



God's Big Story



Asbury's Vision Statement:

Developing all generations for significant lives in Christ.

This defines our specific and unique calling.

Asbury's Marks:

Worship and obey Christ

Learn and live out Scripture

Influence and invite others to follow Christ

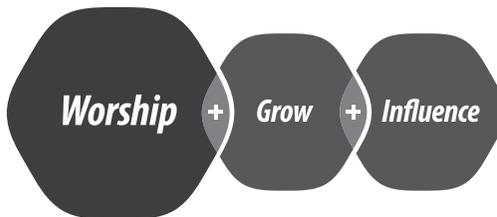
Steward time, skills and resources

United with the Body of Christ

These are outward signs of spiritual growth for a Christ-follower at Asbury.

Asbury's Map

Worship +2. This is what we want people to do to connect at Asbury.



Prayer and Priority List

- Every Sunday, come to worship, grow and influence.
- Every Sunday, communion and prayer are available at 9:00 am in Mason Chapel.
- Every Monday, Celebrate Recovery, Celebration Station and the Landing meet.

January

Thur, 1.1 New Year's Day, church offices closed
Sun, 1.4 Communion in all services
Sun, 1.11 "God's Big Story" sermon series begins
 Joining Asbury luncheon, 12:15–2:00 pm, CLC
 RoadMap classes begin

February

Sun, 2.8 Joining Asbury luncheon, 12:15–2:00 pm, CLC
Wed, 2.18 Ash Wednesday

Asbury begins 2015 with a renewed focus on discipleship. Jesus' marching orders to His church were very simple and direct: *"Go! Make disciples."*

This is an active concept. **"Go!"** means to take initiative. **"Make"** is also an action word. There's nothing passive about it. **"Disciples"** are what we're supposed to produce. A disciple is first and foremost a learner. A disciple has more than just head knowledge, too; it's a way of life. A disciple is also someone who learns to influence others. Being a disciple is learning with a greater purpose in mind!

To be able to make disciples, we must understand God's plan for humanity. This is the basic knowledge that puts everything else into context. It helps us answer questions such as: "Who is God, how is He at work in the world, how does He see us and why do we matter?"

Everything we know about God's big story has been revealed through Scripture—which was written over thousands of years by human hands under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We can understand God's big story primarily by looking at the historical and prophetic books of the Bible—but this can be challenging because the Bible is not arranged in chronological order. Genesis chapter one and Revelation chapter 22 serve as bookends to a very large "middle" part. We're living in the middle of God's big story right now, and we all have a role to play.

The artwork for this series is Michelangelo's iconic painting from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel of God animating Adam. That's where our series will begin. Michelangelo attempted to capture God's big story in the limited space of the Sistine Chapel, so we'll attempt to tell His big story over the next six weeks—in a way that makes it easy to understand and to remember.

It's wonderful to learn, grow, improve and get better. We are trying to develop disciples of Jesus Christ. We want children, youth and adults to engage in this process. We believe this will lead to both satisfaction and significance in life. Thus, our vision statement is a direct reflection of what Jesus said about *"Go! Make disciples."* Asbury will endeavor to: *"Develop all generations for significant lives in Christ."*

This should prove to be one of our very best years. I'm grateful. I'm optimistic. I'm ready to "GO!"



Dr. Tom Harrison, *Senior Pastor*

How to Use the Journal

Congratulations on your decision to engage the Word of God on a daily basis! You have chosen the best approach to spiritual growth available.

Pastor Tom developed the journal several years ago to offer a structured daily reading plan because he wants people learning how to feed themselves spiritually. He places tremendous value on personal study and exposure to the whole Bible. There are many reading plans available, but he thought it best to provide one connected to the sermon series.

Journaling is typically a personal or “inward” discipline. How you relate to the Lord depends largely on your personality and the nature of your relationship. Some may prefer a more academic approach of word-study and cross-references while others may carry on intimate dialogues with Jesus using the Scripture as a springboard for conversation. However you approach journaling is OK.

While journaling is an inward discipline, the journal itself can be used as a guide for group discussion or family devotionals. Think of it as a tool for spiritual growth. Asbury puts time and expense into creating these because it is one of the best ways we can help develop all generations for significant lives in Christ.

To begin, you will need a Bible you can understand; the New International Version is a safe bet and the version Pastor Tom and Pastor Todd use for preaching. The New Living Translation is a little more “user-friendly” for beginners.

1. Pray first. Ask for wisdom and understanding and for the Lord to speak to you through the text.
2. Read the scripture referenced at the top of the page. If you have trouble locating passages, use your Bible’s table of contents. References are always listed in this order: book, chapter, verse(s).
3. Respond to the scripture text by answering these three questions in your own words: What does the passage say? What does the passage say to me? How can I apply it to my life? (These guiding questions may be used every day.)
4. The margin notes offer insight to the text, and the questions are there for group discussion or personal application. You may use the blank lines to write or “process” your responses.
5. Consider everything you write as dialogue with God—a casual, informal prayer conversation that helps you grow into knowing Him (and yourself) better.

Finally, be sure to bring your journal every Sunday to take notes.

A Guide to Journal Symbols

-  context clues or background information about the passage
-  extra application or activity beyond reflection and prayer

God's Big Story



Chapter One

In the Beginning: The Story of Creation

Chapter Two

Separate Ways: The Story of Rebellion

Chapter Three

A Chosen People: The Story of Israel

Chapter Four

Kingdom Come: The Story of God's Kingdom

Chapter Five

A Royal Priesthood: The Story of the Church

Chapter Six

Ending is Beginning: The Story of New Creation

Top Ten List of Best Opening Lines

10. "He was the most extraordinary man I ever knew."
–Robert Bolt, *Lawrence of Arabia*
9. "Now is the winter of our discontent made
glorious summer by this sun of York..."
–William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Richard III*
8. "It was a dark and stormy night."
–Madeleine L'Engle, *A Wrinkle in Time*
7. "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways."
–Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Sonnet 43*
6. "It was the best of times, it was the worst of
times..."
–Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*
5. "There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb,
and he almost deserved it."
–C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*
4. "Space, the final frontier."
–Gene Roddenberry, *Star Trek*
3. "A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away."
–George Lucas, *Star Wars*
2. "We the People of the United States, in Order to
form a more perfect union..."
–James Madison, *The Constitution for the United States*
1. "In the beginning God created the heavens and
the earth."
–Genesis 1:1

Chapter One

GENESIS IS A BOOK of beginnings. It is a history of origins. In it we discover how the heavens and the earth, light and darkness, seas and skies, land and vegetation, sun, moon, stars, animals and humans came into being. We also discover the origins of marriage, family, society, civilization, sin and redemption. Genesis puts forth a monotheistic worldview: there is only one God, and He is the maker of all things. He is independent of His creation and sovereign over it. Genesis chapters one and two give accounts of the same events—by a series of royal decrees the Creator brought a perfectly ordered world and its inhabitants into existence. His final creative act in these chapters—His magnum opus: humanity! He makes humankind in His image and for His glory.

In fact, God made all things for His glory, displaying the work of His hands. Not like a trophy in a glass display case, but as the revelation of His character and His presence. As God's image-bearers, we are uniquely and specially created to be a reflection of Him, but because of our rebellion, our reflection is marred by sin. Jesus Christ brought glory to the Father by reflecting God's character perfectly. Because He is fully God, He can say, *look at me and see what God is like*. Because He is fully human and lived according to God's standard of moral excellence, He can say, *look at me and see how you should live*. In Jesus Christ we find the clearest picture of who God is *and* who we were created to be.

The first book in God's big story introduces the major theme of the Bible—relationship. It sets up God's relationship to His creation, especially to humankind; and humankind's relationship to God, the world and to one another. The story of humanity begins in a garden with two people living in perfect fellowship with God, with one another and with their environment. This was God's intention for humanity all along—to live forever in close communion with Him—as the object of His love, a representation of His character, and an extension of His presence. The original plan gets ruined by sin, and the rest of God's big story, as found in the Bible, is about God restoring everything that was lost. The restoration plan will take thousands of years to unfold, and throughout the entire story, God's relationship to His most prized creation stands at the center of it all.

Matthew 22:15–22

TUESDAY
JANUARY 13, 2015

Imago dei is the Latin phrase meaning “the image of God” and refers to the unique stamp God put upon humanity, identifying them as a special creation—having a spiritual nature, mental aptitudes, the capacity to love and be loved, free will and dominion over creation.

The Pharisees used this question in an attempt to trap Jesus; not only did He outsmart His opponents, but His answer is insightful for His followers. According to the passage, bearing God’s image means we “owe” God what?



“God exists whether or not men may choose to believe in Him. The reason why many people do not believe in God is not so much that it is intellectually impossible to believe in God, but because belief in God forces that thoughtful person to face the fact that he is accountable to such a God.”

—Robert A. Laidlaw

Chapter Two



THE FIRST ELEVEN CHAPTERS of Genesis are critical to understanding God's big story. Although we do not know how much time has passed between Genesis chapters two (creation) and three (the fall of man), we do know at some point in time Adam and Eve rebelled against the rule of God and chose to rule themselves. That critical decision, that choice, put the rest of the events of Scripture into motion.

By eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam did the one thing God told him not to do and, at that moment, Adam became separated from God and all of humanity along with him.

In Genesis chapter four, we see Adam and Eve, now banished from the garden, have two sons. Because of his faith, Abel and his offering have God's favor. God did not "look with favor" on Cain and his offering. Cain murders his brother, and in this one tragic event we see common effects of sin: jealousy, anger, strife, deception and murder. And from this event, we learn the sin nature is transmitted from Adam to his offspring. Every human (with the exception of Jesus) will be born with a sin nature. *We are all sinners.*

Fast forward several hundred years. In Genesis chapter six, Scripture tells us the Lord saw how wicked men had become—every inclination of the heart was evil, all the time. The Lord was grieved He had created humankind. He grieved over His creation! So the Lord decided to wipe the slate clean and begin again with the most righteous man alive, Noah. He sent a great flood to cleanse the earth and start over with the moral "cream of the crop." However, three chapters later, Noah's family is also engaged in sinful behavior. Scripture makes it clear at this point, the solution to our sin problem would not come from humanity—it would have to come from somewhere else.

By chapter eleven we see the individual sin nature has become an organized rebellion against the rule of God as the people gather in a united, proud and selfish effort to make a name for themselves. They attempt to assert their dominance over God and His creation through construction of a great city with a giant ziggurat. The tower of Babel provides a snapshot from history that illustrates our ever-present human tendency to defy God and act selfishly.

God Himself will provide a solution to this sin problem—and the solution will be a who, not a what.

Genesis 11:1–4

WEDNESDAY
JANUARY 14, 2015

“Do not make idols or set up an image or a sacred stone for yourselves, and do not place a carved stone in your land to bow down before it. I am the LORD your God.”

—Leviticus 26:1

Today’s reading is a picture of the fundamental issue which exemplifies humanity’s rebellion—that is a failure to acknowledge and remain loyal to the rule of God. The bottom line—this is God’s universe and He gets to set the standards. Any variance from His rule is rebellion.

What are some “monuments” we build to ourselves? In what ways do these monuments provide for us a sense of identity or self-worth?

Are these monuments wrong, or is it the value we place in them that is the problem?

“For my own name’s sake I delay my wrath; for the sake of my praise I hold it back from you, so as not to destroy you completely. See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake, for my own sake, I do this. How can I let myself be defamed? I will not yield my glory to another.”

—Isaiah 48:9–11

Read Daniel 3 for another example of man’s colossal arrogance and self-glorification.

+1

*Genesis 3:14–24***FRIDAY****JANUARY 16, 2015**

Sin is a lack of conformity to the moral perfection of God. We are not sinners because we sin, rather we sin because we are sinners (Psalm 51:5). In other words, our sinful behavior is a manifestation of our sinful nature.



When do you consider death a good thing? When is it a gift of God's mercy?

It seems God originally intended people to have eternal life because He gave the "tree of life" to provide it. We also see the "introduction" of human death through the curse (verses 19, 22, 24).

When Adam and Eve rebelled against the rule of God, sin entered the world—the earth and everything in it became "fallen." God made death part of the curse. If He had not, we would have to live in a fallen state—along with all its pain, suffering, sickness and depravity until the second coming of Christ.

Genesis 11:1–4

SUNDAY
JANUARY 18, 2015

“And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.

—Romans 13:11–14

“For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”

—Hebrews 4:12–13

“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.”

—Galatians 5:24–25

1 John 3:1–10

TUESDAY
JANUARY 20, 2015

When we are “born of God,” we do not attain sinless perfection immediately, but our lives will become characterized more and more by doing what is right.

“You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.”

—1 John 4:4–6

“We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true by being in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.”

—1 John 5:19–21

What benefits do we gain as children of God? List as many as you can from today’s verses.

Chapter Three

GOD'S ORIGINAL PLAN WAS to live in close communion with His creation, that which was made for His glory. He created a perfect place for people, a place where He could walk in fellowship with them. But Adam and Eve disobeyed God and chose to rebel against His rule. They were banished from that perfect place and all their descendents along with them. When the first humans chose to follow their own selfish will instead of God's, they broke the direct God-connection for all people. His goal was still to be in fellowship with His creation, but He knew people's hearts would be inclined toward evil all the time—so He launched "plan B."

God determined to build a nation of like-minded people who were intent on knowing and trusting Him. His fingerprint would be on this new community from the beginning, and through this chosen nation, God would reveal Himself to the world. Through His interactions with this special group of people, He would provide a picture of what life with the one true God is like. And ultimately, God would use this nation to give others the opportunity to join in life with Him.

From the moment of its inception, this nation was characterized by providence. God's vision was to begin with one righteous couple and grow the nation through their offspring. Instead of picking the obvious choice—a young, healthy, *fertile* couple—God chose the opposite: Abram (later called Abraham) was 75 and his wife, Sarai (later called Sarah) was 65 when God called them to this special task. They had no children of their own because Sarai was barren. And here's the kicker—God gave them only one son, Isaac, 25 years later. The Lord assured Abraham his offspring would be more numerous than the sand on the seashore and through him the whole world would be blessed! Isaac grew up, married Rebekah and 20 years later they had twin boys. The younger son, Jacob, had twelve sons and from these children came the twelve tribes forming the nation of Israel.

Genesis chapters 37 through 50 give the amazing account of Jacob's son, Joseph, whom God sent to Egypt and placed in a position of power so he could save his extended family during a famine. Jacob, his sons and their families moved to Egypt to live under Joseph's care. Over the next 400 years, their numbers increased to a couple million people. They were presumed a threat by Pharaoh and became enslaved by the Egyptians. God sent Moses to challenge Pharaoh, to demonstrate God's power through a series of miracles (known as the ten plagues) and finally to deliver the Israelites from slavery. During their "exodus," God parted the Red Sea allowing the Israelites to escape Pharaoh's army—this became a defining moment

in Israel's history. God instructed Moses to lead the chosen people to the land which God promised Abraham his offspring would inherit. This land was known as "Canaan" then, also called the "promised land" by the Israelites and what we call the "Holy Land" today. But before God would allow them to enter the new "garden" which flowed with milk and honey—He had some refining to do. The Israelites spent 40 years living in the desert wilderness during which time the Lord revealed Himself to them, taught them to trust in Him and prepared them for the most incredible privilege—a privilege no humans had experienced since Adam and Eve. The Lord was going to dwell among His people. He was going to move into their camp and live with them! Before He would step down into their world, however, He had to establish the rules of engagement.

First, the Israelites had to live by God's guidelines. He would have them be a community of moral excellence—where people knew how to behave toward God and toward each other. So God gave them the Ten Commandments and expected them to live accordingly. Second, He required a place to stay. He gave the Israelites detailed instructions so they could build Him a mobile sanctuary. It became known as the tabernacle or "tent of dwelling." Third, the gap between God's holiness and His people's inherent selfishness had to be overcome. The cost of sin is death, so the Lord devised an on-going system of animal sacrifices to provide atonement. Atonement is a temporary "covering" for sin. God's provision was for innocent lambs to receive the punishment people deserved.

The Israelites eventually conquered the land of Canaan and took up residence there. They longed to have a king like everybody else, so God gave them what they wanted—first with Saul, then David and then his son, Solomon.

Throughout their history, God's chosen people went through cycles of obedience and disobedience. When Israel refused to live by God's guidelines, they gave a terribly inaccurate reflection of God's character to the surrounding nations. If they did not live as a people "set apart" by the one true God, then no one would know what life with God was like. The Lord warned them repeatedly and took disciplinary measures, but the chosen people continued to ignore Him and go their separate way. Eventually, God sent Assyria to conquer ten tribes and deport its inhabitants. The tribe of Judah, however, would never be completely destroyed because God had promised King David the "Messiah" would come from his lineage. Therefore, Judah was conquered by the Babylonians, their magnificent Temple was destroyed and the people were sent into exile. Seventy years later a remnant of God's chosen people, now called "Jews," returned to Jerusalem and began rebuilding.

God's long-range plan to cure us of our sin virus by providing permanent atonement would come from the Messiah. About 400 years later—once again, God entered this world and for 33 years, He dwelt among His people but this time as a man, the one and only God-man, Jesus Christ.

A Snapshot of Israel's History from Scripture

The call of Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation: *"The LORD had said to Abram, 'Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. 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. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'"*

–Genesis 12:1–3

The Lord calls Israel to be His chosen representatives: *"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 descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 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, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."* –Exodus 19:3–6

For a succinct review of Israel's early history, read Stephen's speech in Acts 7:1–53.

The Israelites ask God for a king so they can be like other nations: *"And the LORD told him: 'Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king.'" –1 Samuel 8:7*

The Messiah will be a descendent of King David. "Jesse" is David's father: *"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD..." –Isaiah 11:1–2 (see also 2 Samuel 7:16)*

After Solomon, the kingdom of Israel becomes and remains divided: *"When all the Israelites heard that Jeroboam had returned, they sent and called him to the assembly and made him king over all Israel. Only the tribe of Judah remained loyal to the house of David." –1 Kings 12:20*

Many years later, the Lord responds to Israel's failure to represent Him accurately: *"And wherever they went among the nations they profaned my holy name, for it was said of them, 'These are the LORD's people, and yet they had to leave his land.' I had concern for my holy name, which the people of Israel profaned among the nations where they had gone. Therefore say to the Israelites, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: It is not for your sake, people of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone.'" –Ezekiel 36:20–22*

Because Israel continues to reject the Lord, they are scattered and exiled. The Lord promises to restore a remnant: *"In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing: 'This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah.'" –Ezra 1:1–2*

Jesus weeps over Jerusalem because of His people's stubbornness: *"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" –Luke 13:34–35*

Other good readings for Israel's role in God's big story: Psalm 135, Isaiah 43, Isaiah 45

*Romans 9:1–21***WEDNESDAY**
JANUARY 21, 2015

Note: The Sunday text is Romans 11:13–24. The readings this week will carry us through Paul's explanation of God's sovereign choice regarding Israel's past, present and future.

If someone wants proof that God exists, point to the Jews. Their nation has survived over 4,000 years—most of that time without a homeland or a government. Throughout history, they have lived constantly under oppression, persecution and threat of annihilation and yet, *here they are.*

"For I knew how stubborn you were; your neck muscles were iron, your forehead was bronze."

—Isaiah 48:4

Israel's stubbornness is both their greatest weakness and their greatest strength—it is a weakness which made them hard to teach and to lead, but that same stubbornness helped them survive thousands of years of persecution without losing faith in their God. The Lord chose a resilient people.

Romans 10

FRIDAY

JANUARY 23, 2015

Because of His love and grace, God wants everyone to be saved. Because of His truth and holiness, God must uphold His standard of moral excellence. Israel is experiencing God's sternness while the Gentiles are experiencing His kindness. In these chapters from the book of Romans, Paul is warning the church—if God would not spare Israel, "the apple of His eye," for their disobedience then He will not spare us either (Romans 11:20–21).

"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."

—Matthew 10:28–31

How will the Jews be saved (verses 9–13)?

In some ways, those inside the church have become like ancient Israel. Many "religious" people remain spiritually blind and disobedient, while those outside the church are eager to respond to God's message (verses 20–21). How would you feel if verse 21 was spoken about us, instead of ancient Israel?

Romans 15:5–13

TUESDAY
 JANUARY 27, 2015

What can you learn about the purpose of Christ's coming from this passage (verses 8–9)? Does this surprise you? Why or why not?

Have you ever considered the God of Israel including the Gentiles in His salvation plan as an act of mercy toward us?

According to this passage, what are we called to do? Write it in your journal.

Where would the church be without God's chosen people?

"Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: 'May those who love you be secure. May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels.'"
 —Psalm 122:6–7

Chapter Four

IT WAS KING DAVID who pulled together the loose confederacy of twelve tribes, uniting them and transforming them from a nation into a kingdom. He was Israel's most famous king—a man after God's own heart, zealous for the Lord, a gifted musician and poet, a skillful administrator and a valiant warrior. The Lord was so pleased with David that He made an incredible promise—David's heir would sit on the throne forever. For hundreds of years the Jews waited and hoped for the Lord to send the Messiah, the anointed one, from the line of David to throw off their foreign oppressors and restore Israel to its former glory. Then one day a wild man, a sort-of-street-preacher, who ate bugs and wore camel-hair clothes came out of the desert with a strange new message, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." John the Baptist was the forerunner to the Messiah. The time had arrived, not a chronological time, but a decisive time for God's action. Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin, Mary. An angel of the Lord confirms for her, Jesus is the Son of the Most High and God will give Jesus the throne of His servant, David. Jesus will reign over Israel forever and His kingdom will never end.

At the age of 30, Jesus Christ begins His public ministry. He confirms John's message, "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" Jesus would spend much of His ministry explaining what the kingdom of God is like, demonstrating its power, and teaching His followers how to enter into it. What is the good news? Through Jesus, the divine community of God's kingdom is available to anyone who believes! In one sentence Jesus captures the essence of God's restoration plan, "for God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." Jesus explains it this way, whoever wants to enter God's kingdom must be born again, a spiritual birth for a spiritual life. Spiritual birth comes from trusting Jesus and believing in Him by faith.

Jesus came to testify to the truth about God and His kingdom, to seek and to save those who are lost, and to make a once and for all sacrifice for our sins. One of the requirements for God to dwell among the Israelites was making atonement for their sin through an on-going system of animal sacrifices. As the innocent Lamb of God, Jesus would take the punishment we deserved—He would lay down His life for all people through all time. The animal sacrifices provided a temporary covering until Jesus Christ provided a permanent solution to our sin problem.

His followers were expecting the Messiah to overthrow the Romans – for Him to wear a crown and sit upon a throne and rule with justice. What happened was this: Jesus overthrew sin and death, and the curse that came from Adam and Eve's rebellion—He wore a crown of thorns and hung upon a cross. He died as a perfect, unblemished and innocent sacrifice, and three days later was raised from the dead. Jesus Christ is our Savior, but He is also our Lord and our King. When He came to Earth, He brought the kingdom of God with Him, or at least the beginning of it. He came to forgive us our sins, but He also came to give us new life through Him beginning *today*.

The kingdom of God is distinct from the world we know. It is a reversed hierarchy—where the last are first and first are last. God's kingdom is one of healing and wholeness. God's kingdom is characterized by moral renewal—those who choose can live under the rule of God by repenting of sin and turning toward Him. It is not defined by space and time but by a way of living—with faith in and devotion to the King of kings and the One who saves. To those who seek it—the kingdom is more valuable than anything else, even one's own life. Any who wish to enter it must be born again and then live under God's rule. After Jesus ascended, God provided His Holy Spirit so that Jesus may dwell in our hearts and fill us with the knowledge of God's love—helping us live the kingdom life now and empowering us to be witnesses for Christ.

A Snapshot of God's Kingdom from Scripture

Jesus brought it with Him: *"But he said, 'I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.'"* –Luke 4:43

Jesus is King over it: *"He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."* –Luke 1:32–33

Those who understand the benefits will seek it with all their hearts: *"The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure that a man discovered hidden in a field. In his excitement, he hid it again and sold everything he owned to get enough money to buy the field. Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant on the lookout for choice pearls. When he discovered a pearl of great value, he sold everything he owned and bought it!"* –Matthew 13:44–46 (NLT)

It requires repentance and faith: *"After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!'"* –Mark 1:14–15

It requires devotion: *"Jesus replied, 'No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.'"* –Luke 9:62

It requires workers: *"Jesus traveled through all the towns and villages of that area, teaching in the synagogues and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom. And he healed every kind of disease and illness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. He said to his disciples, 'The harvest is great, but the workers are few. So pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest; ask him to send more workers into his fields.'"* –Matthew 9:35–38 (NLT)

Only the righteous will enter: *"Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a fishing net that was thrown into the water and caught fish of every kind. When the net was full, they dragged it up onto the shore, sat down, and sorted the good fish into crates, but threw the bad ones away. That is the way it will be at the end of the world. The angels will come and separate the wicked people from the righteous, throwing the wicked into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."* –Matthew 13:47–50 (NLT)

God's kingdom will last forever: *"Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations. The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does."* –Psalm 145:13

Those who enter eventually receive new bodies suitable for living in it eternally: *"Just as we are now like the earthly man, we will someday be like the heavenly man. What I am saying, dear brothers and sisters, is that our physical bodies cannot inherit the Kingdom of God. These dying bodies cannot inherit what will last forever. But let me reveal to you a wonderful secret. We will not all die, but we will all be transformed!"* –1 Corinthians 15:48–51 (NLT)

Luke 17:20–21

WEDNESDAY
JANUARY 28, 2015

The first century Jews were not that far off when they expected the Messiah to set up a kingdom. They imagined a traditional geo-political kingdom but Jesus brought them something better—a kingdom spanning all time and space. Our understanding of Messiah is also a little off. We imagine Him reigning over a future kingdom in heaven and think He came to earth only to provide a means to get us there. We tend to think the gospel of Jesus is only about His sacrificial death that allows us to be forgiven of our sins so that we can “go to” heaven. But when Jesus preached the gospel—He was preaching about the kingdom of God which He initiated *with His coming*.

“The Gospel of the Kingdom is that you can now live in the Kingdom of God and the Gospel of the Atonement is that your sins can be forgiven. Those are the, respective, ‘Good Newses,’ I suppose.”
—Dallas Willard

What difference does knowing God’s kingdom is available to you now make in your life today?

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.”

–1 John 1:1–3

Matthew 13:31–35

TUESDAY
FEBRUARY 3, 2015

The kingdom of God is the reign of God that He brings about through Jesus Christ. It begins with the establishment of God's rule in the hearts and lives of people. It will continue to grow and spread until it overcomes all the forces of evil and all the consequences of sin, and finally fills the whole world through the creation and occupation of a new heaven and a new earth. In this way the God's kingdom is both now and not yet. It has already begun but it is not yet fulfilled.

Every kingdom needs a king, subjects, rules for governance and some sort of locale. Those who trust Jesus in their daily lives are kingdom people and Jesus is their King. The Lord has given His subjects Scripture and the Holy Spirit for guidance in living under His rule. His realm is both spiritual and physical—Jesus is alive in a resurrected body and He occupies a space in Heaven. He also dwells within our hearts through His Spirit.

Whose rule are you currently living under?

Do you believe Jesus is smart enough to help you handle everything life throws at you?

How can you begin to live in God's kingdom today?

"This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God."

–1 John 4:13–15

Chapter Five

AFTER HIS DEATH, BURIAL and resurrection, Jesus began appearing to people, giving proof of life and continuing to teach about the kingdom of God. One day, during a meal, Jesus instructed His disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Forty days after the resurrection, Jesus was taken into Heaven before their eyes, and for a brief time the disciples were alone. About a week later, on the Jewish festival called “Pentecost,” the Holy Spirit arrived with the sound of rushing wind and visible signs of fire which came to rest on each of the apostles (fire is a symbol of God’s divine presence).

With newfound boldness from God’s Spirit, Peter stands up and begins to preach to the crowds: *Jesus of Nazareth was crucified, dead and buried but God raised Him from the dead! God raised Jesus to life and we are all witnesses of the fact. He has been exalted to the Father. Jesus is both Lord and Christ! Therefore, repent and be baptized—every one of you—for the forgiveness of your sins and you too will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

About 3,000 people believed in Jesus that day, and the church was born. The early church began meeting in homes all over the city of Jerusalem, probably in groups of 30. The followers of Jesus were devoted to learning from the apostles (remember the New Testament wasn’t written yet). And they became like family—sharing meals, providing for one another’s needs, praying together and celebrating the Lord’s Supper. They began loving and caring for their neighbors without expecting anything in return. They praised God as they were empowered by the Holy Spirit to live this new and better life. And what a witness! These new disciples were the coolest kids in town. Their lives were compelling and filled with joy. On-lookers wanted what they had, and God added to their number daily those who were being saved!

We, too, are living in God’s continuing big story. Like the early believers, our lives also should reflect the values of God’s perfect community—providing a picture of God’s kingdom. The power to live in a new way, and the courage and guidance we need to accomplish our mission as witnesses for Jesus, comes from the Holy Spirit. The force of the gospel message comes through our changed lives—it’s not something we do, it’s who we are.

God loves all people and wants everyone to have the opportunity to live with Him both now and forever. Therefore, God has called us, as Christ’s disciples, to function as a royal priesthood who represent Jesus to the world. As the church, we are called to help others enter into eternal life through relationship with God.

1 Peter 2:9–17

WEDNESDAY
FEBRUARY 4, 2015

What is our identity as members of Christ's church (verses 9–10)?

According to this passage, how do we "declare" His praises?

According to this passage, what role do you play in Christ's church? What responsibilities has God given you?

Why do you think Peter refers to the followers of Christ as "foreigners" and "exiles" (verse 11)? See 1 Peter 1:1 and Philipians 3:20.

Have you ever considered respecting your parents, teachers, principals, bosses, elected leaders, and so forth as a way to represent Christ Jesus to them? How do you talk to others about those who are in authority over you? How does trusting Jesus with your whole life make difficult authority figures more manageable?

"Out of 100 men, one will read the Bible; the other 99 will read the Christian."

–D.L. Moody

Acts 4:23–35

FRIDAY
FEBRUARY 6, 2015

Today's reading picks up after Peter heals a lame beggar (Acts 3). He preaches to the crowd gathered in the Temple courts and a couple thousand more people come to faith in Jesus. Peter and John are arrested and spend the night in jail. The next day they are questioned by the religious leaders, including the high priest, and have the opportunity to witness to them also!



Because of their hardness of heart, many (though not all) of the royal priesthood of the Old Covenant stood in opposition to the royal priesthood of the New Covenant—the old guard had become rigid and works-based, while the new guard exuded the love and grace of Christ Jesus.

How did the early church represent God's character and extend His presence in the world? Look for "words" and "deeds" from this week's readings.

How do you think they were "set apart" from other people in their society?

Use this passage as a guide to pray for Asbury today.

"...And from Jesus Christ. He is the faithful witness to these things, the first to rise from the dead, and the ruler of all the kings of the world. All glory to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by shedding his blood for us. He has made us a Kingdom of priests for God his Father. All glory and power to him forever and ever! Amen."

—Revelation 1:5–7 (NLT)

*1 Peter 2:9–17***SUNDAY**
FEBRUARY 8, 2015

“We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God’s original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels—everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment. And when it comes to the church, he organizes and holds it together, like a head does a body.”

—Colossians 1:15–18 (MSG)

“We couldn’t be more sure of ourselves in this—that you, written by Christ himself for God, are our letter of recommendation. We wouldn’t think of writing this kind of letter about ourselves. Only God can write such a letter. His letter authorizes us to help carry out this new plan of action. The plan wasn’t written out with ink on paper, with pages and pages of legal footnotes, killing your spirit. It’s written with Spirit on spirit, his life on our lives!”

—2 Corinthians 3:4–6 (MSG)

2 Corinthians 5:17–21

TUESDAY
FEBRUARY 10, 2015

What does verse 17 mean to you in light of God's big story?

"Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

—2 Corinthians 3:17–18

What does verse 20 mean to you in light of God's big story?

"... Now you're dressed in a new wardrobe. Every item of your new way of life is custom-made by the Creator, with his label on it. All the old fashions are now obsolete. Words like Jewish and non-Jewish, religious and irreligious, insider and outsider, uncivilized and uncouth, slave and free, mean nothing. From now on everyone is defined by Christ, everyone is included in Christ."

—Colossians 3:9b–11 (MSG)

Chapter Six

GOD'S BIG STORY, AS told through Scripture, ends with the book of Revelation. Of course, God's story goes on forever and ever. God's story is an eternal one, and we've been invited to share in it. Revelation was written by the Apostle John when he was an old man exiled on the island of Patmos. The Lord gave John a clear vision of what was yet to come and a picture of what the future will be like. God provided some other sneak peeks in Scripture too—in Matthew, Romans and the letters to the Thessalonians. From God's Word we learn the old earth, which is groaning under the curse of humanity's rebellion, will pass away, and the Lord will create a new heaven and a new earth where those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life will live with Him forever. All who choose to live under the rule of God by putting their faith in Christ Jesus and following Him will one day live in resurrected, imperishable bodies on the new earth. There will be no more sin, no more curse, no more death, no mourning, crying or pain—all those things will have passed away.

What was lost will be redeemed. What was corrupted will be restored. God is making all things new! God will even recreate the city of Jerusalem as the center of all life in the new reality—on its twelve gates will be written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, and on the foundation will be written the names of the twelve apostles. The Lord's throne will be at the center of the city, but there will be no Temple; it will no longer be necessary. At long last, God will dwell among His people perfectly and permanently, face to face and unencumbered. At long last, we will bring Him the glory He deserves.

The new order of things will commence with the return of Jesus to old earth, what's known as the "second coming." People like to speculate about when these things will happen, even Jesus' disciples asked the question. Jesus' reply? Only the Father knows when! In the meantime, we wait and we hope and we live with confidence in God because we know the end of one story is the beginning of another.

Today, we live like people who have eternal life by God's grace through Christ Jesus, our Savior. And we pray, "Come, Lord Jesus. Come!"

*Romans 8:18–30***WEDNESDAY**
FEBRUARY 11, 2015

In this final chapter of God's big story we look at some of the prophetic writings that tell us how things will end. We saw in our study of God's kingdom that Jesus has already brought the kingdom to earth, or at least the beginnings of it. At the end of time, Jesus will bring God's kingdom to fulfillment. The "already and not yet" equation will become "already and now."

Compare Revelation 1:4, 1:8, 4:8 to Revelation 11:17. What is the difference in the phrasing? What is the difference in the kingdom (Revelation 11:15)? **+1**

A secular worldview points to natural disasters such as tornadoes, earthquakes, and tsunamis and ask why a good and loving God would allow such things to happen. Again, the Judeo-Christian worldview offers the only real explanation. The earth itself is suffering from the effects of humanity's rebellion against God. The earth is also waiting to be liberated from its "fallen state." Until God recreates the earth, natural disasters will characterize its existence.

When we trust in Christ, we are already "adopted" as sons and daughters because of God's grace. When Jesus makes all things new, our adoption will be fully manifested and we will be recreated in the image of Jesus to the glory of God (verses 23, 29–30).

1 Corinthians 15:20–28

FRIDAY
FEBRUARY 13, 2015

“Jesus replied, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.’”

—John 12:23–25

Adam and Eve were placed in the garden and given the freedom to choose if they would stay; they could choose to live under God’s rule or rebel against it. Today, we are starting outside the “garden.” Because of God’s prevenient grace, we have the freedom to choose if we will stay outside or enter into it. In the new heaven and the new earth, as recorded in the book of Revelation, there is no mention of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—because at that point, the decision will have already been made by each of us when we chose to trust in Jesus and live under His rule. In the new heaven and the new earth, God has only placed the tree of life.

“I am the resurrection and the life.”

—Jesus of Nazareth

*Romans 8:18–25***SUNDAY**
FEBRUARY 15, 2015

“God knew what he was doing from the very beginning. He decided from the outset to shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son. The Son stands first in the line of humanity he restored. We see the original and intended shape of our lives there in him. After God made that decision of what his children should be like, he followed it up by calling people by name. After he called them by name, he set them on a solid basis with himself. And then, after getting them established, he stayed with them to the end, gloriously completing what he had begun.”

—Romans 8:29–30 (MSG)

“But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.”

—2 Peter 3:13

Hebrews 11:1–39

TUESDAY
FEBRUARY 17, 2015

Eventually Jesus will make all things right, but that leaves us to wonder—what do we do in the mean time? The author of Hebrews gives us a flashback of others who lived by faith in “real time,” but always with an eye toward future events, and future rewards. This is a long passage, but it should be comforting and encouraging. At the least, it reminds us we are not alone. And at most, it reminds us God has called us to be part of His big, big story, and no matter how hard it gets, ultimately it has a *happy ending*. The best part? Our happy ending is really a beginning.

How will your part in God’s big story unfold? Will you walk with God in the cool of the day, like Adam? Will you trust God against overwhelming odds, like Abraham? Will you be a person after God’s own heart, like David? Will you humbly submit your life to Him, like Mary? Will you devote yourself to being the presence of Jesus on earth, like the early church? What’s your story going to be?

“Do you see what this means—all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we’d better get on with it. Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we’re in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: Cross, shame, whatever. And now he’s there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!”

–Hebrew 12:1–3 (MSG)

“If you want to know who God is, look at Jesus. If you want to know what it means to be human, look at Jesus. If you want to know what love is, look at Jesus. If you want to know what grief is, look at Jesus. And keep looking until you are no longer a spectator but part of His grand story.”

–N.T. Wright

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