

The Bible Challenge

Read the Bible in a Year

Edited by Marek P. Zabriskie

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Second Edition

Forward Movement
Cincinnati, Ohio

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Foreword

In most churches, portions of the Bible are selected for use in the course of public worship. As a result, the vast expanse of Scripture is reduced to a series of selected texts. *The Bible Challenge* is an invitation to journey with fellow believers from across the world through the entire length and breadth of the Bible, and to experience the full sweep of the biblical record. But, in order to undertake such a journey, it may be helpful to reflect upon how we, as faithful readers of God's word, might orient our hearts and minds as we approach the text before us.

The Word and the Spirit

"Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). These words from the Letter to the Hebrews, which predate the establishment of what we know as the New Testament, apply to the various ways in which the early Christian community experienced the word of God in its various forms beginning with the Hebrew Scriptures and extending to the preaching and teaching of the apostles and their followers. The word of God took the form not only of speech, it also "happened." It took the form of events and encounters, visions, and words heard with the ear of the heart.

All this was enabled by the Holy Spirit, "the Spirit of truth." Who, Jesus said, would "take what is mine and declare it to you" (John 16:15). In the Acts of the Apostles, which is the account of "the Spirit of Jesus"—the Spirit of the risen and ascended Christ, inhabiting the hearts and minds of the disciples and the infant church—we read of the ceaseless activity and urgency of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit "falls upon...fills...sends...speaks...snatches up...forbids..." All the while, empowered by the Spirit, the word of God "continued to spread...to grow mightily...to prevail."

The vitality of Scripture and its capacity to impart life flows from Jesus' resurrection. In the twenty-fourth chapter of the Gospel according to Luke, we are told that when the risen Lord encountered two grieving disciples on the way to Emmaus, "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the Scriptures." Later on, looking back on the encounter, the disciples exclaim, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:13-32). It is the continuing ministry of the risen Christ, through the agency of the Spirit, to open the Scriptures to us in order that our hearts might burn within us with the living truth of his presence. Christ is the "Word of God" (Revelation 19:13) whom we encounter at the heart of the scriptural word.

Approaching Scripture in Expectation and Joy

This notion of a living encounter mediated by the words of Scripture is wonderfully captured in a hymn written in the fourth century by the deacon Ephraim of Edessa: "I read the opening verses of the book, and was filled with joy, for its verses and lines spread out their arms to welcome me. The first rushed out and kissed me and led me on to the next."

To approach Scripture in such a spirit of expectation opens us to the possibility of our being surprised and accosted by the Spirit who draws continually from "the boundless riches of Christ," (Ephesians 3:8) and makes them present to us through the words of Scripture.

The fathomless depths of Scripture are suggested by well-known twelfth-century commentator and preacher Bernard of Clairvaux, who describes Holy Scripture as "a vast sea in which a lamb can paddle, and an elephant can swim."

These words from the past provide a helpful way of approaching Scripture that counterbalances the critique offered by R. M. Benson, the Founder of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, reacting to what he considered to be an overdependence upon biblical criticism. He wrote, "I think the joy of Holy Scripture is very much hidden by the joylessness of commentators who write about it with no sense of supernatural delight."

There are, of course, different ways in which to approach Scripture. The early commentators made a distinction between a literal and a spiritual reading of the text. According to Origen, a biblical commentator of the third century, not everything in Scripture is true in a historical sense, but nonetheless all Scripture conveys truth in a spiritual sense. It is, therefore, not a question of either/or—either something is true in an empirical sense, or it is not true at all—but of both/and: an ability to approach a passage on a literal and a spiritual level at the same time, and in the process honor both dimensions.

An example might be helpful. Let us take the Song of Mary recorded in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 1:46-53). Who but Mary's kinswoman, Elizabeth, was present to hear it, let alone record it? Further, in examining the text, it appears that it bears a strong relationship, if not dependency, upon the Song of Hannah recorded in the First Book of Samuel (1 Samuel 2:1-10). At the same time, the song can be allowed to address us on its own terms, and Mary's cry of humility and thanksgiving for the "great things [the Mighty One] has done for me," can become our own cry in the face of God's remembered mercies in our own lives.

Bishop Charles Gore, who unsettled late Victorian England by suggesting that the account of creation in the Book of Genesis was not literally true, went on to observe that myth and poetry in the pages of the Bible can as easily convey truth as those portions of Scripture that can be regarded as historical. This then brings us back to Origen and the need to approach scriptural texts on both a literal and a spiritual level.

Scripture Encounters Us

In addition, we must let Scripture accost us on its own terms. And, to that end, we must give room to the risen Christ, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, to address us through the words of the text before us, as the Word at the heart of the word freely wills.

The following prayer may help us in preparing for that encounter:

Take away, O Lord, the veil of my heart while I read the Scriptures.

Blessed are you, O Lord: teach me your statutes: give me a word,

O Word of the Father: enlighten the understanding of my heart:

open my lips and fill them with your praise.

Let me show forth your truth in my life by the life-giving power of your Holy Spirit.

—AFTER LANCELOT ANDREWES

—The Rt. Rev. Frank T. Griswold

25th Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church

Introduction

In the beginning...

The idea for *The Bible Challenge* was born after Christmas 2010, when I read that a friend was inviting members of his church to join him in reading a One Year Bible. I was exhausted after leading six worship services in three days. But my own Bible reading had become sporadic, so I decided to read the entire Bible in a year.

I began reading Genesis by the fireside. The next morning I fixed a cup of tea and continued reading. I soon added a psalm each day and a chapter from the New Testament. After a few days, I felt very spiritually alive. God nudged me to invite a few members of the church I serve to share this experience.

What began as a simple invitation grew rapidly into a ministry that began transforming many lives. Over 180 church members and more than 90 friends committed to read the entire Bible in a year. We read stories that are never read aloud in church. Some stories were very challenging and even disturbing. Some provoked great theological questions and made us realize how much the Bible relates to current events. Because so many church members were participating, *The Bible Challenge* began to transform our church.

Episcopalians and Anglicans are not the best evangelizers, but reading God's Word daily is so powerful that *The Bible Challenge* began to spread naturally. God nudged us to share this ministry beyond our church. So we created the Center for Biblical Studies to promote *The Bible Challenge* nationally and globally. We received wonderful support.

About this book

We developed this book to help Bible Challenge participants. We invited 103 archbishops, bishops, cathedral and seminary deans, Bible scholars, and priests from around the world to each write three meditations along with questions and prayers to stimulate reflection on the readings and help readers apply God's wisdom to their daily life.

The authors of these meditations used a variety of Bible translations. While we recommend reading the New Oxford Annotated Translation of the Bible, you may use any Bible translation that you desire. Our website offers many resources and tips to help you participate in *The Bible Challenge* as an individual or with your church, school, or diocese. We welcome hearing about your experience reading God's Word. Visit us at www.thecenterforbiblicalstudies.org.

How to begin The Bible Challenge

You can start *The Bible Challenge* at the beginning of the year or anytime of your choice. Some find it helpful to begin at Lent or Advent, or at the start of summer. The schedule of this book works best if you begin “Day 1” on a Monday. We encourage readers to read portions of the Bible Monday through Saturday, and assume that on Sunday they will be in church hearing the Scriptures read aloud.

Read the Bible slowly and meditatively, as if it were a love letter written by God especially to you. Our prayer is that *The Bible Challenge* will transform your life and help you to develop a lifelong spiritual discipline of daily Bible reading.

With every blessing,

—The Rev. Marek P. Zabriskie

Founder of *The Bible Challenge* and
the Center for Biblical Studies

Rector of St. Thomas’ Church, Whitemarsh
Fort Washington, Pennsylvania

Visit www.thecenterforbiblicalstudies.org for:

- Tips on how to make best use of the daily meditations
- Reading schedules to start at several different times (e.g., Lent)
- Resources to learn more about the Bible and *The Bible Challenge*
- Ways to connect with other readers

Forward Movement also offers resources for Scripture study and prayer at www.forwardmovement.org.

The Rev. Scott Gunn
Executive Director of Forward Movement
Cincinnati, Ohio

Day 1

Genesis 1–3, Psalm 1, Matthew 1

Today is all about beginnings. It's the start of our great adventure reading the Bible. Even the texts set beginnings before us. Genesis famously opens with "In the beginning. . . ." Chapters 1–2 tell the story of creation. Here we encounter a God who brings into being a world that is wholly good.

But humanity as we know it comes into being in Genesis 3. In the sixth verse, the newly created woman and man both eat forbidden fruit. The rest of the Bible is the story of God's relentless love for a people who never quite manage to live as God intended. As you read the sweeping narrative of the Bible, it's startling how many times and how many ways God reaches out to humanity in love.

Many Christians will regret what we now call "the Fall," that time when humanity first sinned against God. But there is a medieval English carol about the Fall, which ends, "Blessed be the time / That apple taken was. / Therefore we moun singen / *Deo gratias!*" Why would we bless this disobedience? Because it is precisely our disobedience that brought about the need for our redemption through Jesus Christ. No apple, no Jesus.

And this brings us to Matthew. Chapter 1 is the genealogy of Jesus and his birth. It would be tempting to skip past the genealogy, but then we would miss an important point. Even a casual glance at the list of names reveals what is for me an inspiring picture. The Incarnation of Jesus Christ was brought about through a rogue's gallery of imperfect people. While Jesus himself did not sin, his forbearers certainly did.

If God can work through ordinary, flawed people to bring about extraordinary things, then God can work through us.

QUESTIONS

As you read the Bible, where do you see yourself in this vast, sweeping story of God's love for humanity?

Look up a few people in the Matthew 1 genealogy (e.g., "the wife of Uriah"). What does it say about God and about us that God could use ordinary people to bring about the salvation of us all?

PRAYER

God of light and life, open my mind and my heart to your gracious love, and use me for your saving purposes; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Day 2

*The Rev. Scott Gunn
Executive Director of Forward Movement
Cincinnati, Ohio*

Genesis 4–6, Psalm 2, Matthew 2

With today's readings, things start to go awry in a big way. We encounter the Bible's first murder. As people multiply on the face of the earth, their evil deeds increase. But we also get our first real hero, as Noah follows God's commandments.

In the New Testament reading, our curtain opens on the scene with the wise men visiting the child Jesus. The message is clear: this savior is not just for a few people in one particular nation, but for the whole world. But that same fact represents a threat to the established order; Herod's fear runs to epic proportions.

Puzzling out the murder of innocent children is enough to keep a reader up at night. How could God allow this? Why do the pages of the Bible contain these grim stories? Where is God in great tragedy? Of course, these questions are not just for the pages of the Bible. The front page of any newspaper reveals a world of violence, fear, and exploitation. Where is God in *our* world?

As we read the Bible, we have an opportunity to step back to see a God whose saving purposes for humanity are evident over the sweeping range of the biblical story. This same God gives humanity the freedom to worship, to love God. And God leaves us the choice to disobey, at great cost to ourselves and to our world.

We do well to read very difficult passages in the context of the wider narrative. This will not excuse or minimize every terrible act. But we can see a loving God, who at the very least weeps with us and with all those who suffer. Seeing God at work in the Bible can help us see God in our world, too.

QUESTIONS

Do you find the violence of some biblical stories disturbing? Is this more or less troubling than violence in a newspaper? Why?

We don't focus much on the flight into Egypt and the slaughter of innocents at Christmastime. How might our image of Jesus be different if these parts of his life's story were more prominent?

PRAYER

God of love, reveal yourself to me even when it seems that the world has turned far from you, through Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. Amen.

The Rev. Scott Gunn
Executive Director of Forward Movement
Cincinnati, Ohio

Day 3

Genesis 7–9, Psalm 3, Matthew 3

A few years ago, I asked a group of church leaders to name their favorite story from the Bible. As we went around the table, over half of the people said “Noah’s ark.” Certainly it’s a story rich with visual imagery. Walking through a large hardware store at Christmastime not long ago, I saw an inflatable lawn decoration. It depicted the ark, with some cute animals. Over the ark was a large banner: “Joy!”

Joy? Really? I wonder if people who love the story of Noah and the ark have read the story. It is fundamentally a story about God drowning almost every living creature on earth. Noah and his family would have heard the screams of women, men, and children.

It’s not a very joyous story. And yet this tale of a fresh beginning for God’s creation has a hold on us and our culture. Aside from the potential to inspire fanciful murals, the story concludes with God’s promise to spare humanity this terrible fate in the future. God, it seems, was also horrified by how things turned out.

Most biblical scholars agree that the story of the flood is not history in the sense of scientific fact. Rather, it is a story about God’s care for creation and God’s desire to form a covenant with us. It is a story of *meaning* that teaches us something about ourselves, our world, and our God.

It is ironic that in the same day we read about water used as a means of death, we also read about John the Baptizer, who used water as a sign of new life. But in both cases, water brings about new beginnings, new life. It cleanses us and our world, making us ready for a fresh start.

QUESTIONS

Do you think the story of Noah’s Ark is a story of joy? Why or why not?

How would a man such as John the Baptist be received by today’s church? Are his startling words about Jesus relevant today?

PRAYER

Cleanse my heart and my life today, Lord God. Make me ready for fresh starts with each day’s grace. Amen.

Day 4

*The Rev. Dr. Walter Brueggemann
Author, Old Testament Scholar, and Theologian
Cincinnati, Ohio*

Genesis 10–12, Psalm 4, Matthew 4

These readings strike me as an honest acknowledgement of the force of ambiguity before which we live out our faith. Even Jesus, at the outset of his ministry, faced ambiguity, whatever his specific experience might have been. He was tempted by the devil, but before he left the wilderness, “Angels waited on him” (Matthew 4:11). This strange mix, I suspect, is an epitome of his life, for he was sustained in amazing ways by God, yet was endlessly at risk.

Jesus is no exception to the rule of faith. The same mix is voiced in Psalm 4. The psalmist in confidence will lie down and “sleep in peace” (v. 8). But this same person is vexed by social shame (v. 2) and is disturbed at night (v. 4). That is how our sleep may be—disturbed and at peace. In the Genesis reading, the long genealogies of place and continuity are disrupted by the narrative of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9). So it is with our certitudes and our routines, interrupted by foolish yearning.

In these readings, faith seems to have two fronts. There is honesty about lived reality, a candor about how it is. But faith promises to override our conflictedness through trust in God’s good gifts. Either feature without the other makes faith thin. It is not a bad way to begin the new year in faith—honest about the life we live, while at the same time on the receiving end of gifts that bring us to well-being, even in the face of such vexation.

QUESTION

Can you think of a time in your life when your cherished beliefs have been challenged by your experience? Were you able to trust in God in the midst of the ambiguity?

PRAYER

In our can-do society, make us grateful receivers. We do not doubt your gifts, but we manage often to live without them. Give us freedom to match your generosity with our own gratitude. Amen

The Rev. Dr. Walter Brueggemann
Author, Old Testament Scholar, and Theologian
Cincinnati, Ohio

Day 5

Genesis 13–15, Psalm 5, Matthew 5

Faith is a summons to be different, to have a different buoyancy and to live a different ethic. That difference is visible in Psalm 5. After the psalmist in verses 4-6 details all kinds of ignoble conduct on the part of the wicked and evil-doers (such as being bloodthirsty and deceitful), then comes, "But I" (v. 7). The "I" of faith acts from the assurance of God's loyal love (v. 7) and is led by God to a straight, safe path (v. 8).

Father Abraham is described in these Genesis narratives as being different and making a difference. In Genesis 13:8-9 he commits an act of uncommon generosity by letting his nephew, Lot, choose the land he wants. In response, Abraham receives a sweeping promise from God to receive the land of promise (13:14-17). That divine promise, moreover, is verified in the remarkable covenant-making ritual of chapter 15. Abraham and his family are marked as carriers of a difference that is grounded only in God's promise.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs his disciples on making a difference by loving one's enemies. That difference is the vocation of the church. The church faces two temptations: one is to give up difference and fade into the social landscape along with everyone else. The other is to separate from all the others to be safe, pure, and unvexed by social reality. Neither choice is faithful. Rather, this community is dispatched to be engaged in transformative, reconciling generosity, the only difference that finally matters.

QUESTIONS

How have you experienced your Christian faith as a summons to be different?

How has your faith empowered you to make a difference in the world?

PRAYER

We pray for courage to be different. In our self-indulgence, we do not want to be different. In our fearfulness, we cringe from our vocation. Give us hearts shaped by courage and resolve that persists. Amen.

Day 6

*The Rev. Dr. Walter Brueggemann
Author, Old Testament Scholar, and Theologian
Cincinnati, Ohio*

Genesis 16–18, Psalm 6, Matthew 6

These texts ponder what the disciplines are for women and men of faith. Principal among such disciplines is prayer, the opening of one's life in honesty in the presence of God. Our classic prayer, the Lord's Prayer, is found in Matthew 6. Many interpreters believe the prayer pivots on debts to be forgiven in a bold practice of Jubilee. In any case, it is a prayer that eagerly awaits the full rule of God in the world.

Psalm 6, also filled with petition, is a zealous complaint to God in a context of deep need. The key imperative is "turn" in verse 4; the psalmist urges God into transformative action. Remarkably, the prayer ends in confidence that "God has heard" (v. 9). This is a God who hears, answers, and acts. The boldness of the prayer in its demand is anticipated in Abraham's exchange with God in Genesis 18. Both Abraham and God are vigorous bargainers in this text. Such prayer is more than just pious recital of familiar innocuous mantras. It is, rather, down and dirty engagement with God.

In our society, where we imagine we may be (or must be!) on our own, prayer is the core acknowledgement that in fact our lives are referred beyond ourselves. It is for that reason that Matthew 6 can end in an invitation to move out of anxiety and into glad obedience (vv. 33–34). Such prayer that moves us beyond anxiety is sometimes submissiveness to God and sometimes defiant insistence upon one's own need. Father Abraham knew what he wanted and insisted upon it.

QUESTIONS

What bold petition to God have you not yet voiced?

What might you make of prayer that is engaged dispute with God?

PRAYER

God, teach me to pray to you honestly and boldly, trusting in your transformative power. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. C. K. Robertson
Canon to the Presiding Bishop
of The Episcopal Church
New York, New York

Day 8

Genesis 19–21, Psalm 7, Matthew 7

Sodom and Gomorrah! Even for those who have never opened a Bible, the names are famous—or, rather, infamous. They are synonymous with depravity and lawlessness. Yet what is perhaps more remarkable is that even the hero of the tale, Lot, does not appear to be very heroic. Indeed, looking back from our twenty-first-century vantage point, some of his behavior would be described as questionable at best. True, compared to his neighbors, Lot practically wears a halo, but that's not really saying much.

And this is not just in the case of Lot. Many—perhaps most—of the protagonists we encounter in Genesis (and also in the biblical books that follow) say things and do things that might shock, embarrass, or even anger us. Polygamy, concubinage, drunkenness, and incredible violence all form part of the saga of God's "faithful" leaders. We might be pardoned, therefore, for judging Lot and company fairly harshly, but as Jesus reminds us in Matthew 7, looking back in judgment does little good.

Rather, we can note that the stories in Genesis, like this one about Sodom and Gomorrah, are really about the choices people make, both then and now. Lot, his spouse, and his neighbors all made fateful choices that resulted in consequences of one kind or another. The reason that judging others does little good is precisely because, in the end, it is what we ourselves do or do not do that really matters. Then what exactly should we do? Again, it is Jesus who answers that question in words that have been immortalized as the Golden Rule: "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you." Now that is a daily choice worth making.

QUESTIONS

What have you read so far in the Bible that has shocked or disturbed you? What things happening today might be shocking or disturbing to Abraham, Sarah, or Lot if they could visit us?

Radical hospitality is a recurring theme in several parts of Scripture. How can you and your church community display such welcome in fresh, tangible ways?

PRAYER

God of welcome, bless us and others through us, that they might see you in all that we say and do, through Jesus Christ our Savior and Host at the heavenly banquet. Amen.

Day 9

*The Rev. Dr. C. K. Robertson
Canon to the Presiding Bishop
of The Episcopal Church
New York, New York*

Genesis 22–24, Psalm 8, Matthew 8

The story of Abraham and Isaac is hardly a feel-good tale. In fact, you might well find yourself calling out to the boy, “Run, Isaac, run! Don’t let him get you!” You might even feel some consternation with the lad. After all, how dense can he be? He’s carrying the wood for his own sacrifice. It doesn’t help that this passage holds such an important place in the Episcopal tradition, being read each year during the Easter Vigil service.

But as should be obvious by now in this journey through Genesis, a literalistic reading of the biblical texts will not prove very helpful for us. Rather, we are called to do as the Prayer Book says, “to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest” Holy Scripture. The Word of God is not cotton candy; it is something to be chewed on.

So as we come to the tale of a father asked to sacrifice his son, we must move beyond our repugnance and instead consider the deeper realities to which the story calls us. “God will provide,” the father tells the son. These words are not some trite religious sentiment, but a bold assertion of faith in the face of life’s very real struggles.

This does not mean that we are free from struggle, from worry, from pain. No, for as we are reminded in Matthew’s story of the frightened disciples on the water, when we are in the very heart of the storm, and it seems as if Jesus is asleep and unaware of all that we face, the reality is that he is right there with us, providing peace and calm and presence. The problems of life are legion. The potential sacrifices we face are great. But God’s presence and God’s provision are greater still. Thanks be to God!

QUESTIONS

The story of Abraham and Isaac clearly resonates for Christians in New Testament texts such as, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” What do these words mean for you? How do you share the good news of God’s love?

When have you felt most alone, as if God were asleep, and unaware of your struggles? How did God’s presence and peace become known to you?

PRAYER

O God who provides, be with us in the midst of the storms of life, and help us to share your peace and presence with others, for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. C. K. Robertson
Canon to the Presiding Bishop
of The Episcopal Church
New York, New York

Day 10

Genesis 25–27, Psalm 9, Matthew 9

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—their names are legend. Indeed, in later books of the Old Testament and again in the New Testament, the Lord is often referred to as the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” And yet it has already been noted that the first of these great figures, Abraham, the “Father of Faith,” was far from perfect. Now, with his passing, the spotlight turns first to Isaac, whose brief time on the biblical stage is hardly impressive, and then moves to Jacob.

Abraham and Isaac resort to deception when faced with threatening situations. Jacob takes lying and cheating to a whole new level. His very name meaning “supplanter,” Jacob supplants Esau through an elaborate deception that secures for himself the birthright and blessing that should have gone to his brother. Jacob will do whatever it takes to fulfill his ambitions, even if that means spending much of the rest of his life on the run. It is difficult, perhaps, to see why God might choose to raise up “a chosen people, a holy priesthood” through such a morally questionable character.

Turning to Matthew’s Gospel, it seems that not much has changed. Instead of going for the best and brightest to be his disciples, Jesus unexpectedly calls Matthew the tax collector to join his ragtag group of unlearned fishermen. Matthew, or Levi as he is sometimes known, is not that different from Jacob. He cheats—in fact, he cheats for a living!

Eventually, Jacob spends a night wrestling with God and emerges a new person. Matthew leaves his old life behind and becomes a new person. Both then and now, God does not wait for any of us to be perfect before calling us to follow. And somewhere along the way, when we least expect it, we are born anew.

QUESTIONS

What do you think of Jacob, of Esau, of Isaac when you read these stories? Why does God sometimes work through questionable people?

When have you experienced God through an unlikely person?

PRAYER

God of new beginnings, meet us where we are in our journey, imperfect as we are, and use us in ways we cannot imagine to make a difference in the world for you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Day 11

*The Rev. Dr. Francis H. Wade
Interim Dean
Washington National Cathedral
Washington, D.C.*

Genesis 28–30, Psalm 10, Matthew 10

We would probably not like to have Jacob as an influence on our children. He was a liar and cheat who found his match in his Uncle Laban. These two rogues swindled one another back and forth, riding roughshod over the feelings of Rachel and Leah, to say nothing of poor Zilpah and Bilhah. It is natural to wonder what rogues like this are doing in the Bible. And how did Jacob get to be a patriarch, mentioned in solemn tones along with Abraham and Isaac?

The gospel lesson does not help us out very much, as the twelve disciples are introduced with a tax collector (a profession then based on extortion) and a traitor prominent among them. They are sent into a world of wolves where betrayal, slander, and discord are to be expected.

Thoughtful modern readers stand with the psalmist asking, “Why?” Why does God let the arrogant, the wicked, and the deceitful seem to have free reign? Why isn’t the Bible full of saintly folk who set us a good example?

The answer is that our ancestors knew that the Bible is not a book about people but a book about God. They did not go out of their way to make the people of the Bible appear any more saintly than anyone else. The wonder is that the glory of God is able to shine through sinful humanity. The wonder is that God does beautiful things with rogues, misfits, and bumbler, as well as the occasional saint. That is what God was doing in ancient times, and it is what God is doing today.

QUESTIONS

How might the glory and goodness of God shine through sinful people?

How might God be working through you—in spite of yourself?

PRAYER

God of glory and goodness, let your light shine through my life in ways beyond my knowing, and help me to always be ready to see that light shining through others. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Francis H. Wade
Interim Dean
Washington National Cathedral
Washington, D.C.

Day 12

Genesis 31–33, Psalm 11, Matthew 11

The story of Jacob's return to face the brother he had cheated twenty years before is a powerful one by any standard, but it also provides a significant insight into our Judeo-Christian tradition. Jacob did all that he could to protect himself from the righteous anger he expected from Esau. Lavish gifts were sent ahead, and he divided his household into two groups, thinking that if one was attacked the other might escape. Still, the fact that Esau was coming with four hundred men was worrisome. You and I would probably say that Jacob was left wrestling with his conscience, but in the narrative terms of ancient storytellers we are told that he wrestled with a strange man who turned out to be God. One result of the match was that Jacob was given a new name, something that often accompanied turning points in life. The new name was "Israel" which means "one who strives or wrestles with God."

What is especially revealing about this story is that when our faith had developed to the point where it needed a name, there were many options. The people of God could have been named for obedient Abraham or faithful Isaac or Moses the Law Giver. But the chosen name was Israel because the people of God continually wrestle with God about almost everything in life—faith, morality, sin, forgiveness, etc. We wrestle with God partly because, as the psalmist says, God tests the righteous along with the wicked. We wrestle as John the Baptist did when he lost his confidence in Jesus as the messiah and sent a deputation to ask if he really, really was the Anointed One.

The name Israel was not lightly chosen but rightly chosen because the people of God must always wrestle with God.

QUESTIONS

How do you wrestle with God?

What happens if we stop wrestling with God?

PRAYER

Challenging Lord, you come to us in the still of night when we are alone by our own River Jabbok. Help us to engage with you as our ancestor Jacob did that we might greet the dawn with your blessing in our ears. Amen.

Day 13

*The Rev. Dr. Francis H. Wade
Interim Dean
Washington National Cathedral
Washington, D.C.*

Genesis 34–36, Psalm 12, Matthew 12

Those who navigate rely on fixed objects to help them find their way. The North Star, mountains, rivers, and longitude and latitude provide points of certainty for people venturing on unfamiliar paths. Those who undertake spiritual journeys tend to seek similarly reliable points as they (we) try to be faithful in a changing landscape that rises into an unknown future.

The genealogies that tend to confuse the modern reader were part of our ancestors' attempts to establish fixed points for their journey. These lists sought to establish the true owners and, therefore, the true inheritors of property both temporal and spiritual. In Jesus' day the Pharisees relied heavily on certain fixed dogmas that told them whether they were on the right path. One of these was the sanctity of the sabbath, another was predictable pre-established signs of God's favor, and a third was one's place in family life.

Unfortunately, Jesus shows that none of these provide the certainty that the faithful expected from them. In today's reading, Jesus says that he has greater authority than sabbath laws; refuses to give a traditional sign; and rates his spiritual community above his nuclear family.

Lest we feel we are being left to wander, Jesus affirms in each instance that he is the fixed point. Our ongoing, living relationship with Jesus is what guides us on our journey.

Today's texts also remind us of a constant in that relationship: God's concern for what the psalmist calls the despoiled poor and the groaning needy; the sick to whom Jesus responded; and, even in their rough way, the justice sought by Israel's sons. When God's concerns are ours, we have a fixed navigational point.

QUESTIONS

What have people relied on in the past to tell them that they were being faithful?

How does Jesus provide guidance for our spiritual journeys?

PRAYER

Blessed Lord, you have set us on a journey into an unknown future. Sharpen our eyes to see the path you have chosen for us, attune our souls to recognizing the Spirit that goes before us, quicken our hands to reach out to those who struggle beside us, and keep us in living relationships as we make our way. Amen.

Day 14: Enjoy hearing the Scriptures read aloud in church.

The Rt. Rev. Stephen Platten
Bishop of Wakefield
Wakefield, England

Day 15

Genesis 37–39, Psalm 13, Matthew 13

Our readings today begin with the saga of Joseph, one of the most beautiful narratives in the Old Testament. Joseph's handsome appearance and attractive personality make others jealous. The interpretation of the dream that shows Joseph as master over his brothers is the final straw. He is thrown into the pit and left to die. Later he will thrive in Egypt and become the salvation of his family who become the model Israel.

Christians down the ages have often seen Joseph as "a type of Christ," one who suffers and then brings salvation. Our psalm echoes a similar theme—how long will we be forgotten and left to suffer? Despite feelings of despair, the psalmist remains faithful, for he knows in his heart of God's enduring love.

In Matthew's Gospel we read Jesus' parables describing the nature of the kingdom of heaven. Of all the versions of the parable of the sower (it is found in Mark and Luke as well), Matthew's is perhaps the most elaborately drawn. Here Jesus is the teacher of the kingdom of heaven in all its richness. The same temptations and dangers seen in the Joseph stories are there, and they are set in the images of the parable: evil can snatch away the seeds, and people will not root themselves deeply in the life of the kingdom. But ultimately it is a gospel story, a tale of the good news, offered graciously by God in Jesus, bringing forth fruit.

Here too is a feast of shorter parables, of the wheat and the weeds, the mustard seed, the yeast, the treasure hidden in a field, the pearl of great price. Each helps fashion a picture of the kingdom that Jesus himself inaugurates. The trials and temptations of our own lives are not far away in these vivid stories and they connect us with the gospel of hope.

QUESTIONS

How can we offer hope to others as we read these vivid stories of Joseph and from Jesus' parables?

Reflect upon the variety of images of the kingdom of heaven in Matthew's chapter 13. How do these images build a three-dimensional picture of God's will for us upon which we can place our own experience?

PRAYER

Father, through your gracious generosity we are created and redeemed; open our hearts to be channels of your love that our lives may be fashioned in the pattern of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Day 16

*The Rt. Rev. Stephen Platten
Bishop of Wakefield
Wakefield, England*

Genesis 40–42, Psalm 14, Matthew 14

We pick up the story of Joseph, with him now in Egypt. As in the earlier part of the narrative, there are ups and downs. Joseph's talent and wisdom always provoke jealousy and suspicion. So Pharaoh throws him into jail. Not long after, however, his skill as an interpreter of dreams comes into its own again, and this time he advises Pharaoh himself. The interpretation sets out a strategy enabling the Egyptians to preserve sufficient food for their needs. Then follows the moving episode of Joseph meeting with his brothers, giving them a tough time, and then relenting.

This entire narrative is part of a tapestry of "wisdom" writing that weaves in and out of the texture of the Old Testament. The psalmist picks up similar reflections, but in song form as part of the worship of God. Today's psalm implicitly contrasts wisdom with foolishness. The fool's lack of wisdom is rooted in lack of faith: "Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God'" (Psalm 14:1).

Faith and our lack of faith appear again as themes in the passage from Matthew's Gospel. Peter sees Jesus walking toward him on the water and attempts to do the same. Peter fails, and Jesus speaks of faith in our relationship with God. Such faith allows Jesus to nourish the hungry in the classical story of the feeding of the five thousand. This also looks forward to the eucharist, to the Last Supper, and to God's feeding of all his people. Finally, the terrifying story of the death of John the Baptist shows how the faithful servant of God endures even unto death.

Faith is at the heart of the Christian life; and the experiences of Joseph, John the Baptist, and Jesus himself tell us so much of how faith, worship, and prayer can shape our lives and the manner in which we mediate that life to others.

QUESTIONS

In which ways does the lens of faith transform our actions and attitudes in the light of these narratives?

In your reading of the Bible, where else have you encountered suffering for faith and a response to that suffering?

PRAYER

Open our hearts, O Lord, and give us strength under suffering and wisdom to inform our faith in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Rt. Rev. Stephen Platten
Bishop of Wakefield
Wakefield, England

Day 17

Genesis 43–45, Psalm 15, Matthew 15

Yesterday's reading ended with the extraordinary story of Joseph's brothers finding the money they had taken with them to buy grain in their bags when they arrive home. When they return for more grain, Joseph tricks them again, packing a silver cup in their luggage. Benjamin, the youngest son, is then to be held as hostage. Joseph breaks down with emotion, revealing his true identity, and sends his brothers back to bring Jacob, their father. They are then given land in Egypt. The story's underlying message is of generosity. As with all of the Joseph saga, it is a tale about the goodness of God to his people.

Today's psalm is a well-known piece of poetry. It describes the pattern of a godly life. In Matthew's Gospel we encounter Jesus in dispute with the scribes and Pharisees. The dispute is about purity laws, but Jesus uses it to pick up a similar theme to our psalm. It is not the flouting of laws of purity that are the key issue—instead, we are defiled by failing to live a godly life. In contrast to those pious Jews, known to follow the law, the next story sees Jesus encounter a foreigner, a Canaanite woman. Her faith and her humble answer to Jesus' question mark her out as a true follower. These two contrasting tales take us into a second feeding, this time of four thousand people, not dissimilar to the story we read two days ago about the five thousand.

One of the abiding truths about the Bible is how we learn of God's ways with humankind through story. The Joseph narratives and the gospel stories offer us a similar way of learning of God's love and of the life he would have us live. Today's psalm is a commentary on just this manner of learning.

QUESTIONS

How is Joseph's trickery of his brothers still part of the generous tale of God's love?

How do we square the Pharisees' true piety with the more radical command of Jesus about defilement?

PRAYER

Loving Father, you show your love for us through those who nurture us and care for us along the way. Give us the generosity to allow that same love to pour out to others in the service of our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Day 18

*The Very Rev. Ian Markham
Dean of Virginia Theological Seminary
Alexandria, Virginia*

Genesis 46–48, Psalm 16, Matthew 16

The tragic haunts every human life. We all have to cope with mortality, loss, and failed relationships. Learning to cope with the difficulties of life can be a challenge. One important feature of Scripture is the way in which the tragic is recognized. Embedded in the famous and familiar story of Joseph, we see the human family in all its complexity. In today's reading, a father is reconciled to a son he thought dead, and a brother forgives the rest of his siblings and provides land for the family to occupy. The drama is intense. Underneath the text is deep hurt and pain—a feeling that to an extent we all recognize.

Our gospel weaves together the tragic with Christian hope. The tragic is captured in the anxieties around having sufficient food to eat (after all, the disciples did not bring along any bread) and the predication from Jesus that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die. Christian hope is captured in the powerful confession of Peter. Jesus in so many ways did not fit the classic Messianic expectations, but Peter gets it right and tells Jesus that he is “the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” The tragic is intermingled with the hope—indeed, the hope partly depends on the tragic coming to pass.

Scripture does not evade the reality of suffering. Like the psalmist, we pray for God's protection but know that such protection cannot mean a pain-free life or a promise of uncomplicated relationships. Instead, protection means that we trust that God will be with us in the difficult times. It means that God supports us through the complexities of our relationships. It means that we find grace and hope even in the moments of deepest despair.

QUESTIONS

Reflect on the tragic in your life. Search for the moments of grace embedded in those tragic seasons.

Reflect on the question: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” Who is Jesus for you?

PRAYER

Loving God, we pause and remember the tragic moments in our lives. We offer the pain of those moments to you. Please enter into those memories and allow your hope and your grace to be present. Help us, loving God, to cope with all the challenges of being human. In Christ we pray. Amen.

The Very Rev. Ian Markham
Dean of Virginia Theological Seminary
Alexandria, Virginia

Day 19

Genesis 49–50, Psalm 17, Matthew 17

Gathering around the bedside of someone dying is an important moment. This poem, where Jacob blesses his sons, plays a crucial role in the Genesis narrative. Here we have the fortunes of the different tribes anticipated; the older sons have fallen out of favor and one of the younger sons, Judah, is described in very positive terms. The author of Genesis invites us to recognize how the past shapes the future and how decisions now can impact generations to come. The narrative stresses how interconnected we all are. For this author, Reuben's actions during his life (see Genesis 35:22) had an impact for centuries. The ripples from a certain action can extend a long way.

The past meets the present in a very striking way in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain. These three disciples then witness the Transfiguration of Jesus, who is then joined by Elijah and Moses. Elijah is important as a prophet; Moses is important as the giver of the law. This is Matthew's way of letting us know that Jesus stands on the achievements of the past; Jesus is in continuity with the past. In the same way that sin has consequences that can shape generations to come, so faithfulness and service to God can create opportunities for good in the future.

Jesus in this passage is very conscious of the passing of time. This is the second predication of his betrayal "into human hands," which will lead to his death. He has so much to teach the disciples. The need for them to cultivate a faith sufficient to bring God's presence to a difficult situation is stressed. Jesus wants us to grow in our relationship with God so we can be a vehicle for God's grace.

Every second that passes is a second that has gone forever. The invitation today is to reflect on the passing of time and use every moment to build possibilities that God can use in the future.

QUESTIONS

What would you like to say to loved ones when you are near death? What is stopping you from saying some of those things now?

Think a little on your use of time. Set yourself the goal of using every moment for God.

PRAYER

Holy One of love and light, I give you this moment and this day. Please use every moment of this day for your glory. May your Son be seen in me. In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen.

Day 20

*The Very Rev. Ian Markham
Dean of Virginia Theological Seminary
Alexandria, Virginia*

Exodus 1–3, Psalm 18:1-20, Matthew 18

Children often have a hard time. When Jesus explains that real greatness in the kingdom requires us to become “like children,” he was being deliberately shocking. Children are vulnerable and weak; they are easy to abuse and hurt. Jesus makes it clear that those who have the lowest status in society are much closer to being great in the kingdom.

Back in the opening chapters of Exodus, children are the primary victims. Joseph has been forgotten. The leadership of Egypt has turned the Hebrews into slaves. To maintain their superiority, the Egyptians are attempting to eliminate male babies. In this tragic situation, a young Hebrew mother places a baby “among the reeds on the bank of the river.” Through God’s grace, one child is saved.

Jesus is very clear about the value that God places on a child. To hurt a child is a wicked sin. Children have a special place in the kingdom. The sense that everything around us is a gateway to the spiritual comes easily to children. Adults lose that sense of wonder and awe, but children have it all the time. The miracle of a flower growing and the mystery of the stars are understood by children; adults can so easily take it all for granted.

It is a great gift and responsibility to care for children. Whether as a friend, parent, or grandparent, we are invited to strive to be a good and constructive influence on children. Today’s gospel invites us to meditate on what we can learn from children. Perhaps we need to recover some of that childlike appreciation of this remarkable world that God has made.

QUESTIONS

Recall your own childhood. Reflect on those moments when you learned about the world around you. Are you still amazed by the miracle of life and being?

Think about your friendships with children. Spend a few moments considering how you can have constructive relationships with children.

PRAYER

Holy and Loving God, thank you for the gift of children. Help me to retain a childlike appreciation of this remarkable way. For Christ’s sake. Amen.

Day 21: Enjoy hearing the Scriptures read aloud in church.