

**Steve Watson**

**Daily Bible Guide – 40 Days of Faith, 2017**

Welcome to our annual Bible guide. Since our church's inception, we've promoted regular, systematic Bible reading as part of a series of practices that help us follow Jesus and find increasing life, hope, joy, peace, and purpose as we do so. It's not because the Bible is a perfect or easy book. In fact, it's not really a book at all. It's a collection of letters, prayers, ancient historical documents, memoirs, poems, and more written by dozens of people over several centuries.

As noted by writer Mike McHargue, the Bible is "at least a collection of books and writings assembled by the Church that chronicle a people group's experiences with, and understanding of, God over thousands of years." McHargue goes on to say, "Even if that is a comprehensive definition of the Bible, study of scripture is warranted to understand our culture and the way in which people come to know God."

<http://www.reservoirchurch.org/mchargue>)

Now neither Mike McHargue nor I are saying this is all the Bible is. The Bible is also our earliest and best witness to the person of Jesus of Nazareth. It's the text by which God has seemed to speak again and again to so many historical communities and to so many of us as well. It's been used to justify terrible acts and ideologies, but it's also been a source of enormous comfort and inspiration as well.

However, as a library of thoughts and experiences with God, the Bible is – in my opinion – unmatched. It's a reservoir of stories and ideas about people's experience of God with us. And in this year's Bible guide, we'll tap this reservoir to see what it has to offer to each of us.

Our church has produced these Bible guides annually for more than a dozen years. Most years we take a different, single section of the Bible and read it over six weeks. This year, we'll survey the Bible as a whole, more or less from beginning to end, with a particular theme in mind – just how is it that people experience God present in the world, and how do they then engage with God?

One of the most radical assumptions of the Hebrew scriptures, known to Christians as the Old Testament, is that a transcendent, creator God takes a particular interest in human affairs and can be known personally by humans. In the New Testament, the portion of the Christian Bible written in the century following the life of Jesus, this claim is intensified. The writers all indicate that God is uniquely present in the person of Jesus and can be spiritually experienced and connected with even after Jesus' life in Palestine ended.

This year's Bible guide attempts a survey of these experiences and claims. We'll take a quick tour through some of the Bible's most famous and most interesting accounts of people's interactions with God. And we'll ask what seemed to happen in those moments, and what might they mean for us today? In a world where God seems more present and real at some times than at others, what kind of connection with a living God can we expect? When some people report regular and powerful spiritual experiences and others few to none, how can all of us who want to experience a more personal and vital connection to a living God?

Our first two weeks of this guide will look at some experiences recorded in the Hebrew scriptures – moments

when people experienced their world as suddenly God-soaked. In our third week, we'll read a few psalms together. The psalms are the Bible's ancient prayer book, which models engaging with God in all times and moods and circumstances.

In our fourth and fifth weeks, we'll examine some stories and teachings from the life of Jesus. These will be interactions people witnessed Jesus having with God, or times when people's interaction with Jesus forged a connection with God, or things Jesus had to say about knowing God. And in our final week, we'll look at a few things that Jesus' first century followers had to say about experiencing God with us, in the wake of the life and teachings of Jesus.

Each day we'll present you with a different short passage, this year in the New Revised Standard Version, followed by three sections:

- **Points of Interest**—a handful of comments, which include literary or historical notes as well as impressions, thoughts, questions, and reactions. These aren't meant to be exhaustive or authoritative, but simply to give you some more perspective to work with as you ponder the passage yourself.
- **Spiritual Exercise**—every day, there will a takeaway summary thought and a short exercise to try. These actions, meditations, and activities might be the most valuable part of the guide, where we see if God can soak into our experience through the day's passage.
- **Prayer Prompt**—a suggested prayer. These invitations will focus on the prayers for others we encourage people to try during this season:
  - *For your six:* Consider six of your favorite people, people you interact with on a regular basis, who don't seem to have much of a direct connection to God and for whom you are very much rooting. What does this passage have to say to them, or to you about them?
  - *For our church:* How can we apply the passage corporately as a faith community?
  - *For our city:* What does the passage say to or about our entire city?

The Daily Bible Guide, while it can certainly be a stand-alone product, is designed to be one component of a bigger package called 40 Days of Faith – a six-week faith experiment that includes sermons, community group discussions, further prayer exercises, and more. You can learn more about the full 40 Days of Faith in this year's User's Manual, available on the campus and at the website of Reservoir Church. The Bible guide itself is available in various forms: paper, blog, and podcast. Look online at <http://www.reservoirchurch.org/40days>.

**Monday, March 6 – Genesis 11:27-12:9**

<sup>27</sup> Now these are the descendants of Terah. Terah was the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran was the father of Lot. <sup>28</sup> Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans. <sup>29</sup> Abram and Nahor took wives; the name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah. She was the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah. <sup>30</sup> Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.

<sup>31</sup> Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife, and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there. <sup>32</sup> The days of Terah were two hundred five years; and Terah died in Haran.

<sup>1</sup> Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup> I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

<sup>4</sup> So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. <sup>5</sup> Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, <sup>6</sup> Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. <sup>7</sup> Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. <sup>8</sup> From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. <sup>9</sup> And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

**Points of Interest:**

- At the center of this passage is an experience a man named Abram is purported to have had some four thousand years ago. Jews, Christians, and Muslims all tell this story and take interest in this experience of Abram hearing God speak to him. But the experience isn't reported in isolation. It's described in the context of Abram's family story and historical and cultural context.
- The exposition of Abram's life draws us into a colorful and tragic family story. Abram's brother Haran dies young, leaving Terah and the extended family to care for Haran's family. Terah is a bold but grief-stricken man. He leaves his homeland of Ur with one of his surviving sons and a grandson and their families. He is headed to the land of Canaan. For reasons we don't know, but perhaps due to age, perhaps due to grief, he only makes it part way, to the town of Haran where he settles and dies. In Hebrew, this isn't an identical name as his dead son's, but is hauntingly (or maybe comfortingly) similar. Abram and Sarai are the one couple in the family unable to have children. In the ancient Near East barrenness was a tragedy. It meant no heir in times when generational inheritance was the closest thing people had to a sense of afterlife, or long-term significance. It also meant no help in one's old age in an agrarian culture with no cultural safety nets or means of retirement savings.

- In the midst of Abram's disappointing middle age years, he senses God speaking to him. The Bible rarely describes the means by which people discern God speaking. Was this an audible voice? A dream? An internal voice experienced while praying to a moon god? (The ancient city of Haran had a temple to the Canaanite moon god, Sin.) A gut sense that came to him while herding sheep, or eating breakfast, or gazing into a fire? We have no idea. Any of these are possible.
- The content of Abram's message from God is preserved, though. It's a high risk, high reward message. This middle-aged man with no heirs and no help for his upcoming old age experiences God telling him to leave his community – to leave his family, and by extension, his inheritance. He's to continue the journey his father began years ago, to a land he's never been to. In exchange, God will give him protection, reputation, and somehow (without descendants at this point!) a long-term legacy that will impact world history for good. It's an exchange of present security, identity, and land – everything he knew and that defined him – for much greater security, identity, and land that God promises, through at this point mysterious means.
- Abram trusts the voice and uproots his whole household to take a journey into the unknown. As a side note, I have no idea what to make of the ages in these early passages of Genesis. Some conservative readers think they refer to the unusual longevity of the spiritual forefathers of the faith, but there is no anthropological or scientific evidence that would suggest this. I tend to think the numbers were inflated over time in the oral tradition, and that they had numerological significance (largely lost to us) in their original context. Abram, though, was not a young man. This was *at least* a mid-life redirect.
- Once Abram reaches the land his father originally set out for, we read that God appeared to him. Again, there's lots of missing context. As with Abram's first experience, we don't know how this one occurred – a vision, a dream, an interior sense, some other means? We also don't know which god Abram thought he was communicating with. Abram was not a mono-theist. Abram's first spiritual experience happens near a temple to a Canaanite moon god, and this second one happens by a large Canaanite tree, which likely would have been a site of worship to fertility gods, connected with agriculture and offspring. The name used here – the LORD, in Hebrew "Yahweh" – was a name for God first known by Moses, hundreds of years later.
- Abram's second spiritual experience builds upon the first. He senses a "where" and a "how" to God's promise to him. Despite the odds, he'll have offspring, and he's found the land in which his descendants will become great. So he travels about building altars and making sacrifices to the god he sees as backing him. He's using the spiritual practices of his time and culture to respond to his experience of God.

**Spiritual Exercise:** We don't experience God in a vacuum, but in the context of our familial and cultural inheritance. Consider one of the following – an unfulfilled dream of your parents or any ancestor of yours, or a current challenge in your life story. Ask God if God has any promise for you in this context. Sit quietly for a few moments, and take note of whatever you experience.

**Prayer:** Ask that your six – whatever their spiritual context – would experience God speaking promise to them, whatever their experience of God has or hasn't been to date.

**Tuesday, March 7 - Genesis 16:1-16**

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, <sup>2</sup> and Sarai said to Abram, "You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. <sup>3</sup> So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. <sup>4</sup> He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. <sup>5</sup> Then Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!" <sup>6</sup> But Abram said to Sarai, "Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her.

<sup>7</sup> The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. <sup>8</sup> And he said, "Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai." <sup>9</sup> The angel of the Lord said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit to her." <sup>10</sup> The angel of the Lord also said to her, "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude." <sup>11</sup> And the angel of the Lord said to her,

"Now you have conceived and shall bear a son;  
 you shall call him Ishmael,  
 for the Lord has given heed to your affliction.

<sup>12</sup> He shall be a wild ass of a man,  
 with his hand against everyone,  
 and everyone's hand against him;  
 and he shall live at odds with all his kin."

<sup>13</sup> So she named the Lord who spoke to her, "You are El-roi"; for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?" <sup>14</sup> Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

<sup>15</sup> Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. <sup>16</sup> Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

**Points of Interest:**

- Ten years later, Abram and Sarai are no closer to the fulfillment of what they thought God promised when they first arrived in Canaan. Their solution to their barrenness was probably less shocking in their culture than it would be in ours. Slave women were the property of their owners, so using Hagar as a surrogate mother to produce an heir for Abram and Sarai may have seemed reasonable to the couple, regardless of what Hagar may have thought of the arrangement.
- Hagar's pregnancy apparently creates its own problems. Hagar is of lower social class and is a cultural and perhaps racial outsider to this household. But now she has the honor of pregnancy that Sarai has never

experienced. Perhaps she finds ways to rub this in Sarai's face, or perhaps Sarai projects this behavior out of her own insecurity and jealousy. When Sarai blames Abram for her difficulty, he abdicates any responsibility and tells Sarai to solve her own problem. Perhaps she begins insulting Hagar, perhaps she works the pregnant servant harshly, or perhaps she has her beaten. We don't know, but the family is a mess, and Hagar's life in particular is miserable enough that she flees alone to the wilderness.

- Alone and on the run, Hagar has her first experience of a God-soaked world. The word angel means messenger, so Hagar may encounter what she believes to be a spiritual being, or she may talk with a person who meets her by the spring of water, asks her for her story, and then speaks for God.
- The messenger gives what sounds like mixed news. She's supposed to return to her somewhat abusive household and her son is predicted to grow up to be a difficult man. That said, her dignity is elevated in that God sees and understands all the details of her seemingly insignificant life. Henceforth, she also won't merely be a slave and surrogate, but the mother of an important person in the world.
- The Egyptian slave Hagar is the first person in the Bible to name God. She doesn't know what god this messenger speaks for, but she calls this god the "God who sees," since she knows God sees and knows and has taken an interest in her.

**Spiritual Exercise:** Hagar's story tells us God sees and hears us fully, sees all the hard things in our lives, is glad to be with us in them, and can do something about them. Start with your current setting – the room you are in, the clothes you're wearing, etc. – and say to yourself, "God sees this brown chair. God sees my blue sweater, etc." Then name to God one challenge in your life. Naming the various aspects of this challenge, say to yourself that God sees and hears each one of them. Tell yourself God is glad to be with you in this. Then ask God how it is that God understands how big this is to you, and how God can help you.

**Prayer:** Name a large problem your city or country is facing. Practice the above exercise with that issue as well, telling yourself God sees and hears this and is glad to be with you and your community and nation in this. Ask God how God understands how big this is to the people involved and ask God to help them.

### Wednesday, March 8 – Genesis 22:1-19

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” <sup>2</sup> He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.” <sup>3</sup> So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. <sup>4</sup> On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. <sup>5</sup> Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.” <sup>6</sup> Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. <sup>7</sup> Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” <sup>8</sup> Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So the two of them walked on together.

<sup>9</sup> When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. <sup>10</sup> Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. <sup>11</sup> But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” <sup>12</sup> He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” <sup>13</sup> And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. <sup>14</sup> So Abraham called that place “The Lord will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.”

<sup>15</sup> The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, <sup>16</sup> and said, “By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, <sup>17</sup> I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, <sup>18</sup> and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.” <sup>19</sup> So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba.

#### Points of Interest:

- A number of things have happened since we left off with Abram, Sarai, and their dysfunctional household. In response to their ongoing spiritual life and sense of destiny, they have both altered their names somewhat, and are now called Abraham and Sarah. Hagar’s child Ishmael is all grown up, and Abraham and Sarah have had a miracle baby of their own, a son they named Isaac.
- I once studied this passage with a rabbi who found dark humor in the dialogue. When Abraham tells Isaac, “God will provide the lamb, my son,” we hear him at first simply addressing his teenage son. This rabbi joked that Abraham might have been indicating that Isaac is in fact the lamb God provided. That would have put a damper on their hiking conversation! This same rabbi speculated that Abraham returned later to a different city because he couldn’t bear to see his wife afterwards. That would be an awkward conversation – “Honey, what did you and our boy do today?”

- In all seriousness, this is a harrowing story. In the Jewish tradition, it's referred to as the "binding of Isaac." This is a story about a man who thinks God's telling him to kill his only son and who gets as close as tying him down to a homemade altar before stopping. We'll present two very different interpretations of this passage, and then run with the second interpretation for the sake of our own efforts to engage in a God-soaked world.
- The most traditional interpretation of this passage takes it at face value. Abraham has left his home and inheritance based on a word from God, waited over ten years for the promised child to come, and then God tests his faith one more time. In this understanding, Abraham senses God speaking accurately. Then in faith that God will bring Isaac back to life, or provide him with a substitute heir, or make it work out in some other way, he brings Isaac and a pile of wood up to a mountaintop. Very close to the murder, Abraham has a strong impulse to stop and attributes this impulse to a messenger from God, or perhaps he physically sees a vision of a person telling him to stop. He then sees a lamb caught in a bush and realizes God still wants a sacrifice, but will take an animal sacrifice instead. So he unties his son, kills the lamb, praises God, senses God's praise for him and reaffirming of God's promise, then heads back down the mountain, and calls it a day. A particularly Christian spin on this interpretation is to see the lamb in the bush as a foreshadowing of the eventual death of Jesus, who has been called – amongst other things – the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.
- This traditional interpretation has some strengths but also a couple of major problems. It's a pretty ugly and – for the Bible – very unusual view of God. Ancient Near Eastern residents understood their Canaanite fertility gods to demand child sacrifice to ensure further children and good harvests. But the Old Testament strongly condemns this practice and makes it clear that the God of Abraham, who people eventually believe to be the one, true God of the world, is not like this. Also, this scene is only mentioned twice in the New Testament, and never as a symbol for Jesus' death.
- Since the Middle Ages, numerous other readings of this passage have been proposed. Here is one. Abraham may have thought that God was asking for a child sacrifice. After all, he'd experienced God speaking to him at sites of fertility-god worship, other gods in his region expected this, and perhaps his family god would require this sacrifice as well. Under this interpretation, Abraham is mistaken in his original sense of God speaking to him, but then accurately discerns God telling him to stop. In this understanding of the passage, Abraham is led by God's spirit to a truer, healthier view of God – God who will bless Abraham and his descendants and would never demand the death of a human. Abraham is able to pass that knowledge on to his descendants, and child sacrifice is never again proposed by Abraham's descendants, except when they disobey God to worship the false, destructive gods of neighboring cultures.

**Spiritual Exercise:** Name something you used to think about God that you no longer think is healthy or accurate. Ask God to continue to give you a true and accurate belief about and experience of God.

**Prayer:** Pray that your church will help you and many others develop a true picture of God. As you and others seek to hear God's voice during this season, pray that you'll listen well and discern wisely, sorting out false pictures of god from the true and good God revealed in the person of Jesus.

## Thursday, March 9 – Genesis 32:22-32

<sup>22</sup> The same night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. <sup>23</sup> He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. <sup>24</sup> Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. <sup>25</sup> When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. <sup>26</sup> Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." <sup>27</sup> So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." <sup>28</sup> Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." <sup>29</sup> Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. <sup>30</sup> So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." <sup>31</sup> The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. <sup>32</sup> Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

### Points of Interest:

- Isaac, Abraham's son, has grown up and had children himself, two twins in fact. Isaac's favorite, Esau, is the strong, silent type, but not very shrewd. Isaac's wife's favorite, Jacob, is far more clever and ambitious, but also highly manipulative in his patterns of achieving success. As a grown man, Jacob is – for his times – fabulously wealthy and also is now a patriarch of his own large, complicated, polygamous household. Where we pick up the story, Jacob hasn't seen his angry, potentially vengeful brother, Esau, in many years but plans on meeting him the next day. He's also alone at night for the first time in many years, in the darkness of Palestine's pre-electricity, pitch black wilderness.
- Jacob is ambushed in the middle of the night. Options for who this might be: (a) Jacob's angry brother Esau, attacking him before he can prepare to defend himself. Or (b) a bandit, come in the night to rob and kill him. Either way, this is bad news, and Jacob starts fighting.
- As the wrestling continues long into the night, and then – near dawn – Jacob's opponent exerts suddenly massive strength and injures him, Jacob wonders if this is some kind of spiritual being he's wrestling. Long night, polytheistic culture – who knows?
- Turns out Jacob is right. Jacob longs for blessing – positive words about his future that carry authority. You can read the back story yourself in Genesis if you like, but Jacob has been longing for this his whole life, as the only blessing his own father ever gave him was one he stole. It was meant for his brother, not for him.
- Jacob is blessed, and the blessing is a new name – Israel, which means "struggles with God". Jacob's good news is that God wants to know him and interact with him. This god is there to be Jacob's object of worship and allegiance, but also to be Jacob's – and by extension, his descendants' – sparring partner over the most substantive matters of life.
- Names become very important in this passage. Jacob gets a new name that ties his story to God's. Turns out this name will stick to all biological and spiritual descendants of Jacob – people who can struggle/wrestle with God, be blessed, and live. Jacob renames the spot of land where this happened "Peniel," because he

thinks he has seen the very face of God. The one name that's not given is the name of the mysterious nighttime wrestler/angel/god-figure. In ancient religions, naming was a way of gaining power over the one named, and it's clear who maintains authority in this scene.

- As a reminder of the power imbalance in this encounter, Jacob leaves with a limp. Symbolically, he's no longer an ambitious striver, hoping to know God and earnestly trying to prove himself in the world. Instead, he's secure in his identity as loved and named by God, while accepting that his own mortal condition will always be conditional, weak, incomplete.

**Spiritual Exercise:** Reread this passage slowly, trying to imagine yourself as Jacob. How does it feel when you are attacked? What does this wrestling look and sound and smell like as it continues through the night? What do you think when you wonder if this is God? How does it feel that God insists you accept your own weakness? What is it like to be blessed, to be told you are known and that you can struggle with God and live to tell the tale?

After the reflection, ask if there's any question or yearning you have to ask God over these 40 Days. Consider making that your prayer about what you want God to do for you. What would it feel like to "wrestle" with God over this prayer?

**Prayer:** Pray that God will attack, but then love, one of your six in the middle of the night this week. Should that not occur, or should that prove to be an uncomfortable prayer, ask that God will help one or all of your six speak frankly and honestly with God about their doubts, their struggles, or their questions.

## Friday, March 10 – Exodus 3:1-12

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. <sup>2</sup> There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. <sup>3</sup> Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.” <sup>4</sup> When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” <sup>5</sup> Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” <sup>6</sup> He said further, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

<sup>7</sup> Then the Lord said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, <sup>8</sup> and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. <sup>9</sup> The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. <sup>10</sup> So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” <sup>11</sup> But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” <sup>12</sup> He said, “I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”

### Points of Interest:

- Centuries after Jacob, his descendants settle in Egypt – first prospering but then falling into slavery under Egyptian oppression. Moses is introduced as a Hebrew orphan taken into the Pharaoh’s own household until he rediscovers his ethnic identity, murders an Egyptian taskmaster, and flees to the wilderness. At this point in this story, Moses is a middle-aged husband and father, working as a shepherd in his father-in-law’s family business.
- Out in the desert, on a hot day, Moses has a visual hallucination of a burning bush. When he looks more closely, he then has an auditory hallucination as well. This significant encounter is a vivid example of a spiritual experience.
- In his study of spiritual experiences, 19<sup>th</sup> century American psychologist William James described four common qualities to these experiences reported across cultures and religions. They are:
  - Transient – temporary, outside our ordinary experience of space and time,
  - Ineffable – hard to fully capture in words
  - Noetic – mentally engaging, teaching something valuable, and
  - Passive – seeming to happen to us, beyond our control.
- All of this is true for Moses. His attention is drawn away from his work, he experiences a deep and powerful sense of being with and communing with a God who has interrupted his thinking and living, and he is given unique insight into God’s views on current affairs and Moses’ leadership call to intervene.
- By using the word “hallucination” and applying William James’ analysis, we aren’t saying Moses’ experience

was imaginary or that God didn't initiate it all. We're simply introducing analytical language to describe what sometimes happens when we engage in a God-soaked world.

- In his experience with God, Moses experiences beauty and wonder (the unconsumed, flaming bush), holiness (a sense of something in God that is utterly "other" and transcendent), and fear (it's overwhelming, almost too much to apprehend). All these sensations seem common to vivid encounters with God.
- Moses' encounter also leaves him with a sense of calling, direction, and purpose. On the one hand, like Abram, Moses has a calling to do something very much in keeping with his life circumstances and history. He is a Hebrew child who intimately knows Egyptian culture and leadership – who better to negotiate the Israelite exodus out of Egypt and back to Canaan? On the other hand, Moses finds the task overwhelming. He is assured, though, that God will be with him in the task.

**Spiritual Exercise:** By definition, we can't create spiritual experiences for ourselves, even if we want them. As William James writes, they are passive – received, not initiated, by us. Meditation and prayer, though, can increase our receptivity. Consider lighting a candle, and as you gaze into it, meditate on something you know to be true and good about God. Perhaps meditate on "the God of compassion" emphasized in this passage, or on "the God who sees" from Tuesday's story with Hagar.

After a few minutes, see if you perceive God's presence with you in any way. Many of us have been helped in experiencing God's presence by specifically speaking to Jesus, "How are you here with me in this moment? Help me to perceive your presence, and whatever you have to say."

Consider writing down or telling someone whatever you experience during this time.

**Prayer:** Ask God to again call leaders to deliver people out of suffering in your city, country, or world. Pay attention if anything comes to mind that is within the scope of your experience and resources to do.

## Saturday, March 11 – Exodus 32:1-14

<sup>1</sup> When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” <sup>2</sup> Aaron said to them, “Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” <sup>3</sup> So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. <sup>4</sup> He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” <sup>5</sup> When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord.” <sup>6</sup> They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

<sup>7</sup> The Lord said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; <sup>8</sup> they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”” <sup>9</sup> The Lord said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. <sup>10</sup> Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.”

<sup>11</sup> But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, “O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? <sup>12</sup> Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. <sup>13</sup> Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’” <sup>14</sup> And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

### Points of Interest:

- Years later, Moses has indeed led the Israelite underclass out of Egypt, and into the desert between there and Canaan. But wouldn’t you know it, change is hard? Exodus and the following books describe the ups and downs of a group of people trying to form a social identity and stay on mission even when distracted and delayed. This passage is one of many moments in that drama.
- Why in the world would people want Aaron to “make gods” for them? One, Moses has been gone for a while, up on a mountaintop praying to God on behalf of the people. The absence of leadership has made people anxious. Also, there’s an impulse to center their lives on something they can see and control, rather than a personal God they can’t control and can’t directly see. The scriptures call this called idolatry – looking for security and protection and identity in things that we can control but that don’t in the end bring us much security or protection. They argue that this habit of people and cultures is a leading factor in human disappointment and misery.

- The particular form these people give to their idol is a young bull. Bulls and calves represented both strength and fertility in the Ancient Near East. They symbolized people's hopes that the gods would make them strong and give them productive wombs and productive lands – in other words, wealth and security leading to happiness. We have one of these idols in America too – the golden statue of the bull by Wall Street! Perhaps there's something revealing here. Like the ancients, we experience so much of life as anxious and out of control. As a result, more than the communion and centering that God offers, we long for strength, wealth, and success that we hope will immunize us against threat.
- Perhaps this is a common human impulse, but God sees it as perverse – illogical, unhelpful, wrong-headed. Perhaps this is because unhealthy attachments reduce God, attach us to promises that can't deliver, and thus compromise both God's and our greatness.
- In Moses' prayer, there's what looks to us like a role reversal. God is angry, and Moses plays a calming role, reminding God of God's promises to this people and of the stakes of this moment. So God lets go of his original thoughts of destruction, literally changing his mind.
- We could see two different dynamics at play here. This isn't the only time the Bible describes God as changing God's mind in response to human petition. So that's an indication of the enormous power prayer may have, particularly prayer that asks God to act consistent with the very best we know to be true of God.
- On the other hand, this may also be the tradition's way of describing Moses experiencing a deeper revelation of what God is like. When the Israelites' faith goes astray, Moses expects God to respond like all the other gods they would have known – lashing out in anger. But Moses discovers the God they are coming to know as deeper, wiser, and more restrained.

**Spiritual Exercise:** Unhealthy attachments – what the Bible calls idolatry – reduce us and reduce our experience of God. Consider this short examination. Put two columns on a piece of paper. On the left, write down 3-5 things that make you experience the greatest vulnerability or anxiety. To the right of each one, write down what you do most to distract yourself or what you trust most to make you secure or strong in the face of this challenge. As you look at the lists, ask if any of these strategies are unhealthy for you. If you like, invite the unseen God to give you faith that God can be your help and security in the face of these challenges.

**Prayer:** Ask God to help your church become more and more comfortable trusting an unseen God each time people experience vulnerability, uncertainty, and insecurity. Pray that people in your community will not use religion to pretend to be stronger than they are, but will trust in an unseen and strong God to be loving and helpful to them in their weakness.

**Sunday, March 12 – Ruth 1:1-18**

<sup>1</sup> In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. <sup>2</sup> The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. <sup>3</sup> But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. <sup>4</sup> These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, <sup>5</sup> both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

<sup>6</sup> Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had considered his people and given them food. <sup>7</sup> So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. <sup>8</sup> But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back each of you to your mother’s house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. <sup>9</sup> The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.” Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. <sup>10</sup> They said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” <sup>11</sup> But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? <sup>12</sup> Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, <sup>13</sup> would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.” <sup>14</sup> Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

<sup>15</sup> So she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” <sup>16</sup> But Ruth said,

“Do not press me to leave you  
or to turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go;  
where you lodge, I will lodge;  
your people shall be my people,  
and your God my God.

<sup>17</sup> Where you die, I will die—  
there will I be buried.

May the Lord do thus and so to me,  
and more as well,  
if even death parts me from you!”

<sup>18</sup> When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

**Points of Interest:**

- After the original stories involving Israel's founding fathers (and mothers), there are a series of historical books that trace the rise and fall of Israel's political and spiritual life in the twelfth through fourth centuries B.C. Tucked into these books is the short account of Ruth, celebrated as the eventual great-grandmother of Israel's greatest king, David.
- Ruth begins with a series of epic tragedies. Insecure economic conditions force a family of four to migrate to a foreign land, where both sons grow up to marry foreign women. Afterwards, the father dies, then both sons also die, leaving three widows alone, with no children. In the culture and economy of the Ancient Near East, childless widows were by definition destitute. The elder widow, Naomi, hears the economy back home has rebounded and plans to return, hoping to find help and mercy from her hometown relatives.
- Naomi reacts to tragedy with bitterness. She takes it as a sign that God has abandoned her. Orpah takes Naomi's advice to start life over, abandoning both Naomi and Naomi's god for a happier future elsewhere. Ruth, though, has hope in her circumstances despite all odds.
- Despite Naomi's current bitterness, Ruth has seen something in Naomi and in Naomi's God that draws out of her both love and loyalty. Ruth makes what the Ancient Near East would recognize as a covenant. It's a solemn promise, at the level of seriousness and sacredness that we see in marriage vows. Something in Naomi's or her late husband's lives or in the stories they told about God has given Ruth optimism and hope that life will go well for her if she stays loyal to this God.

**Spiritual Exercise:** Faith can be nourished by experiencing God in another person. Think of someone you deeply love, respect, or otherwise admire. What do they seem to know about God that you would like to experience? Ask God to experience this yourself. What about God does this person reflect to you? Express directly to God that you love that God is the source of this goodness.

**Prayer:** Pray for your six, that they will see a winsome faith and a reflection of a beautiful and loving God in your words, actions, and stories.