your soup. God promises - that He will be a father - to David's offspring. Wow. That's a covenant promise!

So three big themes: Kingdom, Covenant, and God with us - all bound together in one.

V: (Kings Story)

So the question is - how'd it work out? We have the rest of the story - and David indeed had plenty of offspring. His son Solomon inherited the throne - and Solomon did indeed build a house for God - a magnificent Temple in Jerusalem - one of the great marvels of ancient architecture. And the time of Solomon's reign in Israel - was truly its zenith - peace and prosperity. But his rule - didn't last. All things must come to an end.

Sadly, prosperity for Solomon - turned to pride - and his son was far worse. Unrest in the kingdom, revolt - and the kingdom was split in two - 10 tribes in the North - still called Israel - and 2 in the south, together called Judah. Two kingdoms - and the sordid stories of several centuries of infighting follow in the books of Kings and Chronicles.

For the most part, the kings that follow - are terrible. Greed, deceit, idolatry. Every few generations, the Southern kingdom had a king with a heart for God -but the rest just kept getting worse. The Law of God was forgotten. The covenant promises left in the past.

God sent prophets - like Elijah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah - to warn the people, to call them back. But by the sixth century BC - God had had enough, and the Israelites - with their kings - were sent into exile - captured by the King of Babylon. And the Babylonians destroyed the Temple - and left it all - in ruins.

VI: (Themes review)

So much for kings and kingdoms, and so long to the temple of “God with us.”

But wait a second. What happened to God’s promise? What happened to “I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever?” It’s as if - all three of our mega-themes sort of sparked up a flame - and just died out.

The temple - destroyed, the line of kings - gone wicked and gone to exile, and the covenant... Well that poses a great question: Can God break His own word? Could His promise fail due to human weakness? Or is there more to this story?

Read 2nd Samuel 7, and meet me back here tomorrow, as we move into the Prophets.

The Big Picture Day 12 | Jeremiah 29

Welcome back everyone, today we come to one the Bible's most beloved verses. Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

It's a beautiful thought, isn't it? That the Creator God has plans for you - that He intends for you - a future - and a hope!

But is that promise - really for you? To figure that out - we need some context.

We've taken a significant jump today - from the books of history - to the books of prophecy. In the Old Testament, the historical books span from Genesis to Esther, then there are the books of wisdom and poetry - from Job to Song of Solomon - and then - the prophets. History - wisdom - prophets.

Chronologically - the prophets actually fit in with the last half of the history books - from about 900 to 400 BC. We left our story in the time of David - in the era of Israel's kings. That era - didn't go so well. Again and again, the Israelites left God to follow idols - gods carved out to fit their own image. And they just plain did evil. But the Israelites still thought of themselves as God's people. Sometimes we're blind to our own hypocrisy. And that is where the prophet comes in. Prophets - are a reality check. God speaks through the prophet - to show the people the reality of their condition.

Now we'll help you fit each prophet with their time period as we follow the Bible Journey. But the prophets don't just speak of their present time - they often go far beyond their historical context. This is where it gets interesting - when God speaks - of the future. See in the Bible, the word prophecy means a word from God - but sometimes God's word - predicts the future.

As for the precision and accuracy of those predictions - we'll take a closer look tomorrow in Daniel. Today, I want to consider the purpose for all these predictions. Isaiah was a prophet in the time of the kings, and His prophecies are full of predictions. In Isaiah 46, God calls out to a generation of Jews that went wandering after idols.

“Remember the former things, those of long ago;
I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like me.
I make known the end from the beginning,
from ancient times, what is still to come.”

See - God sets Himself apart - there is none like Him - no idol, no mythology, no 1.21 gigawatts - nothing else - that makes known the end from the beginning. Search all the holy texts - only the Bible does it. But it's not just God showing off - it's about God's plan and purpose. There in Isaiah 46, He goes on to say, 'My purpose will stand,'

And speaking of God's purpose - that brings us back to Jeremiah 29 - and God's beautiful promise - of His good plans for you. Or - is it - for you? If you ask me, there is a danger in cherry-picking Bible verses that happen to sound nice - out of context. So let's get some context on the prophets.

Prophets like Elijah, Amos, Micah and Isaiah delivered their prophecies in the time of Kings - when Israel stood as a mighty nation. But the Kings - were not so good. The kingdom split, and most of the kings did evil in the God's sight. God sent each prophet - to speak to the king and to the people in their time. Sometimes warnings, almost always calling back to God. Most spoke to Israel - some like our whale friend Jonah spoke to other nations. All the prophets spoke God's words - but some were given object lessons - and some even lived out God's message. God called the prophet Hosea to marry a prostitute - whom he knew would cheat on him. Betcha didn't hear that one in Sunday school. It was a dramatic picture of God's people - cheating on Him.

But for all the warnings - the people never listened for long. The Northern kingdom fell to invasion by Assyria in 740 BC. The South stood - but weakly. More bad kings - with the occasional bright light. More prophets were sent - Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk - and then in the 600s - Jeremiah. The weeping prophet. Jeremiah had a lonely task - cry out to a generation that would not listen - and warn them - you will be invaded, captured - and sent into exile. In spite of all his warnings, there was no change of heart.

Jeremiah's book of Lamentations is a heartbreakingly lament recorded as the city of Jerusalem was destroyed. And the people - went into exile.

But even in exile - there was hope. In fact, that hope was found right along side those warnings - here in Jeremiah 29 verse 11:

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. "

To a people actively cheating on Him - God declared that things would get very bad - they would reap what they sow, but His plan - His BIG plan for them - was good. And my favorite part - is verse 13:

"You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. 14I will be found by you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back - from captivity."

That promise - for a return from exile - is a key Bible promise. It is - restoration - and the books of Ezra & Nehemiah will tell the story. But would the people simply be restored - to the same kingdom and same covenant - that failed the first time? Remember the covenant with Moses - the Law. If you keep the Law, it will go well. They didn't keep it. Not even close. So why bother trying again?

Think about it. If I break the rules 490 times - does it really help if I just start over and you remind me of the rules - one more time? The problem is not the rules - it's my heart. So what will God do - to deal with the heart issue?

Two chapters later, in Jeremiah 31, at verse 31, God makes a phenomenal promise - that is one of the key connections between the Old Testament and New Testament. In fact - the word Testament - means covenant. And here in the old covenant - God promises - a new one. Verse 31:

"The days are coming," declares the Lord,
"when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.

And then verse 33,

“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord.

“I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God, and they will be my people.”

That promise - is the new covenant. Not like the old one. God promises to forgive their wickedness - and remember their sins no more. No longer would following God be a set of rules carved into stone or written on paper. God promises - to write the law - on their hearts - and put it - in their minds. It's sort of like... do you know the difference between struggling through playing notes from a page - that just don't feel natural - and playing a tune straight from the heart? God sets his song - his law - inside us - so you can do right and live well - and play it - by heart.

But hold on - what if the heart is wicked? What if it just can't play a righteous tune? The prophet Ezekiel - around the same time - delivered this promise from God:

(36:26) “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”

Read Jeremiah 29 today. And as you get to verse 11 - a future and a hope - you may wonder - is that verse for you? Well, not directly. It was given to Israel. However, God may use that verse to speak to you directly - if you have that relationship with God. So the real question is - do you have that relationship with God? And based on what? In the Bible - that relationship is based on - a covenant. We'll find out more - when we get to the New Covenant - I mean - New Testament. Same thing.

But speaking of covenant - what happened to the covenant with David? The line of kings went bad - sent into exile. What happened to a king forever? We'll find our answer with our next prophet: Daniel.

The Big Picture Day 13 | Daniel 2

Hello Through the Word! Welcome back. Today - one of my personal favorites, the book of Daniel. Not only is Daniel a favorite - it is controversial. Because this book - predicts the future. A lot. It was written during the sixth century BC - but it gives such detailed prophecies about events that took place in the five hundreds BC - four hundreds - three, two - one - and all of it accurate - so many scholars simply concluded that it had to be written later - like 50 AD - and just pretended to be older. So which is it?

We'll get back to that. But... there's more to prophecy than just bending the space-time continuum to predict the future. There's a message. Now the accuracy of prediction gives strong evidence that the message is indeed from God - but don't miss - what that message is. Still, I must admit that when you read the Bible's prophecies - it can be hard to put all the pieces together. It's sort of like - well, have you ever put together a huge puzzle - without the box top? Neither have I - and I don't want to. And the Bible - can be like that - if you don't see the box top. You know - the big picture. So God put one in the Bible. A couple in fact. And Daniel 2 - is a puzzle box top.

We left off our story in the book of Jeremiah. The people of God - had forsaken their covenant. They forgot the law, and the line of kings went from bad to worse. Jeremiah prophesied judgment - exile to be specific. And the book of Daniel begins with the fulfillment of that prophecy. In about 605 BC, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, besieged Jerusalem and took the Israelites captive - just as Jeremiah prophesied.

But also just as he prophesied - there was still hope. In fact, some of the Bible's greatest heroes came out of the exile - like Esther and Ezra - and here Daniel. Daniel grew up in Israel - in a world of religious hypocrisy - when everyone called God their Lord - but no one treated Him that way. Daniel was only a youth when he was captured, and sent across the vast desert - to serve a pagan king.

Daniel must have wondered - what happened to God's kingdom? What happened to Israel, and the covenants - and God's promise to David?

What happened to the descendant to be on the throne forever? Now Babylon rules - and Nebuchadnezzar worships a multitude of gods.

Interesting - in Jeremiah 32 - right among the prophecies of exile and judgement, God declares again - that His covenant with David - is as strong as his covenant with day and night. Just as sure as the sun rises - David's descendant will sit on the throne forever. But how will that work out?

Well, we catch up with Daniel some years later, and he serves now as a wise man in Babylon. See King Nebuchadnezzar had a strategy. When he conquered a kingdom, he would take the best and brightest of the youth - and put them into training - treated well, fed from the king's table, and trained up to serve him.

As a result, Nebuchadnezzar had wise men, enchanters, sorcerers, and astrologers representing every people and every god you could think of - including the big G - and I don't mean General Mills. When Israel was captured - the prophets of the Creator God were put to work right alongside the rest.

Chapter 2 - begins with a dream. Nebuchadnezzar's dream hits him hard, and he just can't shake it. So he gathers his wise men, and demands that they interpret the dream. What does it mean? But the king gets tricky. He refuses to tell them - what he dreamed.

In verse 5 he insists, "If you do not tell me what my dream was - and interpret it, I will have you cut into pieces and your houses turned into piles of rubble." Now what do you do with that?! There's something going on with Nebuchadnezzar here. He's got all the religious gurus you could ever want - he's been following them for years - but this time, he wants proof - proof that it's not just made up. "Tell me my dream, and tell me the meaning - or you all die."

The wise men can't do it - and the command goes out. Execute them all. Daniel hears the news - and he gathers three fellow believers - Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego - and together, they pray.

And God answers. As you read this story - watch carefully how Daniel talks about God. In verse 27, he tells the king,

“No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries.”

I like that. The answers you need are not found among men. But the God of Heaven - is a revealer of mysteries. So Daniel tells Nebuchadnezzar the dream, and the meaning. And the dream is a prophecy - a big one. It reveals God’s big plan for the kingdoms of the world. Verse 31:

“Your Majesty looked, and there before you stood a large statue—an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay.”

So his dream - was the statue of a man. A huge one - with five sections in five different metals. Now you might just think of a statue as art - but think deeper. Throughout history - statues have been made - for worship. Man forming a god by his own hands - in his own image. Or statues were made to honor kings - to immortalize their greatness. So what about the statue in Nebby’s dream?

Daniel explains that the first four parts in the statue - represent four great kingdoms of the earth - massive empires that would rule far and wide. The head of gold is Babylon - and King Nebuchadnezzar himself. Babylon dominated the known world. But then - his kingdom would not last. In verse 39, “After you, another kingdom will rise.” This should hit to the heart. No man made kingdom will last forever. The next empire is the silver torso - the empire of the Medes and Persians. Then the bronze belly - the Greek empire of Alexander the Great. Finally the legs of iron - the Roman empire of Caesars, strong and ruthless.

Now remember - most of this is being told in advance. 600 BC. The prophecy here is very broad - and you could write it off as too vague to prove anything. But this is just the big picture - the box top.

In chapters 7 through 12 - Daniel is given prophecies with pinpoint accuracy - details and stories of individual kings and generals - not with names - but with detailed description - from Alexander the Great to Cleopatra to Jesus - to things only a historian would know.

And that's the trick of it. Only a historian would know. But Daniel is not a historian - he's a prophet. So maybe it was written around 50 AD. But hold on. In the 20th century, a discovery was made - the Dead Sea Scrolls - with Biblical manuscripts that date back to 150 BC - before many of the prophesied events. And there in the Dead Sea Scrolls - the book of Daniel.

Now there's more to this argument - and we'll dig in more when we get to Daniel's book. But for now, Nebuchadnezzar's dream isn't over. The four kingdoms from Babylon to Rome are pictured in the statue - but the last kingdom changes - and the time period jumps to the distant future. The iron in the legs becomes iron mixed with clay in the toes. This is a new kingdom - rebuilt from the old Roman empire - the kingdom of the antichrist in the final days of the earth.

And then something happens in the dream. Daniel goes on in verse 34, "While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. So the rock hits the statue - and the whole statue - every man-made kingdom - crumbles to dust - and blows away. Back in verse 35 - "The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth."

What - was that? Daniel explains that the great rock - is another Kingdom. This one is not carved out by humans - as the statue was. In verse 44: "the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed," This - is what the prophecy is really all about. The big picture - the puzzle box top, and the fulfillment of God's enduring promise to David - is a kingdom, God's kingdom, that will never be destroyed. The kingdoms of man have come and gone like ancient statues. But the Kingdom of God - is a rock. As you read the Bible - watch for His Kingdom. Miss the Kingdom, and you miss the whole story. In all your seeking - seek first, the Kingdom of God.

The Big Picture Day 14 | Nehemiah 8

Welcome again to Through the Word. Thanks for taking this journey with us. Today, a great milestone on our overview of the Bible. We finish out the Old Testament storyline - with the book of Nehemiah, and the story of the restoration.

Restoration is a beautiful thing. To take something old - and very much worse for wear - and to rebuild, restore, and renew. It is also a work very close to God's heart here in the Bible. This book is full of restoration stories.

Our story today is a rather dramatic scene. Picture it: daybreak in the ancient city of Jerusalem. Tens of thousands of Israelites have gathered along the city's wall at a place called the Water Gate. As the sun begins to rise over the crowd, you can see the wall around the city - freshly rebuilt under a massive restoration project that involved everyone in that crowd. After decades of sitting in ruins, the wall is finally up. In the distance, the Temple of the living God towers once again in the heart of the city, also rebuilt from ruin. But not everything is renewed.

Throughout the city, reminders linger of the utter destruction that overcame a generation of Jews not long before. Most of the Jewish people still remain in the lands of exile, but these families - these are the remnant - those who returned from exile to rebuild and restore. Yet there is more to this restoration than just walls and buildings.

At the head of the crowd, there is a high wooden platform - with several men standing tall. And in verse 1, "They told Ezra - the teacher of the Law - to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel."

Ezra is a priest and scribe - grew up in exile, studying and preparing - now he steps forward with a great scroll. And in verse 3,
"He read it aloud from daybreak - till noon - as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law."

Six hours of Bible reading - and the people listen - in rapt attention - to the story of their ancestors. And something else is happening in this crowd as Ezra reads the scroll - a group of Levites are instructing the people. In verse 8, "They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read."

So these men are teachers. As the reading went on, they stopped to - well to do the same thing I try to do every day - explain the Bible so you can understand it.

Have you ever wondered about that word - understand? It appears four times in this chapter. But did you ever think about the roots behind the word. Does it mean to stand under something to make sense of it - like a mechanic under a car? Well, I looked it up - turns out the original wording meant - to stand in the midst of."

I think of 2005 - when I saw the destruction of Hurricane Katrina on TV and my heart broke for the people and the destruction. But that was nothing - compared to the day I arrived there - when I stood in a neighborhood without a single house standing - nothing but concrete slabs and utter demolition. Then I stood in the midst of. Then, I understood.

Here at the Water Gate, standing before the newly rebuilt wall, the people of God listen to the Word of God, and pay attention, as the teachers explain it and make it clear. And the people - perhaps for the first time in their lives - understand. The whole story (speed up): God's plan - God's purposes - His phenomenal promises - the righteousness and justice of His laws. (Slow) And His people - God's people - they turned away, again and again.

And now in our story - as this generation listened to their history, their forefathers - their failure - as they heard the laws and the prophecies their forefathers had ignored, as they stood amidst the ruin that their forefathers had wrought - there before the Water Gate, verse 9 tells us - the people began to weep. (Pause). They understood.

What was it that drove all the people to weep? Well, let's review the story they read - it's the same one that we've been reading. From the story of God's creation, and the gifts to mankind - to the fall - to Abraham, chosen by God to make a covenant - to Jacob's wanderings and wrestlings - to God's great escape plan in the Exodus - to the Law, God's righteous rules - and then the kings, and a new covenant with David - and the failure of kings, and then destruction, and exile.

And that brings us to this story. The Old Testament tells the story of this restoration in six books - three history and three prophets. The history books feature three key players in that work of restoration: and all three of them picture for us - the work of the Holy Spirit.

Ezra - the teacher - his name means Helper - a title that Jesus gives to the Holy Spirit. Ezra restores the people through the teaching of God's Word - just as the Spirit does for us.

Then Nehemiah - the governor of the people, the great leader who rallies the people to rebuild the wall. Nehemiah's name means Comforter from the Lord. Also a title given to the Holy Spirit - picturing for us how the Spirit organizes and equips the church with gifts and calling - to rebuild families, to restore souls.

And then Esther, whose name means Hidden - one of the Bible's many courageous female heroes - called by God - in the right place at the right time - to save thousands of lives. The Spirit may be hidden, but the Spirit shows up at just the right time to save.

This - symbolism in the Bible is called typology - stories and characters that give us pictures of a greater reality. Not parables - true stories - pointing to a greater truth.

And back here in Nehemiah 8, Ezra the teacher and Nehemiah the rebuilder are working their gifts together in the restoring of God's people.

As the people are weeping at the words of the book, as they stand in the midst of God's law and God's story - Nehemiah steps up, and calms the crowd, "Do not mourn or weep," and in verse 10, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

Have you ever experienced - a renewing - like a second wind from your very core - like your very bones find their strength again? And that strength - is joy. Joy that awakens your soul. For the Israelites - with tears still upon their cheeks - it is not their own joy, it is the joy of the Lord that is their strength. God's joy over His people - because His love forgives, and forgets, and restores.

And the people get it. They receive it. Verse 12 says they went away to eat and drink, to share with others - and watch the words - "to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them."

They understood. They understood God's law; they understood their own guilt; and now they understand - they stand - in the midst - of God's grace. And for days that followed, they gathered, read the Word of God, and celebrated - and in verse 17, "their joy - was very great."

This is the power of the Word of God: the Law that convicts, and the grace that forgives, that redeems - and restores. And this, I must admit to you, is exactly what I hope will happen - for all of you - for everyone who listens. This chapter is one of the great inspirations that got me started on the audio guides, on this app - from the reading of the Word to the teaching and clear explaining - but most importantly - to the lives changed, the joy of restoration that comes by the power of the Holy Spirit - through the Word.

I know - some of you don't even believe this stuff - you're just here for a little education. I totally respect that. I also respect you enough to be honest about why I do this. My hope - is that you and I - will understand, and find ourselves standing in the midst of grace, that the joy of the Lord will be our strength, and that He will restore our souls... through the Word.

The Big Picture Day 15 | Hebrews 11

Hello Through the Word - it's a big day - our overview of the Old Testament is done, and we turn the page to the New Testament. So what is the difference between the Old and New - and what's the connection?

Well, the difference is Jesus. And the connection... well the connection is Jesus. I know - that sounds a little crazy - so let me explain.

We turn to the New Testament book of Hebrews today - which is an excellent book to make our connection with the Old. See Hebrews is not really a book, but a letter - as most of the New Testament books are. We call them epistles, which is just fancy-talk for letters. The letters were written by a variety of leaders in the early Christian church - and sent to churches in various cities, or to specific people. That explains why the New Testament books have names like "Corinthians" - it was a letter for Christians in Corinth, or "Titus" - it was a letter for a guy named Titus.

I love this - because the letters make the New Testament way more personal than the Old. They were real people - and their stories and character shine through. And the amazing part is - these letters are for us too. They explain the faith, answer questions, deal with problems - and generally cover things that we still deal with today.

Now understand - the Bible teaches, and Christians like me believe - that these letters were written by people - but inspired by God. 2nd Timothy & 1st Peter tell us - all scripture is God breathed. Now whether you believe that - is your call.

And it turns out that belief is also a key connection between the Old and New Testaments. Or more specifically - faith. And it's the topic of our chapter today. I picked the book of Hebrews because it was written by one of the early church leaders - to a group of Hebrew Christians. Hebrew means they were Jewish by descent and faith. They grew up believing in the Jewish scriptures - the Old Testament, and now they believe in Jesus as well.

And this letter was written to the Hebrews - to help them see the full connection between the Bible they grew up with - Old Testament - and the Jesus they now follow - New Testament.

See the main difference between the Old and New - was Jesus. Search the Old Testament for the word Jesus - it's not there. But does that mean that He's not in there?

Well, the letter to the Hebrews covers a lot of Old Testament stories, themes and symbols - and helps us connect them all together - in Jesus. And that's important. Sometimes people talk about the Old and New Testaments as if they are two thoroughly different things - Old Testament is about the Jews, New Testament is about Jesus - as if God scrapped one idea and started over with another. But that's not true at all. In fact, in Matthew 5, Jesus Himself said,

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets" (that's the Old Testament); "I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." (Matthew 5:17).

That's important. Jesus did not replace or abolish what came before - He came to fulfill it. In other words - everything we've read so far - was incomplete. It was full of prophecies and promises from God - but in all that we've read - those promises haven't become reality - not fulfilled.

So what about all the people in the Old Testament stories? Well we find a lot of them right here in Hebrews 11. This chapter is called the Hall of Faith - lots of Old Testament heroes, with one important virtue in common. Chapter 10 just ended with an important Old Testament quote, "my righteous one shall live by faith," Remember - righteous means right with God - and in the Bible it's the only way to heaven. "The righteous shall live by faith."

What is faith? Verse 1:

"Now faith is confidence in what we hope for - and assurance about what we do not see."

Hebrews 6 calls hope an “anchor for our souls.” But hope is about the future - it takes faith to grab ahold of that hope here in the present. And verse 2 tells us,

“This is what the ancients were commended for.”

The ancients here refer to Old Testament heroes - and the rest of the chapter recounts their stories - and the one thing they had in common - faith.

We begin with the stories of creation, then Abel and Enoch - you may not know them, but Abel is commended as righteous and Enoch as one who pleased God - because of faith. And in verse 6 something important, “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”

We move on to Noah in verse 7, and you’ll notice that every hero - every story - is introduced with the words, “By faith....” Noah had the faith to believe God’s warnings and build an ark - and he “became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.”

There’s those two words together again - righteous and faith.

Then verse 8,

“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise.”

And here we see something that so many of our faith heroes had in common: they were pilgrims. Not like buckle hats and Thanksgiving dinner - pilgrims as in immigrants - God’s wanderers - only with a destination. No permanent address in this world - just tents. Verse 10 explains, “For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.”

See faith is not a passive thing - it is not the same as simple belief that some idea is true. Faith is active - it not only believes, it trusts - and it looks forward in hope.

Abraham and Sarah had no kids - but they had a promise from God - and verse 11 says they "considered him faithful who had made the promise."

And what we learn from all these heroes is that faith is not something blind. Quite the contrary - faith sees more. It sees the world and all it's challenges - but faith also sees God - who is far greater. Faith sees the hardships of the present - but also sees the glory of the future - and the two are hardly worth comparing.

That's true in Moses' story as well - grew up in luxury in the house of Pharaoh, but in verse 25,

"He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward."

Moses wasn't blind - he saw more. And the stories keep coming, with one thing in common. Every Bible hero, every inspiring story, had severe trials - and endured - and overcame - by faith.

Some of them saw victory in their lifetime, others in verse 35 - suffered and died.

But notice verse 39,

"These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made - perfect."

The word perfect there is important. It's not the same word as perfect score - as in no mistakes. Made perfect means made complete - as in - finish the story. What he's saying is - all of those Old Testament stories - aren't done. The promises aren't fulfilled - the lives are incomplete. . . because God has something better.

And chapter 12 tells us - to look at all those heroes of faith - as a cloud of witnesses - their lives bearing testimony to the walk of faith - so that we will run our race with perseverance, and in verse 2, "fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith."

And here, all those incomplete stories in the Old Testament - find their finisher - their perfecter - in Jesus: the pioneer who began it all - and the perfecter who finishes it.

So what's the difference between the Old Testament and the New? And what connects them together? Same thing: Jesus. How does all that work? We'll see more as we go. First - read Hebrews 11. Tomorrow - I think it's about time that we met Jesus.

The Big Picture Day 16 | John 1

Jesus Christ. Two words with a lot of gravity. Depending on your background, you might think that I just praised God - or you might think I just swore. So - who is this Jesus?

Whatever you believe about Him, there's no denying the impact of this one man - this one name - on the history of the world. More than a billion people connect their faith in God with his name and his teaching. Around the world for two millennia, this one name has impacted society, religion, philosophy, politics, ethics, worldview. In just about everything and everywhere - there is the impact of Jesus.

Here in the Bible, it's not simply that we have stories about Jesus. He is the story. So - who is Jesus Christ?

The New Testament introduces us to Jesus in the first four books - called the gospels - and each one gives us a different perspective on the story of Jesus. For today, we're in John chapter 1. I love this chapter, so let's dig in at verse 1. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

So John begins the story of Jesus - at the beginning. As in - the beginning of everything. The first three words match Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning..." but then he says "...was the Word."

Now, a little explanation. Back when John wrote this, the Greek philosophers pondered about origins, and they had a concept known as the Word - or in Greek, logos. Basically it means the original form - the prototype or perfect model.

If you create something, you begin with an original design, and copy the rest from there. If we invent something new - we name it - with a word - like car, or blender, or ...doohickey. So the Greeks applied this idea to nature. And for every thing, they said there must be an original - the logos, the word.

So John takes that concept of the word - and basically combines that Greek concept with Genesis 1. I'm not saying that John just mashed up Greek philosophy with Jewish scripture. Rather, he recognized that which was true in philosophy - and gave it direction from the revelation of God. What is that direction?

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" And in verse 2, John refers to the Word - as "He" - like a person. "He was with God in the beginning."

We have a challenge here. How can He - be with God, and also be God? John says both are true, in clear and direct language. He was with God and was God - from the very beginning.

Then in verse 3:

"Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made."

That's a big statement. Everything - in all creation - was made through Him. Everything. Then verse 4:

"In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind."

As if the first statement wasn't big enough - it gets bigger. "In him - in the word - was life. And not just any life - this life - is light - it's how we see. Light makes everything visible, so we can see - so we can make sense of things. And verse 5:

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

Verse 6 changes the direction here to the story of a man whom God sent, whose name is John. Not the same John who wrote the book, by the way. This one is John the Baptizer.

Verse 7 tells us, "He came as a witness to testify concerning that light," The key word there is witness - it's an important Bible word. Someone who has seen - someone who testifies so that you can hear and decide whether to believe.

In fact, the four gospels are really four testimonies. Matthew - eyewitness, Mark - likely sharing Peter's eyewitness, Luke - collecting many eyewitness testimonies to compile an orderly account, and John - eyewitness.

The testimonies are not identical. That would be a little fishy. Rather each gospel offers its own perspective, and all of them are like John the Baptist here in verse 7 who, "came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe."

So to overview - the New Testament has four gospels - Jesus' time on earth; one book of Acts - the first decades of the Christian church; twenty-one epistles - letters from church leaders; and one book called Revelation - a prophetic book like no other.

But back here in John 1, John tells us in verse 9 that this Word - this light to all mankind - "was coming into the world."

Verse 14 explains, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."

Here we have a great mystery. The Word - the original - the quintessential one, the eternal God - "became flesh." God in human form. And he "made his dwelling among us." The word for dwelling there - is the same word used for a tabernacle - or temple. Remember - our mega-theme back in the Old Testament. God chose a place to dwell with His people. Same concept, only now, that temple is a living, breathing human body.

Now - all of this - is massive in its claim. If it's not true, it's blasphemy. If it is true - it's everything.

And who is this Word - this God who became flesh and dwelt among us? John finally gives us his name in verse 17:

"For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

And there - is that name. Jesus. And notice the contrast - Moses gave the law. We saw in Exodus that Moses delivered God's rules of righteous living. But the law is only part of God's message. Jesus brings grace. I love grace. It means gift. You don't deserve it - God just gives it because He loves you. Grace - and truth.

Chapter 1 introduces us to Jesus, to John the Baptist as the first witness bearing testimony of Jesus, and in verse 35 - to Jesus' first disciples. That's an important word. Disciple means learner, one who follows the teaching of another. Jesus' disciples literally followed him - his teaching and his footsteps.

In verse 37, two men who had been John's disciples, heard about Jesus, and started following - as in - just walking along behind Jesus - until he asked what they want. Don't miss that picture. As you read the story, pay attention the simple way that Jesus calls each disciple. In verse 43, he invites Philip with just two words, "Follow me."

And don't miss what the disciples do. Just as soon as they start following, they're also telling others about him. Andrew tells his brother Simon - who became Peter. Philip tells Nathanael.

But you have to ask - why did these guys believe and follow so quickly? Verse 45 has some insight.

"Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote..."

See when Philip talks about Jesus - he's not a new concept. He's the one they've read about for years in the Old Testament, the one they've heard about from John. There were testimonies.

Even with that - Nathanael won't believe so easily. So Philip says, "Come and see." As you read Nathanael's first encounter, pay close attention.

Jesus impresses him with inside information - Jesus knew Nathanael long before their first meeting.

And in verse 49,

“Then Nathanael declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.”

That massive proclamation of faith from Nathanael takes us back to the promises of God to King David in 2nd Samuel. Remember? The covenant. The King forever. God promised to set a son of David over His Kingdom forever, “I will be his father, and he will be my son.”

Nathanael knows that promise - and believes that Jesus is the King of Israel, the Son of God.

Jesus responds in verse 50,

50Jesus said, “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that.” 51He then added, “Very truly I tell you you will see ‘heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending’ on the Son of Man.”

Do you remember the story of Jacob? How he was on the run, and fell asleep on a rock - and dreamed of a ladder going up to Heaven - with angels ascending and descending upon it. Right here - Jesus tells Nathanael - that He - Jesus - the Son of Man - He is that ladder. He is the connection between heaven and earth.

So - who is Jesus Christ? Well, in John 1 he is the fulfillment of so much in the Old Testament. But to be honest, this is the kind of question that you could spend a lifetime trying to answer. And if you ask me - that sounds like a life well spent.

The Big Picture Day 17 | Luke 15

Hey, through the word today we're going to talk about the teachings of Jesus. What was Jesus actually like as a teacher? What did he do? What did he do that was different from everyone else?

Matthew chapter seven verse 28 tells us, and when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority and not as their scribes.

Have you ever wondered what people did before they stared at their phones, ignoring one another? Well, before that, people stared at television screens. In fact, grumpy old men like me like to say, in my day, we didn't do all this staring into technical techno mumbo jumbo gizmos. But the reality is we did. And before TVs, people stared at newspapers instead of looking each other deep into the eyes. And before that, it was books. And in fact, if you go back to the very dawn of time, what you'll find is that people have actually sat around campfires for years listening to stories way back into the caveman days.

People were hopping about in their animal skins, telling stories of brave adventures out and hunting and raiding parties. Tales of heroes. Tales of gods. Tales of valor. Why? Because stories are the oldest form and the most powerful way of human communication. When we look at Jesus as a teacher, it's important to know that almost all of his teaching was told in the form of stories.

Sure. John's gospel tells us about conversations he had. But the Gospels tell us that most of his teaching had to do with story, our oldest form of communication. Why? Well, stories. First off, they connect with our emotions. They have a way of drawing us in, pulling, tugging on the heartstrings and actually pulling us and putting us into the story, making us a character.

For this reason, Jesus told parables. The word parable means to cast alongside. In other words, like in illustration, when we're teaching or telling something important to somebody, we might grab for an illustration and we might say, you know, it's like the sun comes up every morning that tells us that God's grace and his mercy is new every day.

Those are the kind of illustrations that the psalmist told. But when Jesus addressed a crowd, he would use normal, everyday things that people already knew, and he would attach spiritual truths to them. In other words, he would say something like, there was once a father who had a son and he would tell a story.

And as he did, people would automatically begin to go back in their memory banks and they would think, I know a dad like that, or I know a son like that.

And Jesus would say, if this is how the world works, what you already know in the world around you, then guess what? These things are the same with your soul. More importantly than people even knowing about a son or a father, they would eventually begin to realize that perhaps they were that son.

How many people over the last thousands of years since Jesus told the parable of the prodigal son, have seen themselves immediately transported into that story and realized with power and conviction that they were the ones who flung aside all of God's grace and mercy and went after a life of their own choosing, only to come to realize, like the prodigal son staring down at that pig slop at their life had come to this. There was no reward. And in fact, like the son says, I was better off in my father's house. I should return to him.

At that moment when Jesus told that story, the crowds knew. We need to return to God. But not only was Jesus a good storyteller, he was also a good question asker. You know, out of Jesus's statements, he asked 307 questions in the gospel. Now think about this. He has 307 questions, and he was asked 183 questions, of which he answers only three.

Why would Jesus ask so many questions and answer so few? Well, the way that Jesus taught was very typical of a rabbinical type of questioning. The rabbis actually believed that if you asked a question that it was more powerful if someone had to dig deep down within their soul or into their deep cavities of their mind to have a breakthrough in their understanding.

In other words, a truth arrived at is more powerful than a truth simply told to a person. For this reason, sometimes Jesus answered questions that he was asked by asking them another question in return. For example, when he was asked, teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

Jesus immediately asked, why do you call me good? Nobody is good but God. Well, obviously the man didn't understand that Jesus was God, but also he didn't understand that he wasn't good. And by Jesus asking this question, the man was meant to come to that conclusion.

This meant that Jesus's teaching was actually interactive. That's why we talked today about rabbinical questioning. But the last part about Jesus's teaching was not typical of the rabbis. Jesus's teaching was scandalous. He actually made people mad because often he had a twist, like an M Night Shyamalan film. I see dead people. There would be some amazing plot twists where the lasso would come first, or the first would come last, and everybody would be shocked and scandalized.

Well, this is simply because Jesus's subject matter was who God really was. He was teaching about the grace and love of God to a group of people who actually believe they were good enough to come to know this God without him. Therefore, Jesus's primary message was himself.

That's why today, when we teach, we have the same message. As Paul said, we preach Christ. Jesus said that all the scriptures were about him. So every time he opened his mouth and taught with the scriptures, he was preaching about people's need for him. You know, there's never been a storyteller quite like Jesus, but he was so much more than a storyteller.

The cool thing about Jesus is that we know the weight of his word simply because he didn't just talk. Jesus was a doer of miracles. And Jesus literally said that he did those miracles to point back to the authority in what he said. That's why when we look at Jesus, a great storyteller, a great question asker, a great scandalous teacher who rocked all of our expectations, scandalize our popular beliefs, and turned what we thought about God upside down. There's simply no contest. Jesus gets my vote for favorite teacher at the end of my yearbook.

Join us next time as we continue the journey, one chapter at a time. And remember, faith comes by hearing and hearing through the word.

The Big Picture Day 18 | Luke 9

We read about Jesus. Christ is the central character of the whole Bible. Today, we ask the question - what is Christianity? Or more precisely - what does it mean to be a Christian?

We're in the gospel of Luke, chapter 9, where Jesus lays out - the foundation of the church, and the heart of what it means to be a Christian.

Now John introduced Jesus to us in grand terms - the Word become flesh - in Him was life, the light of all mankind! But His disciples didn't understand all of that right away. Jesus' first words to most of them were simple, "Follow me." Two little words. The very core of Christian life comes down to this - follow Jesus. To be a Christian is not just to believe in a philosophy, nor is it to join an institution. It is a walk, it is a life lived in His footsteps. It is - to follow.

Actually that's what the word disciple means. One who follows - and learns. Jesus' disciples did just that - they followed Him around. They watched him heal, watched him mend broken hearts, cast out demons, preach good news. They watched as he reached out to the lost and broken, to every kind of sinner - and they saw how he loved.

You know - I read this chapter again today, and I was just struck. What was it like, to be there - to see - the Son of God, the Creator, taken on flesh. Nonetheless, following Jesus was not a spectator sport. So - let's start in at verse 1:

"When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick."

So the disciples weren't just following - they were sent out. I love this. God calls us His fellow workers - working alongside Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit - to do amazing works. We get to heal, we get to reach, and preach, and forgive, and serve. We get to love. It's called ministry - and every Christian is called to it.

Back in Luke 9, the disciples were sent out to preach and serve, and come back again. Next thing you know a crowd of several thousand comes out to hear Jesus. And they stay. By late afternoon, supper time is approaching, and the disciples figure the crowd should go somewhere to eat. So that's what they tell Jesus.

But in verse 13, "He replied, "You give them something to eat." Pay attention - there's more than just a miracle in the works here. Jesus tells the disciples, "You feed them." But there's a problem. No food. One disciple finds a boy - with five small loaves of bread and two small fish. But Jesus gave thanks, handed the food to the disciples, and they shared it.

Now - Imagine you're one of those disciples. Take a look down at what Jesus just handed you - you're holding about half a small loaf of bread and a few slices of fish. Look up and you've got a crowd to feed - several hundred just for you.

"Okay everyone - just take a little, and pass it on." I don't know what they said - but they trusted - and obeyed. And the people ate to their full -with 12 basketfuls left over! And the disciples were not just spectators. They got to be the hands and feet of Jesus' miracle.

Does it still happen for disciples today? You'll never know until you follow Jesus. And talk to people who really go for it - I've heard some stories. I've got some stories.

Back in Luke 9, Jesus follows up with the disciples in verse 18, "Who do the crowds say I am?"

This was an easy question. The crowds said lots of things about Jesus. A prophet, maybe Elijah returned from the dead. Mostly they said good things. The same is true today. People say lots of things about Jesus. Mostly good.

But it's easy to talk about what others say about Jesus, but then in verse 20: "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do YOU say I am?" Peter answered, "God's Messiah."

This is the real question. You can talk all day about who others say Jesus is. The question is, “Who do YOU say He is?”

Peter got it. Jesus is the Messiah - the holy one. Matthew records that Jesus also said - “On this rock I will build my church.” In other words, the foundation stone of Christianity - is WHO - JESUS - IS.

Not only that - Jesus gave Peter a new name. Understand who Jesus is - and you will find who you are in the process.

And because of who He is, Jesus explains to the disciples that He must suffer many things, that he will be killed, and on the third day, be raised to life. Who He is - determines what He does.

And the same would be true for the disciples. To be Jesus’ follower, is to follow in Jesus’ footsteps to the cross.

In verse 23:

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and FOLLOW - ME.”

That’s it. That is Christian life. Follow Jesus. Following Jesus means taking up your cross daily. Following Jesus means denying yourself. I don’t think that means you - deny yourself anything fun or good. It just means you say no to your selfish desires when they lead you away from Jesus. You can’t follow two people in different directions. Follow Jesus, not money. Follow Jesus, not pleasure. Follow Jesus, not self. Just follow Jesus.

Now I’m sure that Jesus recognized - that what He’s asking for - is huge. When I asked my wife for her hand in marriage - I didn’t just want a nice soft hand to hold for a ceremony. I was asking for life. Jesus is asking for no less. Remember - the Bible is a book of covenants - and Jesus is inviting the disciples into a new covenant. The one prophesied in Jeremiah. This is it. For the disciples, following Jesus was more than just putting their feet in his sandal prints - it was commitment. It was covenant.

Well - this is a big decision. So to help his disciples better weigh out their options, he lays out a little reality on the scales.

Verse 24:

“For whoever wants to save their life - - - will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me - - will save it.”

In other words - you can go down that path of living for yourself - find your own life on your own terms. But there is no gold at the end of that rainbow. Life for self is an empty road. The key is not inside of you. But whoever loses their life for Jesus - will save it.

Verse 25:

“What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?”

Live for self, and you'll lose your self - lose your very soul. Live for the world, and everything you get is stuff you can't keep, and stuff that doesn't matter. Live for Jesus, and what you get - is the only stuff that matters. And you'll find yourself in Him.

So what did the disciples do with all this? Two words. They followed Jesus.

That is what it means to be a Christian. As for the Christian church - we'll get to that in the book of Acts.

For today, read Luke 9. And consider your answer. Who do you say Jesus is? Will you accept His invitation - to follow. And if you do follow Jesus - how does that work today? I mean - you can't just tag along behind him like the disciples did. So what does discipleship look like now?

Well, it starts just like the disciples - with a commitment to follow Jesus. Not exactly his footsteps - but follow in his way, in his mission. Read the gospels - see how Jesus walked, how he loved and lived, and treat people the way he treated people.

The disciples weren't spectators, and neither are we. And like them, we follow Jesus together. Jesus sent them out in teams - to grow together, and learn from each other.

Like Paul said, "Follow me as I follow Christ."

So following Jesus - well, it's a lot of things. And we put some of them right here in Through the Word.

Remember that verse we read from 2nd Timothy? "All Scripture is God breathed"? That same passage tells us that scripture is meant for training - to equip you for every - good - work."

So Read the Bible. Apply it to your life. Pray. Connect with others. And make it a habit. Then - get out there and live it!

The Big Picture Day 19 | Mark 15

Welcome back to Through the Word. Mark 15 today. And a question: How is Christianity different from the other religions of the world?

They certainly have a great deal in common. Teachings of goodness, love, justice, good and evil, right and wrong. And those commonalities are essential for building understanding.

But there are elements to the teaching of Jesus - and the story of Jesus - that you won't find anywhere else.

Future prophecies - those are pretty amazing - we saw that back in Daniel 2. God's grace - that's very amazing - like nothing else in the world. We'll see that in a couple days. But there's one part of the Bible story - that's just kinda ... shocking. When people who are Bible curious get a chance to ask me privately, they usually have really good things to say about Jesus, but they have a hard time - with the crucifixion.

I read an article some time ago - about how the religions of the world see Jesus. Muslims believe Jesus is a prophet - born of a virgin, and sinless. Many Buddhists believe Jesus to be an enlightened one. And many Hindus hold Jesus in high regard - among the gods and incarnations of gods.

And it went on - so many religions speak of Jesus in honorable and even heroic terms. But in every case, there was one thing about Jesus that just didn't make sense. The way he died. Muslims say it's just not true. Others simply don't understand why people who celebrate love and peace - would constantly remember something so gruesome.

There is no getting around it. Crucifixion is a horrific way to die - but there it is - at the very center - of all that the Bible teaches - Old Testament and New. Remember Abraham? Faith, covenant, and God's big plan to save the world. That plan is coming together fast.

Now as we've followed along with Jesus and His disciples, He's talked about His death several times. But the disciples ... well, sometimes you don't hear what you don't want to hear.

So today - Mark 15. We begin in Jerusalem, early - before daybreak. In a few hours, the city will be packed as Israelites gather from far and wide to celebrate the Passover. Families will gather for a feast - and the story will be told again - of how God saved them - by the blood of a lamb. Redemption.

But as the people sleep, the Jewish leaders have gathered at the house of Caiphas, the high priest - for a trial. Jesus, the humble rabbi, stands accused.

Exactly what he's accused of - they can't seem to get straight. Some step forward with claims - - but the stories don't add up. What really strikes me - is the silence of Jesus. He hardly speaks. But pay attention when he does. In the trial before Caiphas in chapter 14, Jesus gives a direct answer to only one question: "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One? "I am," said Jesus."

And that's enough. For this - they convict Jesus of blasphemy - because a claim to be the Son of God - is a claim to be equal with God.

Now we begin chapter 15 at daybreak. The Jewish leaders want Jesus dead, but only the Roman court can carry out the death penalty. So they bring Jesus to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. This trial begins in verse 2. "Are you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate. "You have said so," Jesus replied. The chief priests accused him of many things. So again Pilate asked him, "Aren't you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of." But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed."

Again, Jesus will not speak up. But notice the one question that He does answer. "Are you the King of the Jews?" From his arrest and through his trials, Jesus answers the questions - about who He is. Search the red letters. It were as if Jesus is saying that amidst all the arguing, this is the one thing that matters: who He is.

And watch how Pilate responds. Every time he refers to Jesus from here on out, he calls him, “the king of the Jews.” And for his part, Pilate makes an attempt to free Jesus. There was a custom each year at Passover, to release a prisoner, as a sign of peace to the Jews. In verse 9, Pilate asks, “Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?”

But the priests convince the crowd to ask for Barabbas - an insurrectionist convicted of murder. Then verse 12,

“What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?” ... “Crucify him!” ... “Why? What crime has he committed?” ... But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!”

And Pilate gives in. Jesus is flogged brutally, and led away to the palace with a whole company of soldiers. In verse 17, “They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. And they began to call out to him, “Hail, king of the Jews!”

Added to the mocking are senseless beating, insults and spit. The callous cruelty of man. I don’t know why it still shocks me, but it does. But notice the core of their mocking - the robe and the crown - they mock him as King. Next they lead Jesus to a place called Golgotha, the place of the skull, and in verse 24,

“...they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get. It was nine in the morning when they crucified him.”

Crucifixion is a testament to the unashamed cruelty of mankind. It was a hideous punishment for crime, and the Romans wanted everyone to know exactly why each man was crucified. So in verse 26,

“The written notice of the charge against him read: The King of the Jews.”

The priests convicted Jesus - because he claimed to be the Messiah - the son of God, and Pilate crucified him with just one conviction: King of the Jews. The notice does not seem to impress those who stand nearby. Many of them mock Jesus, ““He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself!”

And - ironically - the words that mocked Jesus bring us back to the heart of this story. What's going on here? The Messiah is here - the seed of Abraham, the King in the line of David, the rock of Daniel's prophecy, the restorer, the fulfillment of all we've been reading - is here.

He healed, he taught, he saved so many - and now he's on a cross - dying. And the religions of the world look on in wonder. And the mockers mock - he saved others...

And that's just it. Jesus saved. God's big plan to save the world - is Jesus. He didn't come to save himself. Jesus gave his life - for all those who can't save themselves - for sinners. Romans 5 says something profound.

"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

(Romans 5: 6-8)

See What the world struggles to understand in the death of Jesus - is answered in the love of God. Something else we have a hard time grasping - just how much God loves us. God - loves - sinners. Jesus died - for bad people. For us. He took our place.

This is redemption. This is where all the stories come together. The Jews were celebrating Passover - the blood of a lamb that rescued from death. But could it be that the sacrificed lamb was also the promised King?...

The sign hung above his head, King of the Jews. But the mockers still mocked.

And in verse 33,

"At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. Three long hours pass by without sun or moon."

Then in verse 37,

“With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, “Surely this man was the Son of God!” ...”

So what do you think? Who was he? And why did he die? Read Mark 15, consider the cross - and consider just how great is the love of God. And remember - the story's not over. ...

The Big Picture Day 20 | 1 Corinthians 15

Welcome back to Through the Word. Before we jump in - a question. How do we know - that the books in the Bible - are the right books? What if there were other gospels? What if some of the gospels got it wrong?

Well, there were others. You may have heard of the gospel of Thomas, or the gospel of Judas - or Mary. And you have to wonder - why didn't those make it in the Bible? How do we know that we got the right gospel?

It's actually - a very good question. There were - and are - wrong gospels out there - counterfeit Christianity. Which is exactly why many of the epistles were written - and compiled - and carefully kept - to keep believers from falling for a fake.

Those other gospels aren't in the Bible - because they were rejected as fakes from the very beginning. But the upside of the counterfeit - is that it forces us to clarify the real thing. And that's what Paul does here in 1st Corinthians 15. Verse 1:

"Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel. By this gospel you are saved, For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day - according to the Scriptures,"

There it is. Resurrection. Jesus was raised from - the - dead. And everything hangs on this. The story of Jesus is not a death story - it's a conquering death story.

And on this one point, Paul spends the rest of the chapter. Because there were some teachers in Corinth trying to convince the church - that there is no resurrection - no life after death - for anyone.

So Paul starts out - with some evidence. Eyewitnesses. Jesus was verified dead - and was seen alive again. He appeared to Peter, to the twelve apostles, in verse 6 he appeared to more than five hundred believers.

And when Paul wrote this - most were still alive to testify. Then James saw Jesus, and in verse 8, Paul tells us that Jesus appeared to him as well. But Paul's story - is a little different. He is one of the most important - and most intriguing people of the New Testament.

He began with the name Saul. And Saul was bad. He was self-righteous, judgmental, and angry - the worst kind of religious. Any he hated Christians - hunted them down, locked them up - had some executed. Bad. But all of that - changed. Saul changed. His heart - his name, everything. And he credits it all - in verse 10 - to God's grace. "...by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect."

Grace is a gift - underserved - God's goodness just because He loves you. And grace changes you. It changed Saul into Paul. A new life. A resurrection.

You know - there is a lot of historical evidence that Jesus did indeed rise from death. But you can see the power of His resurrection today - in the lives of changed people. Some of my best friends - are ex-convicts, ex-junkies, ex-thieves, ex-liars - even ex-self-righteous hypocrites - you name it - changed by the grace of God and the power of resurrection. In Christ, a new creation.

But there in Corinth - verse 12 tells us there were men in the church - teaching that there is no resurrection. So Paul takes them on. In verse 13, he sets up the hypothetical. "Okay - what if you're right? There's no resurrection. Can you just take the rest of Jesus' message without the life after death stuff?" Well, first in verse 15 - it would make every Christian preacher a liar - including Paul - and including Jesus.

Secondly in verse 17, it means that your faith in Jesus is futile. Pointless. You're still in your sin - not forgiven.

Thirdly, those who died - are lost.

Listen, if you want to try believing Jesus, but just don't want to buy in to the resurrection stuff - verse 19 sums it up,

"If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied."

Take Jesus without afterlife - and it's pitiful.

You gotta understand here - for Paul - and all those other eyewitnesses of the resurrection - life was hard. Historians and archaeologists will attest - there was nothing gained in earthly terms by insisting that Jesus died and rose. They lived in catacombs or died in arenas, under stones, or at the stake.

And yet - they were convinced - that it was true. And that Jesus was worth it - that whoever loses his life for Jesus sake - will find it.

So Paul tosses out the hypotheticals and the ridiculous notion of following a dead savior - and writes emphatically in verse 20,
"But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead."

And that is where Bible takes it's stand - on the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

All the Bible hangs on this. In verse 21, Paul goes all the way back to Genesis - when death came through one man - Adam - and we all inherited it - so the resurrection of the dead also comes through one man - Jesus.

And Paul explains that the resurrection is essential to establishing the Kingdom of God. Huge Bible theme. God is establishing His Kingdom - with Jesus as the King. And Jesus will hand over the Kingdom to God the Father after He has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. Verse 25,
"For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet."

That's part of establishing the rule of a kingdom - getting your enemies under foot. But don't misunderstand. Jesus taught us to love our enemies. Jesus died to save - His enemies! Like Paul. But the real enemy - the last enemy is in verse 26:

"The last enemy to be destroyed is death."

Death. The only true winner in every man-made war. I'm not a pacifist, just a realist. Death - is the enemy. And in Christ - death is defeated.

In verse 32, Paul says - "If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink - for tomorrow we die!'" In other words, if this is all there is - you're stuck in Ecclesiastes. And life is vanity. Meaningless.

But in Christ, the dead are raised. But some people have a problem with that. In verse 35, someone challenges Paul, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body?"

So Paul answers with an analogy of seeds. Seeds don't grow anything - unless they get buried. Then they come back with a whole new body! And Paul explains that for a believer - it's kinda like that. But the new body is different. Verse 42 says - that "the body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable." And 44, "it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body."

That difference is important. We inherit the natural body from Adam and Eve. Remember - made in God's image? We inherit the spiritual body from Jesus.

And verse 49 - is HUGE. "And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man."

That is God's BIG plan. Mankind was made in God's image - male and female. A reflection of who God is - love and compassion. But mankind fell, and sin left a broken image. Jesus is the image of God. To see Jesus is to see God - His very nature. And He died to take away our sin - all the darkness that distorted and destroyed His image - and He was raised again to give us new life - that we might be restored, transformed back into the image of God that we were always meant for.

So my life in this body - as I follow Jesus - is about transforming my character into His image. To love like He loves, to forgive, to show compassion and wisdom and mercy and truth. And when I die - then my body will transform into His image. Not to be God - but to reflect God, and be with God.

That is the full resurrection. And in verse 54, that is when death is swallowed up in victory.

So in 58, “Stand firm, let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord. Because you know that your labor in the Lord is - not - in - vain.” You are not stuck in Ecclesiastes. This world is not as good as it gets. If you are in Christ, you will be - resurrected.

The Big Picture Day 21 | Acts 2

We're back in the Starter Journey - and today, I'm introducing a new teacher. Bill Welsh is the pastor of a wonderful church in Huntington Beach called Refuge. Bill is my good friend - and my pastor. You'll hear him again as your guide to the book of Acts - and today - he introduces us to that book - in chapter 2. Here is Bill Welsh.

Hello and Welcome back to Through The Word.

Today it's Acts chapter 2. Of course the full title is "The Acts of The Apostles." those 12 chosen by Jesus from the crowd for special leadership training. These weren't religious professionals or rabbis, priests or scribes. They were "Blue Collar" or ... "Blue Robed" working men. More than half were fishermen. Seven returned to fishing at the end of the Gospel of John.

But here .. as this first book of Church History begins, Jesus reminds them that their fishing days are over ... He's now sending them to the ends of the earth to preach the Gospel of forgiveness, salvation and eternal life.

Let's review world history up to that point.

God creates a perfect world. He makes 1 man and 1 woman, and gives them the whole big beautiful planet to enjoy ... ALL EXCEPT ONE BEAUTIFUL POISONOUS DEADLY TREE ... the only tree we see them eating from.

Adam & Eve's sin against God caused their eviction from the garden ... But before they leave, God promised to fix what they'd broken. HOW? A mysterious promise is made. A child ... the SEED of the woman would destroy the destroyer, the serpent, who masterminded this tragic downfall of mankind.

The rest of the Hebrew Scriptures (what we call "Old Testament") is the record of God preparing to bring that promised Child into the world to restore what we lost ... a loving relationship with God.

When we open the Gospels, we see God keeping His promise. The savior comes. Born of the Woman. His name is JESUS ... He preached, healed, set people free, restored families and ... yes ... He raised the dead.

Then ... Jesus was executed under order of a Roman governor, at the insistence of Israel's religious leaders. But the execution of Jesus was no accident. It was absolutely necessary. His death was the most important event ever to take place on this earth. It was a SACRIFICE ... PAYMENT for the sin of every person who has ever lived. He paid our sin-debt because we are all incapable of paying it.

But Jesus was GONE. His Movement was over. WRONG! It was only ON HOLD for a weekend. Jesus came back - risen from the dead. And for 40 amazing days appeared to followers.

Those visits prepared his followers to be Evangelists, preachers, pastors, prophets and ... APOSTLES. Their Mission? "GO EVERYWHERE ... MAKE DISCIPLES. Tell every one ... Jews and Gentile ... their sins can now be forgiven ... they can live forever with God, because Jesus suffered, died & rose from the dead for them.

That's what the book of The Acts of The Apostles is all about ... except for ONE FACT. The content of this book isn't just about the ACTIVITY of 12 men. The Apostles are there ... But so are stories about other men AND WOMEN ... all doing their part to spread the Jesus Story under the power of the Spirit.

Perhaps this book should be called The Acts of the Followers of Jesus ... VOLUME ONE.

And it all starts right here in Chapter 2. When Jesus ascended to heaven He told his followers to WAIT for MORE. More what? More power. The power of the Holy Spirit. Only then they should GO FOR IT ... Spread out and tell the world.

As this chapter opens, ALL those believers are gathered together in one place in mid-morning ... waiting for this POWER to be His witnesses.

They're probably on the Temple Mount in the Courtyards of the Gentiles, wondering HOW they'd know when it happened. What would it LOOK like ... FEEL like, SOUND like when the Holy Spirit showed up? They were about to find out.

On one of Israel's great holy days ... PENTECOST ... they heard the sound of a wind storm they saw visible flames, descending upon them. At that point we read "They were all filled with the Holy Spirit".

But then another sound begins ... they ALL began speaking in tongues ... languages that were new to them ... but familiar to those around them.

The Bible tells us some thought these Jesus Followers were just a babbling pack of drunken Galileans. Yet there was no question these Christians were speaking identifiable languages from all around the Mediterranean. Europe - Asia - Africa - the Middle East.

This was not a part of the "Order of Service" for Pentecost. It was Disruptive & Confusing ... BUT IT WAS REDEMPITIVE.

And then... the BIG STORY of Acts. All the Apostles stood, and PETER began to do what Jesus told them they would do. Full of the Spirit ... He preached His first Post-Resurrection message about Jesus, telling that huge crowd ... WHY Jesus Died ... and WHY death couldn't hold Him. He told them that THIS SAME JESUS was both Lord and Savior ... the Christ ...the Messiah they'd been waiting for. Peter made it clear that this resurrected Jesus was the only hope for all mankind ... For all Jews and Gentiles.

Peter's message was marked by clarity, simplicity, urgency and conviction. He told them all "Turn from your sins ... Trust in Jesus ... be baptized in His name and you'll be SAVED." That's the simple Gospel. And that day about 3000 men, women and children "GLADLY BELIEVED in JESUS.

AND ... Something else began that day. CHURCH!!! Not a building ... a FAMILY of Jesus Followers.

Most were Jewish ... but before long the family grew into a very multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, tribe of those from countless nations. This is the beginning of YOUR family.

As you read this ACTION Packed Book of ACTS ... you'll see what that 1st century Church accomplished as they moved forward together as a FAMILY in the power of the Holy Spirit ... preaching the Gospel.

There would be sacrifice ahead ... great cost ... even loss of life ... but they were moved by Jesus command to GO everywhere with this News. They were FILLED with Power ... and ... They were filled with love for the lost. They learned THAT from Jesus too. And notice ... they did all this without all our buildings or technology. This was a family, not just an organization. Revolutionaries not just religious zealots.

So dig in ... get to know your family. Watch them fellowship. Listen to them pray & preach ... and Argue ... and forgive. Take courage. You'll find your story right here in this amazing JOURNAL of Jesus' first followers.

Guys like Peter ... who didn't always get it right

Paul ... a terrorist turned Jesus Follower

Steven and Philip ... two of my favorites. Philip? He started as a bread boy ... willing to perform the humblest ACT for Jesus as well as preach to outcasts and ... most significantly ... raise a godly family.

Also notice ... Husband and wife teams ... house churches ... courageous (sometimes frightened) missionaries, crossing into hostile territories to tell their enemies about Jesus.

They're just like you. So ask God to pour out that same Spirit upon YOU ... There's so many who are waiting to hear the Gospel.

You'll also realize that there NEVER has been that elusive thing we call the "Perfect Church" because ... so far ... there are no perfect People.

All of us have had less-than-perfect experiences with the church we grew up in or the churches we've joined later in life. Don't be discouraged by that ... You'll see God, here, in the Book of Acts using unlikely people like You & Me to do His great works. So, if you love Jesus ... if you're determined to grow in Him and if YOU are imperfect ... you're in the right place.

Read this powerful story carefully, and prayerfully ... then lace up your sandals and take a hike with Jesus into a world He wants to touch through US ... together.

And also let me encourage to keep using Through the Word as a tool of connection for fellowship and life together in God's family. You will get so much more out of this and your faith will come alive. So consider using "Through the Word Together" - small groups, family Bible time, or just friends meeting for coffee. Our goal for you is daily time with God, and weekly time together.

Now ... Let's go write the Next Volume of the Acts of the Followers of Jesus.

The Big Picture Day 22 | Ephesians 2

Hey, through the word today, we are going straight into the heart of our faith, talking about salvation by grace alone through faith, not by works.

Paul lays this out in Ephesians chapter two. At the very heart of the book he reaches a climax, saying, for by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them all the way, stretching back to Abraham.

Abraham simply believed in God, counted it as righteousness, and the word used there is credited it righteousness, almost like he just got a deposit. Like when you get a free drink on your Starbucks app. It was just given, like Paul says, as a gift from God.

But when the law came, people began to get a little bit confused. There were all these rules. But of course, Paul comes in to tell us in the book of Galatians that this was simply to show us our need for Jesus, that we couldn't do it, we couldn't be good enough, no matter how hard we worked or how sorry we were for what we'd done.

We just couldn't get ourselves to heaven. It's kind of like saying, I'm going to jump as high as I can to get to the moon. Some jump higher than others, but everybody falls ridiculously short.

When Jesus came on the scene, he was basically saying, I can get you there, I can fly, jump onto me, hold on to me, and I'll make sure that you get there with me.

Having a friend that can fly to the moon isn't a bad thing, but having a Savior who can get you to heaven is even better. The book of Ephesians is rich with Old Testament imagery. In fact, because the city of Ephesus housed one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

Paul uses Old Testament temple imagery throughout the entire book. Now, this would have really struck a chord with the Ephesians.

History tells us that when Alexander the Great came through Ephesus, he volunteered to rebuild the destroyed temple of Diana, to which the Ephesians replied. Excuse us, but we are the Ephesians. We will fix our own temple. Thank you.

It had been destroyed and rebuilt so many times that to the Ephesians it was a badge of honor, even a badge of pride, if you will, that when their temple was destroyed, they would rebuild it. Now here Paul enters and introduces them to Jesus, who said, destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.

That becomes the theme of the Apostle Paul's lesson to them about what Jesus has done and to do that. In particular, he talks about walls, places where they couldn't get places they were blocked out from God's presence. But in Ephesians, Paul lays out that Jesus broke down all these walls of separation until finally the tabernacle itself was ripped from top to bottom.

This actually happened at the moment where Jesus died. This is why Paul says, for by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God.

Jesus did every single thing necessary to get you to heaven. He died the death of a criminal. Your death, my death with all of our sin placed on him. He was punished for us. And instead, because we attach ourselves to him, we receive all the good that he's done. At the very beginning of chapter two, Paul says that we were dead.

Let me ask you a question. What can dead people do? If I walked up to you when you were dead and I said, hey, get up. Hey, you want some coffee? Hey, you want to go for a jog? Hey, I got a donut. It's got jelly in it. It wouldn't matter because you're dead.

Paul said that's how spiritually powerless you were to do anything for yourself. That's why he goes on to say, this is not a result of works so that no one may boast. You becoming a Christian, being saved was as much a passive experience on your part as God raising a dead person from the grave. Therefore it says we are his workmanship. He did all the work. We are the trophy. So what about your works? What about being good?

Well, Paul has an answer for that too. In And verse ten he says, we were created in Christ Jesus for good works.

In other words, this is the reason you were saved, to go shine his glory and praise and grace to the rest of the world. It's not how you were saved, but it's one of the reasons why you were saved. Carrying Paul's Temple imagery just a little bit further, Paul talks about how we are a holy habitation of God's Spirit, meaning that God now dwells within us, just like we learned earlier in the book of Jeremiah that God would give us a new heart filled with His Holy Spirit. It's the restoration of God's people like we learned in Nehemiah.

You see, everything in the Old Testament becomes fulfilled at that climactic moment on Calvary 2000 years ago, where Jesus was suspended between heaven and earth, and he yelled out in his dying breath. His final words. It is finished. What was finished? The work of your salvation. Because the words it is finished literally mean. It is paid in full.

You know, as you contemplate your salvation today, rather than boasting in how good you've done, doesn't it seem so much better to praise God for what he's done that you couldn't do? That's the fuel of worship. And the deeper your appreciation of the grace of God goes, the louder your songs of praise will rise. Be sure to read Ephesians chapter two today, and as you do, praise God that he didn't leave it up to you, but he left it up to Jesus who paid it all.

Join us next time as we continue the journey, one chapter at a time. And remember, faith comes by hearing and hearing through the word.

The Big Picture Day 23 | Romans 8

Welcome back to Through the Word. Today - we look for answers. When the gospel hits the real world, we run into some questions. Life is complicated. It needs answers. And a great place to find answers to hard questions - is the book of Romans. Reason and compassion, justice and mercy, God's wrath and God's love - all come together powerfully - in the book of Romans.

And today - one of the toughest questions: Now that I'm saved, how do I stop - sinning? It's a common story: "I repented. I'm following Jesus. But temptation just gets the better of me. And I know it's wrong now! I hate it - but I still do it! Jesus forgave me - but can He help me stop?"

The answer - is yes. The answer - is in Romans 8. The answer - is the power of the Holy Spirit.

Let me explain. The Holy Spirit - is God. "Wait - I thought in the Old Testament - that the Father is God." Yes. "But I thought in John 1 that Jesus is God." Yes. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All three are one God. The Word trinity is not in the Bible - but it is a great word to capture what the Bible clearly teaches - that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all one God.

I realize that short explanation of trinity just brought up a lot more questions. Hold those for now, and let's focus on the chapter at hand, and dive in to Romans 8.

To give you some context, Romans 7 presents the great frustration - of a Christian trying to get it right, trying to stop sinning - in the flesh, that is, in their own strength. The war between good intentions and wicked desires rages within. It's an endless cycle of convictions, screwing up, and guilt.

Finally Paul cries out for someone to rescue him from this body that just keeps sinning!

And Jesus answers. Chapter 8, verse 1:

"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,"

This is the verse that stops the guilt cycle. No condemnation. The picture in Romans is of a courtroom - and you're on trial. You were found - guilty. That's called conviction. But then the sentence... Jesus took it! He paid the full price. The shackles are removed! You're set free! Sin has no more hold on you.

And the law no longer binds you. One of the essential New Testament teachings is that you can't live out your Christian life by going back to the Law. Trying to follow a set of rules to make you good enough will - not - work. Because your flesh can't do it.

But then - how do you stop sinning? With your hands set free - how do you stop them from doing bad?

The answer: The Holy Spirit. In verse 2

"...the law of the Spirit - who gives life - has set you free from the law - of sin and death."

Our flesh was hopeless, and the law was powerless to change us. But the Spirit has power. So in verse 4, we "...do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

That phrase - "live according to the Spirit" - is how it's done.

It changes you. In verse 5 - it changes your mindset. Your mind is "governed by the Spirit" now - and your thoughts change! Life and peace fill your mind. No more mental battles with God. Verse 9 reminds us that this only works if you belong to Christ.

If you do - Jesus is in you, the power of the Spirit is in you. It is the Spirit who raised Jesus - and the Spirit raises you. Remember - God doesn't lower his standards, He raises the dead.

So in verse 12 - don't live according to the flesh! You'll die. Live by the Spirit!

And then check out verse 14

"For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God."

That verse hits the heart of it. Following God's Spirit - makes you family. We are God's children.

And check out what it means to be God's kids. Fifteen:

"The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father."

In other words, when you talk to God, you can call Him Dad - and the Spirit is with you to remind you it's true. You're His kid, and He loves you.

Seventeen: "Now if we are children, then we are heirs..."

Wait a second. Heirs? As in - inherit - something - kind of heir? Yep. Look again.

"heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share - now pay attention - what we share is our inheritance - if we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."

So the inheritance for God's kids - shared with Jesus - is sufferings - and glory. But who wants to inherit suffering? Eighteen:

"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

So Paul puts our inheritance on the scales - on one scale - the suffering. It's real. Remember what Jesus said, "If anyone would follow me, he must take up his cross." Paul says that anyone who wants to live godly will suffer persecution. It's real. It's heavy. But not compared to glory.

Now there's an important Bible word. Glory means weighty - having substance - that's eternal. Suffering is today. Glory is forever.

Paul goes on to say that creation has been waiting - to see God's children. Why? Verse 20: "For the creation was subjected to frustration,"

Frustration - as in - your plan fails. Paul says - God made life frustrating - on purpose. The word frustration is better translated vanity.

Remember Ecclesiastes? Vanity. Meaningless. Chasing the wind. God subjected creation - to vanity. When? - At the curse. Genesis 3. He made work - frustrating! Thorns and thistles and sweat of your brow.

It explains a lot about Murphy's Law. But why? Verse 21: "in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought in-to the freedom and glory of the children of God."

What that means - is that at the curse, God frustrated life - in hope - that you would never be satisfied without Him. Life without God - is vanity. Fleeting - empty. The opposite of vanity - is glory.

If you follow Jesus - you are God's child. And your inheritance - is suffering - and it is glory. - And it is worth it!

But why the suffering? Verse 28.

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

If you are His kid - God works in everything - for your good. It doesn't say God makes everything happen. It doesn't say everything that happens is good. It says He works in it. For you. For good.

But for what good? Verse 29.

"For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son,"

The word predestined there has created some controversy. We'll hit that later. But it will help you to know that the Greek word behind it literally means - "to mark out a course." In other words - it doesn't mean God forces your steps, it means he sets out your path. A path "to be conformed to the image of his Son." Remember - that's resurrection - reborn and remade in the image of God.

How? Through suffering. Jesus went through it. So do you. And it refines your character - to compassion, to love, to be like Him - and with the power of His Spirit - to stop sinning. To be God's kid - is to be remade in His image.

So don't let the trials scare you. Verse 31:
"If God is for us, who can be against us?"

I love this chapter. Read Romans 8. The end is so good - I'm just gonna close with it. Verse 35:

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

"For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The Big Picture Day 24 | Revelation 5

Hello Through the Word. Today - we skip to the end! I know what you're thinking. You're thinking I'm one of those people who reads the last page of the book to find out what happens. The truth is I hate ruining a good story. But here in the Bible, the end of the story - is what makes all the story - make sense. And this is more than just story, this is God's plan. So God does skip to the end because He wants us to know where where it's all going. Not just the Bible - but life, the universe, everything. And no, the answer is not 42. The answers are found - in Revelation.

There are a lot of Bible books with end times prophecy: Daniel, Isaiah, Thessalonians - but only one book gives us the big story all in one place. The last book: Revelation.

Now I should warn you - that a lot of readers jump into Revelation excited, but skipping to Revelation is sort of like skipping to the last season of Lost...which I tried... for about half an episode. Revelation is confusing - because it's full of references to all that came before. That's why it's at the end. It's also full of symbolism. And not everyone interprets it the same way. And that's okay - a little disagreement can be healthy if we handle it with humility. But for the reader - it can be... confusing. We'll help you with all that when we get there, but let's start with an overview.

Revelation was written by the apostle John. Six decades have passed since the cross - and nearly every one of John's fellow disciples - has been killed. John is exiled on the island of Patmos - and there he receives a vision, recorded for us in Revelation.

Revelation means a revealing. As in - something that was hidden - but then the curtain is pulled back so you can see - so you can understand. Remember - God reveals Himself through His word? So what's being revealed here? The very first words in the book: "The revelation of Jesus Christ." Jesus is revealed.

But wait - I thought it was about the end of the world. You're right. It is. And the main thing to know about the end of the world - is Jesus.

In chapter 1, Jesus appears to John. And he tells John to write down - the things he has seen, what is now, and what will take place later. And those three form an outline to the book.

What he has seen - is Jesus - but his appearance - is like nothing John had ever seen before. He appears - in glory.

What is now - comes in chapters 2 and 3, as Jesus dictates seven letters for John to deliver - to seven churches. In these, we find Jesus' heart for the church that he loves, with direction and discipline.

What will take place later - is chapter 4 onward. It begins with John suddenly caught up to Heaven. Which may or may not be a reference to the Rapture - an important end times event in which Jesus' disciples are suddenly caught up to Heaven.

There in Heaven, John sees a throne. Remember - the Bible is a story of covenants and kingdoms, and Revelation brings us the final kingdom showdown. It starts - with the throne of God in Heaven. The scene is fascinating - with strange living creatures, 24 elders, and a multitude of angels - and everything centers on the throne.

Now Chapter 5 - is pivotal - so that's what you'll read today. John sees - in the right hand of him who sat on the throne - a scroll - sealed up with seven seals. What is the scroll? Not everyone agrees, but I believe - it is the title deed to the earth.

In Genesis 1, mankind was given dominion over the earth. The world was entrusted to mankind, but it fell to Satan. The Bible refers to Satan as "the ruler of this world" and the "god of this age."

So the title deed has been forfeit, and the seals on the scroll represent the price to redeem the earth - to rescue and restore it.

But no one is found worthy to open it. Who can possibly redeem all humanity? John - weeps. But then verse 5:

“Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed.”

That Lion of Judah is Jesus. The promised King in the line of David. And it says “He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.” Jesus can redeem the world!

But then verse 6:

“Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne.”

The slain Lamb is Jesus. Jesus - slain like a Passover lamb. Remember the sign above him - King of the Jews? It all comes together here.

Now there's a lot of symbolism, and a lot of stuff in Heaven that is more than a little bit mind blowing. But focus on the big picture. Jesus takes the scroll - and all those gathered around the throne sing a new song:

“You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom...”

So Jesus is establishing a Kingdom. That's the heart of this book - the whole Bible really. The rest of Revelation - presents the final judgement of the kingdom that was, and the establishment of Kingdom come. It is the redemption of the world.

In His first coming, Jesus redeemed our hearts and minds - He established His Kingdom within His people. In His second coming, Jesus will redeem the world itself, and establish His Kingdom upon the Earth.

That redemption begins in chapter 6, as the Lamb opens the first seal, and with it, judgement.

It continues through chapter 19, a time called the Tribulation. It's a rough read - a lot of judgment, a lot of death. Seven seals are opened, and each one unleashes more devastation. But much of that devastation appears to be God simply getting out of the way - and allowing mankind to ruin himself and the planet. Seven seals, then seven Trumpets. The world falls under the rule of Antichrist. Antichrist is a human leader - empowered by Satan. Anti doesn't just mean against Christ - it literally means in place of Christ - a false savior.

Finally, seven bowls of God's wrath are poured out. The picture is a winepress. Every person has sown seeds by the works they've done. Every evil act - plants a seed. Those seeds grow into grapes - and the grapes are tread - in the winepress of his wrath. The bowls of wine that are poured out for mankind to drink - are reaping - exactly - what we sowed. This is justice - the righteous wrath of God.

And the number seven represents completion - a finished work. Revelation is full of sevens. And with the seven bowls, God's wrath is complete.

God's wrath is a heavy message. But read carefully. The only thing more pervasive in this book than God's wrath - is God's mercy. In the midst of the chaos, the gospel is preached to the whole world. And we see another vision of Heaven - with a great multitude beyond counting - from every nation, tribe, people, and language - who will be saved during the Tribulation.

Everyone gets one last chance at salvation.

But many won't take it. Many take their stand against the Son of God.

In chapter 19, Jesus returns - riding a white horse - "King of Kings and Lord of Lords." And the kings of the earth and their armies gather to make war against Jesus. The battle of Armageddon.

Jesus wins, and Jesus reigns. He establishes his rule for a thousand years - the Millennium.

Then one more battle. Then the final judgement at the Great White Throne. Then in 21, a new heaven and a new earth.

The throne of God, a river of the water of life, the tree of life is back, and the curse is gone! Like the Garden of Eden - restored.

And if you got a little lost in all of that - that's okay. Me too. It'll make more sense when we read the whole book. But for now, don't miss the big picture. This is where it all comes together, every theme we've followed from the beginning: redemption, justice, mercy, faith, covenant, God's big plan to save - and above all: Kingdom. In Revelation 11, loud voices in heaven proclaim: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever."

And in the last chapter - Jesus brings us back to the present, but reminds us, "Look, I am coming soon!"

And there is one last invitation: "Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes - take the free gift of the water of life."

That invitation - is for us.

(YouVision Ending)

And that does it for the Big Picture! I recorded this little epilogue - to say thanks so much for joining me. I'm gonna miss you guys... until the next journey!! We still have seventeen to go!

From here on out, the 19 Journeys take one book off the Bible shelf at a time, and read through chapter by chapter. But we changed the book order a bit - and with a purpose. We kept the Old Testament chronology, but we balanced out Old and New Testaments to weave together themes and genres, and make each Journey a powerful experience on its own.

Looking ahead, each Journey is about 90 days. Follow all 19, and you'll read the Old Testament once and New Testament twice - and every chapter comes with a clear and compelling audio guide - like this one.

Next up is Journey #3: Foundations, as we go to Genesis for some epic stories and foundational truths. Then to Daniel for phenomenal prophecy - and the big picture - on God's Kingdom.

And then on to Romans for the heart of the gospel. But if another journey intrigues you - feel free to jump ahead - to wisdom and worship, or kings and kingdoms - or even skip to the end times. Whichever journey you choose, invite someone to join you!

If you can't find it here, we've got all 19 Journeys on the Through the Word app - at ThroughtheWord.org.

So what are you waiting for? I'm ready when you are. I love a good journey!

Road Trip!!