

WEEK ONE: BEGINNINGS

DAY 1: CREATION

In order to fully appreciate a story, you have to start at the very beginning. You can't expect to understand what's happening in a book if you just open it up to a random page and start reading. Walking into a movie an hour late can leave you confused about the story and its characters. The same is true for God's Story. Starting at the very beginning helps us get perspective on what this story is about and our place in it.

- READ GENESIS 1:1-2:4
 - Who is the main character in the first chapter of the Bible? What does this say to us about who this Story really centers on?
 - Why are we so tempted to make this Story about us? What difference does it make when we start to see God as the central character in all of this?

- READ JOHN 1:1-14
 - What additional information does John give us about the creation account? How does the majesty of Creation point us to the magnificence of Jesus?

Today, you'll be tempted to make the story all about you. In a day filled with errands, assignments, and chores, it'll be easy to place yourself in the center of all the action. Commit yourself to remembering who is really in charge of this Story and align your day according to His priorities.

DAY 2: FALL

The opening chapters of the Bible paint a picture of paradise. Genesis 1 and 2 tell us about the Garden of Eden and the perfection of God's creation. We don't have to look around too much to see that things in our day have fallen far short of that original ideal. So, what happened? How did everything fall apart? Genesis 3 introduces us to the tragedy of God's story.

- READ GENESIS 3:1-24
 - How did the serpent deceive Adam and Eve? What tactics did he use to convince them to sin against God?
 - What curses did sin bring on the Creation? How does this explain so much of the pain and suffering we see in our own day? What curse did God pronounce on the serpent? How did this offer the first glimmer of hope in the Story?

- READ ROMANS 3:21-26
 - Genesis 3:14-15 gives us the first prophecy of a coming Deliverer. What does Romans 3 tell us about how God ultimately saved us from sin?

If God's Story ended in Genesis 3, it would be a story of tragedy and loss. Mankind had paradise and we threw it away with one act of disobedience. Yet, God's Story keeps going to offer us hope. We have sinned, but God provided us a Savior. Though we have fallen, we have a future. The remainder of God's Story is one of His redemption and grace. That's the story we want to live out today.

DAY 3: CALL

Most of the time, big movements have small beginnings. Huge plants can grow from the tiniest of seeds. Each of us began our lives as the most miniscule collection of cells. When God began His work of redemption, He began by calling one man. This man – Abram (or Abraham) – would be the forefather of a great nation. More than that, his lineage would give birth to the One who would bless the entire world. God used the calling of one man to call all men to Himself.

- READ GENESIS 12:1-9; 15:1-6
 - What promises did God offer to Abraham? If you were in Abraham's place, would you have found it easy to believe such promises?
 - According to Genesis 15:6, why was Abraham considered righteous? What does faith in God look like on a practical level?

- READ GENESIS 22:1-19
 - What did God ask Abraham to do in this passage? Why do you think God asked Him to do this? How does this sacrifice point towards what God would do with His own Son?

“Abraham believed the Lord, and the Lord counted him as righteous because of his faith.”

Abraham' faith revealed itself in some pretty dramatic actions. He left his home to travel to an unseen land. He willingly took his son up a mountain to offer him as a sacrifice. His faith was alive and active. What will you allow your faith to do today?

DAY 4: SLAVERY

Years after Abraham lived, God made good on his promises. Abraham's descendants became a mighty people numbering in the millions. Unfortunately, their size drew the attention of the Egyptian empire, who conscripted them as slaves. For years, the Israelites (the name given to the descendants of Abraham) served under a brutal regime. Their suffering, however, would not go unnoticed.

- READ EXODUS 1:1-2:10
 - How did God show His faithfulness to the promises He made to Abraham? What assurance does this give us?
 - God delivered Moses through the faithful actions of his mother and the Hebrew midwives. What does this teach us about the nature of faith?

- READ EXODUS 3:1-15
 - When God called Moses, He revealed His Divine Name. What is that name? What does God's name reveal about who He is?

The Israelite people languished in slavery for years. Generation upon generation lived and died under the hands of the pharaohs. And yet, God had not forgotten His people. Even in the midst of their suffering He had a plan to rescue them and bring them into a new land. Their difficulty did not keep them from their destiny. Though today might be hard, the Great "I Am" still holds out hope.

DAY 5: DELIVERANCE

There's nothing more exhilarating than a story of rescue. Whether it's a covert mission, a thrilling car chase, or an epic battle, we love stories of deliverance. We want to see people gain their freedom. We want to see captives rescued. That longing for rescue is written into the very pages of God's story. When it came time for God to deliver His people from Egypt, He didn't disappoint. The story of their exodus is one of the most daring rescues in history.

- READ EXODUS 12:21-42
 - What animal had to die in order for the Israelites' homes to be marked safe from the plague? How were they supposed to commemorate this event?

- READ EXODUS 14:5-31
 - What happened when the Egyptians decided to pursue the fleeing Israelites? Can you imagine being one of the Israelites on that day? What do you think it was like?
 - How did the Israelites respond to this miracle? How should God's people respond when they understand His deliverance?

God did some incredible things to save His people. He redeemed them from death by the blood of the Lamb. He led them away from their enemies by taking them through the waters of the Red Sea. God's power and might did for the people what they never could have done for themselves. Our God is a God who delivers. He delivers on His promises. He delivers His people. Knowing what He's done in the past gives us assurances for our own future.

WEEK TWO: A CHOSEN PEOPLE

DAY 6: WANDERING

You would have thought the events at the Red Sea would have given the Israelites the confidence they needed to follow God anywhere. Unfortunately, their trust in God wavered almost as soon as they stepped out of the water. As they surveyed the land God had promised them, all they could see were the obstacles. They refused to go where God was leading them. As a result, they would wander the desert for 40 years, costing a whole generation their opportunity to grab ahold of the promise.

- READ NUMBERS 13:17-14:4; 14:26-30
 - What sights kept the 10 spies from feeling confident in their ability to take the Promised Land? Why do you think they were so quick to forget what God had already done for them?
 - Why would they have even considered returning to their slavery in Egypt? In what ways do we allow our past to keep us from taking hold of the future God has for us?

- READ PSALM 95:6-11
 - How can our attitude be the same as that of the Israelites who rebelled against God in their wandering?

To be sure, obedience always has a cost. At the very least, doing what God wants us to do can cost us our comfort. Sometimes, it comes with an even higher price tag. Yet, we must also remember that disobedience has a cost. It can keep us from living in rhythm with God. It can keep us from the good gifts our Father has for us. Today, if you hear Him calling you to do something, make sure you listen to His voice.

DAY 7: CONQUEST

For four decades, the Israelites wandered the desert. Their disobedience condemned them to years of aimless roaming in the wilderness, as God waited for the unbelieving generation to perish in the sand. Eventually, the time came for their conquest of the Promised Land. While Moses supervised their decades of detours, a new task called for new leadership. Joshua, one of the 12 spies originally sent to scope out the land, assumed the mantle of leadership. Just as He promised, God did mighty things in order to bring His people into the land.

- READ JOSHUA 1:1-9; 6:1-21
 - What promise did Joshua receive from God? How would it make you feel if you received such a promise from the Lord?
 - God's power was on full display in the battle of Jericho. How do you think this generation of Israelites felt when they saw God do something so great?

- READ JOSHUA 24:14-24
 - After they took the land, Joshua charged the people to follow God. What were the conditions of his challenge to them?

God made good on His pledge to the Israelites. They had taken the land God promised to Abraham. As Joshua reminded them, however, the faith that helped them take the Promised Land would also sustain them in the land. They needed to be a nation that continually clung to God. Only time would tell how well they could hold on to that challenge.

DAY 8: KINGDOM

While Israel had been led by such great men as Moses and Joshua, the people had never had a King. Up until this point in the Story, they had functioned with God as their ultimate authority. Yet, after a couple of centuries in the Promised Land, the Israelites began to look with envy at the nations that surrounded them. They wanted a king just like these other countries had. God allowed them to pursue this path, though He warned them of the consequences of a crown.

- READ I SAMUEL 8:4-22; 10:17-25
 - Why did the Israelites want a king so badly? Who were they rejecting as their King when they made this request for a human ruler?
 - What warnings did God give them about what kings would do? In what ways is God a better King than any human king?

- READ I SAMUEL 16:1-13
 - Who eventually took Saul's place as king? What qualities was God really looking for in the person who would lead His people?

Under the leadership of David – and his son Solomon – the nation of Israel would experience great wealth and prosperity. With the godly leadership of David and the construction of the Temple under Solomon, the people looked like they would prosper for centuries. Sadly, the Israelites were soon to learn that a nation is only as good as her leaders. As their kings wandered farther and farther away from the True King, so too would the nation.

DAY 9: EXILE

Joshua's parting words to the Israelites reminded them of how tightly they needed to cling to their God. The God who had parted the Red Sea for them and brought them into this Land would continue to protect and provide for them so long as they trusted in Him. Unfortunately, a series of diminishing kings would lead the nation down the path of division and disobedience. Their wickedness culminated with their capital city of Jerusalem being invaded and destroyed by foreign nations. With the nation shattered and many of her people carried into exile in Babylon, it seemed as though Israel might never recover.

- READ II CHRONICLES 36:9-21
 - Israel faced an erosion of leadership on several fronts. How did the kings, priests, and people all contribute to the nation's downfall?
 - Why is leadership so important? How does leadership set the tone for a nation? A workplace? A home?

- READ DANIEL 1:1-17
 - How did the Israelites in captivity continue to bear witness to God's power and reign?

In the days of Moses, the Israelites spent 40 years wandering through the desert. This time, their disobedience would cost them 70 years in exile. They would serve a foreign king in a foreign land, living as aliens and strangers in a place where they did not belong. Yet, God was still at work even in the midst of this trouble. Prophets spoke of a coming renaissance, encouraging Israel that her days in exile would not be her last.

DAY 10: RESTORATION

Restoration is hard work. If you don't believe me, ask anyone who has ever tried to fix up a classic car or flip a house. Bringing things back to their original condition takes a lot of blood, sweat, and tears. As the nation of Israel emerged from their seven-decade exile, they found there was an incredible amount of work to do. The nation had to be reconstructed, the Temple had to be rebuilt, and the people needed to be rededicated to God. In their return to the Promised Land, God showed His people that He still had a plan to bless the world through their efforts.

- READ EZRA 1:1-8; 3:1-13
 - Who stirred the heart of King Cyrus to allow the people to go home to Jerusalem? What does this show us about God's control of world?
 - Why was this season of restoration so bittersweet for the Israelites? Have you experienced the same in your own life? Why or why not?

- READ NEHEMIAH 6:15-16; 8:1-12
 - What happened as the Law was read over the Israelites? How did they rededicate themselves to seeking God?

Though the Israelites had proven themselves faithless, God showed Himself faithful to them. He restored them to their land and poured new blessings out on His people. More importantly, He began once more to remind them of the great promise He made to Adam and Abraham. One was coming who would undo what sin had done and forever take away the curse of our disobedience.

WEEK THREE: PROMISES MADE

DAY 11: MESSIAH

Queen Elizabeth II was crowned the Queen of England on June 2, 1953. As the first televised coronation ceremony in the history of the world, it brought millions of viewers together to catch a glimpse of the appointment of a new monarch. There's something about a new king (or queen!) that people feel the need to celebrate. The Old Testament contains many passages promising that a new King was coming. From the very beginning, God was working to prepare His people for this ultimate ruler.

- READ GENESIS 3:15-16
 - What did God promise would happen to the serpent? What would happen to the One who crushed the serpent's head?

- READ PSALM 2:1-12
 - How does this passage describe the coming King? What phrases make it clear this passage is about no mere man?

When the Israelites appointed a new king, they would pour oil over the king's head. This anointing would serve as a physical reminder of how God had selected this man to rule over his people. The Hebrew term "Anointed One" (literally, 'Messiah') came to denote this supreme King – the One who would eventually come to reign over all the earth.

DAY 12: SHEPHERD

Throughout the Old and New Testament, God often referred to His people as “sheep.” One of the reasons for that was to point us towards our need for His leadership. Sheep need shepherds. They need someone to care for them and look after them. They need someone to keep them from hurting themselves. While some of the Shepherds we entrust ourselves to don’t always have our best interests in mind, God promised that the coming King would be the Good Shepherd who would look after His flock.

- READ ISAIAH 40:1-11
 - What does this passage reveal about the Messiah’s power? What does it have to say about His heart?

- READ EZEKIEL 34:1-16
 - How does this passage describe bad shepherds? How have you seen these effects of bad leadership in your life?
 - What promises does God give us about this “Good Shepherd”? Why is it important for us to have a leader like this?

As God’s sheep, we need a shepherd. Our hearts cry out for good leadership. Our hearts cry out for God’s leadership. The Old Testament prophets looked forward to the day when God Himself would gather His people in His arms the way a shepherd lovingly gathers his sheep. When that shepherd finally arrived, He would show His flock just how far He was willing to go in order to carry them. **“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices His life for the sheep”** (John 10:11).

DAY 13: HEART

We don't like rules. Tell a young child not to touch the stove and they'll make a beeline for the appliance they had previously ignored. Post the speed limit and even the most experienced driver will try to figure out how far they can bend it before getting a ticket. The same goes for God's laws. We hear what God wants and our hearts immediately turn the other way. Perhaps that's why God promised His people that He would one day restore and renovate their hearts.

- READ EZEKIEL 36:16-36
 - How had the Israelites' hearts led them away from God? What was the result of that wandering?
 - What kind of heart does God promise to give His people? What's the outcome of this "heart transplant"?

- READ JEREMIAH 31:31-34
 - In what ways will this new covenant change the people's relationship with God?

When it comes to following God, we don't need new rules; we need new hearts. We need transformation, not information. With the promise of this new covenant, God was guaranteeing that the day would come when His people's hearts would be softened and transformed. What areas of your heart do you still need to open up to this kind of transforming work?

DAY 14: SERVANT

The imagery of the Messiah, or “Anointed One,” would have immediately made the Israelites think of a conquering king. They would have imagined the splendor and magnificence of a monarch adorned with a crown on his head. While God did promise that this Coming King would reign and rule, there was another aspect of His nature the prophets wrote about. This sovereign would also be a servant. More than that, He would be a suffering servant, one who would know pain and loss.

- READ ISAIAH 53:1-12
 - What word pictures and images does this passage use to describe the suffering of God’s servant?
 - Why was this man being punished? More specifically, whose disobedience brought Him such suffering?

- READ PSALM 22:1-31
 - How does this passage describe the suffering of the Coming King?

Most kings experience great wealth and affluence. God’s King would know pain. He would experience heartache. He would encounter some of the most brutal suffering the world has ever known. The craziest part is that it wouldn’t be because of anything He had done. This king would suffer because of what we have done. His suffering would bring our salvation. His punishment would buy our peace.

DAY 15: BRANCH

At the center of the Garden of Eden stood the Tree of Life. When Adam and Eve's sin banished them from paradise, they were separated from its life-giving branches. But the Old Testament promised that another Branch was coming. This one would grow out of King David's line and would bring life to the entire world. Where we were banished from the one tree, this Branch would call all men to Himself.

- READ ISAIAH 11:1-12
 - What will this Branch accomplish? How universal is the scope of His work?
 - What word pictures does the prophet use to help us see how this Branch will restore creation to God's original intent?

- JEREMIAH 23:1-8
 - How does this Coming King differentiate Himself from all other kings?

In the middle of their destruction and exile, God repeatedly spoke words of hope and courage to His people. Their predicament was not permanent. Their sin wouldn't define their stories. Instead, God had a plan to redeem their mistakes and restore them to their rightful place. Though our stories could have ended in shame, God offered salvation. While our sin deserved death, God offered us deliverance. In so doing, He proves Himself as both Author and Hero of this Story.

WEEK FOUR: THE HERO

DAY 16: ARRIVAL

There are few things in life better than Christmas morning. As children, there's the anticipation of finding out what's beneath all that wrapping paper. As parents, there's the satisfaction you get from seeing your children's joy. Everything that you've hoped and waited for comes true on that day. That was true of the very first Christmas, as well. On the day Jesus Christ arrived, God's long-promised plan to provide salvation finally began to take shape.

- READ MATTHEW 2:1-23
 - Matthew's account of Jesus' birth references many Messianic prophecies. What reassurance does this give us about His arrival?
 - How did Herod respond to the news of Jesus' birth? Why is Jesus such a threat to those who are trying to build their own Kingdom?

- READ LUKE 2:1-20
 - How did the shepherds respond to this newborn King? What is it about Jesus that leads you most towards worshiping Him?

With Jesus' birth, the King had finally arrived. The Kingdom had come. Though it would be years before Jesus would begin His public ministry, His incarnation meant that God was with us in the flesh. There was no turning back now. All of God's promises were about to become "Yes" because of what Jesus Christ had come to do (2 Corinthians 1:20).

DAY 17: BAPTISM

After spending His first thirty years in obscurity, Jesus decided it was time to go public with the news of God's Kingdom. Before He embarked on His ministry, Jesus went out to the Jordan River. There, a man called John the Baptist had been preaching the coming Kingdom. As soon as he saw Jesus, John recognized that the Kingdom he had long proclaimed was finally becoming a reality.

- READ JOHN 1:19-34
 - With what titles did John identify Jesus? How do these titles point us toward the work Jesus came to do?

- READ MATTHEW 3:1-17
 - What happened when Jesus was baptized? How did God identify Him in that moment?
 - Why did Jesus say He must be baptized (v. 15)? What does this tell us about the importance of baptism?

At His baptism, God identified Jesus as His beloved Son. It was at that moment that Jesus' identity became clear to the gathered crowd. Interestingly, the New Testament writers say something similar about our baptism today. When we were baptized, we were "joined with Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:3). It's in the waters of baptism that we, too, are identified as God's children.

DAY 18: TEACHING

Most people can point back to their favorite teacher in school. Maybe it was an instructor who made a subject come alive. Maybe you had a professor who took an interest in helping you live up to your potential. Regardless of who it is, we all have that teacher who had an impact on us. Yet, as great as those teachers were, none of them holds a candle to Jesus. His teachings have survived for centuries. They've transformed hearts, changed minds, and influenced nations. The lessons He taught have altered countless lives.

- READ LUKE 6:20-29
 - How do Jesus' teachings show us a better way to live? Why do you think His words were so impactful?
 - According to Jesus' own words, what will happen if we don't listen to His teachings?

- READ MATTHEW 11:28-30
 - What makes Jesus' teaching different? Why should we listen to Him?

A lot of Christians carry Red-Letter Bibles that print the words of Jesus out in red ink to differentiate them from the rest of the Scriptures. That's because we recognize something special in Jesus' teachings. His words have authority. His words pierce our hearts. His words show us life. Those who would know Jesus as Savior and Lord must also recognize Him as the greatest teacher the world has ever seen. What will you allow Him to teach you today?

DAY 19: PARABLES

The world is full of stories. Thousands of books are published every single year. The Hollywood box office rakes in billions of dollars every summer. Stories have a way of capturing our hearts and sparking our imaginations that simple facts do not. As our Creator, Jesus understood the power stories can have over us. Some of His most powerful lessons came in the form of parables. These short stories contain eternal truths.

- READ MATTHEW 13:1-23
 - Why did He teach in parables? How do they push us deeper into truth?
 - What was the meaning of the parable of the seeds? What does this parable reveal about the state of our hearts?

- READ LUKE 15:1-32.
 - What truths do these parables teach us about our heavenly Father? How are these stories more powerful than just knowing facts about Him?

A farmer planting his crops. A lost coin. A wayward son. Each of these stories teach us something about the Kingdom. Each of these stories teach us something about the King. They help us orient our own stories toward the Story God has been telling since the beginning of time. If our lives really are a story, then Jesus stands as the Ultimate Storyteller.

DAY 20: MIRACLES

As Jesus taught and traveled the countryside, people noticed there was something different about Him. He spoke with authority. He taught with power. Yet, nothing showed Jesus' authority and power more than the miracles He performed. In every town He visited, Jesus healed the sick, restored the sight of the blind, and liberated the demon-possessed. No one had ever seen such great wonders as the ones Jesus accomplished in His short ministry.

- READ LUKE 7:18-23
 - What miracles did Jesus claim to have performed? How would this have encouraged John the Baptist? How does it encourage us?

- READ JOHN 11:1-44
 - What claim did Jesus make in John 11:25? How does this miracle validate that claim?
 - Why do you think John records this as Jesus' final miracle? What does this account show us about Jesus' ultimate power?

For as impressive as Jesus' miracles were, they were simply a preview of what He really came to do. His healing of the sick and wounded served merely as a foretaste of that ultimate reality where there will be no more sickness, mourning, crying, or pain. More than that, every account of Jesus raising someone from the dead gives us the slightest glimpse of what it will be like on that day when He raises all men from their tombs. We look forward to a world – we long for a world – where Jesus' miracles are the norm.

WEEK FIVE: PROMISES KEPT

DAY 21: COVENANT

From the very first time He called Abraham to follow Him, God had shown Himself to be a covenant God. He is a God who wants His people to have a deep and abiding relationship with Him. For the people of Israel, that covenant looked like the Law. The 613 commands of the Old Testament gave the people a very clear expectation of what God wanted from them. However, at the end of His life, Jesus announced that a new covenant was quickly approaching.

- READ LUKE 22:7-30
 - According to Jesus, what was the foundation of the New Covenant? How was His sacrifice giving us a new relationship with God?
 - How does this New Covenant affect the way we understand greatness?

- READ HEBREWS 10:1-14
 - What would Christ's sacrifice on the cross make possible for His people?

As Jesus gathered His disciples together for one last meal, He passed around a loaf of bread and a cup of wine. The bread represented His body – a body that would soon be broken on the cross. The wine represented His blood – blood that would soon be spilled out as a sacrifice for sin. Establishing this New Covenant would come at a great cost. It was a cost that only Jesus could pay.

DAY 22: CRUCIFIXION

Jesus' ministry had attracted a large number of followers. It had also attracted a large number of opponents. Chief among them were the religious leaders of the day. They didn't like how Jesus confronted their excesses and challenged their power. So, they decided he needed to be eliminated. Emboldened by Judas' betrayal, they seized their opportunity to arrest Jesus at the Garden of Gethsemane. The trials they subjected Him to revealed their predetermined verdict: death was the only acceptable punishment.

- READ MATTHEW 27:11-44
 - In what ways was Jesus mocked and humiliated throughout His crucifixion? How does this reveal the depth of His love and care for us?
 - On the cross, Jesus took the punishment for our sins. What does this account teach us about the seriousness of our sin?

- READ COLOSSIANS 2:13-15
 - What was really happening at the cross? What was Jesus' sacrifice accomplishing for us?

“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

When Jesus hung on the cross, it had been less than 24-hours since He had spoken these very words. With His death, Jesus showed the truth of this statement. He paid the penalty for our sin. He suffered so that we could be saved. He was broken so that we could be whole. He laid down His life not just to show us that we're His friends, but to show us that God is our Father.

DAY 23: BURIAL

Crucifixion was a brutal and barbaric practice. It inflicted a level of pain unmatched in the history of capital punishment. In fact, the word “excruciating” derives from the same root word as “cross.” That the Son of God would subject himself to such torture speaks volumes to His heart. After a few hours of such piercing pain, Jesus’ body could take no more. With some final words and a last breath, His sacrifice for sin was complete.

- READ MARK 15:33-47
 - What happened when Jesus died? What does the tearing of the Temple curtain say about our access to God?
 - Why do you think the Roman officer made his proclamation about Jesus? What was it about Jesus’ death that reveals His true identity?

- READ MATTHEW 27:62-66
 - Why did the Pharisees and religious leaders want a guard stationed at the tomb?

On the night Jesus died, all hope seemed lost. His body lay lifeless in a borrowed tomb, His disciples were scattered. His teachings seemed like they might be swept into the dustbin of history. In that moment, it must have felt like all of the miracles and parables and sacrifices had been for nothing. And yet, there was another part of Jesus’ story yet to be told.

DAY 24: RESURRECTION

On the third day after Jesus' death, some of the women who had followed Him went to the tomb to pay their final respects. Their weekly observance of the Sabbath had kept them from anointing Jesus' body and preparing Him for burial. Defeated and dejected from the loss of their master, they walked to the tomb full of sadness and fear. But what they found there not only changed their lives, it changed the course of human history.

- READ JOHN 20:1-29
 - What encouragement did Jesus give His followers when He appeared to them?
 - Why didn't Thomas believe the initial stories of the Resurrection? How did Jesus even manage to convince the skeptic?

- READ LUKE 24:13-34
 - How did Jesus use the Old Testament to explain His work? What does this tell us about the unity of God's Story?

The crucifixion had looked like the ultimate defeat. But, the empty tomb changed everything. It redeemed the cross, showing us the true meaning of Jesus' death. It confirmed Jesus' identity, validating everything He ever said about Himself. More important, the Resurrection shattered the power of the grave. Its power is broken. Its pain is only temporary. The empty tomb proclaims Jesus as the Lord of all things – death included!

DAY 25: ASCENSION

Over the course of forty days, the resurrected Jesus appeared to His disciples multiple times. He ate meals with them. He offered proof of His resurrection. He taught them about the Kingdom of God. In all these things, Jesus was preparing them for the road ahead. His work on the cross was complete, but the mission was far from over. The disciples still had work to do, work they would take up once Jesus returned to His Father.

- READ LUKE 24:35-53
 - What power did Jesus promise His disciples? How would this power help them in their task?
 - How did the disciples respond to Jesus' ascension? How should our response be the same?

- READ ROMANS 8:31-39
 - Paul reminds us that Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father and is interceding on our behalf. What assurance does that give us as His people?

Though we don't often talk about the ascension, it is an integral part of our hope. We don't follow a dead and buried Jesus. We serve a risen and triumphant Jesus – a Savior who now sits at the right hand of God. Because of Him, we have access to the throne room of heaven! Because of Him, we have assurance of life and resurrection! Because of Him, we have hope!

WEEK SIX: A CHOSEN COMMUNITY

DAY 26: MISSION

“Your mission, should you choose to accept it...” We’re all familiar with these words. They signal the beginning of a new assignment, an exciting adventure, and a mission to save the world. Jesus may not have used these exact words, but they are at the very core of the task He gave His disciples. His mission may have been completed, but theirs was just beginning. Their mission, if they would choose to accept it, was to proclaim to the world who Jesus is and what He had done.

- READ ACTS 1:1-11
 - Why did Jesus send His disciples back to Jerusalem? What were they waiting for?
 - Jesus told them they would go into the world as “witnesses.” What does this tell us about the work God expects from us?

- READ II CORINTHIANS 5:11-21
 - Paul says that we are Christ’s ambassadors. What do ambassadors do? How can you be His ambassador at work? In your community? In your home?

While we often refer to ourselves with titles like “Christian” or “believer,” the New Testament talks about who we are using other terminology. We are witnesses. We are ambassadors. Those who follow Christ have been called to represent Him in their day-to-day life. They show others who He is by the way they live. They reveal what citizenship in the Kingdom is like by the love they have for one another. They tell people about the love and grace they have found in Him. Being a Christian isn’t about attending a meeting; it’s about living on mission.

DAY 27: SPIRIT

Cars need gasoline. Appliances need electricity. Toys need batteries. Our bodies need food and water. Nearly everything in this world runs on some kind of power source. We need sustenance and energy to do the things we need to do. The same is true for the church. If Jesus' people were to complete their mission to the nations, they would need power to get the task done.

- READ ACTS 2:1-47
 - How does Luke describe the scene when the Holy Spirit arrived? What did the Spirit equip the believers to do?
 - What was the early church like? What kind of community did they build together?

- READ GALATIANS 5:16-26
 - What qualities does the Holy Spirit bring into believers' lives? How does the Holy Spirit equip God's people to live today?

Jesus didn't just give His followers a mission. He also gave them the power to see that mission accomplished. The power Jesus offered wouldn't come from any kind of natural fuel; it would come from the supernatural fire of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit-emboldened church had an instant impact on their community. Thousands upon thousands of people came to know Jesus and the Gospel preached in His name. Once the church was unleashed, the world would never be the same.

DAY 28: PERSECUTION

Jesus knew what it was like to face opposition. His death on the cross had been the finale of years of hostility between Him and the religious leaders. It shouldn't surprise us that these same religious leaders began to persecute those who preached Jesus' name. The miraculous success of the early church soon gave way to a steady diet of persecution and pain. Even the beloved disciples Peter and John were not exempt from paying the price for their faith.

- READ ACTS 4:1-31
 - How did Peter and John respond to the Sanhedrin's request? Where did their ultimate allegiance lie?
 - How did the church respond to the news of this persecution? What did they pray for God to do through them?

- READ ACTS 7:54-8:3
 - What happened to Stephen because of his faith? Who led this new persecution of the church?

With the death of Stephen, the church had her first martyr. A believer paid the ultimate price for their belief. Unfortunately, Stephen would be but the first Christian casualty. Countless others throughout the centuries would make the same sacrifice for the Gospel. Yet, what their enemies hoped would extinguish the Gospel only served to expand it. The church scattered and grew following Stephen's death. The early Christians didn't flee or falter. The blood of the martyrs strengthened their resolve. Christ's church could not be so easily overcome.

DAY 29: TRANSFORMATION

The day of Stephen's death introduced the believers to a new enemy. The Pharisee Saul, empowered by his great devotion to the Law, led the charge in persecuting the new believers. Everything he desired and everything he did was pointed in one direction – the elimination of this new Christian sect. Saul just couldn't see God at work in the midst of this new movement. But God was just about to show Saul how blind he really was. In so doing, Saul would become part of one of the greatest transformation stories in history.

- READ ACTS 9:1-31
 - What happened to Saul on the road to Damascus? What mission did God have in mind for him?
 - How did the church in Jerusalem respond to Saul? Who ultimately helped him?

- READ ACTS 13:1-12
 - What ministry did God call Saul and Barnabas to do?

Saul's transformation went far beyond his name change to Paul. God had taken an enemy of the Gospel and turned him into its greatest ambassador. He had taken the most devout Jew and turned him into an instrument to reach the Gentiles. This man who had done so much to destroy the church would do more to build it up than arguably anyone else in history. Paul would travel from city to city, journeying thousands of miles, all so he could share the Gospel of Jesus Christ. His path around the world began on the road to Damascus.

DAY 30: COMMUNITY

Everybody wants to be a part of something bigger than themselves. It's why people spend years pouring their life into a job or a company. It's why sports fans gather together in stadiums and sports bars to cheer on their team. We want to be a part of something that matters. We want to be a part of a movement. The first Christians recognized the power of their community. Each of them knew that they belonged to all the rest. Their love for one another – and ultimately their devotion to Christ – made them a force to be reckoned with.

- READ ACTS 4:32-5:16
 - How did the early Christians look out for one another? In what ways did God continue to bless their community and ministry?

- READ EPHESIANS 4:1-32
 - What does Paul say in these verses about the kind of unity that should exist within the church? How does the Gospel transform our relationships?
 - What practical commands does Paul give here when it comes to holy living? What does that teach us about how Christians should live?

As the Gospel spread across the Roman Empire, it shattered all of the old divisions. Where you came from or what you looked like didn't matter anymore. All that mattered was the Kingdom. All that mattered was Christ. As Paul would say in Galatians 3:28: "There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus." The early Christians were one in faith and in purpose. Their community thrived because of their unity.

WEEK SEVEN: ENDINGS

DAY 31: RETURN

When General MacArthur and the United States army fled the Philippine Islands during World War 2, he made the bold declaration that he would return. Three years later, he made good on that promise. He returned victorious to free the islands from Axis control. The Bible says that Christians look forward to an even greater act of return. When Jesus ascended into heaven, He promised that He would one day return to finally and eternally free them from their sin.

- READ MATTHEW 24:1-44
 - What did Jesus say it would be like in the days prior to His return?
 - What does it mean to “keep watch” for the end? How do we prepare ourselves?

- READ REVELATION 19:11-16
 - How does this picture of the returning Christ compare with how you normally view Him?

At Jesus’ first arrival, He came as a lowly baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. At His second coming, Jesus will arrive as a conquering King. His appearance and demeanor make it clear what He has come to do. He has come to destroy evil. He has come to set things right. He has come to bring the story to its end. Knowing that day is coming can transform how we live on this day.

DAY 32: JUDGMENT

Judgment Day. Nearly every culture in history has had some concept of a final day of reckoning. From the ancient Mayans to today's dystopian literature, it seems like people have been talking about the end of the world since the beginning of time. We have this sense that there's a day of accountability coming. That's because the Bible says that day is on its way. There's a day coming when everyone from throughout history – the greatest to the least – will stand before the very throne of God.

- READ REVELATION 20:11-15
 - What happens on the day we stand before God's throne? What books are read?

- READ MATTHEW 25:14-46
 - How did Jesus picture Judgment Day in these two stories?
 - What does the master judge the servant for in the first parable?

In the second story, what criteria was used for judgment? What kind of standard separates the "sheep" from the "goats"? It's hard for us to even begin to comprehend what that day of judgment will be like. What will it be like to hear God recount the story of our lives? How will we respond when it's our turn to stand before Him? Regardless of how we respond, we know what His response will be. Because of Jesus, He will look at us with love, with grace, and with mercy. That is the Good News of the Gospel! "So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

DAY 33: WEDDING

Weddings take a lot of work. They require an insane amount of planning. They demand the utmost attention to detail. After all, every bride wants her wedding day to be perfect. While we often refer to Judgment Day in negative terms, the New Testament has a decidedly different moniker for that day: “The Wedding Feast of the Lamb.” A wedding means that two people are uniting together to build a new home. On the day Jesus returns, He will come to make His home with His Bride, the church.

- READ REVELATION 19:1-9
 - What is given to the Bride for her to wear? What does this represent?

- READ MATTHEW 25:1-13
 - According to Jesus’ story, how should we live in light of the end? What does it look like to be prepared for His return?
 - What keeps us from focusing on the reality of this day? How would keeping our eyes on the wedding day change how you live today?

Human history ends with a wedding. When that day comes, we’ll see the clouds of heaven part and our groom will ride in triumphantly on His white horse. We’ll see Him destroy the forces of evil once and for all. Best of all, we’ll be ushered into the place He’s created specifically for us. One day, we will see and experience everything Jesus has spent these long years preparing for His people.

DAY 34: NEWNESS

Most things in this world are so much better when they are new. There's nothing quite like that new car smell. Likewise, holding a newborn baby is one of the greatest joys life has to offer. Yet, we know that newness doesn't last. That new car smell loses its luster once we have to deal with door dings and new car payments. The joy of holding a newborn is soon tempered by late night feedings and diaper changes. Newness wears out. What's new today becomes old by tomorrow. Yet, God promises that His new creation will be perpetually new!

- READ REVELATION 21:1-14
 - How does John describe the new city? What is there? What isn't there?

- READ I CORINTHIANS 15:35-58
 - How does Paul describe our resurrection bodies? What will they be like?
 - What assurance does this passage give us? What can we do because of this promise?

On the day of Christ's return, everything will be made new. This creation will be renewed to its original design on the day it was first made. Our relationship with God will be returned to what it was before sin entered the picture. Our bodies will be remade into something that lasts forever. Everything you've ever known will be restored to the way God intended it to be. God has a plan to make all things new – including you!

DAY 35: FOREVER

“And they lived happily ever after...” The best kind of stories end with those six simple words. They bring closure. They bring relief. Yes, the journey may have been long and difficult, but everything turned out alright in the end. We want the assurance that everything – all the heartache, the suffering, the loss – is going to be worth it. The closing chapter of the Bible holds out that exact hope. When all is said and done, God will peel back the curtain of time to reveal an eternity far beyond our wildest dreams.

- READ I THESSALONIANS 4:13-18
 - How long will we get to be with Jesus? Who will be there along with us?

- READ REVELATION 21:22-22:7
 - How does John describe our eternal home? In your opinion, what’s the best promise in these verses?
 - For how long does this story continue on? How does this help us recast our momentary and temporary troubles here?

The end of all things is merely the beginning. God will make all things right for all time. This life, for all its trials and troubles, is merely a passing shadow. The day is coming when Jesus will bring us into our eternal home. On that day, all the suffering of this world will melt away as we finally glimpse our eternal hope. We will forever live in a place where there is no mourning, or crying, or pain. Then, the words we’ve longed to hear all our lives will finally become our reality: *“And they lived happily ever after...”*