

40 DAYS OF FAITH 2006
In the Beginning: Genesis 1 to 25

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In the Beginning: Genesis 1 to 25

Week 1

Introduction

It's become our habit to spend the 40 days or so before Easter, traditionally known as Lent, studying a section of the Bible together. This year, we'll be looking at the first half of Genesis. The name Genesis comes from the Greek for, 'In the beginning,' the first words in the book. And that's what the book is about: the beginning of the world, of human civilization, and of God's relationship with humanity. One biblical commentator, David Atkinson, calls Genesis an 'overture to the rest of the Bible.' It's like a miniature introduction to the whole story of God, introducing every theme that the rest of the Bible will elaborate on. In the next 40 days, we'll get a taste of God's entire plan for the world, and we'll see where we human beings fit into that plan.

Genesis is traditionally considered to have been written by Moses; it's one of the Five Books of Moses, which are the first five books of both the Christian and the Hebrew Bible. Modern scholarship has called into question Moses' authorship. Some scholars deny Moses' connection to the book at all, theorizing that Genesis must have been written much later in the history of the Jews. The current dominant view among biblical scholars would probably be that a later editor collected materials from earlier written and oral sources, Moses being one of those sources. Moses would have been writing around 1500 B.C.; if there was a later editor, he could have been working anywhere from 1000 B.C. to shortly after 500 B.C. So, regardless of how you look at it, Genesis is a very ancient story. For what it's worth, as long as someone is willing to entertain the idea that God communicates with people (which I am), it doesn't seem to me that there's any serious reason to disbelieve Moses' authorship of Genesis. After all, the Bible tells us that Moses twice spent 40 days talking with God and writing down what he heard. Why wouldn't the story of Genesis be one of the things they talked about? That being said, I also have no trouble believing that we might have received Moses' story through the hands of an editor. In any case, for simplicity's sake, when I refer to the author, I will call him Moses.

The book of Genesis, and particularly the first chapter of Genesis, has gained some cultural currency recently in big debates about the place of Creationism and Evolutionism in school curriculums. I don't think we'll discuss these 'faith versus science' debates very much. I simply don't think that this very ancient story is very well-suited to addressing specific modern scientific ideas, like the Big Bang Theory. Rather, it's a story about the primary questions of existence that both fits well into its ancient Near Eastern cultural context, and at the same time transcends that context in amazing ways. We'll do our best to read Genesis on its own terms—and then apply it to the context of our modern lives.

It's true that, as we read this story, we will encounter some things that will be foreign to us, a talking animal and a 900-year old man being just two examples. We'll do our best to get some handle on how to understand these things. But there are some unavoidable mysteries in Genesis, things that are difficult to grasp with our modern minds and experience of the world. Even more remarkable, though, than these places of dissonance between our worldview and the worldview of Genesis, are the points of connection. The people in Genesis seem to live in a much different world than ours, but I think we'll probably be surprised to find how similar to us the people themselves are. They face the same problems, challenges, and opportunities as we do—and in very similar ways. As we see how God interacts with these people, ancient in their context but recognizable in their humanity, I believe we'll learn a lot about ourselves, God, and the world.

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As I mentioned, our 40 Days study will take us only through the first half of Genesis. These twenty-five chapters are a comfortable amount of text for us to cover, and also conveniently end a major story arc that takes us to the death of Abraham. Abraham is known as the ancestor of both Jews and Arabs, and even more than that he has the nickname, 'Father of the Faithful.' Abraham is considered—by biblical authors and apparently even by God himself—to be the model and the forerunner of anyone who attempts to live a life of faith. We're going to try to see what we can learn about faith from taking a pretty close look at his life.

In the interests of full disclosure, I feel I must warn you that one significant literary element of Genesis is genealogies. I don't know how you feel, but for me long lists of unfamiliar names aren't exactly the most scintillating reading. Nonetheless, I decided to include them, not out of some religious notion that we need to read every word, but out of an honest assessment that we might miss some important themes if we completely left them out of our study. I promise you that you'll only end up reading genealogies a handful of the forty days. Please don't feel that you ought to memorize them, be able to pronounce the names, or be able to remember who begat whom. Don't even feel like you ought to be more interested than you are. Feel free to skim. But at least try to give them a glance, and hopefully read my commentary; I'll try to pick up on the salient points.

Each day's guide is broken into three sections:

1. **The story for the day.** The first 25 chapters of Genesis have been divided into 6 week's worth of daily stories. For your convenience, I've included the text of the story in the *New Living Translation* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1996). I've found this translation to be in fresh, modern language that has really helped me to do what I most want to do: enter into the story myself. As you read the passage, try to read it from the perspective of the participants in the story. Really get inside the story. What is it like to go through this experience with these people?
2. **Points of Interest.** This section briefly explores aspects of the day's story that might be especially interesting or potentially confusing. It offers some historical notes and references that might help to interpret the story, frames some of the issues or questions, and gives suggestions of ways to understand the story and its meaning.
3. **Taking it home.** In this section, I offer some suggestions for how the day's reading might apply practically to our lives and the life of our church. Each day, we'll look at the passage from 3 different angles:
 - a. **For you and your family**—we'll explore how we and the people closest to us might identify with the story. We'll discuss implications that it has for how we look at ourselves, how we approach our lives, and how our family relates with God.
 - b. **For our church**—the stories in Genesis have things to say to our entire church community. Each day, we'll look for implications of the story for our church, and we'll pray that our church will experience the kind of life together that God created us to experience.
 - c. **For our city**—We'll spend some time each day particularly focusing on what God's hopes for the world mean for the city of Boston. We'll take the opportunity to pray for Boston, and to think about our relationships to our city.

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Monday, March 6th

Genesis 1 1-13

1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2The earth was empty, a formless mass cloaked in darkness. And the Spirit of God was hovering over its surface. 3Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. 4And God saw that it was good. Then he separated the light from the darkness. 5God called the light "day" and the darkness "night." Together these made up one day.

6And God said, "Let there be space between the waters, to separate water from water."

7And so it was. God made this space to separate the waters above from the waters below.

8And God called the space "sky." This happened on the second day.

9And God said, "Let the waters beneath the sky be gathered into one place so dry ground may appear." And so it was. 10God named the dry ground "land" and the water "seas." And God saw that it was good. 11Then God said, "Let the land burst forth with every sort of grass and seed-bearing plant. And let there be trees that grow seed-bearing fruit. The seeds will then produce the kinds of plants and trees from which they came." And so it was. 12The land was filled with seed-bearing plants and trees, and their seeds produced plants and trees of like kind. And God saw that it was good. 13This all happened on the third day.

Points of Interest:

- 'the heavens and the earth'—'the heavens' here is most likely not referring to the spiritual realm we call 'heaven' but to what we commonly call 'outer space,' the place where the other planets and the stars are. So, the phrase 'the heavens and the earth' means that God is creating the entire cosmos.
- 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth'—in the creation story of nearby Babylonia, the world was created in the aftermath of a fight between two gods. The heavens and the earth were made out of the corpse of the loser, Tiamat the ocean goddess. Here, the feeling is quite different. The story only tells us of one God, and that God seems to be in full control of the creation process. The raw materials of creation appear to be natural elements, and the process of creation seems more constructive than one would imagine the dismemberment of an opponent being. There are some theologians who do believe that Genesis 1 indeed happens in the context of a great spiritual battle not completely unlike what the Babylonians describe; and we will indeed see signs that just such a cosmic battle may have happened and that the spiritual war continues. Nonetheless, especially if creation is happening in the context of a war between spiritual powers, it's interesting to notice that Genesis makes no overt mention of such a struggle. Instead, it gives us an initial portrait of a God who is rather calmly and deliberately going about making a universe he seems to be quite happy with. Moses wants us to know that God is powerful and unique and that he's making something good in the world.
- 'empty, a formless mass cloaked in darkness'—on the other hand, he also quickly lets us know that the initial environment isn't all that conducive to such a positive creative process. When God starts his project of creating the heavens and the earth, all he has to work with is a dark, wet, empty chaos—or perhaps a wet, dark, chaotic emptiness. I don't know if this formless emptiness is the battlefield after some great cosmic battle or it's simply Moses' (pretty impressive, I must say) attempt at describing the universe before the creation of matter. What I do know is it sounds desolate, unwelcoming, confusing, and scary.

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- 'And God said . . . And so it was'—even with such terrible materials to work with, it doesn't seem that God has to go through any great struggle to start to bring it into shape: he thinks of something that the world needs; he speaks it out; and it happens.
- 'Then he separated the light from the darkness'—when God begins his work of creation, there are two problems with the world: it's shapeless, and it's empty. In these first few days, God focuses on addressing the shapelessness. He takes this very confusing mixture of things, and begins to separate it into different, comprehensible elements. Giving names to things as he goes about this work of separation is another aspect to this project of bringing order and form to the world. God's first phase of creation involves making the world into something capable of being understood.
- 'This happened on the second day'—I'm a bit partial to the way another translation (the NRSV) says it: 'And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.' I think the NRSV communicates something of the rhythm of the passing of time. I myself am not too concerned with whether these are thought of as being actual 24-hour days. The sun doesn't even get created until day 4; so apparently it didn't concern Moses too much either. For what it's worth, while they did treat the seven days of creation as being literal 24-hour days, early biblical interpreters tended to think that the seven days also had symbolic meaning. For instance, Augustine thought of the seven days as representing the seven ages of the world. To me, what's significant about the seven days is they describe God doing his work gradually, in stages, over time. God doesn't do the whole work of creation in one moment. Instead, each day, he does a good day's work. At the end of the day, he steps back from his work, looks with satisfaction at what he's accomplished, and then takes a break for the evening; the next morning, he starts up work again.

Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* As your family goes about your routine today, try to pay attention to the signs of God's good creation you see around you. Take a moment together to thank God for night and day, the sky, water, dry land, and the plants you see around you.
- *For our church:* While God had a grand plan to create the universe, he was willing to move toward the ultimate design one day at a time. Each day, he tackled the right project for that day, and then he waited until the next day before moving on. Our church is currently considering taking on the big new idea of expanding to a Boston site. Pray that God would give us wisdom about the right steps to take and the right timing for those steps as we move in that direction.
- *For our city:* In the passage we studied today, God shows himself to be perfectly capable of bringing good things into existence simply by speaking the word. Pray that God would bring great new things into being here in Boston and Cambridge.

Tuesday, March 7th

Genesis 1:14-2:3

14And God said, "Let bright lights appear in the sky to separate the day from the night. They will be signs to mark off the seasons, the days, and the years. 15Let their light shine down upon the earth." And so it was. 16For God made two great lights, the sun and the moon, to shine down upon the earth. The greater one, the sun, presides during the day; the lesser one, the moon, presides through the night. He also made the stars. 17God set these lights in the heavens to light the earth, 18to govern the day and the night, and to

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separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. 19This all happened on the fourth day.

20And God said, "Let the waters swarm with fish and other life. Let the skies be filled with birds of every kind." 21So God created great sea creatures and every sort of fish and every kind of bird. And God saw that it was good. 22Then God blessed them, saying, "Let the fish multiply and fill the oceans. Let the birds increase and fill the earth." 23This all happened on the fifth day.

24And God said, "Let the earth bring forth every kind of animal--livestock, small animals, and wildlife." And so it was. 25God made all sorts of wild animals, livestock, and small animals, each able to reproduce more of its own kind. And God saw that it was good.

26Then God said, "Let us make people in our image, to be like ourselves. They will be masters over all life--the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the livestock, wild animals, and small animals."

27 So God created people in his own image;
God patterned them after himself;
male and female he created them.

28God blessed them and told them, "Multiply and fill the earth and subdue it. Be masters over the fish and birds and all the animals." 29And God said, "Look! I have given you the seed-bearing plants throughout the earth and all the fruit trees for your food. 30And I have given all the grasses and other green plants to the animals and birds for their food." And so it was. 31Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was excellent in every way. This all happened on the sixth day.

1 So the creation of the heavens and the earth and everything in them was completed. 2On the seventh day, having finished his task, God rested from all his work. 3And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because it was the day when he rested from his work of creation.

Points of Interest:

- 'They will be signs to mark off the seasons'—God continues his work of bringing order to the world, by creating the sun, the moon, and the stars. The heavenly bodies aren't created to bring light—that already exists—but to bring order to the passage of time. God sets the movement of the sun, moon, and stars in order to mark off days, months, years, and seasons.
- 'to govern the day and the night'— in many ancient religions, the sun and the moon were considered to be important deities. In the Genesis story, they are clearly only part of God's created order; they're the 'bright lights' that God puts in the sky. Nonetheless, he gives these bright lights real responsibility over an aspect of his creation. In fact, he commissions them to continue to do the work that he himself had already begun, the work of separating light from darkness. God wants his creation to play a role in his continuing project of bringing goodness to the world.
- 'Let the fish multiply and fill the oceans'—the fish (and the birds and the land animals) also play their part in continuing God's work of creation. In yesterday's passage, we saw that before God began his work of creation, the earth had two problems: it was formless, and it was empty. In the first 3 days of creation, God primarily worked at bringing form to the chaos. In the next 3 days, he mostly addresses filling the emptiness. In fact, the days come in matched sets:

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Day 1—forming day and night	Day 4—filling day and night with stars and planets
Day 2—forming sea and sky	Day 5—filling the sea with fish and the sky with birds
Day 3—forming the dry land	Day 6—filling the dry land with land animals and human beings

When we get to the 'filling' part of God's mission, all of the living creatures play their part. God creates only a starter set of each type of animal, and then he commands them to continue the work of filling the earth by multiplying.

- 'Let us make people in our image'—it's a matter of some mystery to whom God is speaking here. It's sometimes proposed that he could be talking to a 'heavenly council,' a collection of angels who serve as his advisors. However, when he does create the human beings, he specifically creates them in his own image, patterned specifically after himself, not after some more generic heavenly pattern. He could be speaking in "the royal 'we'" in order to highlight the special significance of the creation of the human beings. Or, God could be speaking to himself. Perhaps this moment of self-deliberation on God's part is a hint that God, while a single being (referred to in the singular most of the time), is more than one person. Perhaps community relationship is part of the very nature of God; that could be why it would take both male and female to reflect God's image. Especially with the mention of the Spirit of God in verse 2, this could be the very first glimpse we get at one of the most interesting and perplexing of biblical beliefs: the idea of the trinity, that God is one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- 'male and female he created them'—both men and women are equally patterned after God's image.
- 'fill the earth and subdue it'—there is a great deal of debate as to what exactly it means to be created in the image of God. Some theologians think that it is the human capacity for rational thought. Others propose that it might be the possession of a soul. From what we've seen so far in Genesis, I wonder if being created in the image of God might have a great deal to do with being created to participate in his mission. As we've noticed above, the sun, the moon, and the stars are commissioned by God to participate in his work of bringing order to the world. The fish, the birds, and the land animals participate in God's work by multiplying and filling the earth. It is only human beings who are invited to participate in both parts of the mission: bringing order by subduing the earth and filling the earth by multiplying and spreading. The human beings are given a unique role of partnership with God in his goal of bringing his goodness to the world. We are patterned after God in that we were created to imitate him and work side-by-side with him.
- 'having finished his task'—God recognizes on the seventh day that no new major act of creation is necessary. In the first half of the week, he brought shape to the world. In the second half of the week, he filled the earth with the creatures that would fill its emptiness, and continue to bring further shape. He created a world that was good and that had the capacity to get better and better, as the living creatures—and particularly the human beings—continued to grow and spread and fill the earth. In celebration of his good work, he rests. The fact that God rests on the seventh day does not mean that from this point on God simply sits back and watches what happens; we will see him continue to be quite active in the story. But he does establish the first holiday, in

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celebration of the fact that his plan to fill the earth with goodness has been put in place.

Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* Do you recognize just how wonderful you are? You are created in God's own image, cut after his pattern, designed to imitate him. And when God made you, he declared his work to be 'excellent in every way.' Take a moment today to let how special you are to God sink in. It could be helpful just to say aloud to yourself at least once today something like, 'You are created in the image of God, intended to be just like him.' Try telling your family or some friends the same thing. How does it feel to think of yourself in this way? What effect does it have on the people you say it to?
- *For our church:* In this passage, we see that one of God's great interests is in seeing things that display his goodness multiplied until they fill the earth. God has given us as a church the dream to see our church multiplied 200 times in the next generation, as teams go out from our church to plant new churches. Pray that God would give us the ability to see that multiplication dream come true.
- *For our city:* I had a friend once who visited Stanford and Harvard, to decide which school to attend. He told me that the very first thing he noticed was how much faster the people in Boston walk. Boston is a hurried, busy place. As you go about your business around town today, consider praying for the people you see, that they would get a taste of the real rest God experienced on the seventh day.

Wednesday, March 8th

Genesis 2:4-23

4This is the account of the creation of the heavens and the earth.

When the LORD God made the heavens and the earth, 5there were no plants or grain growing on the earth, for the LORD God had not sent any rain. And no one was there to cultivate the soil. 6But water came up out of the ground and watered all the land. 7And the LORD God formed a man's body from the dust of the ground and breathed into it the breath of life. And the man became a living person.

8Then the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he placed the man he had created. 9And the LORD God planted all sorts of trees in the garden--beautiful trees that produced delicious fruit. At the center of the garden he placed the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

10A river flowed from the land of Eden, watering the garden and then dividing into four branches. 11One of these branches is the Pishon, which flows around the entire land of Havilah, where gold is found. 12The gold of that land is exceptionally pure; aromatic resin and onyx stone are also found there. 13The second branch is the Gihon, which flows around the entire land of Cush. 14The third branch is the Tigris, which flows to the east of Asshur. The fourth branch is the Euphrates.

15The LORD God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and care for it. 16But the LORD God gave him this warning: "You may freely eat any fruit in the garden 17except fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat of its fruit, you will surely die."

18And the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a companion who will help him." 19So the LORD God formed from the soil every kind of animal and bird. He brought them to Adam to see what he would call them, and Adam

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chose a name for each one. 20He gave names to all the livestock, birds, and wild animals. But still there was no companion suitable for him. 21So the LORD God caused Adam to fall into a deep sleep. He took one of Adam's ribs and closed up the place from which he had taken it. 22Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib and brought her to Adam.

23 "At last!" Adam exclaimed. "She is part of my own flesh and bone! She will be called 'woman,' because she was taken out of a man." 24This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one. 25Now, although Adam and his wife were both naked, neither of them felt any shame.

Points of Interest:

- 'This is the account of the creation of the heavens and the earth'—we now get a second version of the creation of the world. The fact that two different creation stories are included back-to-back in this way is often used as an argument that Genesis is a collection of unrelated stories, rather than the work of a single author. I would think that even if Genesis were primarily the work of a later editor, he would have noticed that he was giving us two different versions of the creation story; and he would only have included both stories if he believed that both were true and valuable, and that they didn't fundamentally contradict one another. The writer of Genesis gives us two different stories about the creation because they each give us a different angle on what God wants us to know about himself, ourselves, and the world. One major difference between the two accounts is a difference of perspective. Genesis 1 gives us the cosmic perspective on creation: we see the whole grand plan rolled out in front of us. Genesis 2 is more personal and specific: it is located in a particular place, and it focuses on two specific people. If we put the two stories together, they communicate the message that we are only a small part in a very big plan, and yet God knows us and relates to us individually.
- 'Then the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east'—provided with every good thing that the man and woman could ever want, this garden is a symbol of perfection. Yet, it isn't an otherworldly paradise. It's located in a specific place in the known world of Moses and his readers. The garden is a picture of what life in this world is intended to be.
- 'A river flowed from the land of Eden'—the river in Eden is the source of four major rivers in the wider world: the Tigris and the Euphrates are the most famous rivers of the region, flowing through Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq); we don't know exactly what the other two rivers are, but they may have been located in upper Egypt and Arabia. The point Moses seems to be making here is that the river in Eden is a source of fertility, riches, and abundance for all of the surrounding lands. Eden's abundance overflows to the world around it. Even in this more localized account of creation, God shows concern that his goodness and abundance grow and spread. Perhaps the garden isn't meant to be a sanctuary from the rest of the world, but instead an example of what the rest of the world could become and a base from which God's abundance could flow to it. When the man is given the garden to tend, perhaps part of his assignment is to expand the garden. Maybe the rest of the world is something of a wilderness, having some of the same emptiness and formlessness of the pre-creation in chapter one. God gives the man one area of the world that is ordered and abundant, and then he tells him: 'Multiply and fill the earth and subdue it'—bring this garden to the rest of the world.

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- 'you will surely die'—this is the first time since the formless emptiness in the second verse of chapter one that we've heard of anything that's not good. Even in the midst of all of this abundance and perfection, there's the possibility of danger.
- 'Adam chose a name for each one'—naming things is one of God's activities in chapter one. Here is an example of Adam displaying God's image by following his example.
- 'It is not good for the man to be alone'—the man is designed to live in the midst of a community. He's been commissioned to multiply and fill the earth; practically speaking, he needs the help of a woman if he is going to have children. I think God is talking about more than that, though. God recognizes the major task he has given to the man of spreading God's goodness and abundance across the world. It's a job that's too large for one person. Besides the mere size of the mission, in the next chapter we will see that there are enemies (or, at least, there's an enemy) who must be faced. It will take companionship, partnership, and mutual encouragement to succeed.
- 'At last!'—once he sees her, the man immediately recognizes with joy that the woman is the friend, companion, and partner he's been looking for. The climax of the first chapter is the creation of human beings, who are meant to be the bearers of God's image and his partners in his mission. The climax of the second chapter is the creation of the woman, who is a God-given partner for the man in his mission. In some ways, this whole chapter is an elaboration of the first chapter's idea that God created the human beings, both male and female, to be the bearers and multipliers of his image. Given the dramatic turn for the worse which will soon happen in gender relations, it's significant to notice that in chapters one and two, the man and woman are treated as equals. If anything, the man's need for the woman is highlighted, rather than the other way around; and it's abundantly clear that the man loves, longs for, and cherishes the partnership and friendship of the woman.

Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* We weren't designed to live life on our own. Who are the companions God has given you? Take a moment to thank God for the friends and partners he has given you. If there's a way in which you feel alone, ask God to provide you with company, just like he did for the man in this passage. You could be looking for a spouse, a friend, a business partner, someone who sees eye-to-eye with you at work, someone to lead a Jesus-based small group with, etc. Ask God to bring that right person along to help you.
- *For our church:* Sadly, through most of history, the church as an institution has done much to put women into an inferior place. Genesis 1 and 2 paint a strong picture of women as highly-valued, much-needed, equal but complementary partners with men. Pray that God would forgive the church for its treatment of women, and pray that our church would be a place where women would be honored and would be empowered to take up their legitimate place as partners with men. Particularly pray for strength and encouragement for our female pastors and leaders.
- *For our city:* The garden of Eden was filled with every good thing, and that abundance was supposed to overflow to every place on earth. Even though human beings no longer have access to that great garden, God's intention that everywhere would be like the garden of Eden hasn't changed. He wants Boston to have every good thing. What's one way you'd like Boston to be more like the garden of Eden? Cleaner water? Cleaner air? More, better housing? Don't be limited by the physical attributes of the garden or by what you can imagine being possible. Simply imagine that one good

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thing that you'd like Boston to have more of, and ask God to somehow give that thing to our city.

Thursday, March 9th

Genesis 3: 1-13

1 Now the serpent was the shrewdest of all the creatures the LORD God had made.

"Really?" he asked the woman. "Did God really say you must not eat any of the fruit in the garden?"

2 "Of course we may eat it," the woman told him. 3 "It's only the fruit from the tree at the center of the garden that we are not allowed to eat. God says we must not eat it or even touch it, or we will die."

4 "You won't die!" the serpent hissed. 5 "God knows that your eyes will be opened when you eat it. You will become just like God, knowing everything, both good and evil."

6 The woman was convinced. The fruit looked so fresh and delicious, and it would make her so wise! So she ate some of the fruit. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her. Then he ate it, too. 7 At that moment, their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they strung fig leaves together around their hips to cover themselves.

8 Toward evening they heard the LORD God walking about in the garden, so they hid themselves among the trees. 9 The LORD God called to Adam, "Where are you?"

10 He replied, "I heard you, so I hid. I was afraid because I was naked."

11 "Who told you that you were naked?" the LORD God asked. "Have you eaten the fruit I commanded you not to eat?"

12 "Yes," Adam admitted, "but it was the woman you gave me who brought me the fruit, and I ate it."

13 Then the LORD God asked the woman, "How could you do such a thing?"

"The serpent tricked me," she replied. "That's why I ate it."

Points of Interest:

- 'the serpent was the shrewdest of all the creatures'—in the midst of the garden, we suddenly find this very strange creature and mysterious creature, a serpent who can talk and who seems bent on tempting the man and the woman to distrust God. Where would such a creature come from? It doesn't fit our view of nature, or the description we've been given so far of an abundant garden and a very good world. It may have been less a surprise to the original readers than to us to see this serpent make its sudden appearance. Throughout ancient Near Eastern cultures, the serpent is associated with wisdom, with death, with deception, and with chaos ([The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament](#), p. 32). In other Near Eastern cosmologies, the oldest supernatural beings, the powers of primeval chaos, were often depicted as great serpents. And apparently we are indeed encountering some sort of spiritual being along that order here in the garden: a spiritual being interested in chaos or deception who possesses a serpent, takes on the form of a serpent, or can simply best be described as a serpent. Over the course of the Bible, this being continues to do his work of confusion and deception and temptation, and eventually he picks up the name Satan, which means accuser; but where he came from remains a bit shrouded in mystery. We don't know when this creature was created, or how he got in the garden. Perhaps he was directly placed by God made in the garden along with the other creatures, or perhaps he sneaked into the garden from outside. It does seem

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possible—though not by any means provable—from what we see of him here that this being could be responsible for all of the mayhem God has been working against in his work of creation. There's a lot the story doesn't explain. One thing it does make clear is that this being was indeed made by God. It's a significant fact because it lets us know that God is supreme over this serpent, and because it means that the man and the woman also could and should be able to take authority over the serpent. After all, God made them the rulers over everything he had made. This serpent was one of the very things God had blessed and commissioned the humans to subdue—perhaps the most important thing to subdue. But they allow themselves to be mastered by it instead.

- 'Did God really say you must not eat any of the fruit in the garden?'—this is the very first question in Genesis, and the first time that doubt of any kind enters the picture. Of course, God said no such thing. He gave the man and woman free use of almost all of the plentiful and various trees in the garden. There was only one single tree they were warned not to eat of. The serpent very cleverly focuses all of their attention on this one prohibition, and makes it seem as if it's everything.
- 'or even touch it'—God didn't say anything about not touching it. Perhaps the serpent has already successfully influenced the woman to see God in a harsher light.
- 'You won't die'—God warns them that they will die if they eat of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, and the serpent flatly contradicts him. It turns out that they don't immediately die. Was the serpent right? It could be that the man and woman were intended to be immortal, but now they become subject to death. Or perhaps they undergo some sort of spiritual death—there is certainly an unpleasant spiritual transformation that happens, in which they suddenly become fearful, guilty, and ashamed. We'll talk more about this question of death tomorrow.
- 'You will become just like God'—here the serpent is promising the woman something she already had. She had been created in God's image, made to be like God. But the serpent manages to convince her that there is a better way to be like God, a way that God is selfishly holding back from her. The god-like quality that the man and the woman take on when they eat the fruit is the power to decide for themselves what is right and what is wrong. The woman trusts her own eyes, her own senses, and her own desires when she decides to eat the fruit—and she has terrible judgment. The one thing in the entire world of which God said, 'It's not good for you to eat,' is the very thing that the woman looked at and saw that it was good. The results are disastrous.
- 'who was with her'—the woman often gets an undue share of the blame in this episode of eating the fruit. It's true that she does all of the talking; but the man is there with her, and he eats of the fruit right along with her.
- 'they hid themselves among the trees'—the immediate result of eating the fruit is shame and fear. They hide their bodies from one another, and they hide themselves from God. Barriers are being put up in what used to be the perfectly open relationships between the man and the woman and between the human beings and God.
- 'it was the woman you gave me'—a subtle shifting of blame off of himself to the woman and to God.
- 'The serpent tricked me'—the order God had established in his creation is quickly coming undone. The human beings are supposed to be the masters over God's creation, maintaining and spreading the good order he had established; they are mastered by one of the creatures instead. They are supposed to be bearers of God's

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image, but they decide they'd rather be gods themselves. They are created to be helpers for one another; instead, the woman leads the man toward temptation, and the man sits by silently while it happens and then turns on the woman when things go bad.

Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* The Bible tells us again and again that one of the best ways to live a happy life is simply to practice gratitude. We see in this passage why that's so. The serpent is able to draw the woman's attention away from her abundance of good things; all of a sudden, they mean nothing in comparison to the one thing she doesn't have. She begins to believe God is harsh and stingy, and she ends up reaching out to grab at something that ultimately makes her miserable. If you're up for it, try a little experiment with complaining and expressing gratitude today. At home and at work, try to be attentive to the temptation to complain; see if you can stop yourself before you get to the point of complaining. On the flip side, be on the lookout for things you are grateful for; as often as you can, say out loud, to yourself or to others, that you are grateful for that thing. See what kind of effect these choices have on your day.
- *For our church:* God created us for community, so that we could serve as mutual support and encouragement for one another. Regrettably, in this passage, the man and the woman encouraged one another on a path toward death. But we also have the awesome potential to encourage one another toward the abundant life of pursuing God's mission and reflecting his image. Pray for our small groups that they would be effective communities of positive encouragement.
- *For our city:* Not only our city, but our society in general is one that is inundated with advertising. In many ways, the goals and methods of advertising are very similar to the serpent's strategy in this passage: it creates a feeling of desire or need where no real need exists, by focusing our attention on what we don't have and by making grand promises about what it will do for us. When we are bombarded so heavily with this message, it's very easy to live in a constant state of restless dissatisfaction, even when we have plenty. Pray that God would strip away the power of advertising, revealing the lies that lead us to this place of unhappy acquisitiveness.

Friday, March 10th

Genesis 3: 14-24

14So the LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, you will be punished. You are singled out from all the domestic and wild animals of the whole earth to be cursed. You will grovel in the dust as long as you live, crawling along on your belly.

15From now on, you and the woman will be enemies, and your offspring and her offspring will be enemies. He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."

16Then he said to the woman, "You will bear children with intense pain and suffering. And though your desire will be for your husband, he will be your master."

17And to Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate the fruit I told you not to eat, I have placed a curse on the ground. All your life you will struggle to scratch a living from it. 18It will grow thorns and thistles for you, though you will eat of its grains. 19All your life you will sweat to produce food, until your dying day. Then you will return to the ground from which you came. For you were made from dust, and to the dust you will return."

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20Then Adam named his wife Eve, because she would be the mother of all people everywhere. 21And the LORD God made clothing from animal skins for Adam and his wife.

22Then the LORD God said, "The people have become as we are, knowing everything, both good and evil. What if they eat the fruit of the tree of life? Then they will live forever!" 23So the LORD God banished Adam and his wife from the Garden of Eden, and he sent Adam out to cultivate the ground from which he had been made. 24After banishing them from the garden, the LORD God stationed mighty angelic beings to the east of Eden. And a flaming sword flashed back and forth, guarding the way to the tree of life.

Points of Interest:

- 'you will be punished'—it's interesting to note here that God only explicitly punishes the serpent, not the man or the woman. He does outline for them bad things that will happen to them, but to me these sound more like the natural consequences of their actions than God lashing out at them in anger or judgment. At the very least, they seem like very fitting, though severe, responses to what they have done. By eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the man and the woman have essentially declared their intention to be their own gods. Now, they will find out what it's like to try to live life on their own strength. Without God's blessing and action on their behalf, life will become much harder.

The consequences of their action come specifically in the areas of their calling. They are still going to multiply and fill the earth, but it will become a much more painful process. They are still going to subdue the earth, but the work becomes much more difficult. Perhaps most sadly of all, they will still need one another's partnership to accomplish these things, but that partnership will now be fraught with misunderstanding, dissatisfaction, and imbalance.

- 'He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel'—this works on two levels. It's a concrete description of the relationship between snakes and people (People are in fact always trying to crush the heads of snakes, and snakes are always biting at the feet of people from their hiding spots in the grass), and it's also a symbolic prediction of an eventual showdown between one particular descendent of the woman and this very same lying serpent (the spiritual power who we sometimes call the devil) Incidentally, Mel Gibson picks up on this prediction very effectively in his movie 'The Passion' when Jesus crushes the head of a snake at the end of the temptation scene in the garden.
- 'though your desire will be for your husband, he will be your master'—this is almost the complete opposite of the way things were in chapters 1 and 2. In chapter 2, it was the man who desired the woman, his desire was satisfied, and together they were the masters of all of creation. Here, the woman has an unreciprocated desire for the man, who instead lords it over her. It's worth mentioning here that God is not commanding that gender relations work this way, nor saying it's the way things are supposed to be or even have to be. What he's saying is it's the way things will tend to be, and it will take great effort to make it otherwise. We don't make childbirth or our work as difficult as possible. A farmer doesn't simply settle for a crop of weeds and thorns; he works his hardest to minimize the effects of the curse on the ground. Likewise, we should work our hardest against this curse on the relationship between the genders.
- 'you were made from dust'—up until now, we've mostly noticed how the human beings are made in the image of God. Here, after the eating of the fruit, God reminds

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us of another, equally true aspect of human nature: we were made from the dust. We are, after all, in one way of looking at things, just a small collection of carbon-based molecules mixed with water. God breathed his life into us, and formed us into his image, making us his representatives on earth. But we're also earthly bodies that will someday decompose back into the earth. We will see continue to see this dichotomy of human nature in the rest of Genesis. We're children of God and of the dust.

- 'the LORD God made clothing from animal skins'—God shows kindness to Adam and Eve even while working out the consequences of their terrible choice. He replaces the ridiculous and insufficient clothing they made out of fig trees with more proper clothing made from skins. The animal that was killed to make these clothes is the first death in Genesis. In most ancient religions—including that of the Israelites which will come later in the Bible—animal sacrifice is a significant component of the sacred rituals. In these rituals, people kill animals as gifts to the gods. Here in Genesis, God himself kills an animal as a gift to his people. God told Adam and Eve that death would follow if they ate the fruit. It was supposed to be their death. But he had mercy on them, killing an animal instead and using the skin of that animal to cover their shame.
- 'What if they eat the fruit of the tree of life?'—There were two special trees in the middle of the garden: the tree of life, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. At any time they could have eaten from the tree of life. Apparently, they never did. Instead, they chose to eat of the other tree, though they'd been warned that eating it would lead to death. Now that they've eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God actively prohibits them from eating of the tree of life. I think that he does this because of what he fears they might do to themselves and one another if they could live forever. We'll see in the next chapter that God has reason for concern.
- 'the LORD God banished Adam and his wife from the Garden'—they were meant to be the ones who would spread the goodness of the garden beyond its borders. Because of their sin, they themselves are left outside of it. However, though there are significant and lasting consequences of their sin, Adam's and Eve's lives are not ruined. God still continues to talk with them and provide for them; in fact, in the next chapter we're told that God's very presence lives with them in their new land outside the garden. God kicks them out of the garden, but he goes with them. Adam and Eve continue their work of subduing the earth and of multiplying to fill it. They continue in their relationship with God, and with his mission to bring his goodness to the world.

Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* God is a kind and gracious God. When we allow him to, he is eager to cover our shame, even shame caused by our own bad choices. Is there something on your mind that you are ashamed of? Consider telling God about it. Ask him if we would be willing to cover you in that area of shame.
- *For our church:* Although it is Jesus who has defeated the devil and will ultimately crush his head, it is still our mission as God's people to fight him and to attempt to subdue him in the meantime. Pray that God would give us as a church the ability to see well through his tricks, and that we would have the strength to fight him effectively.
- *For our city:* Work is a big part of the lives of most people in our city. It takes a lot of their time, energy, and attention. And since Adam and Eve ate the fruit, it's become a lot more difficult for our work to be life-giving. It's still God's desire that we all experience satisfaction in our work, and that we bring about more of God's goodness through our labor. Pray for people as you see them at work today. Pray that God

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would give them joy and meaning through their work, and that he would give them insight into new ways—even if they're small ways—of bringing more goodness into the world through their job.

Saturday, March 11th

Genesis 4: 1-15

1Now Adam slept with his wife, Eve, and she became pregnant. When the time came, she gave birth to Cain, and she said, "With the LORD's help, I have brought forth a man!"

2Later she gave birth to a second son and named him Abel.

When they grew up, Abel became a shepherd, while Cain was a farmer. 3At harvesttime Cain brought to the LORD a gift of his farm produce, 4while Abel brought several choice lambs from the best of his flock. The LORD accepted Abel and his offering, 5but he did not accept Cain and his offering. This made Cain very angry and dejected.

6"Why are you so angry?" the LORD asked him. "Why do you look so dejected? 7You will be accepted if you respond in the right way. But if you refuse to respond correctly, then watch out! Sin is waiting to attack and destroy you, and you must subdue it."

8Later Cain suggested to his brother, Abel, "Let's go out into the fields." And while they were there, Cain attacked and killed his brother.

9Afterward the LORD asked Cain, "Where is your brother? Where is Abel?"

"I don't know!" Cain retorted. "Am I supposed to keep track of him wherever he goes?"

10But the LORD said, "What have you done? Listen--your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground! 11You are hereby banished from the ground you have defiled with your brother's blood. 12No longer will it yield abundant crops for you, no matter how hard you work! From now on you will be a homeless fugitive on the earth, constantly wandering from place to place."

13Cain replied to the LORD, "My punishment is too great for me to bear! 14You have banished me from my land and from your presence; you have made me a wandering fugitive. All who see me will try to kill me!"

15The LORD replied, "They will not kill you, for I will give seven times your punishment to anyone who does." Then the LORD put a mark on Cain to warn anyone who might try to kill him.

Points of Interest:

- 'With the LORD's help, I have brought forth a man!'—Eve is awed to find that she is able to bring another real, live human being into the world. She has begun the work of multiplying to fill the earth.
- 'The LORD accepted Abel and his offering, but he did not accept Cain and his offering'—it's unclear exactly why God prefers Abel's offering over Cain's. It may simply be God's choice: he was in the mood for meat. It may be that Abel gave his offering with more cheerfulness than Cain (Cain's later actions indicate he might not have totally been in the spirit of things). The best guess we have from the story is that God was especially appreciative of the fact that Abel would give 'the best of his flock.' In any case, it doesn't seem that God particularly has anything against Cain; he simply thinks Abel's offering deserves some recognition.
- 'Sin is waiting to attack and destroy you, and you must subdue it'—sin is just like the wild animals. It is stalking us like a cat, ready to pounce on us. It's within our power and within our interests to overcome it. Just like the natural world, and like the

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schemes of Satan, sin is within our realm of authority and responsibility. Things can go terribly wrong if we don't properly take care.

- 'Cain attacked and killed his brother'—the first human death is the murder of one brother by another. Death did indeed come to Adam and Eve's family, although it took a generation for it to happen.
- 'You are hereby banished from the ground you have defiled'—just like Adam and Eve were sent out from the garden, Cain is sent out from where his fields are, where his family lives, and where the presence of God dwells. Touchingly, Cain seems genuinely shocked by what he has done and by the consequences. His murder of his brother can't simply be overlooked, but God shows mercy even to him: he guarantees to protect him personally from any further punishment.
- 'All who see me will try to kill me'—without any government or laws, a person's tribe would be his only protection against attack. Cain is being sent away from his tribe, and therefore left defenseless (apart from God's sign of protection over him). It does beg the question who exactly would try to kill him. There are a few theories about that, all of which have their strong points and their weak points:
 - It could be that Abel has unmentioned sons (which would also mean that he was married to an unmentioned sister) who kill Cain to avenge their father's death. This is the simplest theory, but it seems to me in that case Cain might say, 'My brother's sons might pursue me and kill me,' rather than, 'All who see me will try to kill me.' Cain's concern seems to have a wider scope;
 - He could have spiritual enemies like the serpent in mind. It's possible, but there's no real reason to think so, except for that we're not sure that there are any other human beings;
 - There could be more people on the earth than we've previously heard about. Perhaps while the story has been focusing thus far on one particular family, there are other families and tribes currently living on the earth. In that case, it is not that Adam and Eve were the only people in existence, but that they were the people through whom God chose to start spreading his image and his goodness. Part of their mission to multiply and fill the earth would be to share what they know about God, his nature, and his mission, with the people they would encounter as they spread. I think this theory most satisfactorily deals with the question of whom Cain was afraid, it puts this story into a somewhat broader context, and it gives an interesting spin to the commission given to Adam and Eve. It doesn't, however, adequately explain the ways in which Adam and Eve's experiences are treated as universal: for instance, their choice to take the fruit affects all of humanity and all of nature; and Eve is named 'Mother of All People Everywhere.'

It's an irresolvable tension in the story that—sometimes even in the same scenes—there are ways in which Adam and Eve are treated as the forefathers of all human beings, but other ways in which a larger human society is assumed. For what it's worth, I tend to gravitate toward the third of the above explanations: it feels more real to me, and it seems to fit with what we are learning of God's mission as we go. I nonetheless recognize that it has serious flaws.

Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* Cain's murder of Abel is uncommonly extreme, but envy, competition, bitterness, and fighting between family members are all too common.

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Take a moment today to pray for peace in your family, whether it be among your siblings, among your children, between you and your parents, or between you and your children. Particularly lift up to God any current sources of potential bitterness. Ask God to give your whole family the strength by his Spirit to overcome the temptation to succumb to that bitterness.

- *For our church:* Pray that our worship of God, like Abel's offering, would be pleasing to God. Particularly ask for God's blessing on our worship teams, that they would experience for themselves the wonder of offering God delightful worship and that they would have the ability to lead us in the same way.
- *For our city:* This passage gives us a powerfully sad picture of the way that violence tears a community apart. In the case of Cain and Abel, God intervenes to stop the killing before a vicious cycle begins. Pray that he would intervene in the same way in the city of Boston, bringing a stop to violence, killing, and the downward spiral of revenge.

Sunday, March 12th

Genesis 4: 16-23

16 So Cain left the LORD's presence and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

17 Then Cain's wife became pregnant and gave birth to a son, and they named him Enoch. When Cain founded a city, he named it Enoch after his son.

18 Enoch was the father of Irad.

 Irad was the father of Mehujael.

 Mehujael was the father of Methushael.

 Methushael was the father of Lamech.

19 Lamech married two women--Adah and Zillah. 20 Adah gave birth to a baby named Jabal. He became the first of the herdsmen who live in tents. 21 His brother's name was Jubal, the first musician--the inventor of the harp and flute. 22 To Lamech's other wife, Zillah, was born Tubal-cain. He was the first to work with metal, forging instruments of bronze and iron. Tubal-cain had a sister named Naamah.

23 One day Lamech said to Adah and Zillah, "Listen to me, my wives. I have killed a youth who attacked and wounded me. 24 If anyone who kills Cain is to be punished seven times, anyone who takes revenge against me will be punished seventy-seven times!"

Points of Interest:

- 'Cain left the LORD's presence and settled in the land of Nod'—this sentence would probably get my vote for the saddest single sentence in this week's study. When Cain hears God's sentence of banishment, he's terror-struck about a life of ceaseless wandering, and he's forlorn at the prospect of living apart from the presence of God. Very quickly—almost immediately—he decides that life without God is not so bad. He settles down in a new town and busies himself making a new life for himself. What's unimaginable a short time ago—that he could live apart from the presence of God—quickly becomes normal. It doesn't even seem that he notices his lack after a while.
- 'Enoch was the father of Irad'—I just wanted to point out that we've encountered our first genealogy. I hope you found it relatively quick and painless. Incidentally, one of the reasons Moses and other ancient writers use genealogies is to fill the gaps in their story. Since Moses doesn't have much to say about Enoch through Methushael, he uses a genealogy to fast forward through them to the next interesting person, Lamech.

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- ‘the inventor of the harp and flute’—this genealogy does have some interesting tidbits too. One thing I notice is that although Cain’s family lives apart from the presence of God and seems to have fully embraced the serpent’s plan of trying to be their own lords, they still to a remarkable degree reflect the image of God. They’re a pretty creative bunch, and they employ their skill to doing the kinds of things God himself was doing: bringing more shape and abundance to the world. They come up with the idea of cities. They invent new technologies for breeding cattle and for working metal. They create music and musical instruments. Tomorrow, when we are introduced to Seth and his family, we’ll talk a little bit more about the legacy of Cain’s family and the significance of the fact that they are indeed responsible for filling the world with much that we would call good—even while it’s equally clear that something has gone wrong and continues to get worse and worse.

- ‘Listen to me, my wives’—with Lamech, human society reaches a low point. He makes Cain look like a saint. They’re both murderers, but Lamech is proud of it. Cain asks God to protect him from retaliation or attack; Lamech claims that he can take care of himself ten times better than God took care of Cain.

At the end of chapter one, God recites a little poem about how wonderful it is to have humanity reflect his image. At the end of chapter two, Adam unabashedly exclaims how ecstatic he is to have found his true companion, who is like another part of him. Here, at the end of chapter two, Lamech makes his two wives listen to a boast about how good he is at killing people. Actually, all three of these exclamations are probably short poems or songs; so in effect God is singing a love song to humanity, Adam is serenading Eve, and Lamech is making his wives listen to a song about how much he loves himself. In a few short chapters, we’ve gone a far distance in the wrong direction from the creation that was ‘excellent in every way’ and destined to get even better. Sin has grown quickly and exponentially: from Eve’s grabbing of the fruit to Cain’s murder to Lamech’s self-indulgence and wanton violence. God’s plan is to see his image multiplied and filling the earth. We see here that sin has the capacity to multiply and fill the earth at least as quickly. How will God respond to this fast growth of sin, and how will he get his plan to spread goodness throughout the earth back on track?

Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* Sin and its effects can quickly grow when they are passed on from generation to generation. Perhaps we are given this glimpse of the frightful escalation of sin so that we will have an extra sense of urgency to take care of sins and problems before we pass them on. Are there specific weaknesses or problems that you know have been passed from generation to generation in your family? If so, bring those sins or problems to God. If appropriate, ask God’s forgiveness. Ask him to give your family the ability to leave that problem in the past from now on.
- *For our church:* Pray that we as a church would never lose our hunger for God’s presence. Ask God to give us more and more satisfaction in relationship with him, and more and more awareness of our desire to stay close to him.
- *For our city:* Pray too that there would be an increase in spiritual hunger in our entire city, that people who don’t have much of a spiritual hunger would recognize that they are missing something and that a dynamic relationship with God would fill the hole.