

# *God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide*

## Week 1

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February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2009

### **Introduction**

All but one of the past several years, our church has spent the six weeks before Easter doing a forty-day faith experiment we call (creative titling not really being our thing) the 40 Days of Faith. It's our somewhat unique approach to the traditional church season of Lent. You can learn more about the 40 Days of Faith in general, and about the 2009 40 Days of Faith, in Dave Schmelzer's *40 Days Users' Manual*, which is usually close at hand wherever you might have picked up this guide. What you have in your hands or on your screen is one element of the larger 40 Days experience. These Bible guides are something of a guided tour through a book, story, or (in this year's case) theme of the Bible. Many of us have found that a joint experience of the Bible brings a certain richness to our prayer lives, thought lives, and conversation as we go through the 40 Days together.

On a side note, over time I've discovered that an increasing number of readers are not, in fact, in Boston, during the Lent of 2009, participating in a wider 40 Days experience. I've recently heard, for instance, from people in Chicago, New York city, New York state, and Germany who have ended up using previous guides. I'm delighted to know that my thoughts, questions, and suggestions have been of some broader appeal. To those of you tuning in from Germany, Minneapolis, or 2011, welcome, and thanks for bearing with the wrong dates and the occasional Boston-centric references.

Whether you've never opened a Bible before in your life or you've been reading the Bible ever since you did memory verses as a kid, I've written this guide with you in mind. People of both varieties have told me that previous guides have been helpful and interesting, occasionally thought-provoking, and not-too-infrequently relevant to their lives. Hopefully, you'll find the same to be true of this year's guide.

### **This season's theme: 'the Nations'**

In previous Bible guides, we've read a book of the Bible together, or followed the story of a specific Bible character. This time around, we're doing something a bit different and following a theme through the entire Bible: the theme of 'the Nations.'

*The Nations* is the Bible's way of referring to 'the rest of the world' or 'everyone else.' Much of the time, the Bible's setting is surprisingly intimate. In a majority of the Bible, the spotlight is on the doings of a single nation: the Israelites, a small and rather unimportant people group (in ancient geopolitic terms at least) living on a rather tiny piece of land in the Middle East. In fact, much of the time the Bible focuses singularly on God's dealings with one person or family. And yet, from beginning to end, whenever we start getting comfortable in that cozy setting, the Bible drops a hint—and sometimes more than a hint—that God is up to something much larger, that the

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story isn't really just about one person or one nation at all. The Bible widens out its perspective to show us that God's attention is very much on the Nations—that is, on everyone, everywhere.

In preparing this guide, I read every reference to the Nations in the Bible, and out of the upwards of 750 references, I've chosen out forty-two that I think give us a pretty good picture of the story the Bible seems to be telling about the Nations. Of course, given our limited space, I did have to make some difficult decisions about what to include and what not to include. The story being played out among God, Israel, and the Nations is a long and fairly complex one. At different times over the course of the story, the Nations play different parts: an audience watching and commenting on God's performance; a jury, judging between God and Israel; God's agents, executing his will (often in punishing Israel); the enemy of God or Israel or both; and seducers, trying to pull Israel away from God. I imagine we'll get glimpses of each of these roles along the way, but I decided not to give equal weight to all of them. Instead, in my passage selection, I particularly looked for passages that spoke to God's ultimate intentions toward the Nations. We'll make our way from the beginning of the Bible to the end, spending about a week along the way in each of the Bible's major sections:

1. the Old Testament histories (which take us from the creation of the world to before Jesus' birth);
2. the psalms (the Bible's prayer book);
3. the prophets (which collect the words of God's prophetic messengers during the Old Testament period);
4. the gospels (the stories of Jesus' life);
5. the book of Acts (the experiences of Jesus' followers shortly after his death);
6. and the New Testament letters (words of guidance written from more experienced Jesus-followers to newly-established churches).

### **The Daily Bible Guide Format**

Each day's guide is broken into three sections:

1. **The Bible passage for the day.** We'll follow our theme in 42 bite-sized portions, meant to be short enough that you can comfortably read them in a single sitting, but long enough that each day is a satisfying stand-alone experience. The passages tend to be between about half a page and about a page-and-a-half long (maybe a little longer, if it's poetry—but each of the lines is pretty short). For your convenience, I've included the Bible text of each day's story in *Today's New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). I find it to be a very readable translation, with current vocabulary and a modern sensibility.
2. **Points of Interest.** This section briefly explores aspects of the day's passage 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 presented by the passage, and offers some possibilities as to the passage's 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 lives of the people around us. Much of the time, I'll propose a way we might want to respond to the passage through prayer; other times, I might

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propose a little experiment, or a conversation. Each day, we'll look at the passage from the perspective of three groups of people:

- a. **For you**—we'll explore how the passage might apply to us and the people closest to us. We'll discuss implications it has for how we look at ourselves, how we approach our lives, and how our families relates with God;
- b. **For 'your six'**—think of six people in your life who live locally, who aren't currently followers of God (but who may be interested in God or exploring issues of faith), and for whom you'd like to see God do good things. What does this passage have to offer to those six friends?
- c. **For America**—we've found that it's often helpful to consider how the passage might apply beyond just our own social circle. This year, we'll be thinking about America. As Dave discusses further in the aforementioned *Users' Manual*, there's some evidence that America is in the midst of an interesting time, religiously speaking. We seem to be in the middle of a swift and steady transition from being a largely church-based culture to a largely secular culture. And yet, perhaps that shift away from church affiliation doesn't necessarily imply a similar decline in interest in spiritual things. What, exactly, does faith look like in a secular culture? Each day, we'll see if the passage has anything to say about how the nation of America might address that question.

By the way, you can also find all of these materials two places online:

1. in PDF form at [www.bostonvineyard.org/classesprograms/40-days-of-faith](http://www.bostonvineyard.org/classesprograms/40-days-of-faith);
2. in blog form at [www.rtb.t.bostonvineyard.org](http://www.rtb.t.bostonvineyard.org).

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**Monday, March 2<sup>nd</sup>**

**Genesis 1:1-2, 24-31**

1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters . . .

24 And God said, "Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals, each according to its kind." And it was so. 25 God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

26 Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

27 So God created human beings in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.

28 God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

29 Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. 30 And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so.

31 God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

#### **Points of interest:**

- 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth'—I imagine that those of you who are reading come from a variety of perspectives on when and how the world came into existence; I don't intend to get into that topic very much here. My point in including this verse in our study is simply to start at the beginning of the story. Over the next six weeks, we'll be following what the Bible has to say about all people, all over the earth. I thought it would be worth setting the scene a little before we begin that story. And here's what we see when it all starts: just God, and a completely empty world.
- 'the sixth day'—you'll notice that we're reading here about the sixth day. For brevity's sake, I decided to skip several days. Between verse 2 and verse 24, God creates light, darkness, oceans, dry land, the sun, the moon, the stars, fish, and birds. It all happens more or less in the same way he creates the animals here in verses 24 and 25.
- 'Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds'—I get two things from this account of God's creative work: God dislikes emptiness, and he likes variety. God finds an empty world, and immediately begins to fill it. And God doesn't just fill it with a lot of one thing, but with an abundance of many kinds of things. As the Bible tells it, God is happy to see the earth filled with an amazing diversity.
- 'Let us make human beings in our image'—God takes a more direct hand in the creation of humankind: not the land, as with the other creatures, but God's own effort forms them. I

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don't know how to square it with anthropology or evolutionary theory, but this idea that the creation of humans was separate and different resonates with me. And it seems simultaneously astounding and true that, in forming us, God modelled us after God's own self. We'll soon be reading about peoples, nations, and cultures spread throughout the earth. Here we see one important thing that's the same among all of those various people: every single one of them is made in the spitting image, as they say, of God.

- 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it'—we are created not just to look like God, but to act like God as well. God finds a formless and empty world, and immediately begins to bring shape to it and fill it. Upon creating humankind, God commissions us to do the same. We are God's emissaries or God's partners in the grand project of bringing order, abundance, and variety to what started as an empty mess.

#### Taking it home:

- *For you:* God likes you. When God looks at you, God sees a 'chip off the old block.' How does it feel to know that, fundamentally, God takes a great deal of pleasure in you? If you're having a hard time believing it, ask God to help you see yourself through God's eyes.
- *For your six:* Ask God to bless the work of your six today. Pray that in their work they would contribute to God's project of bringing more and more goodness to the world. And ask God to give them satisfaction, like his own, in the work they do.
- *For America:* In this passage, we see that abundant variety is one of the things God most wants to bring to the world. We're fortunate to live in a place that enjoys a great deal of both abundance and diversity, in its natural resources and in its people. Be on the lookout for signs of God's abundance and variety as you go through your day, and when you see them take a quick moment to say, 'Thanks.'

### Tuesday, March 3<sup>rd</sup>

#### Genesis 11

1 Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. 2 As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

3 They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. 4 Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

5 But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that they were building. 6 The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. 7 Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."

8 So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. 9 That is why it was called Babel—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

#### Points of interest:

- 'one language and a common speech'—in yesterday's passage, we noticed the vast variety of land animals. God didn't simply fill the world with one kind of animal—golden

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retrievers, for instance—but with all kinds: sheep, goats, pigs, deer, snakes, lizards, panda bears, koala bears, polar bears, giraffes, chimpanzees, chipmunks, and on and on and on. It was the same with plants, fish, and birds. From the get-go, the natural world was a teeming diversity. That's not the case here with the human beings, though; they're all golden retrievers, as it were. They're in the same place, speaking the same language, and doing the same thing—making bricks. Initially, there's definitely something alluring about this singularity. It feels like Utopia: they're all together, with a common purpose, accomplishing great things. And yet, I can't help but wonder if something's gone wrong. With the rest of the world presenting such an amazing variety, why would human beings be so monolithic?

There are indeed signs that this isn't how it was meant to be. In the chapter just before this one (which didn't make the cut into the top 42 because, while on topic, it's a bit dull), we read of various clans, peoples, and nations spreading out into their own territories with their own languages; it's the 'according to their kinds' list for human beings. Yet, here we're back to one language and one place. It's as if the potential for a diversity of cultures is there, but it's being suppressed or held back.

- 'and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth'—in yesterday's passage, God had commissioned the human beings to multiply, spread out, and fill the earth. He repeats almost the same commission to Noah in chapter nine. In both places, the Bible calls this mission a blessing. Apparently, the people of Babel disagree. They devise this entire tower-building project as a way to resist God's call to multiply and fill the earth.
- 'But the LORD came down'—the tower is impressive enough that it gets God's attention, but the Babylonians aren't entirely successful in building a tower that reaches heaven: God has to come down in order to get a closer look.
- 'So the LORD scattered them'—God will not be thwarted in this regard. Since they will not spread out and fill the earth of their own accord, he forces them to scatter. Spreading out into a variety of nations and languages is so important that God is willing to force it to happen.
- 'the LORD confused the language of the whole world'—in a way, God is merely setting things back on course. There was always supposed to be a diversity of human cultures, but the Babylonians had put a barrier in the way of that natural progression. God simply removes that barrier. However, because God has to force it to happen, what was meant to be a blessing is tinged with curse: spreading becomes scattering, and the resulting diversity is marked by confusion and misunderstanding.

#### Taking it home:

- *For you:* Has confusion been plaguing your communication with your family, friends, or workmates recently? Ask God to help you bridge the communication gap.
- *For your six:* At bottom, the whole Tower Affair happens to the Babylonians because they suspect that God means them harm instead of good. Are any of your six angry with or suspicious of God? Pray that God would somehow communicate to them his good intentions toward them.
- *For America:* Yesterday, we took a moment to enjoy the diversity our nation experiences. I think it is indeed one of our highest ideals to be the kind of place where anyone, from anywhere, can belong and thrive. In many ways, we've been able to accomplish a pretty amazing diversity. In just as many ways, we often fall far short of our own ideal; we can end up behaving a lot more like Genesis 11 than Genesis 10. Pray that God would forgive

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us for the ways we reject or mistreat those who don't seem to fit in; and ask God to give us the ability to live up to our ideal of honoring diversity.

**Wednesday, March 4<sup>th</sup>**

**Genesis 12: 1-6**

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

2 "I will make you into a great nation,  
and I will bless you;  
I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing.

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

4 So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. 4 So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. 5 He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

6 Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. 7 The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

#### **Points of interest:**

- 'The LORD had said to Abram'—as I mentioned in the introduction, the Bible often narrows its focus to one individual or family. This is certainly one of those cases. The first eleven chapters of Genesis mostly look at things on a global scale: the creation of the world; the judgment, and subsequent rescue, of the whole earth; the spreading of humanity into a multitude of nations that fills the whole earth. Then, here in chapter 12, we're introduced to Abram (more commonly known as Abraham), and for the next thirty-eight chapters Genesis follows his history and the history of his immediate family.
- 'I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you'—Abram is childless, and he and his wife are already beyond child-bearing years. In Abram's culture, to have no children was a great shame, a sign that he was cursed. God says, 'Far from it.' Abram is uniquely blessed, will be all the more blessed, and will be the ancestor of a great nation. He is destined not simply to have a son to carry on the family name, but to be the father of a multitude.
- 'and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you'—Abram's descendants will be a great nation, but the greatness isn't at the expense of any other nation. Rather, the blessing of Abram's children is to the benefit of everyone else. God pays special attention to Abram, while at the same time caring deeply for the rest of the world.
- 'Abram went, as the LORD had told him'—while the people of Babel actively resisted God's mandate to go and fill the earth, Abram quickly and wholeheartedly moves on when God

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prompts him. Maybe this is what distinguishes Abram. He has a trusting relationship with God, and because of that he's able to accept the blessing God has for him. It's not so much that God prefers Abram, as that Abram actually says 'yes' to what God offers.

- 'To your offspring I will give this land'—the land eventually becomes the land of Israel, named after Abram's grandson. In the 400 years between God's promise here and the people of Israel inhabiting the land, it came to be known as the Promised Land.

#### Taking it home:

- *For you:* It can be frightening to step out beyond what is safe and well-known, but Abram's story tells us that the greatest opportunities often involve stepping into the unknown. Have you felt any nudges to move beyond your comfort zone recently? Ask God to give you the faith to step out and see what happens.
- *For your six:* Abram's relationship with God is based on two very simple things: God speaks to Abram, and Abram hears God speaking. Pray that your six would have just that kind of relationship with God. Ask God to speak to them, and pray that they would be able to recognize when God does.
- *For America:* God promises Abram that his nation will be blessed, but not at the expense of other nations. I think God is saying something that applies uniquely to Abram, but maybe God is also stating a general truth: the welfare of the nations is intertwined; they rise and fall together. Especially during difficult economic times, it can be tempting for nations to pull back from the rest of the world and try to solve their own problems. History tells us that it does indeed make things worse in the end. Pray that our nation would resist the urge to seal off from the rest of the world and go it alone, and ask God to bless us in ways that are of real benefit not just to us but to the rest of the world as well.

#### Thursday, March 5<sup>th</sup>

##### Exodus 19:4-6

**3** Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: **4**'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. **5** Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, **6** you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."

**7** So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the LORD had commanded him to speak. **8** The people all responded together, "We will do everything the LORD has said." So Moses brought their answer back to the LORD

#### Points of interest:

- 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt'—a few things have happened and a few hundred years have passed since yesterday's passage. Here's a quick recap: Abram, renamed Abraham, does indeed have a son, named Isaac; Isaac, in turn, has a son named Jacob (also called Israel); Jacob's family moves to Egypt to avoid a famine; they become a numerous people, as God had promised; the Israelites become slaves of the Egyptians; and God sends this man named Moses to rescue them from slavery.
- 'This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob'—after Moses rescues the Israelites from Egypt, he leads them to a mountain in the Sinai desert, where they meet God to get further

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instructions. What we have in this passage is God's plan for the Israelites. Although they had some sense of group identity before now, you could say that it is during this passage that the Israelites really become a nation. God's promise to make a great nation of Abram's descendants is coming true.

- 'and keep my covenant'—a covenant is like a contract or an agreement. God is inviting the Israelites into a partnership here. In what follows, God will have his part to play, and the Israelites will have theirs.
- 'out of all nations you will be my treasured possession'—God basically repeats his promise to Abraham. The Israelites, Abraham's descendants, will have a special place in God's plan.
- 'a kingdom of priests'—here's what God has in mind for them. Usually, priests are a very small proportion of the population; they're especially close to God, and they serve as intermediaries between God and everyone else. But in Israel, everyone is meant to be a priest, everyone is close to God. If everyone is a priest, for whom exactly are they mediating? I think the answer is the rest of the world. Just like every individual nation has a priesthood, the world as a whole has one priestly nation. This idea of the priestly nation reminds me of God's promise that Abram's descendants would be blessed, not to the detriment of other nations, but to the benefit of other nations. I think the Israelites are meant to be a blessing to other nations in two ways:
  - a. As a model nation. Kind of like a model home, they're God's demonstration of what he can offer to a nation that decides to enter into a covenant with him;
  - b. As spokespeople. They're meant to spread the word about just how good a god God is. God plans to start the blessing with the Israelites, and have them pass it on.
- 'We will do everything'—this is like the Israelites' signature. They agree to the covenant God proposes.

#### Taking it home:

- *For you:* Consider the idea that God would like your life, or the life of your family, to be a model of what God can do when given a chance. What features of your life would you recommend to others? What would you like to be able to recommend? Ask God to give you more of the life you really want, and would really want others to have. Also, ask God to give you the chance to boldly and humbly pass along the things that have worked well for you.
- *For your six:* Before God asks Israel to enter into a covenant with him, he gives them a free sample, as it were. He rescues them from Egypt, in order to demonstrate both his willingness and ability to bring some tangible benefit to their lives. Pray that God would do the same for your six.
- *For America:* It seems like the trick of being a good priest is not to lose contact with either God or a nation's people. If our nation's people are becoming more secular in culture (as I proposed in the introduction), perhaps that means that being priests to our nation requires adopting some of the features of that secular culture. Pray that we as a church would be good priests: that we would strongly identify with our nation's secular culture, without by any means losing touch with God.

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**Friday, March 6<sup>th</sup>**

#### **2 Chronicles 6: 14-42**

"LORD, the God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven or on earth—you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way. 15 You have kept your promise to your servant David my father; with your mouth you have promised and with your hand you have fulfilled it—as it is today.

16 "Now LORD, the God of Israel, keep for your servant David my father the promises you made to him when you said, 'You shall never fail to have a successor to sit before me on the throne of Israel, if only your descendants are careful in all they do to walk before me according to my law, as you have done.' 17 And now, LORD, the God of Israel, let your word that you promised your servant David come true.

18 "But will God really dwell on earth with human beings? The heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built! 19 Yet, LORD my God, give attention to your servant's prayer and his plea for mercy. Hear the cry and the prayer that your servant is praying in your presence. 20 May your eyes be open toward this temple day and night, this place of which you said you would put your Name there. May you hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place. 21 Hear the supplications of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place; and when you hear, forgive.

22 "When anyone wrongs their neighbor and is required to take an oath and they come and swear the oath before your altar in this temple, 23 then hear from heaven and act. Judge between your servants, condemning the guilty and bringing down on their heads what they have done, and vindicating the innocent by treating them in accordance with their innocence.

24 "When your people Israel have been defeated by an enemy because they have sinned against you and when they turn back and give praise to your name, praying and making supplication before you in this temple, 25 then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your people Israel and bring them back to the land you gave to them and their ancestors.

26 "When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain because your people have sinned against you, and when they pray toward this place and give praise to your name and turn from their sin because you have afflicted them, 27 then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your servants, your people Israel. Teach them the right way to live, and send rain on the land you gave your people for an inheritance.

28 "When famine or plague comes to the land, or blight or mildew, locusts or grasshoppers, or when enemies besiege them in any of their cities, whatever disaster or disease may come, 29 and when a prayer or plea is made by anyone among your people Israel—being aware of their afflictions and pains, and spreading out their hands toward this temple— 30 then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Forgive, and deal with everyone according to all they do, since you know their hearts (for you alone know the human heart), 31 so that they will fear you and walk in obedience to you all the time they live in the land you gave our ancestors.

32 "As for foreigners who do not belong to your people Israel but have come from a distant land because of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm—when they come and pray toward this temple, 33 then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears your Name.

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34 "When your people go to war against their enemies, wherever you send them, and when they pray to you toward this city you have chosen and the temple I have built for your Name, 35 then hear from heaven their prayer and their plea, and uphold their cause.

36 "When they sin against you—for there is no one who does not sin—and you become angry with them and give them over to the enemy, who takes them captive to a land far away or near; 37 and if they have a change of heart in the land where they are held captive, and repent and plead with you in the land of their captivity and say, 'We have sinned, we have done wrong and acted wickedly'; 38 and if they turn back to you with all their heart and soul in the land of their captivity where they were taken, and pray toward the land you gave their ancestors, toward the city you have chosen and toward the temple I have built for your Name; 39 then from heaven, your dwelling place, hear their prayer and their pleas, and uphold their cause. And forgive your people, who have sinned against you.

40 "Now, my God, may your eyes be open and your ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place.

41 "Now arise, LORD God, and come to your resting place,  
you and the ark of your might.

May your priests, LORD God, be clothed with salvation,  
may your faithful people rejoice in your goodness.

42 LORD God, do not reject your anointed one.

Remember the great love promised to David your servant. "

#### **Points of interest:**

- 'You have kept your promise to your servant David my father'—again, we have a large time gap between passages. Since our last passage, the Israelites have spent 40 years wandering in the desert, and then begun the long, slow process of taking possession of the Promised Land. This is perhaps—particularly to modern readers—the most disturbing part of the Bible's story of God and the nations, because the land God has promised to the Israelites is actually possessed by other people. Under God's clear and specific instructions, the Israelites drive out, subjugate, and in some cases completely destroy this other group of nations, the Canaanites.

Even here, there are signs that things aren't quite as simple as God loving the Israelites and hating everyone else. For one thing, we get hints that being an Israelite isn't entirely a matter of physical descent from Jacob. Many non-Israelite slaves and perhaps even Egyptians end up joining with the Israelites (Exodus 12:37); and the Bible makes a point of telling us that Moses' own wife and two of the ancestors of Israel's royal family (Rahab and Ruth) are not Israelites by birth, but are fully included in Abraham's promises. Also, it seems there is more going on between God and the Canaanites than God simply shoving the Canaanites aside to make room for the Israelites. Apparently, the Canaanites are a pretty corrupt group, and God has been warning them for some time to put a halt to their injustice and wickedness (Genesis 15:16). When those warnings go unheeded, God uses the Israelites to punish the Canaanites. In this regard, God tells the Israelites that they are, in fact, just like the Canaanites; if the Israelites neglect treating God, one another, and strangers well, they too could find the same thing happening to them (Deuteronomy 8: 19-20).

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These nuances don't completely allay my discomfort at what happens to the Canaanites, but it does help quite a bit to know that God isn't acting arbitrarily, or simply out of a blind preference for the Israelites.

In any case, moving back toward today's passage, it is during the time of David that the possession of the Promised Land is finally completed. David starts out as a shepherd, but ends up becoming the greatest king the Israelites will ever have. Among other things, David is known as a passionate lover of God, and it's David's biggest dream in life to build God a temple. Ever since the departure from Egypt (perhaps 400 years earlier), the center of Israelite worship had been a tent. To honor God, and to commemorate the fact that the Israelites have fully moved into their land, David wants to move God from the tent into a more permanent dwelling. God in essence replies, 'That's very nice of you, David, but it's more important that I build your house (i.e. establish your dynasty) than that you build mine. Maybe your son will get the chance to build a house for me.' David's son Solomon does in fact build a temple. This passage is Solomon's prayer of dedication when the temple is complete.

- 'But will God really dwell on earth with human beings?'—Solomon starts this prayer by recognizing that God does not, in fact, live in the temple. God doesn't need a roof over his head. The temple is meant to be a symbol of God's presence, not an actual place for God to live. The Israelites often have a hard time remembering this fact.
- 'As for foreigners'—when you think about it, this is fairly remarkable. This place is meant to be the center of the Israelite's religious life and, in fact, of their entire national identity. In my experience, places like this are usually built entirely for the people who are already in the club. But from the beginning, Solomon has the expectation that there will be a flow of visitors to this temple.
- 'so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel'—again, as we saw with Abram, the temple is in Israel, but it's not only for Israel. Here's Solomon's plan:
  - When Israelites come to this temple to pray, they will actually meet a living God who answers prayer;
  - News of this amazing place where prayers are answered will spread beyond their borders;
  - Strangers will come to see if these rumors are true, and they too will meet God and have their prayers answered;
  - And they will spread the word until the whole world knows of this living, prayer-answering God.

#### Taking it home:

- *For you:* Do you feel like God has made you any promises recently? Take a moment to remind God of those promises, and ask him to fulfill them.
- *For your six:* It seems that even people who don't really believe in prayer can occasionally find themselves praying, sometimes out of sheer desperation. Pray that if any of your non-praying six do step out in prayer, for whatever reason, God would quickly answer them.
- *For America:* David initiated the building of the temple, but it was Solomon who finished it. Often, a nation's most important projects take more than one generation to accomplish. Today, choose one of our nation's overwhelming, long-term projects: improving public education, re-forming healthcare or social security, or decreasing carbon emissions for instance. Pray that the generations now living would start a good foundation for future generations to build on, even though we may very well not see the end results.

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**Saturday, March 7<sup>th</sup>**

#### **1 Kings 4: 29-34**

29 God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. 30 Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. 31 He was wiser than anyone else, including Ethan the Ezrahite—wiser than Heman, Kalkol and Darda, the sons of Mahol. And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. 32 He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. 33 He spoke about plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also spoke about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. 34 From all nations people came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom.

#### **1 Kings 10: 1-9**

1 When the queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon and his relationship to the LORD, she came to test Solomon with hard questions. 2 Arriving at Jerusalem with a very great caravan—with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold, and precious stones—she came to Solomon and talked with him about all that she had on her mind. 3 Solomon answered all her questions; nothing was too hard for the king to explain to her. 4 When the queen of Sheba saw all the wisdom of Solomon and the palace he had built, 5 the food on his table, the seating of his officials, the attending servants in their robes, his cupbearers, and the burnt offerings he made at the temple of the LORD, she was overwhelmed.

6 She said to the king, "The report I heard in my own country about your achievements and your wisdom is true. 7 But I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half was told me; in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard. 8 How happy your people must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! 9 Praise be to the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the LORD's eternal love for Israel, he has made you king to maintain justice and righteousness."

#### **Points of interest:**

- 'God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight'—God had granted Solomon one wish. With it Solomon asked to be given the wisdom he would need to rule the people of Israel as well as his father David had.
- 'greater than all the wisdom of Egypt'—it's interesting to hear that there was something of an international market for wisdom. People were willing to take the best wisdom they could find, wherever it originated. During Solomon's time, Israel goes from being a net importer of wisdom to a major exporter. Egypt was the center of power, knowledge, and culture at the time, at least in Israel's neighborhood and perhaps in the whole world.
- 'From all nations people came to listen to Solomon's wisdom'—Solomon himself is the biggest example of his hope at the dedication of the temple coming true. Solomon's prayer for wisdom is answered, and it draws others. Other kings (and queens too) are especially interested. They want the same wisdom to rule their own nations.
- 'When the queen of Sheba heard'—we're not sure exactly where Sheba is. It was probably in East Africa, southern Arabia, or both. If it's any of those places, Sheba would have been at the very edges of the Israelites' awareness. The author of 1 Kings is saying that someone travelled from the other end of the world (as far as they knew) to check out what they'd been hearing about Solomon.

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- ‘and his relationship to the LORD’—the queen of Sheba is aware that Solomon’s wisdom has a supernatural source.
- ‘I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes’—what she sees when she arrives in Israel matches, and even goes beyond, the rumors she had heard.
- ‘Because of the LORD’s eternal love for Israel’—the queen is willing to grant that Israel has something special going on. She also seems to think that she can get a share of that same favor. I hear in her exclamation a desire to follow Solomon’s example, in wisdom and relationship with God.

#### Taking it home:

- *For you:* God seems to be very willing to give wisdom to those who ask, and not just about spiritual matters. Solomon gains wisdom about wise government, and even about the workings of nature. Do you find you need wisdom? Maybe it’s about a problem you’re encountering at work, a challenge you’re having raising your children or caring for your parents, a puzzle in your research, a difficult subject at school. Ask God to give you the wisdom you need to succeed.
- *For your six:* One thing I notice in this passage is that wisdom is meant to be shared. Ethan the Ezrahite, Mahol’s sons, the Egyptians, Solomon, and the Queen of Sheba are all passing along whatever wisdom they find—and other people are glad to pick it up. What can you learn from your six? What wisdom do they have that could be of help to you? Is there anything you have to offer them? It would be a pity if any wisdom you or your six have went to waste.
- *For America:* The thing that impresses me most about the Queen of Sheba is that, though she is the powerful leader of a prosperous nation, she doesn’t pretend to have everything figured out. She is willing to seek and take advice. Pray for the leaders of our nation—President Obama, the leaders of both parties, and the leaders of both houses of Congress—that they would have the same humility and wisdom.

### Sunday, March 8<sup>th</sup>

#### Psalm 22

For the director of music. To the tune of "The Doe of the Morning." A psalm of David.

1 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me,  
so far from the words of my groaning?

2 My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,  
by night, but I find no rest.

3 Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;  
you are the praise of Israel.

4 In you our ancestors put their trust;  
they trusted and you delivered them.

5 They cried to you and were saved;  
in you they trusted and were not disappointed.

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6 But I am a worm, not a human being;  
I am scorned by everyone, despised by the people.

7 All who see me mock me;  
they hurl insults, shaking their heads.

8 "He trusts in the LORD," they say,  
"let the LORD rescue him.  
Let him deliver him,  
since he delights in him."

9 Yet you brought me out of the womb;  
you made me feel secure on my mother's breast.

10 From birth I was cast on you;  
from my mother's womb you have been my God.

11 Do not be far from me,  
for trouble is near  
and there is no one to help.

12 Many bulls surround me;  
strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.

13 Roaring lions that tear their prey  
open their mouths wide against me.

14 I am poured out like water,  
and all my bones are out of joint.  
My heart has turned to wax;  
it has melted within me.

15 My mouth is dried up like a potsherd,  
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;  
you lay me in the dust of death.

16 Dogs surround me,  
a pack of villains encircles me;  
they pierce my hands and my feet.

17 All my bones are on display;  
people stare and gloat over me.

18 They divide my clothes among them  
and cast lots for my garment.

19 But you, LORD, do not be far from me.  
You are my strength; come quickly to help me.

20 Deliver me from the sword,  
my precious life from the power of the dogs.

21 Rescue me from the mouth of the lions;  
save me from the horns of the wild oxen.

22 I will declare your name to my people;  
in the assembly I will praise you.

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- 23 You who fear the LORD, praise him!  
All you descendants of Jacob, honor him!  
Revere him,  
all you descendants of Israel!
- 24 For he has not despised or scorned  
the suffering of the afflicted one;  
he has not hidden his face from him  
but has listened to his cry for help.
- 25 From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly;  
before those who fear you I will fulfill my vows.
- 26 The poor will eat and be satisfied;  
those who seek the LORD will praise him—  
may your hearts live forever!
- 27 All the ends of the earth  
will remember and turn to the LORD,  
and all the families of the nations  
will bow down before him,
- 28 for dominion belongs to the LORD  
and he rules over the nations.
- 29 All the rich of the earth will feast and worship;  
all who go down to the dust will kneel before him—  
those who cannot keep themselves alive.
- 30 Posterity will serve him;  
future generations will be told about the Lord.
- 31 They will proclaim his righteousness,  
declaring to a people yet unborn:  
He has done it!

#### **Points of interest:**

- Today, we step out of the Old Testament histories and into poetry. For the next week or so, we'll be reading the psalms, which are the Bible's prayers and worship songs. Incidentally, about half of these psalms—including the one today—were written by Solomon's father David.
- 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'—this may sound familiar. It's Jesus' cry of agony when he is on the cross. The psalm comes first; David lived about a thousand years before Jesus. So, Jesus is quoting David. In fact, Jesus may very well be referring to the whole psalm, rather than just quoting the first line: it may have been common practice to use a psalm's first line as its title; and there are indeed remarkable similarities between this psalm and Jesus' own experience. This psalm seems to operate on two planes at the same time; it's simultaneously a somewhat hyperbolic complaint about trouble David is facing and a startlingly accurate prophecy of the suffering Jesus will face.

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- ‘But I am a worm, not a human being’—if God answer’s people’s prayers, then the subject of the psalm is a lot less than a person, because his prayer is not being answered.
- ‘you made me feel secure on my mother’s breast’—the psalmist’s current experience doesn’t match what he has come to know of God. God had cared for his ancestors, and even for him personally in the past. Why, then, is he not answering now?
- ‘strong bulls of Bashan encircle me’—Bashan is near what we now know as the Golan heights. During David’s time, it was Israelite territory. Apparently it was somewhat famous for its livestock. Several biblical poets use Bashan cattle as a symbol of strength and vitality. Here all of that strength is put to the purpose of bullying the psalmist.
- ‘But you, LORD, do not be far from me’—everyone else is abandoning the psalmist. He claims to be trusting in God, but he looks much more like he’s cursed; and people are afraid that the curse is contagious. When everyone else runs away, the psalmist asks God to draw near and to help.
- ‘You who fear the LORD, praise him!’—in the middle of the song, we shift from complaint and pleading to praise. The psalmist’s prayer has been answered.
- ‘All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD’—this is a message that the psalmist wants everyone, everywhere to hear. The news spreads from those closest to him (‘my people), to a wider community (‘the assembly’), to the ends of the earth. What he wants everyone to know is that even when things look darkest, there’s a God who hears, answers, comforts, and rescues.
- ‘those who cannot keep themselves alive’—this good news applies to rich and to poor, to the present and to the future. That’s because it addresses a problem we all face: we can and will die. David was apparently on the very edge of death. Jesus did, in fact, die; and yet God was able to rescue both of them. God is willing and able to save each and everyone one of us from death as well. That’s a message worth telling everyone who can hear.

#### Taking it home:

- *For you:* Are you feeling alone? Disappointed with God? Consider praying this psalm as if it were your own prayer. When it’s applicable, personalize the prayer to your own situation.
- *For your six:* Are any of your six facing a difficult time? It can be tempting to distance ourselves from the suffering of others, because it’s overwhelming, or frightening, or we don’t know what to do. Pray that God would give you the ability to stick with your friend, offering comfort and support when times are hard. Ask God to sustain you when it gets tiring, and to guide you when you don’t know what to do.
- *For America:* I love the fact that at the end of this psalm, the rich are feasting, and the poor have more than enough to eat. Pray for the welfare of our nation, that rich and poor alike would experience abundance and joy.