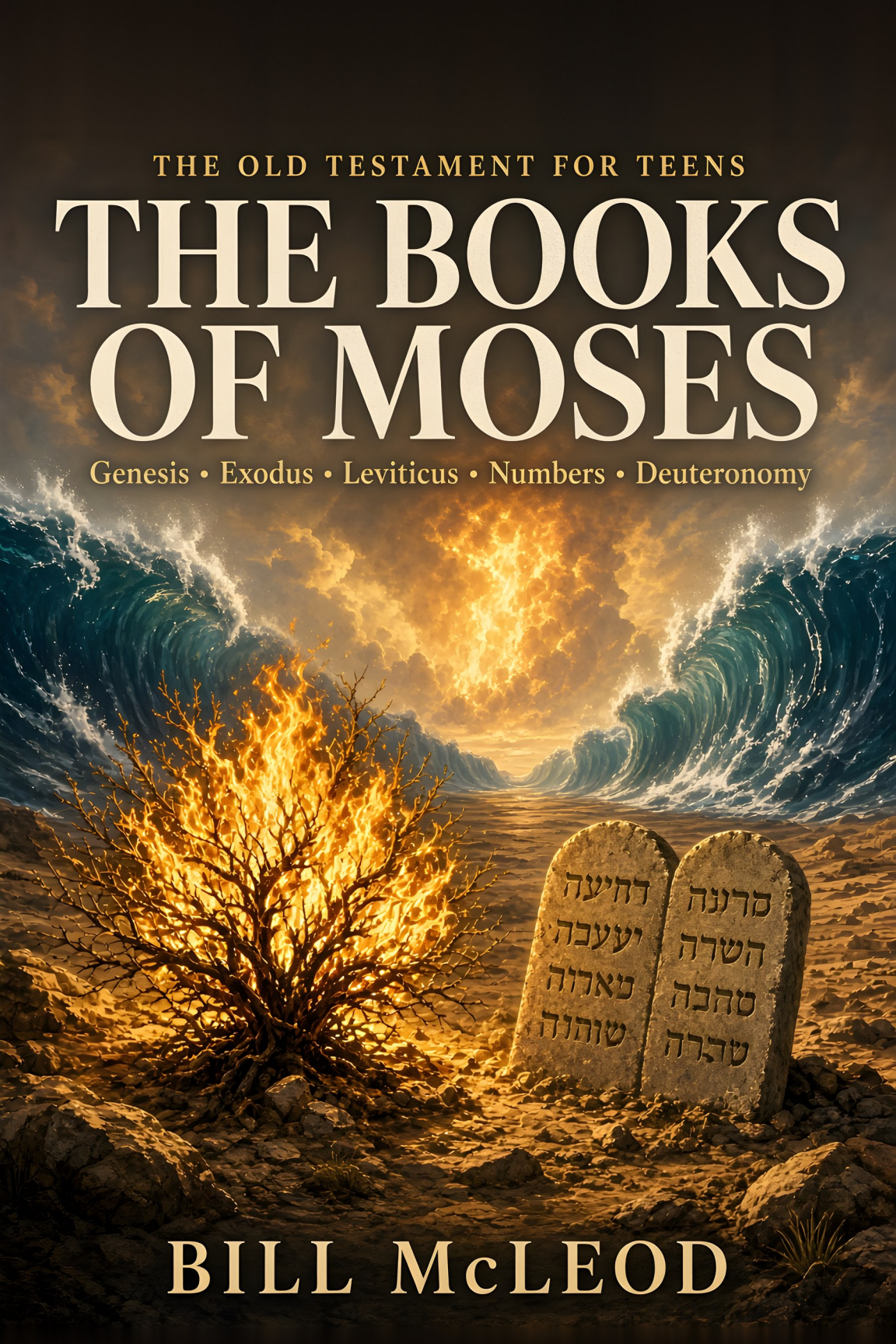
THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

THE BOOKS OF MOSES

Genesis • Exodus • Leviticus • Numbers • Deuteronomy



BILL McLEOD

THE BOOK OF GENESIS

The King Who Started It All

Genesis, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Who Started It All: The Book of Genesis, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

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In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you read the New Testament for Teens series, you know the saying: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” It was in every book, and it’s here too. Genesis is a good place to test it, because most people think they know Genesis already. Adam and Eve, a snake, an ark full of animals, a coat of many colors. Kids’ stuff, right?

Not even close. Genesis is one of the boldest, strangest, most honest books ever written. It tackles the biggest questions there are. Why is there something instead of nothing? What is a human being? Why is the world so beautiful and so broken at the same time? Why do families hurt each other? Can God use people who keep messing up?

It’s also not a book for little kids, whatever the coloring pages suggest. There’s murder, a flood that wipes out a world, lies, jealousy, a near sacrifice, sexual violence, human trafficking, and brothers who sell their own brother. Genesis doesn’t clean up its heroes. Almost every one of them is a mess. That’s part of why it’s believable, and part of why it’s hopeful. If God could work with this family, He can work with yours.

And running through the whole book, from the first page to the last, is a promise. God promises that evil won’t win, that a family will bless the whole world, and that He’ll never let go of the people He’s chosen. The rest of the Bible is the story of how He keeps that promise.

This is the first book of a new series on the Old Testament. So open your Bible to page one. In the beginning. Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Genesis in nine chapters: creation (Genesis 1–2), the fall (3), from Cain to the tower of Babel, including the flood (4–11), Abraham's call (12–17), Abraham tested (18–23), Isaac and Jacob's early years (24–28), Jacob's struggles (29–36), Joseph's rise (37–41), and Joseph and his brothers (42–50).

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what kind of book Genesis is, who wrote it, how it's put together, and the world it came from. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as how to read the days of creation, how big the flood was, and how Genesis was written, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. Genesis also tells some painful stories. When it does, you'll find a box with a safety note. This book quotes Genesis in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Read each section of Genesis first, then the chapter here. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It begins The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Genesis raises questions teens are already asking, often because of what they're learning in science class. On the days of creation, I've presented the main Christian views (young-earth, old-earth, the framework view, the analogical days view, and evolutionary creation) fairly, without endorsing one. The same is true of the flood (global or regional), ancient Near Eastern parallels such as Enuma Elish and the Epic of Gilgamesh, and the question of authorship, including the Mosaic tradition and the documentary hypothesis. I'd encourage you to share your own church's view with your teen, and to explain why other Christians see it differently.

Genesis contains violence and abuse, including the stories of Hagar, Lot's daughters, Dinah, Tamar, and Joseph's brothers. These are handled carefully and age-appropriately, without graphic detail. Each one includes a safety box that tells readers that what happened was wrong, that it is never the victim's fault, and that if anything like it is happening to them or a friend, they should tell a trusted adult.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how Genesis sets up the rest of the Bible and how the New Testament sees its promises fulfilled in Jesus, while acknowledging that Jewish readers have their own rich ways of reading these same promises. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will see in Genesis a God who made them on purpose, who doesn't give up on broken families, and who keeps His promises.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

The Book of Beginnings

The name Genesis comes from a Greek word meaning origin or birth. In Hebrew, the book is called Bereshit, its first word, which means in the beginning. That's a good summary. Genesis tells the beginning of the universe, of human beings, of marriage, of sin, of languages and nations, and of the family through whom God would bless the whole world. If you want to understand the rest of the Bible, you have to start here. The New Testament quotes or refers to Genesis more than sixty times, and Jesus Himself went back to it when He talked about marriage (Matthew 19:4–6).

Part of a Bigger Book

Genesis is the first of five books, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, that Jews call the Torah, which means instruction or teaching, and Christians often call the Pentateuch, which is Greek for five scrolls. These five books tell one long story, from creation to the edge of the promised land. Genesis is the prequel. It explains who Israel was, where they came from, and why God chose them.

Two Halves

Genesis divides into two big parts. Chapters 1–11 cover the whole world: creation, the first humans, the first murder, the flood, and the tower of Babel. Scholars call this the primeval history. Then, in chapter 12, the camera zooms in on one man, Abram, and his

family. Chapters 12–50 follow four generations: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's twelve sons, especially Joseph. Notice the shift. The problem is worldwide. God's solution starts with one family.

These Are the Generations

Genesis has its own built-in outline. Again and again it says, This is the account of, or in older translations, These are the generations of. The Hebrew word is toledot, which means family history or what came from. The phrase appears ten or eleven times (depending on how you count), introducing each new section: the heavens and the earth (2:4), Adam (5:1), Noah (6:9), Noah's sons (10:1), Shem (11:10), Terah, Abraham's father (11:27), Ishmael (25:12), Isaac (25:19), Esau (36:1, 9), and Jacob (37:2). Genesis is a book of family trees, and the long lists of names that most people skip are actually the skeleton that holds the book together.

Who Wrote Genesis?

Genesis doesn't name its author. Jewish and Christian tradition has long held that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible, and the rest of Scripture refers to them as the Law of Moses or the Book of Moses (Joshua 8:31; Mark 12:26). Jesus spoke of Moses writing about Him (John 5:46). Many who hold to Mosaic authorship think Moses used older records and family histories, possibly the toledot sections, and that later editors added a few updates, such as the account of Moses' own death in Deuteronomy 34 or modern place names like Dan (Genesis 14:14), a city named centuries later (Judges 18:29).

In the 1800s, many scholars proposed what's called the documentary hypothesis, associated especially with the German scholar Julius Wellhausen. It suggests that the Pentateuch was

woven together from four main sources, labeled J, E, D, and P, written at different times. Scholars pointed to things like the use of different names for God, repeated stories, and differences in style. Today, many scholars have moved away from the classic four-source version, and propose other models, while many conservative scholars argue that the evidence fits a single, carefully designed book better than a patchwork. Whatever you conclude, Christians agree that Genesis is inspired by God and part of His Word. The question is how He brought it to us.

The World It Came From

Genesis comes from the ancient Near East, the world of Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), Egypt, and Canaan, between them. Abraham's family came from Ur, a great city in Mesopotamia, and Joseph ended up in Egypt. These cultures had their own stories about creation and a great flood, written on clay tablets, some older than Genesis. Two of the most famous are the Babylonian creation story Enuma Elish and the Epic of Gilgamesh, which includes a flood story. We'll look at them in chapters 1 and 3. Comparing them with Genesis is fascinating, because the similarities show that Genesis speaks the language of its world, and the differences show how radically different its God is.

When Did It Happen?

If you add up the ages in Genesis and the rest of the Old Testament, Abraham lived around 2000 BC, and Joseph went to Egypt a few centuries later. Some scholars date these events later, and some doubt that they can be dated at all. Many details of the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, such as names, customs, and travel routes, fit what we know of the ancient Near East in the early second

millennium BC. The events of Genesis 1–11 are much harder to date, and Christians disagree about how to read them, as we'll see.

Asking the Right Questions

We usually come to Genesis with our questions: How old is the earth? How did life develop? Where did the dinosaurs go? Those are good questions. But Genesis was written to people thousands of years before modern science, and it mainly answers different questions: Who made the world? Why is it here? What does it mean to be human? Why is there evil? Who is God, and can He be trusted? Christians disagree about how Genesis relates to science. But all agree that it gives the answers science can't give: that the world is not an accident, that you're made in God's image, and that God hasn't abandoned His creation.

Messy Heroes

Don't read Genesis as a book of role models. Noah gets drunk. Abraham lies about his wife, twice. Sarah laughs at God and mistreats Hagar. Isaac plays favorites. Jacob cheats his brother and his father. His sons commit murder and sell their brother into slavery. Judah treats his daughter-in-law unjustly. The Bible doesn't hide any of this. It tells the truth about people, even its heroes. That honesty is one reason to trust it. And it shows that God's plan doesn't depend on people being good. It depends on God being faithful.

Hard Stories and Safety Notes

Genesis includes stories of violence and abuse. Including a story in the Bible doesn't mean God approves of it. Often Genesis simply reports what happened and lets the consequences show how wrong

it was. When we come to these stories, you'll find a safety box. Here's what they all say: abuse is always wrong, it is never the victim's fault, and if something like this is happening to you or a friend, tell a trusted adult, like a parent, teacher, school counselor, youth leader, or pastor. If one adult doesn't listen, tell another one until someone does.

Promise and Covenant

Two words will come up again and again in this book. A promise is God's word about what He will do. A covenant is a binding agreement or relationship, often sealed with a sign. God makes covenants with Noah (with the rainbow as a sign), with Abraham (with circumcision as a sign), and later with Israel at Mount Sinai. Genesis is driven forward by God's promises: offspring who will defeat evil, a land, a great nation, and blessing for all peoples. Almost every story asks the question: will this promise survive? Watch how often it seems impossible, and how God keeps it anyway.

The Map

Chapter 1 (Genesis 1–2): In the beginning.

Chapter 2 (Genesis 3): The snake, the fruit, and the first promise.

Chapter 3 (Genesis 4–11): From Cain to the tower of Babel, including the flood.

Chapter 4 (Genesis 12–17): Abram's call.

Chapter 5 (Genesis 18–23): Abraham's tests.

Chapter 6 (Genesis 24–28): Isaac, Rebekah, and the twins.

Chapter 7 (Genesis 29–36): Jacob's struggles.

Chapter 8 (Genesis 37–41): Joseph, from the pit to the palace.

Chapter 9 (Genesis 42–50): Joseph and his brothers.

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CHAPTER 1

Let There Be

Genesis 1–2

The Bible doesn't open with an argument. It doesn't try to prove that God exists, and it doesn't start with a list of rules. It starts with a sentence so simple a kid could memorize it and so huge that scientists, philosophers, and poets have been chewing on it for three thousand years: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." Before there was anything, there was God. Everything else, every galaxy, every mountain, every grain of sand, and you, came after Him and came from Him.

That one sentence quietly knocks over a lot of ideas. It says the universe isn't eternal; it had a beginning. It says the universe isn't God; it's something God made. It says the universe isn't an accident; Someone meant it. And it says God isn't one of many gods fighting for control. There's no rival, no partner, no battle. There's just God, creating.

Then the camera zooms in on the earth, and it's not a pretty picture yet. The earth was "formless and empty." It was dark, and water covered everything. In the ancient world, dark churning water was the ultimate picture of chaos, the stuff of nightmares. But even here, God is present. His Spirit is "hovering over the surface of the waters," like a bird over its nest. The chaos isn't out of control. God is about to bring order to it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Formless and Empty**

The Hebrew phrase for "formless and empty" is tohu wabohu, which sounds a little like a rhyme. Many readers notice that the six days answer those two problems. On days 1 through 3, God gives the world form by separating things: light from dark, sky from sea, land from water. On days 4 through 6, God fills the empty spaces He just made: lights for the day and night, birds and fish for the sky and sea, animals and people for the land. Day 1 matches day 4, day 2 matches day 5, and day 3 matches day 6. It's a beautifully designed passage about a beautifully designed world.

And then God speaks. "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." No struggle. No magic spell. No raw materials He had to wrestle into shape. God just speaks, and reality obeys. This is the first thing Genesis wants you to know about God's power: His word is enough. When He says something, it happens.

Day after day, the same rhythm repeats. God said. It was so. God saw that it was good. There was evening and there was morning. The repetition is on purpose. Genesis 1 reads almost like a song with a chorus, and the chorus is this: God is in charge, and what He makes is good.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Enuma Elish**

Israel's neighbors had their own creation stories. The most famous is the Babylonian Enuma Elish, written down on clay tablets. In it, the gods are born from the mixing of fresh and salt water, and the young god Marduk kills the sea goddess Tiamat in a violent battle, splits her body in two, and makes the sky and earth from the halves. Humans are made from the blood of a defeated god so that they can do the gods' hard labor and feed them. When you read Genesis 1 next to that, the differences jump out. In Genesis there's one God, not a crowd of them. He doesn't fight anyone to create; He simply speaks. The sun, moon, and stars, which Babylon worshiped as gods, are just lamps God hangs in the sky (Genesis doesn't even call them by their usual

names, just the greater light and the lesser light). And humans aren't slaves made from a dead god's blood. They're made in God's own image and blessed. Scholars debate how much Genesis is responding directly to stories like this, but many readers think it's deliberately setting the record straight.

On the fourth day God makes the sun, the moon, and the stars, to mark "seasons, days, and years." Notice the job description. They aren't gods to fear or worship. They're more like clocks and calendars. On the fifth day the seas swarm with fish and the skies fill with birds, including the "large sea creatures," which some ancient people pictured as monsters of chaos. In Genesis, they're just more of God's creatures, made by Him and called good.

Then comes the sixth day, and the story slows down. Up to now, God has said, "Let there be." Now He says something different: "Let's make man in our image, after our likeness." It's as if God pauses before the most important part of the project.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Is "Us"?**

Why does God say "Let's make" and "our image"? Readers have offered several answers. Some Jewish interpreters suggested God is speaking to the angels of His heavenly court. Others see it as a plural of majesty, the way a king might say "we." Many Christians, from the early church on, have seen a hint of the Trinity here: God the Father, the Son, and the Spirit (who was just mentioned hovering over the waters). Genesis doesn't explain it, so be careful not to claim more than the text says. But it's fair to notice that the God of Genesis 1 is not lonely. Even before He made anything, there was something like conversation inside God.

Then comes one of the most important sentences ever written about human beings. God created humanity in His image, male and female. The writer is so excited he says it three times in one verse, almost like poetry.

What does it mean to be made in God's image? In the ancient world, a king would put statues of himself in the far corners of his kingdom to remind everyone who was in charge there. These statues were called the king's images. Genesis takes that idea and turns it upside down. God doesn't need stone statues. He made living ones. Every person is meant to show the world what God is like and to care for the world on His behalf. That's why God immediately gives people a job: "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it." The word dominion has sometimes been twisted to mean people can trash the planet. But in context it means ruling the way God rules, carefully and generously, like a good king who looks after his land.

The image of God also means something about every single person you'll ever meet. Not just the popular kids. Not just people who agree with you. The kid nobody sits with at lunch, the person with a disability, the unborn baby, the elderly woman with dementia, the refugee, the enemy: all of them bear God's image. Genesis 9:6 will later say that's why murder is so serious. Human worth isn't something you earn by being smart, attractive, or useful. It's stamped into you by your Maker.

Notice too that both male and female are made in God's image. In a world where women were often treated as property, that was a revolutionary thing to say. Men and women are different, and Genesis celebrates that difference, but they're equal in dignity and worth, and they share the same job of caring for God's world. Neither one shows the world what God is like without the other.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Caring for Creation**
>
> If God made the world and called it good, then the way we treat the world matters. Psalm 24:1 says the earth belongs to the LORD, not to us. We're more like tenants or gardeners than owners. Christians disagree about a lot of

environmental politics, but nearly all agree on the basic principle: we're called to care for creation, not exploit it. That can be as simple as not wasting food, picking up trash on a trail, or learning the names of the birds and trees around your house. When you take care of God's world, you're doing the job He gave humanity on day six.

REAL TALK **You Are Not a Mistake**

Some days it's hard to believe you're worth much. Maybe you're not good at sports, or your grades are low, or your body doesn't look like the bodies you see online. Genesis 1 doesn't say you're made in the image of whoever has the most followers. It says you're made in the image of God. Your worth was settled before you did anything at all. If you struggle with thoughts that you're worthless, or with thoughts of hurting yourself, please don't keep it to yourself. Tell a parent, a counselor, a youth leader, or another trusted adult today. In the United States you can also call or text 988 to reach the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline any time.

At the end of the sixth day, God looks at everything He's made, and the chorus changes. It isn't just good anymore. "It was very good." The world, as God made it, was not a mess. It was beautiful, ordered, and full of life.

Then, on the seventh day, God rests. He isn't tired; God doesn't get worn out. The word means He stopped, because the work was finished. And God "blessed the seventh day, and made it holy." This is the first thing in the Bible called holy, and it isn't a place or a person. It's a day, a slice of time. Later, Israel would keep the Sabbath as a weekly reminder that the world doesn't depend on our nonstop work. It depends on God. In a world where your phone never stops buzzing, that's a pretty radical idea.

REAL TALK **Rest Is Not Laziness**

A lot of teens are exhausted. Between school, homework, sports, jobs, practices, and the pressure to always be available online, there's hardly a

moment to breathe. Genesis 2 says God built rest into the very structure of creation, before sin ever entered the picture. Rest isn't a reward you earn once everything's done; everything is never done. It's a gift you receive by trusting that the world keeps turning even when you stop. Jesus said the Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). Try setting aside a few hours each week with no homework and no screens, and use it to sleep, pray, take a walk, laugh with your family, or just enjoy God's world. You were made by a God who rests.

BACKGROUND CHECK **How Long Were the Days?**

Christians who all believe God created everything disagree about how to read the days of Genesis 1. Here are the main views, as fairly as possible. Young-earth creationists read the days as six ordinary 24-hour days, a few thousand years ago, and often point to the repeated phrase "there was evening and there was morning" and to Exodus 20:11. Old-earth creationists accept that the universe is billions of years old and often read each day as a long age (the Hebrew word yom can mean a long period), or as days of God's work separated by long gaps. The framework view sees the days as a literary structure, the forming and filling pattern, meant to teach who made the world and why, not the order or timing. The analogical days view, held by some theologians, sees them as God's days of work, described by analogy to a human work week, so that we can copy His pattern of work and rest. Evolutionary creationists (sometimes called theistic evolutionists) accept the scientific account of an old universe and the development of life over time, and see God as the Creator working through those processes, with Genesis teaching theological truth rather than science. Faithful, Bible-believing Christians hold each of these views. What they all share is more important than where they differ: God made everything, it was good, humans bear His image, and the world belongs to Him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The World as God's Temple**

One more way of reading Genesis 1 is worth knowing, because it overlaps with several of the views above. Some scholars, such as John Walton, point out that in the ancient world, temples were often dedicated in seven-day

ceremonies, and that a god was said to rest in his temple once it was finished, meaning he took his seat to rule from there. Read that way, Genesis 1 shows God setting up the whole universe as His temple, giving everything its function, and then resting on the seventh day as He takes His throne. Isaiah 66:1 pictures heaven as God's throne and the earth as His footstool. Whether or not you find this view convincing, it highlights something true: the world isn't just a big rock floating in space. It's the place where God intends to live with His people. That's exactly where the Bible ends, in Revelation 21, with God's dwelling place among people.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Science and Scripture**

Some people think you have to choose between science and faith. Many of the founders of modern science, like Johannes Kepler, Robert Boyle, and Isaac Newton, believed God made the universe, and that's exactly why they expected it to follow orderly laws they could discover. Today, many scientists are Christians too. Christians have often spoken of God writing two books: the book of nature and the book of Scripture. Because the same God is behind both, they can't ultimately contradict each other, even when our understanding of one or the other is still incomplete. It's okay to have questions. Ask them out loud, and keep reading.

Then Genesis 2 starts over and tells the creation story again, from a different angle. Genesis 1 is the wide shot from space; Genesis 2 is the close-up at ground level. In chapter 1, God is called simply God, the mighty Creator of everything. In chapter 2, a new name appears: the LORD God. That's God's personal name, the name He'll later reveal to Moses. The God who rules the galaxies is also a God who comes close.

And close is exactly what He does. "The LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life." Picture a potter getting His hands dirty, then leaning down face to face to breathe life into what He's made. The Hebrew word

for man, adam, sounds like the word for ground, adamah. You might call him Dirt Guy. You're made of the same stuff as the earth, which keeps you humble. But you also have the breath of God in you, which makes you priceless.

God plants a garden in Eden, full of trees "pleasant to the sight, and good for food." God cares about beauty, not just usefulness. In the middle are two special trees: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God puts the man in the garden "to cultivate and keep it." Work was part of paradise. It isn't a punishment. It's part of what it means to be human. Later, those same two Hebrew words are used for the priests who serve and guard the tabernacle, so some readers see Eden as the first temple, the place where God lived with His people.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Where Was Eden?**
>
> Genesis names four rivers flowing out of Eden. Two of them, the Tigris and the Euphrates, are still around today, in modern Iraq. The other two, the Pishon and the Gihon, are harder to identify, and people have proposed everything from the Nile to rivers that dried up long ago. Nobody knows exactly where Eden was, and the flood stories and thousands of years of history may have changed the landscape. What's clear is that Genesis wants you to see Eden as a real place on the map, not a fairy-tale land far, far away.

God gives the man freedom and one boundary. He can eat from any tree but one. If he eats from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he will die. Why put the tree there at all? Because love needs freedom. God didn't want robots who obeyed because they had no choice. He wanted people who would trust Him and stay close because they wanted to.

Then, for the first time, God says something is not good. "It is not good for the man to be alone." Everything was very good, but one

thing was missing. So God brings the animals to the man to name, which shows his authority and creativity. But none of them is right for him. There was no "helper comparable to him." The word helper doesn't mean an assistant or someone less important. In the Old Testament the same word is used for God Himself when He helps His people. It means someone who brings strength the other lacks.

So God puts the man into a deep sleep, takes part of his side, and builds a woman. When the man wakes up and sees her, he bursts into the first poem in the Bible: "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh." In other words, finally! She's like him, she's equal with him, and she's different from him, all at once. Then the writer adds that a man will leave his father and mother and join his wife, "and they will be one flesh." Jesus quoted this line when people asked Him about marriage (Matthew 19:4–6).

The chapter ends on a quiet note: "The man and his wife were both naked, and they were not ashamed." That's not just about clothing. It's a picture of total openness. Nothing to hide from each other. Nothing to hide from God. No masks, no filters, no fear of being seen. Hold onto that picture, because in the next chapter, it shatters.

> **REAL TALK** **Two Accounts?**
>
> Some readers notice that Genesis 1 and 2 tell creation in different orders and wonder whether they contradict each other. Others, especially those who hold the documentary hypothesis, see them as two separate sources placed side by side. Many readers, ancient and modern, see them as two complementary pictures, one that shows the order of the whole universe and one that zooms in on the first humans and their relationship with God. Either way, the final editor of Genesis clearly wanted both, and each teaches things

the other doesn't. Genesis 1 tells you you're made in God's image. Genesis 2 tells you God breathed His own breath into you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Genesis 1 and John 1**

The Gospel of John begins with the same three words as Genesis: "In the beginning." Then John says that the Word was with God and was God, and that all things were made through Him. Genesis shows God creating by speaking. John reveals that the Word God spoke is a Person, the Son, who later became flesh as Jesus. And just as Genesis 1 starts with light shining into darkness, John says the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness hasn't overcome it. Christians read Genesis 1 and John 1 together: the One who made the world is the One who came into it to save it.

KEY VERSE

God created man in his own image. In God's image he created him; male and female he created them.

Genesis 1:27 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Genesis starts by saying that God made everything. What difference does it make to you whether the universe was made on purpose or happened by accident?
2. Which creation view in the box makes the most sense to you right now? Why do you think Christians can disagree on this and still agree on the main point?
3. If every person bears God's image, how should that change the way you treat someone you don't like?
4. God built rest into the rhythm of creation. What would it look like for you to take a real day of rest from screens and work?

TRY THIS *Go outside tonight, look at the sky for ten full minutes with your phone put away, and read Psalm 8. Then write down one thing you noticed about God's creation and one thing you noticed about yourself.*

CHAPTER 2

The Day Everything Broke

Genesis 3

Genesis 3 is one of the shortest chapters in this book, and one of the most important chapters in the whole Bible. It explains why the world you live in looks so different from the very good world of Genesis 1. Why do people lie, cheat, and hurt each other? Why does it feel so hard to be close to God? Why does everyone die? Genesis 3 says it started here.

It begins with a new character. "Now the serpent was more subtle than any animal of the field which the LORD God had made." Subtle means crafty or sneaky. Notice that the serpent is a creature God made; it isn't a rival god. Genesis doesn't explain where evil came from or tell you everything about the serpent. Later Scripture identifies the serpent with the devil, the "old serpent" of Revelation 12:9. Here, he's simply a voice that wants to pull people away from God.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Serpents in the Ancient World**
>
> In the ancient Near East, serpents showed up everywhere: on Pharaoh's crown in Egypt, in stories about chaos monsters, and as symbols of wisdom, healing, and fertility. In the Gilgamesh epic, a snake steals the plant that could have made the hero young again. So when Genesis introduces a talking serpent, its first readers would have recognized it as a symbol of something

powerful, mysterious, and dangerous. Genesis makes sure you know the serpent is just a creature, not a god, and not anyone to trust.

The serpent's first words are a question: "Has God really said, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden'?" It's a brilliant trick. He doesn't deny God exists. He just twists what God said and makes God sound stingy. God had actually said they could eat from every tree but one. The serpent makes it sound like God said no to everything.

The woman answers, and she gets it mostly right. But she adds a detail God never said: "You shall not touch it." Maybe she was building a fence around the rule to stay safe. Maybe the serpent's question was already working on her, making God seem harsher than He is.

Then the serpent goes for the kill. "You won't really die." He flatly contradicts God. Then he gives his reason: God knows that when you eat it "you will be like God, knowing good and evil." In other words, God is holding out on you. He doesn't want what's best for you. He wants to keep you small. If you want to really live, you need to stop trusting Him and decide for yourself what's good and what's evil.

That's the oldest lie in the world, and you've heard it a thousand times. It shows up in commercials, songs, and your own head. God's rules are there to ruin your fun. You'll be happier if you do what you want. Follow your heart, even if it means ignoring God. The serpent's strategy hasn't changed. It's always some version of this: God isn't good, and you can't trust Him.

REAL TALK **How Temptation Works**

Look at the steps in Genesis 3:6. She saw that the fruit was good for food (it appealed to her body), that it was "a delight to the eyes" (it looked amazing), and that it was "desired to make one wise" (it promised something she

wanted). Then she took it. First John 2:16 describes temptation in almost the same three ways. Temptation usually doesn't look ugly. It looks good, delicious, and smart. It almost always starts with a thought about God that isn't true. The best defense isn't just trying harder. It's knowing who God really is, so that when the lie comes, you can recognize it.

She takes the fruit and eats, and then she gives some to her husband, who was "with her." He didn't argue. He didn't protect her. He just ate it too. Both of them chose to trust the serpent's word over God's.

Immediately, their eyes are opened, just as the serpent promised. But what they see isn't godlike wisdom. "They both knew that they were naked." The beautiful openness of chapter 2 is gone. Now they feel exposed and ashamed. So they sew fig leaves together and try to cover themselves. It's the first cover-up in history, and it doesn't work very well. People have been sewing fig leaves ever since: masks, excuses, perfect profiles, and the sense that if anyone really knew us, they wouldn't love us.

Then they hear God walking in the garden "in the cool of the day." He's coming to spend time with them, like always. But this time they hide among the trees. The people made to walk with God now hide from Him.

And God comes looking. "Where are you?" God isn't asking because He doesn't know. He's giving the man a chance to come out and tell the truth. It's the first question God asks in the Bible, and it's a question of love. God goes after people who are hiding from Him. He still does.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Shame vs. Guilt**

Guilt says I did something bad. Shame says I am bad. Notice that Adam's first words after he comes out are about shame: "I was afraid, because I was

naked; so I hid myself." Shame makes us hide, from God and from each other. But God doesn't leave them hiding, and He doesn't leave you there either. If you're carrying shame about something you did or something that was done to you, the worst thing you can do is keep hiding. Talk to God about it, and talk to a trusted adult. Shame grows in the dark and shrinks in the light.

REAL TALK **Is Sin Really a Big Deal?**

It was just a piece of fruit, right? Why such a big punishment? But that's like saying a wedding ring is just a piece of metal. What made the act so serious was what it meant: Adam and Eve chose to believe God was a liar and to put themselves in His place. Sin is always bigger than it looks, because it's really about a broken relationship. That's also why little sins aren't so little. A lie, a bit of cruelty, a secret habit, all of them grow out of the same root: I know better than God. The good news is that God's grace is bigger than our sin. But we'll never really appreciate grace until we take sin seriously.

The man explains why he hid. Then God asks the hard question: did you eat from the tree? And the blame game begins. The man says, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate it." Did you catch that? He blames the woman, and he blames God for giving her to him. When God asks the woman, she blames the serpent: "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." Nobody takes responsibility. Sound familiar? Ever since, people have been saying it's not my fault.

Then God speaks to each of them, in reverse order. To the serpent, God announces a curse. It will crawl on its belly and eat dust. And then God says something that shakes the whole Bible: "I will put hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will bruise your head, and you will bruise his heel." There will be a long war between the serpent's side and the woman's family. But one day a descendant of the woman will crush the serpent's head, even though He'll be wounded doing it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The First Gospel**

Since at least the second century, Christians have called Genesis 3:15 the protoevangelium, which means first gospel. Irenaeus, a church leader around AD 180, saw it as the first promise of Jesus, the descendant of a woman who would defeat the devil, getting wounded in His heel on the cross while dealing the serpent a death blow. Some readers think the verse is mainly about the ongoing struggle between humans and evil, and Jewish interpreters have often read it that way. But Paul seems to echo it when he writes, "The God of peace will quickly crush Satan under your feet" (Romans 16:20). Either way, notice when this promise comes. Before God tells Adam and Eve about the consequences of their sin, He announces that evil won't win. The bad news comes wrapped in good news.

To the woman, God says that bearing children will now come with great pain, and that her relationships will be marked by struggle. "Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." Many readers see this not as how God wants things to be, but as a description of what sin will do: the beautiful partnership of chapter 2 will be twisted into power struggles. A lot of human history, sadly, proves the point.

To the man, God says the ground is cursed because of him. Work will now be frustrating, full of thorns and sweat. And then the saddest line of all: "For you are dust, and you shall return to dust." God told them they would die, and now death enters the story. They didn't drop dead that very day, but the process started. They were cut off from the source of life, and they began to die, like a flower cut from its plant.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Is Eve to Blame for Everything?**

Some people through history have used Genesis 3 to say women are weaker, more easily fooled, or more to blame. That's not what the text says. Adam was standing right there. He ate too, and the New Testament actually holds

Adam responsible for bringing sin into the world (Romans 5:12). Both of them chose to disobey, and both of them faced the consequences. Using this story to put women down is just another version of the blame game Adam started.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Were Adam and Eve Real People?**

Christians answer this question in more than one way. Many hold that Adam and Eve were a real, historical first couple, the ancestors of all humanity, specially created by God, and they point to Jesus and Paul speaking of Adam as a real person (Matthew 19:4; Romans 5:12–19). Some, especially among those who accept evolutionary science, believe Adam and Eve were real historical people whom God chose from among early humans to represent humanity in a special relationship with Him. Others read Adam and Eve mainly as archetypes, figures who represent every human being (the name Adam simply means human). Christians in all these camps affirm that humans were made by God in His image, that humanity really did fall into sin, and that Jesus came to undo what went wrong. If you have questions about this, talk them through with your pastor or youth leader. It's a question worth asking.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Was the Tree?**

What was so special about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? Was the fruit magic? Probably not. Many readers think the point is not the fruit but the choice. Knowing good and evil may mean deciding for yourself what's good and evil, instead of receiving that from God. Others think it refers to wisdom or maturity that God intended to give in His own time, in His own way, and that Adam and Eve grabbed too early. Others see it as a phrase meaning everything, all knowledge, which belongs to God alone. Whichever way you read it, the heart of the story is the same. The first sin wasn't really about food. It was about trust. Would humans let God define what's good, or would they take that role for themselves? It's the same question you face every day.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Kind of Death?**

God said that in the day they ate from the tree, they would surely die. But Adam lived to be 930. So was God wrong, or was the serpent right? Readers

have answered in a few ways. Many say death began that day spiritually, as Adam and Eve were cut off from God, and physically, as their bodies began a slow march toward the grave. Some note that the Hebrew phrase can mean you will surely become mortal. Others point out that in the day can simply mean when. Either way, the serpent's promise that they would not die turned out to be a lie. Every funeral since has proven God right. And that's why Jesus' resurrection is such good news. He beat the death that entered the world in Genesis 3.

Then comes a small detail that's easy to miss. "The LORD God made garments of animal skins for Adam and for his wife, and clothed them." Their fig leaves weren't enough. So God Himself makes something better. For the first time, an animal's life is given to cover human shame. Many Christians see in this a first picture of sacrifice, pointing ahead to the day when Jesus would give His life to cover our sin. At the very least, it shows God's tenderness. Even while sending them out, He takes care of them.

Finally, God sends them out of the garden, to keep them from eating from the tree of life and living forever in their broken state. Cherubim, powerful angelic beings, and "a flaming sword which turned every way" guard the way back. Eden is closed. Humans are now east of Eden, outside the garden, longing to get back home.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Cherubim**

Forget the chubby baby angels on greeting cards. The cherubim of the Bible are awesome and a little frightening. In the ancient Near East, giant winged creatures with human faces and animal bodies, like the lamassu statues of Assyria, guarded the entrances to palaces and temples. Visitors to the British Museum or the Louvre can still see them, some more than fourteen feet tall. In the Bible, cherubim guard God's holy presence. Golden cherubim stood on top of the ark of the covenant, and they were embroidered on the temple curtain. Ezekiel saw cherubim with four faces and wings full of eyes. When

> God placed cherubim at Eden's gate, the message was clear: the way back to God's presence was closed, and only God could open it again.

It's worth pausing to notice how much changed in one chapter. Humans' relationship with God was broken: they hid. Their relationship with each other was broken: they blamed. Their relationship with themselves was broken: they felt shame. Their relationship with creation was broken: the ground would fight back. Sin isn't just breaking a rule. It's like a crack that runs through every part of life. That's why the good news has to be just as big. Jesus came to reconcile us to God, to each other, to ourselves, and, according to Romans 8, even to set creation free.

The rest of the Bible is the story of how God opens the way back. In the tabernacle and temple, cherubim are woven into the curtain that keeps people out of God's presence. When Jesus dies, that curtain is torn in two (Matthew 27:51). And at the very end of the Bible, in Revelation 22, the tree of life appears again, growing in a city where God lives with His people, with no curse. What was lost in Genesis 3 is restored in Revelation 22. The whole Bible is a story about getting home.

> **REAL TALK** **Is It Fair?**
>
> Maybe you think it's not fair that everyone suffers because of what two people did. Christians have wrestled with this for centuries, and they don't all explain it the same way. Some emphasize that Adam represented all of us, like a team captain whose choices affect the whole team. Others emphasize that we've all inherited a nature bent toward sin, or that every one of us has made the same choice Adam did. Romans 5 makes the connection, and then it adds the good news: just as one man's disobedience brought death, one Man's obedience, Jesus', brings life to everyone who trusts Him. If you think it's unfair that Adam's choice affects you, remember that Jesus' choice can affect you too.

REAL TALK **The Blame Game Today**

Adam blamed Eve and God. Eve blamed the serpent. Today the blame game has gone digital. It's easy to subtweet, screenshot, and pile on someone else's mistakes while hiding our own. It's easy to say my parents, my teacher, my coach, or my friends made me do it. Some of those people might really share the blame. But Genesis 3 shows that healing starts with honesty. God asked Adam what he had done. God already knew. He wanted Adam to say it. The same is true for you. First John 1:9 promises that if we confess our sins, God is faithful and righteous to forgive us. You don't have to hide behind fig leaves or excuses. You can come out from behind the trees.

KEY VERSE

I will put hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will bruise your head, and you will bruise his heel.

Genesis 3:15 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. The serpent's main lie was that God can't be trusted. What are some ways you hear that same lie today?
2. What are some modern fig leaves people use to hide their shame?
3. God's first question to the hiding humans was "Where are you?" If God asked you that question today, how would you answer?
4. Why do you think God announced the promise of the serpent-crusher before He told Adam and Eve about the consequences of their sin?

TRY THIS *This week, when you catch yourself blaming someone else for something you did, stop and admit out loud that it was your fault. Then take one step to make it right.*

CHAPTER 3

East of Eden

Genesis 4–11

Once humans leave Eden, things go downhill fast. In just eight chapters, Genesis goes from the first murder to a world so violent God sends a flood, and then to a tower built by people who want to make a name for themselves. These chapters can feel strange: giant ages, mysterious beings, a boat full of animals. But they show something you'll recognize: what happens when people try to live without God, and how God refuses to give up on them anyway.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Genesis 1–11**

Scholars sometimes call Genesis 1–11 the primeval history, meaning the story of the earliest times. These chapters cover a huge sweep of time very quickly, and they read differently from the more detailed family stories that begin with Abraham. Some readers take them as straightforward history in every detail. Others see them as true history told in a highly stylized way, with symbolic numbers and literary patterns. Still others see them mainly as theological stories that use the language of their time to teach truth about God and humanity. Christians across these views agree that they teach real truths about the real God and the real human condition.

Adam and Eve have two sons, Cain and Abel. Cain farms the land, and Abel keeps sheep. One day they both bring offerings to God. Cain brings some of his crops. Abel brings "some of the firstborn of his flock and of its fat," which means the best he had. "The LORD

respected Abel and his offering," but not Cain's. Genesis doesn't explain exactly why. Hebrews 11:4 says Abel offered his gift by faith. It seems the difference wasn't plants versus animals, but the heart behind the gift. Abel gave God his best; Cain went through the motions.

Cain is furious. His face falls. And God comes to him, the way He came to Adam, with a question and a warning. Why are you angry? If you do what's right, you'll be accepted. "If you don't do well, sin crouches at the door. Its desire is for you, but you are to rule over it." Sin is pictured as a wild animal crouching outside the door, waiting to pounce. But God also says Cain can master it. He doesn't have to give in.

Cain doesn't listen. He invites Abel into the field and murders him. Just one generation after the garden, a brother kills his brother. Then God asks another question: "Where is Abel, your brother?" And Cain lies: "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?" That's one of the most famous questions in the Bible, and the whole rest of Scripture answers it: yes, you are.

> **SAFETY NOTE** **When Anger Turns Dangerous**
>
> The story of Cain shows how anger and jealousy can grow into violence if they aren't dealt with. Anger itself isn't always wrong, but God told Cain to master it before it mastered him. If you feel so angry that you're afraid you might hurt someone, or if someone in your life is threatening to hurt you, don't wait. Tell a parent, school counselor, or another trusted adult right away. If anyone is in immediate danger, call 911 or your local emergency number.

God says Abel's blood cries out to Him from the ground. Even if no one else saw, God did. Cain is sent away to wander. But even here, God shows mercy. When Cain is afraid that someone will kill him,

God puts a mark on him to protect him. Even a murderer is still made in God's image, and God doesn't give up on him.

Cain's family builds the first city and invents music and metalworking. That's good. Human creativity is part of the image of God. But Cain's great-great-great-grandson Lamech brags to his wives that he killed a young man for wounding him, and that if Cain is avenged seven times, he'll be avenged seventy-seven times. Violence is spreading and getting worse. Much later, when Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive, Jesus answers with almost the same number: seventy-seven times (Matthew 18:22). Jesus reverses Lamech's song of revenge.

Meanwhile Adam and Eve have another son, Seth. "At that time men began to call on the LORD's name." So there are two family lines growing up side by side: one marked by violence and pride, the other marked by worship.

Genesis 5 is a family tree from Adam to Noah. It can feel boring at first, but it has a rhythm, and the rhythm is grim. Each man lives, has children, lives some more, "and he died." Over and over. Death is real now, just like God said. The ages are enormous; Methuselah lives 969 years, the oldest person in the Bible.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Did They Live So Long?**
>
> Readers have different explanations for the huge ages in Genesis 5. Some take them literally and suggest that people lived longer before the flood, perhaps because the effects of sin and decay built up gradually. Others think the numbers are symbolic, or that they follow ancient ways of honoring important ancestors. Interestingly, the Sumerian King List, an ancient record from Mesopotamia, gives kings before a great flood reigns of tens of thousands of years, much longer than anything in Genesis. Whatever the ages

mean, the ages get shorter after the flood, and the main point stays the same: everybody dies.

But in the middle of the chapter, the rhythm breaks. "Enoch walked with God, and he was not found, for God took him." Enoch didn't die. He walked so closely with God that one day God simply took him. It's a tiny glimmer of hope in a chapter full of death. Death doesn't have to have the last word.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Enoch in Later Tradition**

Enoch gets only four verses in Genesis, but he became a celebrity in later Jewish writings. A whole collection of books, called 1 Enoch, was written in his name in the centuries before Jesus, full of visions of angels, heaven, and the coming judgment. The little letter of Jude in the New Testament even quotes from it. Most churches don't consider 1 Enoch part of Scripture, though the Ethiopian Orthodox Church does. Hebrews 11:5 gives the simplest summary of Enoch's life: before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. That's not a bad way to be remembered.

Then Genesis 6 opens with one of the strangest passages in the Bible. "God's sons saw that men's daughters were beautiful," and they took wives from among them. Their children were connected to the Nephilim, the "mighty men who were of old, men of renown." Who were the sons of God? Some readers think they were angels or spiritual beings who crossed a line they should never have crossed, which is how many ancient Jewish writings, like 1 Enoch, understood it (and which may be in the background of Jude 6 and 2 Peter 2:4). Others think they were powerful kings who took whatever women they wanted, or that they were men from Seth's godly line who married into Cain's ungodly line. Whichever view is right, the point is that boundaries God set were being trampled.

God also announces that people's days will be limited to 120 years. Readers aren't sure whether that means human lifespans would shrink to about 120 years, which is roughly the upper limit of human life today, or that there would be 120 years before the flood came. Either way, it's a sign that God was setting limits on a humanity that recognized none.

And it gets worse. "The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of man's heart was continually only evil." That's a terrible description: every thought, only evil, all the time. The earth was filled with violence. Then comes one of the most emotional verses in Genesis: "The LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him in his heart." God isn't a cold machine. He grieves. His heart breaks over what people have done to His world and to each other.

So God decides to wash the world clean and start again. "But Noah found favor in the LORD's eyes." Noah was "a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time. Noah walked with God." Like Enoch, he walked with God. God tells Noah to build an ark, a huge floating box made of wood and sealed with pitch, about 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high. Noah is to bring his family and pairs of every kind of animal, plus extra clean animals, on board.

Noah obeys. "He did all that God commanded him." Imagine building a giant boat on dry land for years while your neighbors watch. Second Peter 2:5 calls Noah "a preacher of righteousness." His obedience itself was a message.

BACKGROUND CHECK **How Big Was the Ark?**

Genesis gives the ark's size in cubits, the length of a forearm, about 18 inches. At 300 cubits long, 50 wide, and 30 high, it was roughly 450 feet long: about one and a half football fields, as tall as a four-story building, with three decks inside. Its proportions, long and narrow like a box, are remarkably stable on rough water; modern ship designers have noticed that its ratios are similar to those of large cargo ships. In the Gilgamesh epic, by contrast, the boat is a perfect cube, which would spin and roll in a storm. In Kentucky, a group built a full-size replica called the Ark Encounter, and visitors are often stunned by how huge it is. Whatever your view of the flood's scope, the ark was no bathtub toy with giraffes sticking out of the top.

REAL TALK **Different in a Corrupt World**

Noah lived in a world where violence was normal and everybody went along with it. He walked with God anyway. That's not easy. You may be the only one in your friend group who doesn't vape, cheat, or join in when people are cruel. It can feel lonely. But Noah shows that one person who walks with God can make a difference for a whole family, and for the future. You don't have to be perfect, and you don't have to be weird for the sake of being weird. You just have to keep walking with God, one day at a time, even when no one else is.

Then the flood comes. "All the fountains of the great deep burst open, and the sky's windows opened." Genesis describes it as creation running in reverse. In Genesis 1, God separated the waters above from the waters below and made dry land appear. Now the waters crash back together, and the world returns to the watery chaos of the very beginning. "Every living thing was destroyed that was on the surface of the ground." Only Noah and those with him in the ark survive.

REAL TALK **Is the Flood Story Too Harsh?**

Lots of people struggle with the flood. Why would a loving God destroy almost everyone? It's a fair question. Genesis doesn't present God as angry for no reason. It shows a world drowning in violence long before it drowned in water, and a God who was grieved, not trigger-happy. It's also worth noticing that God waited, that He gave people time while Noah built and preached, and that He made a way to be saved. The flood shows that God takes evil seriously. A God who didn't care about violence wouldn't be good. And the story ends not with destruction but with a promise.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Was the Flood Global or Local?**

Christians disagree about how far the flood reached. Some believe it covered the entire planet, pointing to phrases like "all the high mountains that were under the whole sky" and to the purpose of the ark, and some argue for flood geology to explain rock layers and fossils. Others believe it was a massive regional flood that covered the whole world as Noah and the writer knew it, the land of Mesopotamia, pointing out that phrases like "all the earth" can mean a known region elsewhere in the Bible (see Genesis 41:57, where all the earth comes to Egypt to buy grain), and that geology doesn't show a single worldwide flood layer. Still others focus on the story's theological message and don't think its point depends on settling the question. Faithful Christians hold each view. All agree the flood was God's judgment on human evil and His rescue of Noah's family.

After 150 days, "God remembered Noah." That doesn't mean God forgot. In the Bible, God remembering means He acts on His promise. A wind blows, the waters go down, and the ark comes to rest on the mountains of Ararat. Noah sends out a raven and then a dove. The second time, the dove comes back with a fresh olive leaf in its beak, the sign that life is growing again. Ever since, the dove and the olive branch have been symbols of peace.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Gilgamesh and Atrahasis**

Genesis isn't the only ancient story about a great flood. In the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, a man named Utnapishtim survives a flood in a boat, brings animals along, sends out birds (including a dove and a raven), and offers a sacrifice afterward. An even older story, Atrahasis, tells a similar tale. When these tablets were discovered in the 1800s, some people thought it proved Genesis had just borrowed a myth. Others thought it showed a real memory of a great flood had been passed down in several cultures. Look at the differences, though. In the Babylonian stories, the gods send the flood because humans are too noisy and keep them awake. The gods are scared of the flood themselves, and afterward they swarm the sacrifice like flies because they're starving without humans to feed them. In Genesis, one holy God sends the flood because of human violence and evil, chooses to save a righteous man, and makes a gracious covenant with all life. The stories share a shape, but they tell you very different things about God.

Noah steps out onto a washed world, and the first thing he does is build an altar and worship. God smells the pleasing aroma and makes a promise: "While the earth remains, seed time and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night will not cease." The seasons you see every year are a reminder of God's faithfulness.

Then God blesses Noah and his sons just like He blessed Adam and Eve: "Be fruitful, multiply, and replenish the earth." It's a fresh start, a new creation. God allows them to eat meat now, but not the blood, which represents life. And God declares that human life is sacred: "Whoever sheds man's blood, his blood will be shed by man, for God made man in his own image." The flood didn't erase the image of God. Every person still carries it.

Then God makes a covenant, a binding promise, with Noah and every living creature: He'll never again destroy all life with a flood.

The sign of this covenant is the rainbow. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for rainbow is the same word as the word for an archer's bow. Some readers see a beautiful picture here: God hangs up His war bow in the sky, pointed away from the earth. Every rainbow you see is God's reminder, to Himself and to you, that He keeps His promises.

But the new start doesn't fix the human heart. Noah plants a vineyard, gets drunk, and lies uncovered in his tent. His son Ham sees him and goes and tells his brothers, while Shem and Japheth respectfully cover their father without looking. Noah later pronounces a curse on Ham's son Canaan. This passage was horribly misused for centuries to justify racism and slavery against people of African descent. That's a gross misreading. The curse falls on Canaan, not on Ham's other sons, and the text says nothing about skin color. Using the Bible to hurt people God made in His image is the opposite of what Genesis teaches.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Table of Nations**
>
> Genesis 10 lists the descendants of Noah's three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and the nations that came from them. It contains about seventy names, which later Jewish tradition took as a symbol of all the nations of the world. This chapter tells you something big: every people group on earth is part of one human family. All nations matter to God. That's why it's so powerful when, at Pentecost in Acts 2, people from many nations hear the gospel in their own languages.

Genesis 11 tells the story behind that scattering. At this point, everyone speaks one language. They settle in a plain called Shinar, in Babylonia, and they have a plan. "Come, let's build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top reaches to the sky, and let's make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad on the surface of

the whole earth." God had told people to fill the earth. They want to huddle together and make themselves famous instead. It's pride, plain and simple. They want to reach heaven on their own terms.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Ziggurats**
>
> The tower of Babel was probably a ziggurat, a huge stepped pyramid made of baked mud bricks. Ancient Mesopotamian cities built them as temples, with a shrine on top where they believed the gods could come down to earth. The most famous ziggurat in Babylon was called Etemenanki, which means the temple of the foundation of heaven and earth. Genesis has a little fun here. The builders think they're reaching heaven. But God has to "go down" to even see their tower. Compared to God, the greatest human achievement is tiny.

The LORD comes down and says that if they keep going like this, nothing they plan will be impossible for them. So God confuses their language, and they can't understand each other anymore. The building project stops, and the people are scattered across the earth. The city is called Babel, which sounds like the Hebrew word for confused. The irony is sharp: the place they hoped would make them famous becomes a name for confusion. And Babel, or Babylon, becomes a symbol throughout the Bible of human pride that sets itself against God, all the way to Revelation 18.

But the story isn't over. On the day of Pentecost, God reverses Babel. Instead of people trying to climb up to heaven, the Holy Spirit comes down from heaven. Instead of languages dividing people, people from all over the world hear about God's works in their own languages and become one family in Jesus (Acts 2). At Babel, people tried to make a name for themselves. At Pentecost, they called on the name of Jesus.

REAL TALK **Making a Name for Yourself**

The people of Babel wanted to be famous. That desire hasn't gone away; it's just moved online. Likes, followers, views, and streaks can become our tower. There's nothing wrong with doing great things or being known. But when your worth depends on making a name for yourself, you're building on sand. In the very next chapter, God promises Abram, "I will bless you and make your name great." The difference is who's doing the building.

Genesis 11 ends with another family tree, this time from Shem down to a man named Terah, whose family lived in Ur of the Chaldeans. Terah had a son named Abram. And then comes a quiet, painful line: Abram's wife Sarai "was barren. She had no child." After eleven chapters of sin, judgment, and scattering, the story narrows down to one family with no future. It looks like a dead end. But that's exactly where God likes to start.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Patterns in Genesis 1–11**

If you look back over these first eleven chapters, you'll notice a pattern that repeats again and again. First, people sin: Adam and Eve, Cain, the world before the flood, the builders of Babel. Second, God speaks and announces judgment: the curse, Cain's wandering, the flood, the scattering. Third, God shows grace in the middle of judgment: clothing for Adam and Eve, a protective mark for Cain, an ark for Noah, and, after Babel, the call of Abram. Sin, judgment, grace. Sin keeps spreading, but grace keeps showing up. Paul summed it up centuries later: where sin increased, grace increased all the more (Romans 5:20). That's still true in your life.

KEY VERSE

I set my rainbow in the cloud, and it will be a sign of a covenant between me and the earth.

Genesis 9:13 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. God told Cain that sin was crouching at the door, but that he could master it. What sins crouch at your door? What would it look like to master them?
2. How do you feel about the flood story? What questions does it raise for you, and how does the covenant with Noah help answer them?
3. Babel was about people trying to make a name for themselves. Where do you see that same attitude in your life or online?
4. Why do you think Genesis spends so much time on family trees? What do they teach about God?

TRY THIS *The next time you see a rainbow, stop and thank God for one promise He's kept in your life. Until then, read Acts 2 and list every way Pentecost reverses Babel.*

CHAPTER 4

Leave Everything

Genesis 12–17

Genesis 12 is a turning point for the whole Bible. For eleven chapters, the camera has been pulled way back, showing the whole human race spiraling away from God. Now it zooms in on one man, one wife, and one tent. God's plan to fix the whole world is going to start with a family. And not an impressive one. An old man and an old woman who couldn't have children.

God speaks to Abram, and His first word is a hard one: leave. "Leave your country, and your relatives, and your father's house, and go to the land that I will show you." Notice what God doesn't say. He doesn't give Abram a map. He doesn't tell him where he's going. Abram has to leave everything familiar and follow God one step at a time.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Ur and Haran**
>
> Abram's family came from Ur of the Chaldeans, a wealthy city in southern Mesopotamia (modern Iraq). Archaeologists have dug up Ur and found royal tombs full of gold, a huge ziggurat to the moon god Nanna, and evidence of a sophisticated city with schools and trade. Abram's family moved northwest to Haran, another city famous for worshiping the moon god. Joshua 24:2 says Abram's father "served other gods." So when God called Abram, He wasn't calling a man who grew up in church. He was calling someone out of a world full of idols, to trust a God he couldn't see.

Then God gives Abram a sevenfold promise. He'll make him a great nation. He'll bless him. He'll make his name great. Abram will be a blessing. God will bless those who bless him and curse those who treat him with contempt. And finally: "All the families of the earth will be blessed through you." Remember Babel? The people there tried to make a name for themselves, and God scattered them. Now God promises to make Abram's name great Himself, and to use Abram's family to bless all the scattered families of the earth. The rest of the Bible is the story of how God keeps that promise, all the way to a crowd from every nation, tribe, and language worshiping Jesus in Revelation 7.

"So Abram went, as the LORD had told him." He's seventy-five years old. No retirement plan. No GPS. He takes his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, and everything they own, and he goes. Hebrews 11:8 says, "By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed to go out to the place which he was to receive for an inheritance. He went out, not knowing where he went." That's what faith looks like. Not having all the answers, but trusting the One who does.

When Abram arrives in Canaan, God appears and promises, "I will give this land to your offspring." There's just one problem. Abram doesn't have any offspring. And the Canaanites already live there. Still, Abram builds an altar and worships. Everywhere he goes in this chapter, he builds altars. He's claiming the land for God, not with swords, but with worship.

But Abram is no superhero. Almost immediately there's a famine, and Abram goes down to Egypt. He's scared that the Egyptians will kill him to take his beautiful wife, so he asks Sarai to say she's his sister. (She actually was his half-sister, as we learn later, but it was still a lie meant to deceive.) Pharaoh takes Sarai into his palace, and

Abram gets rich from Pharaoh's gifts. God has to step in and rescue Sarai by striking Pharaoh's house with plagues. The man God promised to use to bless the nations just brought a curse on a nation instead. It's embarrassing. Pharaoh has to scold Abram and send him away.

> **REAL TALK** **Heroes with Clay Feet**
>
> One of the most honest things about Genesis is that it doesn't hide its heroes' failures. Abram lies about his wife (twice, actually; he does it again in chapter 20). Jacob is a cheat. Judah is a hypocrite. If Genesis were made up to make Israel's ancestors look good, it did a terrible job. The heroes of Genesis aren't heroes because they're perfect. They're heroes because God is faithful to them even when they aren't faithful to Him. That's good news for you, because you're not perfect either.

Back in Canaan, Abram and Lot have so many animals that the land can't support them both, and their herdsmen start fighting. Abram has every right to pull rank. He's the older man, and God gave the promise to him. Instead he says, "Please, let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen; for we are relatives." And he lets Lot choose first. Lot looks at the well-watered plain of the Jordan, which looks like the garden of Eden, and he chooses it, settling near the city of Sodom. Genesis adds an ominous note: the men of Sodom were very wicked. Lot chose by what looked best, and it would cost him dearly.

After Lot leaves, God tells Abram to look in every direction, north, south, east, and west. All that land will belong to his family. And his descendants will be "as the dust of the earth," too many to count. Abram gave up the best land, and God gave him everything.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Is a Covenant?**

You'll see the word covenant again and again in Genesis and the rest of the Bible. A covenant is more than a contract. A contract is about exchanging goods or services: you do this, I'll pay that. A covenant is about a relationship: I will be yours, and you will be mine. Marriage is a covenant. In the ancient Near East, great kings made covenants with smaller kingdoms, promising protection in return for loyalty. God uses that familiar idea to describe His relationship with His people. In Genesis, He makes covenants with Noah (and all creation), with Abraham, and through Abraham with his descendants. Later He'll make a covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai and with King David. And on the night before He died, Jesus took a cup and called it the new covenant in His blood (Luke 22:20). The whole Bible is a covenant story.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Canaan**

The land God promised Abram was called Canaan, roughly modern Israel, the Palestinian territories, and parts of Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. It was a narrow land bridge between the great empires of Egypt and Mesopotamia, which meant armies and traders passed through it constantly. It wasn't the richest land in the region; it depended on rain instead of great rivers like the Nile or the Euphrates. Later, Deuteronomy 11:10–12 points this out: in Egypt, farmers watered crops from the river, but in Canaan, the people would have to look to God for rain. The land itself was designed to teach trust.

After the rescue of Lot, the king of Sodom offers Abram all the goods he recovered. Abram refuses to take even a thread or a sandal strap. He doesn't want anyone to say that the king of Sodom made Abram rich. Abram has learned something since his trip to Egypt. He wants to receive his blessings from God, not from a wicked king's handouts. It's a quiet but important moment of integrity.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Melchizedek**

Genesis 14 tells about a war between kings, and Lot gets captured. Abram gathers 318 trained men and rescues him in a daring night raid. On the way home, a mysterious figure appears: "Melchizedek king of Salem brought out

> bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High." Salem is probably an early name for Jerusalem, and Melchizedek's name means king of righteousness. He blesses Abram, and Abram gives him a tenth of everything. Then he vanishes from Genesis. Psalm 110:4 picks him up again, saying a coming king will be "a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek." And the book of Hebrews (chapter 7) sees Melchizedek as a picture of Jesus, a King and Priest whose priesthood is greater than any other. Bread and wine, a priest-king in Jerusalem: Christians have noticed the echoes of the Lord's Supper too.

Then comes one of the most important chapters in the Bible. Abram is still childless, and he's worried. God comes to him in a vision: "Don't be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward." But Abram is honest with God. "Lord GOD, what will you give me, since I go childless, and he who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" His servant is going to inherit everything. What good are God's gifts if there's no one to pass them down to?

God doesn't scold him for asking. He takes Abram outside and says, "Look now toward the sky, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." So your offspring will be. Imagine a sky with no light pollution, packed with thousands of stars. That's how many descendants this old, childless man is going to have.

And then the big sentence: "He believed in the LORD, who credited it to him for righteousness." Abram didn't earn God's approval by being good. He simply believed God's promise, and God counted his faith as righteousness. Paul quotes this verse in Romans 4 and Galatians 3 to explain the heart of the gospel. Abram was declared right with God by faith, long before the law of Moses, long before he was circumcised. And that's still how anyone becomes right with God: not by earning it, but by trusting God's promise, which for us is fulfilled in Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Smoking Furnace**

God then makes a covenant with Abram in a way that sounds strange to us. Abram cuts animals in half and lays the halves opposite each other. In the ancient world, people sometimes sealed a covenant by walking between cut animals, as if to say, may this happen to me if I break my promise (Jeremiah 34:18 describes this practice). But Abram doesn't walk between the pieces. He falls into a deep sleep, and "a smoking furnace and a flaming torch passed between these pieces." That's God Himself, appearing as smoke and fire, the way He would later lead Israel out of Egypt. God alone walks the path. He takes the whole weight of the promise on Himself. If anyone breaks this covenant, God will pay the price. Christians see that come true at the cross.

During that same vision, God tells Abram some hard news. His descendants will be foreigners and slaves in a land that isn't theirs for four hundred years before God brings them out. That's a preview of the book of Exodus. God's promises are sure, but they're not always fast.

And waiting is hard. Ten years after arriving in Canaan, Sarai still has no child. So she comes up with a plan. She gives Abram her Egyptian servant Hagar, so that Hagar can have a child for her. In their culture this was a legal custom; ancient contracts from the region mention it. But it was still a human shortcut around God's promise, and it goes badly. Hagar becomes pregnant and starts to look down on Sarai. Sarai blames Abram. Abram passively says, "Do to her whatever is good in your eyes." And "Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her face."

SAFETY NOTE **Hagar's Story**

Hagar was an enslaved woman with no say in what happened to her body or her life. She was used for someone else's plan and then mistreated when it got complicated. Genesis tells her story honestly, and it doesn't pretend what happened to her was okay. If someone is using you, controlling you,

pressuring you sexually, or treating you harshly at home or anywhere else, it is not your fault, and you don't have to handle it alone. Tell a trusted adult, like a parent, teacher, school counselor, or pastor. If you're in the United States, you can also call or text the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453. God saw Hagar, and He sees you.

Hagar runs into the wilderness, pregnant and alone. And there, by a spring of water, "the LORD's angel found her." The angel calls her by name and asks, "Hagar, Sarai's servant, where did you come from? Where are you going?" It's the kind of question God asked Adam: a question that invites her to tell her story. The angel tells her to go back, and promises that her son, Ishmael, whose name means God hears, will have countless descendants. God has heard her misery.

And then Hagar does something no one else in the Bible does. She gives God a name. "You are a God who sees," she says. The first person in Scripture to name God is not a patriarch or a priest. It's a pregnant, runaway, enslaved foreign woman. Nobody in Abram's household saw her as a person. But God did.

REAL TALK **The God Who Sees**

Have you ever felt invisible? Like nobody notices you, or nobody would care if you disappeared? Hagar felt that way. She was a foreigner and a servant. She was pushed around and finally driven away. And God came looking for her in the desert. He knew her name. He knew where she'd come from and where she was going. He listened to her pain. The God who sees Hagar sees you. Not just when you're doing great, but especially when you're alone and hurting.

Thirteen more years go by. Abram is ninety-nine. And God appears again: "I am God Almighty. Walk before me and be blameless." God renews His covenant, and He gives Abram a new name: Abraham, meaning father of a multitude. Sarai becomes Sarah, meaning princess. God also gives the sign of the covenant: circumcision for

every male in Abraham's household, a mark in the body that this family belongs to God.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Circumcision?**
>
> Circumcision was practiced by some other ancient peoples too, but for Israel it took on a new meaning as the sign of belonging to God's covenant. Later, Moses and the prophets talked about circumcising the heart, meaning that God wants more than a physical mark; He wants a heart that loves and obeys Him (Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4). In the New Testament, the early church decided that non-Jewish believers in Jesus didn't need to be circumcised (Acts 15), and Paul connects circumcision to baptism and new life in Christ (Colossians 2:11–12). The deeper point was always the same: God's people are marked as His.

Then God says Sarah, at ninety, will have a son. Abraham falls on his face, and laughs. Will a child be born to a hundred-year-old man? Will Sarah give birth at ninety? He even suggests that maybe Ishmael could be the promised son instead. God says no. Sarah will have a son, and "You shall call his name Isaac." Isaac means he laughs. Every time Abraham called his son's name, he'd remember the day he laughed at God's promise, and God made it come true anyway. God doesn't forget Ishmael either. He promises to bless him and make him a great nation. But the covenant will go through Isaac.

That same day, Abraham obeys. He circumcises himself, Ishmael, and every male in his household, just as God commanded. Abraham laughed at God's promise, but he didn't wait to obey it. Sometimes faith is a mix of doubt and obedience at the same time, and God accepts both.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Abraham in Three Faiths**

Abraham is honored by more than half the people on earth. Jews see him as the father of their people, the first to enter covenant with the one God. Christians see him as the father of all who believe, as Paul says in Romans 4, Jew and non-Jew alike, because he was counted righteous by faith. Muslims honor him as Ibrahim, a great prophet and an example of submission to God, and trace their faith back to him through Ishmael. These three faiths understand Abraham's story differently in important ways, and it's not respectful to pretend they're all the same. But knowing that your Muslim or Jewish classmates also honor Abraham can open up some fascinating and kind conversations. Ask them what Abraham means to them, and share what he means to you.

KEY VERSE

He believed in the LORD, who credited it to him for righteousness.

Genesis 15:6 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. God called Abram to leave everything familiar without telling him where he was going. What would be the hardest thing for you to leave if God asked?
2. Abram failed badly in Egypt, yet God didn't give up on him. How does that change the way you think about your own failures?
3. Genesis 15:6 says Abram was counted righteous because he believed God. What's the difference between earning God's love and trusting His promise?
4. Hagar called God "a God who sees." When have you needed to know that God sees you?

TRY THIS *Look up at the night sky this week and try to count the stars. Then write down one promise of God you're having a hard time believing, and ask Him to help you trust it, like Abram did.*

CHAPTER 5

Tested

Genesis 18–23

These chapters contain some of the most beautiful and some of the hardest stories in Genesis. There's a dinner party with God, a bold prayer, the fire that falls on Sodom, a baby long promised, a mother and child left in the desert, and a test so intense it still makes people gasp. Through all of it, one question hangs in the air: can Abraham trust God completely? And can you?

It starts on a hot afternoon. Abraham is sitting at the entrance of his tent by the oaks of Mamre when he looks up and sees three men standing nearby. He runs to meet them, bows low, and begs them to stay for a meal. He hurries to Sarah to bake bread, runs to pick a tender calf, and serves them a feast. Middle Eastern hospitality was, and still is, a big deal. But it turns out these aren't ordinary visitors. One of them is the LORD Himself, and the other two are angels. Hebrews 13:2 remembers this when it tells Christians to show hospitality to strangers, because some have entertained angels without knowing it.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **God in Human Form?**
>
> Genesis 18 says the LORD appeared to Abraham, and then describes three men. How can God appear as a man? Jewish and Christian readers have puzzled over this for centuries. Many Christians have seen moments like this as appearances of the Son of God before He was born as Jesus. A famous

Russian icon by Andrei Rublev, painted in the 1400s, shows the three visitors as a picture of the Trinity. Genesis itself doesn't explain how it works. But it shows a God who is willing to come close, sit down, and eat with people. That's a preview of Jesus, who ate with tax collectors and sinners.

During the meal, the LORD asks, "Where is Sarah, your wife?" Then He promises that by this time next year, Sarah will have a son. Sarah is listening behind the tent door, and she laughs to herself. She's long past childbearing age. The LORD asks why she laughed, and asks the question that sits at the center of this whole story: "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" Sarah is afraid and denies laughing. "No," He says, "but you did laugh." God isn't mean about it. He just won't let the truth go. And within a year, Sarah's laugh of disbelief will turn into a laugh of joy.

REAL TALK **When God's Promises Seem Laughable**

Sarah's laugh is understandable. She had waited for decades. She'd watched her body grow old. She'd probably cried herself to sleep more times than she could count. When someone said she'd finally have a baby, it sounded like a cruel joke. Have you ever felt that way about something God says? That He'll never leave you, when you feel alone? That He can bring good out of a situation that seems hopeless? God didn't reject Sarah for laughing. He kept His promise, and He turned her bitter laugh into a joyful one. Hebrews 11:11 even lists Sarah among the heroes of faith. Faith isn't never doubting. It's bringing your doubts to the God who keeps His word.

Then the visitors head toward Sodom, and God lets Abraham in on His plan. The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and their sin very serious. God is going down to see. And Abraham, the friend of God, does something astonishing. He argues with God. "Will you consume the righteous with the wicked?" What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? "Shouldn't the Judge of all the earth do right?"

God agrees: for fifty righteous people, He'll spare the city. Then Abraham, carefully and humbly, bargains down. Forty-five? Forty? Thirty? Twenty? Finally: "What if ten are found there?" And God says, "I will not destroy it for the ten's sake." God never loses patience. He's not annoyed by the prayer. He seems to welcome it.

Why does God share His plans with Abraham in the first place? Genesis tells us: God chose Abraham so that he would teach his children and his household to keep the way of the LORD, "to do righteousness and justice." Abraham isn't just supposed to be blessed. He's supposed to learn God's heart for justice and pass it on. And when he hears about Sodom, that's exactly what he does: he pleads for justice and mercy.

> **REAL TALK** **Can You Argue with God?**
>
> Abraham's prayer for Sodom shows that prayer isn't just politely reading God a wish list. It can be honest, bold, and persistent. Moses, David, Job, Jeremiah, and Habakkuk all argued with God at times, and God didn't strike them down. Abraham's boldness wasn't disrespect. It was rooted in God's own character: he knew God was just and merciful, and he appealed to that. You can bring your hardest questions to God too. He can handle them.

There weren't ten righteous people in Sodom. When the two angels arrive in the evening, Lot is sitting at the city gate, which means he's become an important man there. He insists that the angels stay at his house. But that night, the men of the city, young and old, surround the house and demand that Lot send out his guests so they can sexually assault them. It's a horrifying scene of violence. And Lot makes it worse. He offers his own two daughters to the mob instead. It's one of the most shocking moments in Genesis, and the Bible tells it without approving it. The angels pull Lot inside and strike the mob with blindness.

SAFETY NOTE **What Happened in Sodom**

The story of Sodom involves a mob threatening sexual violence, and a father who offered his daughters to protect his guests. Genesis isn't recommending what Lot did; it shows how badly even a man living near God's people had been shaped by a violent city. Ezekiel 16:49 adds that Sodom was arrogant, overfed, and unconcerned, and didn't help the poor and needy. If anyone has ever threatened you, pressured you into something sexual, or offered you to someone else, that is abuse, and it is never your fault. Tell a trusted adult right away. If you're in immediate danger, call 911 or your local emergency number.

At dawn, the angels urge Lot to leave with his family. Lot's future sons-in-law think he's joking. And even Lot himself hesitates. Genesis says simply, "But he lingered." So the angels grab Lot, his wife, and his daughters by the hand and pull them out of the city, "the LORD being merciful to him." Lot didn't deserve rescue, but God remembered Abraham's prayer. Genesis says that when God destroyed the cities of the plain, "God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the middle of the overthrow." Abraham's prayer didn't save Sodom, but it did save Lot. Never think your prayers for someone else are wasted. Second Peter 2:7 even calls Lot righteous and says he was distressed by the evil around him. He was a mixed-up man, compromised and slow to obey, but God was merciful to him.

Then fire and burning sulfur rain down on Sodom and Gomorrah. The cities are destroyed. And as they flee, Lot's wife looks back, "and she became a pillar of salt." She couldn't let go of the life she was leaving. Jesus later gives one of the shortest sermons in the Bible: "Remember Lot's wife" (Luke 17:32).

BACKGROUND CHECK **Sodom and the Dead Sea**

The cities of the plain were probably near the southern end of the Dead Sea, a region full of salt formations, sulfur, and bitumen (natural tar), where the land is the lowest on earth. Some archaeologists have suggested that ancient sites in the area, like Bab edh-Dhra, or Tall el-Hammam north of the Dead Sea, show signs of sudden destruction, though scholars debate the evidence and its dates. Visitors to the area can still see strange salt pillars, which locals have sometimes nicknamed Lot's wife.

The story of Lot ends in a cave, and it ends sadly. Lot's daughters, who've lost their home, their fiancés, and their mother, believe there are no men left to marry. So they get their father drunk and become pregnant by him. Their sons become the ancestors of the Moabites and the Ammonites, nations that would trouble Israel later on. Genesis tells this briefly and doesn't approve. It's a picture of how far a family can fall when it soaks in a broken culture.

SAFETY NOTE **When Families Break Boundaries**

The ending of Lot's story describes incest, sexual contact between family members. That's always wrong, and when it happens to a young person, it is abuse, no matter who started it, no matter what anyone says, and no matter whether drugs or alcohol were involved. If anything like this has ever happened to you, or is happening now, it is not your fault and it is not something you have to keep secret. Tell a trusted adult outside the situation, like a teacher, school counselor, pastor, or another family member. In the United States, you can also call or text the Childhelp hotline at 1-800-422-4453, any time.

Then, finally, after twenty-five years of waiting, "The LORD visited Sarah as he had said." Sarah has a son, and Abraham names him Isaac, he laughs. And Sarah, who once laughed in disbelief, now laughs with joy. "God has made me laugh. Everyone who hears will

laugh with me." God kept His promise. Late, from our point of view. Right on time, from His.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Abraham Does It Again**
>
> Just before Isaac's birth, in Genesis 20, Abraham moves to Gerar and tells the same lie he told in Egypt: Sarah is my sister. King Abimelech takes Sarah, and God warns the king in a dream that he's a dead man if he touches her. Abimelech protests that he acted with a clear conscience, and God agrees, which is why He kept him from sinning. The pagan king turns out to be more honest than the man of faith. Abraham admits he thought there was no fear of God in that place. He was wrong. Sometimes believers assume the worst about people who don't share their faith, and then those people turn out to have more integrity than we do. God protects His promise anyway: Sarah is kept safe, and Isaac is born to Abraham and Sarah, just as God said.

But joy quickly turns to tension. At the party celebrating Isaac's weaning, Sarah sees Ishmael, now a teenager, laughing or mocking. She demands that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away. Abraham is deeply troubled; Ishmael is his son. But God tells him to listen to Sarah, because the promise will come through Isaac, and promises He'll make Ishmael a nation too. So early the next morning, Abraham gives Hagar some bread and a container of water and sends her and the boy into the desert.

When the water runs out, Hagar puts Ishmael under a bush and sits down a bowshot away, because she can't bear to watch her son die. She sobs. And then: "God heard the voice of the boy." The angel of God calls to her: "What troubles you, Hagar? Don't be afraid." God opens her eyes, and she sees a well of water. God was with the boy as he grew up in the wilderness, and he became an archer. Once again, the God who sees came through for Hagar.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Ishmael and the Nations**

Ishmael is honored in Genesis. God blesses him and promises he'll be the father of twelve rulers and a great nation. Arab peoples have traditionally traced their ancestry to Ishmael, and in Islam he's honored as a prophet. Paul uses Hagar and Sarah as an illustration in Galatians 4, but that's about two covenants, not about which people God loves more. God's care for Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis is a reminder that God's heart has always been bigger than one family. The promise to Abraham was always meant to bless all the families of the earth.

Then comes the hardest test of all. "God tested Abraham, and said to him, 'Abraham!' He said, 'Here I am.'" Then God says something unthinkable: "Now take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go into the land of Moriah. Offer him there as a burnt offering." Notice how God piles up the words, each one hurting more than the last. Abraham had already given up his homeland, his father's house, and his son Ishmael. Now God was asking for the one thing that was left, the son who held all his hopes for the future. Your son. Your only son. Isaac, the one you waited twenty-five years for, the one all the promises depend on. Whom you love. This is the first time the word love appears in the Bible, and it's the love of a father for his son.

What do we do with a story like this? Many neighboring cultures practiced child sacrifice, and later the Bible clearly condemns it as something God hates (Leviticus 18:21; Jeremiah 7:31). The reader knows from the start that this is a test, and God will stop it. But Abraham doesn't know that. And Abraham obeys. He gets up early. He cuts the wood. He walks for three days. Imagine those three days. Every step, every campfire, every time Isaac said something to him. Genesis doesn't tell us what Abraham was thinking. It just shows us what he did. On the third day he sees the place in the

distance, and he tells his servants: "Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go over there. We will worship, and come back to you." We will come back. Hebrews 11:19 says Abraham reasoned that God could even raise Isaac from the dead.

Isaac carries the wood up the mountain. And then he asks the question that breaks your heart: "Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" And Abraham answers, "God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them went on together.

At the top, Abraham builds an altar, ties up Isaac, and lays him on the wood. Isaac was probably a teenager or older by now; he could have run, but he didn't. Abraham raises the knife. And at the last second, the angel of the LORD calls from heaven: "Abraham, Abraham!" Don't lay a hand on the boy. "For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." Abraham looks up and sees a ram caught by its horns in a thicket. He sacrifices the ram instead of his son. And he names the place "The LORD Will Provide."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **On the Mountain of the LORD**
>
> Moriah shows up only one other time in the Bible. In 2 Chronicles 3:1, Solomon builds the temple "on Mount Moriah," in Jerusalem. So the place where Abraham offered a ram in Isaac's place became the place where countless lambs were sacrificed for Israel's sins. And just outside the walls of that same city, two thousand years later, another Father gave His only Son, whom He loved. This time there was no ram in the thicket at the last second. Jesus carried the wood of the cross up the hill Himself. John 1:29 calls Jesus "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" Abraham's words came true more fully than he could have imagined: God provided the Lamb. Jewish tradition reads this story, which it calls the Akedah, the binding, as a

supreme example of faithfulness, and it's read in synagogues at Rosh Hashanah.

REAL TALK **Would God Ask You to Do This?**

No. If anyone ever tells you God wants you to hurt yourself or someone else, they're wrong, and that includes a voice in your own head. The Bible is clear that God hates child sacrifice and human violence, and the whole point of this story is that God stopped it and provided a substitute. Genesis 22 is about trusting God with what you love most, not about harming anybody. If you ever have thoughts telling you to hurt yourself or someone else, tell a parent, counselor, or trusted adult right away, or call or text 988 in the United States.

After the test, God swears by Himself to keep His promise, and repeats it: Abraham's offspring will be like the stars and the sand, and "all the nations of the earth will be blessed by your offspring." Paul says that "offspring" ultimately points to one person: Christ (Galatians 3:16).

The section ends quietly, with grief. Sarah dies at 127 years old, and Abraham weeps for her. He buys a field with a cave in it, the cave of Machpelah near Hebron, to bury her. He tells the local Hittites, "I am a stranger and a foreigner living with you." God promised him the whole land, but the only piece he ever actually owns is a grave. Yet even that is a sign of faith. Abraham is planting his family's future in the land God promised, believing that one day it will all be theirs.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Cave of Machpelah**

The cave Abraham bought in Hebron is still honored today. Over it stands a massive stone enclosure built by King Herod the Great around the time of Jesus, one of the best-preserved buildings from that era. Jews call it the Cave of the Patriarchs, and Muslims call it the Ibrahimi Mosque. It's a holy site to both, and sadly it's also been a place of conflict and violence. Genesis 23 records the purchase in careful legal detail, with witnesses at the city gate

and the price weighed out in silver. That detail matters: it shows that Abraham's family had a legal claim to at least one small piece of the promised land.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Test Someone If You Know Everything?**

If God knows everything, why did He need to test Abraham? Genesis says the angel told Abraham, now I know that you fear God. Readers have offered different explanations. Some say the test wasn't for God's information but for Abraham's growth, the way a coach's tough drill reveals and builds strength. Others say God was speaking in human terms, the way the Bible sometimes describes God coming down to see Babel. Others say the test made Abraham's faith visible, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to everyone who would read the story. James 2:21–23 says Abraham's faith was made complete by what he did. Tests in your life aren't God trying to trip you up. They're more like the fire that shows gold is real.

KEY VERSE

Abraham said, 'God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.' So they both went together.

Genesis 22:8 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. God asked, "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" What's something in your life that feels too hard right now?
2. Abraham boldly prayed for Sodom. Who is someone you could pray for boldly this week?
3. What did Lot's wife's backward look reveal about her heart? What are you tempted to look back at?
4. How does the story of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah help you understand what God did through Jesus?

TRY THIS *Abraham showed hospitality to strangers and ended up meeting God. This week, go out of your way to welcome someone new at school, church, or practice. Sit with them, learn their name, and listen to their story.*

CHAPTER 6

Twins at War

Genesis 24–28

After all the drama of Abraham's story, Isaac's life can seem quiet. He's the son of a famous father and the father of a famous son, and he gets fewer chapters than either of them. But the promise doesn't skip a generation. In these chapters, God keeps His covenant through a marriage, a pair of fighting twins, a stolen blessing, and a staircase to heaven. And a family that seems determined to wreck itself.

Abraham is old now, and he wants Isaac to marry a woman from his own relatives back in Mesopotamia, not a Canaanite who might lead him away from God. So he sends his most trusted servant on a long journey to find a wife for Isaac. Abraham makes him promise not to take Isaac back there. The family's future is in the land God promised.

The servant arrives at a well outside the town of Nahor in the evening, when the women come to draw water. And he prays one of the most specific prayers in the Bible: "LORD, the God of my master Abraham, please give me success today, and show kindness to my master Abraham." He asks for a sign. If he asks a young woman for a drink and she offers to water his camels too, she'll be the one.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Thirsty Camels**

Watering ten camels was no small favor. A thirsty camel can drink twenty or more gallons of water at a time. So if Rebekah offered to water all ten camels, she was volunteering for hundreds of trips with a heavy jar, up and down the steps of the well. The servant wasn't just asking for a woman who was nice. He was asking for a woman who was generous, strong, hardworking, and kind to strangers, someone with the same kind of hospitality Abraham had shown.

Before the servant even finishes praying, Rebekah comes out with her jar. She gives him a drink, then runs back and forth until all ten camels have had their fill. The servant watches in silence. When he learns she's Abraham's relative, he bows down and worships: "Blessed be the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his loving kindness and his truth toward my master."

The servant tells the whole story to Rebekah's family, including her brother Laban, who seems very interested in the gold jewelry. They agree that this is from the LORD. When they ask Rebekah whether she'll go with the stranger to marry a man she's never met, she gives a two-word answer that echoes Abraham's faith: "I will go." Just like Abraham, she leaves her family and her homeland for a promise.

When the caravan arrives, Isaac is out in the field in the evening, meditating. He looks up and sees the camels coming. Rebekah covers herself with her veil. Isaac brings her into his mother's tent, and she becomes his wife. Then Genesis says something simple and sweet: "He loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death."

REAL TALK **Waiting for the Right Person**

The story of Isaac and Rebekah is not a formula for finding a boyfriend or girlfriend. (Please don't stand by the drinking fountain and wait for someone to offer to water your camels.) Marriage in the ancient world was arranged by

families, which is very different from dating today. But some things carry over. The servant prayed, and God guided. Rebekah's character mattered more than her looks (though Genesis says she was beautiful too). And the marriage was built on faithfulness to God. Whether you're interested in dating now or not, it's worth asking God to shape you into the kind of person who's worth waiting for.

Abraham dies at 175 years old, and Isaac and Ishmael, the two estranged brothers, bury him together in the cave where Sarah was buried. It's a quiet moment of reconciliation.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Isaac, the Quiet Patriarch**

Isaac often gets overlooked. Abraham is the bold pioneer, Jacob is the scrappy wrestler, and Joseph is the dreamer who rises to power. Isaac mostly stays home, digs wells, and keeps the peace. He's the only patriarch who never leaves the promised land, and the only one with just one wife. He also lived the longest of the four, 180 years. Some people are called to dramatic adventures. Others are called to faithfully carry on what they've received, to stay put, to love one person, and to pass the faith along. Both matter to God. Notice that God calls Himself the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The quiet guy is right there in the middle of God's name.

Like Sarah before her, Rebekah can't have children. Isaac prays for her, and God answers. She becomes pregnant with twins, and they fight so much inside her that she asks God what's going on. God tells her: "Two nations are in your womb." The older will serve the younger. That's backward from how things normally worked in the ancient world, where the firstborn son got the most honor and the biggest inheritance. But God keeps choosing the unexpected: Abel over Cain, Isaac over Ishmael, and now Jacob over Esau. God's choices aren't based on who's first, strongest, or most impressive.

The twins are born. The first comes out red and hairy, so they name him Esau. The second comes out grabbing his brother's heel, so

they name him Jacob, which sounds like the Hebrew word for heel and can mean he grabs the heel or he deceives. They grow up as opposites. "Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field. Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents." And then comes a line that explains a lot of the trouble ahead: "Isaac loved Esau, because he ate his venison. Rebekah loved Jacob." Each parent had a favorite. And their children would grow up competing for love, for blessing, and for their parents' attention. A family where love feels like a contest is a family where everyone loses.

> **REAL TALK** **Favorites**
>
> Favoritism tears families apart, and Genesis shows it over and over. Isaac favors Esau, Rebekah favors Jacob, and later Jacob will favor Joseph, nearly getting him killed. If you feel like a parent loves your sibling more than you, that hurts, and it's okay to say so. Sometimes it helps to talk honestly with your parent about how you feel. If that doesn't feel safe, talk with another trusted adult. And if you're the favorite, don't use it as a weapon. You can be the one who breaks the pattern.

One day Esau comes in from hunting, starving. Jacob is cooking stew. "Please feed me with some of that red stew, for I am famished." Jacob, ever the opportunist, says he'll trade it for Esau's birthright, his rights as the firstborn son. And Esau says, "Behold, I am about to die. What good is the birthright to me?" He trades his whole future for a bowl of soup. Genesis sums it up: "So Esau despised his birthright." Hebrews 12:16 warns us not to be like Esau, who traded his inheritance for a single meal. Esau isn't the only one who has traded something precious for something that felt urgent in the moment. And notice Jacob's part too. He didn't share food with his starving brother out of love. He took advantage of his brother's weakness to get what he wanted. Neither twin comes off well.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Instant Gratification**

Esau's choice is a picture of what psychologists call instant gratification: grabbing what feels good right now instead of what's best in the long run. It's the same impulse behind scrolling one more video when you should be asleep, or sending a text you'll regret. It's not wrong to be hungry. It's foolish to let a moment's hunger make a lifetime decision. Before a big choice, try asking: will this still seem like a good trade in a year? In ten years?

Isaac's story repeats his father's in some uncomfortable ways. There's a famine, and God tells Isaac not to go to Egypt but to stay in the land, and repeats the promise to him: "In your offspring all the nations of the earth will be blessed." But Isaac, like Abraham, is scared and lies about his wife, saying Rebekah is his sister. The king of Gerar catches him and scolds him. Like father, like son.

Isaac also gets into a series of quarrels with his neighbors over wells. Each time Isaac's servants dig a well, the local herdsmen claim it. Instead of fighting, Isaac moves on and digs another. Finally he digs a well no one fights over and names it Rehoboth, meaning room, because God has made room for them. That night God appears and tells him not to be afraid. Isaac's quiet life shows a different kind of strength: the strength to make peace.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Wells and Beersheba**

In the dry Negev desert, a well could mean the difference between life and death for a family and its flocks. Digging one took enormous work, and owning one meant you had a real claim to live in the land. That's why the quarrels over wells were so serious. The town of Beersheba, which means well of the oath or well of seven, became an important place for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Archaeologists have excavated an ancient city at Tel Beersheba, including a deep well near its gate, though it dates from later than the patriarchs. In the Bible, the phrase from Dan to Beersheba came to mean the whole land of Israel, from the far north to the far south.

Then comes the most famous family fraud in the Bible. Isaac is old and blind, and he decides it's time to give his blessing to Esau, his favorite. He sends Esau out to hunt and cook his favorite meal first. But Rebekah overhears. She tells Jacob to bring two young goats so she can cook Isaac's favorite dish, and she dresses Jacob in Esau's best clothes and covers his smooth hands and neck with goatskins, so that he'll feel and smell like his hairy, outdoorsy brother.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Blessing**

In the ancient world, a father's final blessing wasn't just a nice wish. It was considered powerful and binding, a kind of spoken will that passed on the family's future, authority, and inheritance. Once given, it couldn't be taken back. That's why everyone in this story fights so hard over it. For this family, the blessing also carried God's promise to Abraham. Whoever received it would carry the covenant forward.

Jacob goes in to his father, and lies to his face. "I am Esau your firstborn." Isaac is suspicious. How did you find game so quickly? Jacob lies again, and even drags God into it: the LORD your God gave me success. Isaac feels his hands. "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau." Finally, Isaac eats, kisses him, smells his clothes, and gives Jacob the blessing: rich harvests, nations bowing to him, lord over his brothers.

Jacob has barely left when Esau walks in with his dish. The truth hits Isaac, and he begins to tremble violently. And Esau "cried with an exceedingly great and bitter cry," and begs, "Bless me, even me also, my father." It's one of the saddest scenes in Genesis. Esau weeps aloud. Isaac gives him a lesser blessing, but the main blessing is gone. And Esau's grief turns to hatred. He plans to kill Jacob as soon as their father dies.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Is God's Choosing Fair?**

God said before the twins were born that the older would serve the younger. Paul quotes this in Romans 9 to show that God's choices depend on His mercy, not on what people do. Christians read Romans 9 in different ways. Some, often in the Reformed tradition, believe it shows that God chooses individuals for salvation according to His own purpose. Others, often in the Wesleyan or Arminian tradition, believe Paul is talking about God choosing nations and roles in history, Israel and Edom, rather than deciding individuals' eternal destinies, and that God's choices always leave room for human response. Both sides agree that God isn't unjust, that He's merciful, and that He's free to work through unexpected people. And notice that being chosen in Genesis never means being better. Jacob was chosen, and he was a cheat. Being chosen was about God's plan, not Jacob's merit.

REAL TALK **The Whole Family Messed Up**

Who's the bad guy in Genesis 27? Everybody. Isaac planned to bless his favorite secretly, even though God had said the older would serve the younger. Rebekah schemed and pushed her son to lie. Jacob deceived his blind father and used God's name to do it. Esau had already despised his birthright and now wanted the blessing anyway. And yet God's plan still goes forward. That doesn't mean God approves of lying. Jacob will spend the next twenty years reaping what he sowed, being deceived himself. But it does mean that God can work even through messed-up families. Including yours.

Rebekah hears about Esau's plan and sends Jacob away to her brother Laban in Haran, telling Isaac he needs to find a wife among her relatives. She thinks it'll only be a few days. She never sees her favorite son again.

Genesis adds a detail that shows how much this family is hurting. Esau has married two Hittite women, and they've been a source of grief to Isaac and Rebekah. When Esau sees that his parents are unhappy with his wives, he goes and marries a daughter of Ishmael,

apparently trying to win their approval. It's a little heartbreaking. Esau is still trying to earn the blessing he lost. Many people live like that, trying to earn a parent's approval or God's approval by doing the right things, never feeling like it's enough.

> **REAL TALK** **Lying for a Good Cause?**
>
> Rebekah may have thought she was helping God. After all, God had said the older would serve the younger. But God didn't need her lies to keep His promise. Have you ever told yourself a lie was okay because your goal was good? Maybe you lied to protect a friend, or to avoid a fight, or to get something you thought you deserved. Genesis shows the cost. Rebekah lost her son. Jacob lost twenty years. Esau lost his brother. The family was torn apart. The end doesn't justify the means. God is able to keep His promises without our cheating. Our job is to trust Him and tell the truth.

Jacob sets out alone, running for his life with nothing but a staff. At sunset, he stops in the middle of nowhere, puts a stone under his head, and goes to sleep. And he dreams. "He dreamed and saw a stairway set upon the earth, and its top reached to heaven. Behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it." At the top stands the LORD Himself. Remember the tower of Babel, where people tried to build their way up to heaven? Here, heaven comes down to earth, not because Jacob earned it, but as pure gift. And it comes to a liar on the run.

God speaks to Jacob and gives him the same promise He gave Abraham and Isaac: land, descendants as many as the dust of the earth, and a blessing for all the families of the earth through him. Then God adds a personal promise: "Behold, I am with you, and will keep you, wherever you go, and will bring you again into this land. For I will not leave you until I have done that which I have spoken of to you." Jacob deserved a lecture. He got a promise. That's what grace is: getting what you don't deserve. Jacob had done nothing to

earn this. He hadn't repented yet. He hadn't even prayed. God simply showed up and gave Jacob His presence and His promise. Grace usually comes first, and change follows after.

Jacob wakes up and says, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I didn't know it." He's afraid and amazed. "This is none other than God's house, and this is the gate of heaven." He sets up his stone pillow as a pillar, pours oil on it, and names the place Bethel, which means house of God. Then Jacob makes a vow that sounds a little like a bargain: if God will be with me and keep me safe and bring me home, then the LORD will be my God. Jacob still has a lot to learn. But God has started something in him.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Jacob's Ladder and Jesus**
>
> In John 1:51, Jesus tells Nathanael, "You will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." That's a clear reference to Jacob's dream. Jesus is saying that He Himself is the stairway, the meeting place between heaven and earth. Jacob found the gate of heaven in a dream at Bethel. We find it in Jesus. You don't have to climb your way to God. He came down the stairway to you.

KEY VERSE

Behold, I am with you, and will keep you, wherever you go, and will bring you again into this land. For I will not leave you until I have done that which I have spoken of to you.

Genesis 28:15 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. The servant prayed a very specific prayer and God answered. Is there a specific thing you need to ask God for right now?
2. Esau traded his birthright for a bowl of stew. What are some things people your age are tempted to trade their future for?
3. Which character in Genesis 27 do you relate to most: Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, or Esau? Why?
4. God met Jacob when he was running away after doing wrong. What does that tell you about how God responds to people who've messed up?

TRY THIS *Find a quiet place to be alone with God this week. Read Genesis 28:10–22 and then write your own "Surely the LORD is in this place" prayer about a place in your everyday life where you want to notice God.*

CHAPTER 7

Wrestling with God

Genesis 29–36

Jacob left home a con artist on the run. He'll come back twenty years later with a limp, a new name, a huge family, and a very different heart. In between, he gets a taste of his own medicine. The deceiver gets deceived. The heel-grabber has to learn to hold on to God instead. These chapters are messy, full of rivalry, tears, and family drama that would fill a whole season of reality TV. But they're also about a God who doesn't let go of Jacob, even when Jacob keeps trying to run his own life.

Jacob arrives near Haran and finds a well with shepherds waiting around it. Then Rachel, his cousin, comes with her father's sheep. Jacob, apparently showing off, rolls the heavy stone away from the well by himself, waters her flock, kisses her, and bursts into tears. It's love at first sight. Rachel runs home to tell her father, Laban, who comes rushing out to welcome his nephew. (Remember how excited Laban was about the gold jewelry in chapter 24? He hasn't changed.)

After a month, Laban asks what Jacob wants for wages. Jacob knows exactly what he wants: Rachel. Laban had two daughters: Leah, the older, and Rachel. Genesis says "Leah's eyes were weak," which might mean they were soft or tender, or that she just wasn't considered as attractive. Rachel was beautiful. Jacob offers to work

seven years for Rachel. "Jacob served seven years for Rachel. They seemed to him but a few days, for the love he had for her." That's one of the most romantic lines in the Bible.

When the seven years are up, Laban throws a wedding feast. But that night, in the dark, with the bride veiled and probably after plenty of wine, Laban sends Leah in to Jacob instead of Rachel. "In the morning, behold, it was Leah!" Jacob is furious. "Why then have you deceived me?" The man who deceived his blind father in the dark has now been deceived in the dark. The younger brother who stole the older brother's blessing is told by Laban, it's not our custom to give the younger daughter before the older. Genesis doesn't need to say Jacob got what he deserved. You can feel it.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Bride Prices and Marriage Customs**
>
> In the ancient Near East, a man usually paid a bride price to the bride's family. Jacob had nothing, so he paid in labor instead. Marriage customs were very different from today. Men sometimes married more than one wife, and wealthy women often brought servants who could become secondary wives. Genesis records these customs without endorsing them, and it shows how much pain they caused. Every polygamous family in Genesis is full of jealousy and heartbreak. Jesus pointed back to God's design in Genesis 2: one man and one woman, becoming one flesh (Matthew 19:4–6).

Laban agrees to give Jacob Rachel too, after Leah's wedding week, in exchange for seven more years of work. So Jacob ends up with two wives who are sisters, and he loves Rachel more. And here Genesis shows God's heart again: "The LORD saw that Leah was hated, and he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren." The God who saw Hagar sees Leah.

Leah names her sons with her heartbreak written in their names. Reuben, because the LORD has seen my misery; surely my husband

will love me now. Simeon, because the LORD heard that I'm not loved. Levi, because now at last my husband will become attached to me. But it doesn't work. Jacob still doesn't love her. Then her fourth son is born, and something changes. She names him Judah and says, "This time I will praise the LORD." She stops trying to earn her husband's love and turns to God instead. And here's the amazing thing: King David, and eventually Jesus, will come from Judah, the son of the unloved wife.

> **REAL TALK** **When You Feel Unwanted**
>
> Leah spent years trying to make someone love her who didn't. Maybe you know what that feels like, with a parent, a friend, a crush, or a group you want to belong to. You can't make someone love you, and your worth doesn't depend on whether they do. Leah found something better when she turned to praise God. That doesn't mean the hurt disappeared. But she found her identity in the God who saw her. If you feel unwanted, God sees you. And if you're feeling hopeless or rejected, talk to someone you trust about it. You're not meant to carry it alone.

Meanwhile, Rachel is jealous of her sister. "Give me children, or else I will die," she tells Jacob. Jacob snaps at her: am I in the place of God? The sisters start a baby competition, giving their servants Bilhah and Zilpah to Jacob as extra wives, then fighting over everything, even some mandrake plants that people believed helped fertility. Eleven sons and a daughter, Dinah, are born in this tangle of rivalry. Finally "God remembered Rachel," and she has a son, Joseph.

After Joseph's birth, Jacob wants to go home. But Laban has been cheating Jacob for years, changing his wages ten times. They make a deal that Jacob will keep the speckled and spotted animals, and Jacob uses a strange breeding method with striped branches. Genesis makes clear it wasn't Jacob's cleverness that made him rich,

though. God tells him in a dream that He has seen how Laban has treated him.

When Laban later accuses Jacob, Jacob finally explodes, and his speech gives us a glimpse of what those twenty years were really like. He worked through scorching heat by day and frost by night, losing sleep. When wild animals killed sheep, he paid for them himself. Laban changed his wages ten times. And Jacob says that if the God of his fathers, the God of Abraham, and "the fear of Isaac," hadn't been with him, Laban would have sent him away empty-handed. Jacob, the cheater, spent twenty years being cheated, and he learned to work hard and trust God for the outcome.

> **REAL TALK** **When Someone Treats You Unfairly**
>
> Maybe you have a boss who doesn't pay you fairly, a coach who plays favorites, or a teacher who seems to have it out for you. Jacob's years with Laban show that God sees unfair treatment, even when no one else does. Jacob kept working hard, and God took care of him. That doesn't mean you should just accept being mistreated. It's okay to speak up respectfully, and to ask a parent or trusted adult for help when something isn't right, especially if you're being cheated out of pay or treated in a way that's unsafe. But you can also trust that your hard work isn't wasted. Colossians 3:23 says to work at everything with all your heart, as working for the Lord.

So Jacob packs up his family and flocks and sneaks away while Laban is out shearing sheep. Rachel secretly steals her father's household gods. Laban chases them down. God warns Laban in a dream not to harm Jacob, but he searches the tents for his gods. Rachel hides them in her camel's saddle and sits on them, claiming she can't get up because she's having her period. It's a funny and pointed scene: the gods Laban worships can be stolen and sat on. They can't even protect themselves.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Household Gods**

The household gods Rachel stole (called teraphim in Hebrew) were small figurines, probably used for worship, protection, or fortune-telling. Some scholars once thought that, based on tablets from the ancient city of Nuzi, owning them could give someone a legal claim to the family inheritance, though more recent scholars question that. Either way, they show that Jacob's family hadn't fully left behind the idols of their culture. A few chapters later, Jacob has his household put away their foreign gods before they go to worship at Bethel.

Jacob and Laban finally make a covenant and set up a heap of stones as a witness. Laban says, "The LORD watch between me and you, when we are absent one from another." People sometimes put that line on friendship necklaces as a sweet saying. In context, it's more like: may God keep an eye on you, because I don't trust you. They part ways, and Jacob heads home.

But there's one huge problem waiting for Jacob there: Esau. The last time Jacob saw his brother, Esau was planning to kill him. Jacob sends messengers ahead, and they come back with terrifying news. Esau is coming to meet him, with four hundred men. Jacob is terrified. He divides his family into two camps, so if one is attacked, the other might escape.

Then he prays, maybe the first truly humble prayer we hear from him: "I am not worthy of the least of all the loving kindnesses, and of all the truth, which you have shown to your servant." He reminds God of His promise, and he admits he's afraid. "Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau." Then he sends wave after wave of gifts ahead to Esau, hundreds of goats, sheep, camels, cows, and donkeys, hoping to calm his anger.

Even before the wrestling match, God gives Jacob a sign. As he sets out, angels of God meet him, and Jacob names the place Mahanaim, which means two camps. Twenty years earlier, Jacob saw angels on the stairway at Bethel as he left the land. Now he sees them again as he comes back. God has been with him the whole time, just as He promised. But Jacob is still afraid. Knowing that God is with you doesn't always make the fear disappear at once. Sometimes you have to bring that fear to God in prayer, which is exactly what Jacob does next.

That night, Jacob sends everyone across the river Jabbok, and he's left alone. "Jacob was left alone, and wrestled with a man there until the breaking of the day." Who is this mysterious man? Jacob doesn't know at first. They wrestle all night, and neither wins. Finally the man touches Jacob's hip and wrenches it out of joint. And the man says, "Let me go, for the day breaks." Jacob says, "I won't let you go unless you bless me."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Who Was the Wrestler?**
>
> Genesis calls him a man. Hosea 12:4 says Jacob struggled with an angel. Jacob himself says he saw God face to face. Many Christians have understood this as another appearance of God in human form, perhaps the Son of God before He became Jesus. Jewish tradition has often seen him as an angel, sometimes the guardian angel of Esau. Whatever the details, Jacob knew that in wrestling with this man, he was wrestling with God.

Then the man asks a strange question: "What is your name?" The last time Jacob was asked that, by his blind father, he lied and said Esau. Now he has to tell the truth: Jacob. Heel-grabber. Deceiver. It's a confession. And the man says, "Your name will no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have fought with God and with men, and have prevailed." Israel probably means he struggles with God or

God struggles. From now on, this is the name of the whole nation that will come from Jacob.

Jacob names the place Peniel, which means face of God, "for he said, 'I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.'" As the sun rises, Jacob limps across the river. He's been blessed and wounded at the same time. He'll walk with a limp for the rest of his life, a constant reminder that he didn't win by being strong. He won by holding on.

REAL TALK **Wrestling with God**

Have you ever wrestled with God? Maybe with doubts, or with something He's asking you to do, or with a prayer He hasn't answered. Jacob's story shows that wrestling with God isn't the opposite of faith. Sometimes it's what faith looks like. Jacob didn't walk away from the fight; he held on and asked for a blessing. And God didn't crush him; He gave him a new name. If you're struggling with God right now, don't let go. Keep praying, keep asking, keep reading. You might come out limping, but you'll come out blessed.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jacob's Twelve Sons**

It can be hard to keep track of Jacob's family, so here it is. Leah's sons: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun (plus a daughter, Dinah). Bilhah's sons (Rachel's servant): Dan and Naphtali. Zilpah's sons (Leah's servant): Gad and Asher. Rachel's sons: Joseph and Benjamin. These twelve sons became the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel, although Joseph's tribe was later split into two, Ephraim and Manasseh, and Levi became a tribe of priests without its own territory. Jesus chose twelve apostles, a sign that He was gathering and renewing God's people. And in Revelation 21, the names of the twelve tribes are written on the gates of the new Jerusalem.

The next morning, Jacob sees Esau coming with his four hundred men. Jacob goes ahead of his family and bows to the ground seven times as he approaches his brother. And then something completely unexpected happens. "Esau ran to meet him, embraced him, fell on

his neck, kissed him, and they wept." Twenty years of fear, guilt, and anger melt into tears. Jesus may have had this scene in mind when He told the story of the prodigal son, where the father runs to meet his son, embraces him, and kisses him (Luke 15:20).

Jacob says to Esau, "I have seen your face, as one sees the face of God." The night before, Jacob saw God's face and lived. Now he sees grace in his brother's face. Forgiveness from someone you've wronged is one of the clearest pictures of God's grace you'll ever see.

> **SAFETY NOTE** **The Story of Dinah**
>
> Genesis 34 tells a painful story. Jacob's daughter Dinah goes out to visit the women of the land, and Shechem, a local prince, "took her, lay with her, and humbled her." That means he sexually assaulted her. Afterward he wants to marry her. Her brothers are furious, and Simeon and Levi trick the men of the city and then kill them all in revenge. Jacob is mostly worried about his reputation. Notice who never gets to speak in this chapter: Dinah. Genesis tells her story honestly, and later Jacob condemns Simeon and Levi's violence (Genesis 49:5–7). What happened to Dinah was wrong, and so was the brothers' massacre. If you have ever been sexually assaulted or pressured, or if someone has touched you in a way that wasn't okay, it is not your fault, no matter what you were wearing, where you went, or who it was. You deserve to be heard. Please tell a trusted adult, and in the United States you can call the RAINN National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-4673 or the Childhelp hotline at 1-800-422-4453. You don't have to be silent like Dinah was made to be.

After Shechem, God tells Jacob to go back to Bethel, where He first met him. Jacob tells his whole household, "Put away the foreign gods that are among you, purify yourselves, and change your garments." They bury the idols under a tree, and they go up to

worship. At Bethel, God appears again, confirms Jacob's new name, Israel, and repeats the promise to Abraham.

But the chapter ends with grief. Rachel dies giving birth to her second son. As she's dying, she names him Ben-Oni, son of my sorrow. Jacob renames him Benjamin, son of my right hand. Jacob buries her on the road to Bethlehem. Centuries later, the prophet Jeremiah pictured Rachel weeping for her children as Israel was taken into exile (Jeremiah 31:15), and Matthew 2:18 applies those words to the grieving mothers of Bethlehem after King Herod's massacre, when Jesus was a baby. Rachel's tomb is still a place of prayer today, especially for women who long for children. Not long after, Isaac dies, and Jacob and Esau bury him together, just like Isaac and Ishmael buried Abraham. Chapter 36 lists Esau's descendants, the Edomites. God kept His promise to Esau too, and blessed him with a large family and land of his own.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Edom**

Esau's descendants, the Edomites, lived in the rugged mountains southeast of the Dead Sea. Their land included the red sandstone cliffs where the famous city of Petra was later carved by a people called the Nabataeans. (Edom means red, which fits both the red stew and the red rock.) Israel and Edom, the descendants of the twin brothers, fought for centuries. The short book of Obadiah is entirely about Edom. And here's a surprising twist: King Herod the Great, who tried to kill the baby Jesus, was an Idumean, a descendant of the Edomites. The rivalry between Jacob and Esau echoed all the way to Bethlehem. Yet God's plan has always been bigger than old rivalries. Amos 9:12 pictures a day when even Edom is included among the nations called by God's name, and James quotes that hope in Acts 15 as the gospel spreads to the Gentiles.

KEY VERSE

He said, "Your name will no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have fought with God and with men, and have prevailed."

Genesis 32:28 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Jacob the deceiver was deceived by Laban. Have you ever experienced something like that, on either side? What did you learn?
2. Leah named Judah saying, "This time I will praise the LORD." What changed in her heart? What would it look like for you to make that change?
3. What do you think it means to wrestle with God? Have you ever done it?
4. Esau forgave Jacob after twenty years. Is there someone you need to forgive, or someone you need to ask for forgiveness?

TRY THIS *Jacob reconciled with his brother. This week, take one concrete step toward healing a broken relationship: send a message, apologize, or have a conversation you've been avoiding. If that relationship is unsafe, talk to a trusted adult about it instead.*

CHAPTER 8

From the Pit to the Palace

Genesis 37–41

Joseph's story is one of the greatest stories ever told. It has a favorite son, jealous brothers, a pit, a fake death, slavery, temptation, a false accusation, prison, dreams, and a rise to power that seems impossible. It's so well told that it reads almost like a novel, and Broadway turned it into a musical. But underneath the drama is one big truth that runs through the whole story: God is at work even when He seems absent. In fact, in Joseph's story God never appears in a vision or speaks out loud even once. He works quietly, behind the scenes.

Joseph is seventeen when the story opens, about the age of a high school junior. He's helping his older brothers with the flocks, and he brings back a bad report about them to their father. Already that's not a great start. Then Genesis says, "Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age, and he made him a tunic of many colors." That famous coat might have been long-sleeved or richly decorated; either way, it was the kind of thing a prince would wear, not someone who worked in the fields. It was a walking symbol of favoritism. "His brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, and they hated him."

Then Joseph has two dreams. In the first, he and his brothers are tying up bundles of grain, and their bundles bow down to his. In the

second, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars bow down to him. And Joseph, maybe naively, maybe arrogantly, tells his family about both dreams. His brothers hate him even more. Even his father scolds him. But Jacob keeps the matter in mind.

REAL TALK **Don't Be That Guy**

Let's be honest. Teenage Joseph was kind of annoying. He tattled on his brothers, wore his special coat around them, and told them his dreams about ruling over them. That doesn't mean they were right to hate him, and it definitely doesn't mean they were right to do what they did next. But Joseph needed to grow in humility, and God used the hard years ahead to do it. If God has given you gifts or a special calling, that's great. Just don't use it to lord it over people. The dreams came true, but only after Joseph learned to serve.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Shechem and Dothan**

Joseph's journey to find his brothers took him first to Shechem, about fifty miles north of Hebron, and then to Dothan, another fifteen miles beyond. That's several days' walk alone for a seventeen-year-old. Dothan sat near a major trade route connecting the region of Gilead, east of the Jordan, with the coast and Egypt, which explains why a caravan of traders carrying spices, balm, and myrrh happened to pass by. Archaeologists have found ancient cisterns in the area, bottle-shaped pits carved into the rock to store rainwater. When empty, they would have made a perfect prison: too deep and too narrow at the top to climb out of.

One day Jacob sends Joseph to check on his brothers, who are pasturing the flocks far away. They see him coming in the distance, maybe recognizing the coat. "Behold, this dreamer comes," they say. "Come now therefore, and let's kill him." Then they'll tell their father a wild animal ate him. "We will see what will become of his dreams."

Reuben, the oldest, talks them out of killing him and suggests throwing him into an empty cistern instead, planning to rescue him later. So they strip off his coat and throw him into the pit. And then, in one of the coldest moments in the Bible, they sit down to eat lunch. Years later, they'll remember that Joseph was begging them for mercy from the pit, and they wouldn't listen (Genesis 42:21).

A caravan of traders comes by, heading to Egypt. Judah says, why kill him? Let's sell him. So they sell their brother for twenty pieces of silver. Interestingly, twenty shekels of silver matches what ancient records suggest was the typical price of a slave in the early second millennium BC; the price rose over the following centuries. It's one of many small details that fit the story's ancient setting. Then they kill a goat, dip Joseph's coat in its blood, and send it to their father. Jacob recognizes it: "It is my son's tunic. An evil animal has devoured him." He tears his clothes and refuses to be comforted. Remember how Jacob deceived his father with goatskins and his brother's clothes? Now his sons deceive him with a goat's blood and their brother's coat.

SAFETY NOTE **When Siblings or Peers Turn Violent**

Joseph's brothers didn't just tease him. They assaulted him, threw him in a pit, sold him into slavery, and lied about it. Jealousy that's allowed to grow can turn into real violence, and it happens in families, teams, and friend groups today. Bullying, beating up, threatening, or ganging up on someone is never okay, even if that person is annoying or the favorite. If you're being hurt or threatened by siblings, classmates, or anyone else, tell a trusted adult. If you're the one tempted to join in when others gang up on someone, be a Reuben, or better, someone who stops it completely.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Judah and Tamar**

Genesis 38 interrupts Joseph's story to tell a story about Judah. Judah marries a Canaanite woman and has three sons. The oldest marries a woman

named Tamar but dies because of his wickedness. By custom, the next brother was supposed to give Tamar a child so the family line would continue, but he selfishly refuses and dies too. Judah promises Tamar his third son when he grows up, but then breaks his promise and leaves her a widow with no future, which in that culture meant poverty and shame. So Tamar takes matters into her own hands. She disguises herself, and Judah, thinking she's a prostitute, sleeps with her and leaves his seal, cord, and staff as a pledge of payment. When Tamar turns up pregnant, Judah orders her to be burned. Then she produces his seal, cord, and staff. And Judah admits, "She is more righteous than I, because I didn't give her to Shelah, my son." It's an uncomfortable story. But it's the beginning of Judah's change, the first time he admits he's wrong. And Tamar's son Perez becomes an ancestor of King David, and of Jesus. Tamar is one of only a handful of women named in Jesus' family tree in Matthew 1.

SAFETY NOTE **Tamar's Story**

Tamar was mistreated by the men who had power over her. One used her, one broke his promise, and one was ready to have her killed for something he had done too. The Bible tells her story honestly and calls her more righteous than the man who wronged her. Being used, exploited, or treated as if you don't matter is wrong. If anyone is pressuring you sexually, exploiting you, or offering you money or gifts for anything sexual, that is abuse, and it's not your fault. Tell a parent or trusted adult. In the United States, you can also call or text the Childhelp hotline at 1-800-422-4453 or the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888.

Meanwhile, in Egypt, Joseph is sold to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard. And here comes the theme of the whole chapter: "The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a prosperous man." Joseph is a slave in a foreign country, far from everyone he loves. But God is with him. Joseph works so faithfully that Potiphar puts him in charge of his whole household, and God blesses Potiphar's house because of Joseph.

Joseph is also handsome, and Potiphar's wife notices. Day after day, she tries to get Joseph to sleep with her. And day after day, Joseph refuses. "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" Notice Joseph's reasoning. He knows it would betray his master's trust. But most of all, it would be a sin against God. One day, when no one else is in the house, she grabs his cloak and says, "Lie with me!" And Joseph does the wisest thing possible: he runs. "He left his garment in her hand, and ran outside." For the second time, Joseph loses a piece of clothing because of someone else's sin.

> **REAL TALK** **Run**
>
> Joseph's response to temptation was simple: run. Second Timothy 2:22 says, "Flee from youthful lusts." Sometimes the best way to deal with temptation isn't to stand and fight. It's to get out of there. That might mean leaving a party, closing an app, deleting a contact, or not putting yourself in a situation where you know you'll be tempted. Running isn't weakness. It's wisdom. Also notice something important: this was sexual harassment by a person with power over Joseph. If someone with power over you, a boss, coach, teacher, or anyone else, pressures you sexually, it's not your fault. Get away if you can, and tell a trusted adult right away.

Potiphar's wife is humiliated and furious. She screams and accuses Joseph of attacking her, holding up his cloak as evidence. Potiphar is enraged and throws Joseph into the king's prison. Joseph did the right thing, and he got punished for it. Sometimes that happens. Doing right doesn't always make life easier in the short run.

Interestingly, Potiphar doesn't have Joseph executed, which was the normal penalty for a slave accused of attacking his master's wife. Some readers wonder whether Potiphar didn't fully believe his wife's story. Either way, God's protection is quietly at work again, even in what looks like a disaster.

REAL TALK **Integrity When No One Is Watching**

When Potiphar's wife grabbed Joseph, Genesis notes that none of the household servants were there. No one would have known. Joseph's integrity didn't depend on who was watching, because he knew God was always watching, and more importantly, because he loved God. Integrity means being the same person in private that you are in public, the same person with your phone screen turned away as with it turned toward your parents. It's built in small choices: turning in the extra change, not copying homework, not saying behind someone's back what you wouldn't say to their face. Joseph's big moment of integrity came after years of small ones.

"But the LORD was with Joseph." Even in prison. The jailer puts Joseph in charge of all the other prisoners. Again, Joseph doesn't sit around feeling sorry for himself. He works faithfully wherever God puts him, whether it's a palace, a household, or a prison cell.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Egypt in Joseph's Day**

Joseph's story has lots of authentic Egyptian details. Egyptians shaved (that's why Joseph shaves before meeting Pharaoh), they embalmed their dead, they valued dream interpretation, and they had officials with titles like chief cupbearer and chief baker. Some scholars connect Joseph's time with the Hyksos, a foreign people from Canaan who ruled parts of Egypt around 1650–1550 BC, which might explain how a foreigner could rise to power. Others place him earlier. The famous Story of Two Brothers, an Egyptian tale, also includes a married woman who falsely accuses a young man. Historians debate how to date Joseph, but the Egyptian setting rings true.

Two of Pharaoh's officials end up in prison with Joseph: the chief cupbearer and the chief baker. One night, they both have disturbing dreams. Joseph notices they look upset and asks why. They say there's no one to interpret their dreams. Joseph answers, "Don't interpretations belong to God? Please tell it to me." Joseph interprets both dreams. In three days, the cupbearer will get his job

back, but the baker will be executed. Both come true. Joseph asks the cupbearer to remember him and mention him to Pharaoh. But the cupbearer forgets. For two more years, Joseph waits in prison.

Think about how easy it would have been for Joseph to become bitter. He'd been betrayed by his brothers, falsely accused by his master's wife, and now forgotten by a man he'd helped. Yet when we next see him, he's still pointing people to God. Bitterness is like drinking poison and hoping the other person gets sick. Joseph chose a different path, not by pretending he wasn't hurt, but by trusting God with his story while he waited.

REAL TALK **Forgotten**

Two years. Joseph had done everything right, and he was still stuck. Maybe you know what it feels like to be forgotten, by friends, by people who promised to help, or even, it seems, by God. Joseph's story is a reminder that being forgotten by people doesn't mean being forgotten by God. Psalm 105:19 says that God's word tested Joseph until the time came. God's timing is rarely as fast as we want, but it's never late.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Dreams in the Ancient World**

In ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, people took dreams very seriously. They believed dreams could be messages from the gods, and experts wrote dream manuals that listed dream images and their meanings. One Egyptian papyrus, known as the Chester Beatty dream book, contains a long list of such interpretations. Pharaoh's magicians and wise men would have studied these manuals. That's what makes Joseph different. He doesn't use a manual or a technique. He says interpretations belong to God. In the Bible, God sometimes speaks through dreams, especially in Genesis and Daniel, and to Joseph the husband of Mary in Matthew. But Scripture also warns against people who claim to speak for God through their dreams when He hasn't spoken (Jeremiah 23:25–28). Dreams aren't a substitute for God's Word.

Then Pharaoh has two dreams. Seven fat cows come out of the Nile and are eaten by seven skinny, ugly cows. Seven healthy heads of grain are swallowed by seven thin, scorched ones. None of Pharaoh's magicians or wise men can interpret them. And suddenly the cupbearer remembers Joseph.

Joseph is rushed out of prison, shaved, given new clothes, and brought before Pharaoh, the most powerful man in the world. Pharaoh says he's heard Joseph can interpret dreams. And Joseph, who once bragged about his own dreams, answers, "It isn't in me. God will give Pharaoh an answer of peace." Prison has humbled him. He points to God, not himself.

Joseph explains that both dreams mean the same thing. Seven years of great abundance are coming, followed by seven years of severe famine. Then he gives Pharaoh a plan: find a wise man, put him in charge of collecting a fifth of the harvest during the good years, and store it for the famine. Pharaoh looks around and asks, "Can we find such a one as this, a man in whom is the Spirit of God?" And he puts Joseph in charge of all Egypt. Only Pharaoh himself is greater.

In one day, Joseph goes from prisoner to prime minister. Pharaoh gives him his signet ring, fine linen clothes (a third garment, this time given in honor), a gold chain, and a chariot. People shout "Bow the knee!" as he passes. Joseph is thirty years old. Thirteen years have passed since his brothers threw him in the pit.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Joseph's Egyptian Life**
>
> Pharaoh gives Joseph an Egyptian name, Zaphenath-Paneah, which may mean something like God speaks and he lives, and a wife named Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera, priest of On. On was the city the Greeks later called Heliopolis, city of the sun, the center of Egypt's worship of the sun god Ra, near modern Cairo. So Joseph is completely woven into Egyptian high

society, with an Egyptian name, an Egyptian wife, Egyptian clothes, and Egyptian language. And yet he remains faithful to the God of his fathers, and he gives his sons Hebrew names that praise God. Daniel would face a similar challenge in Babylon centuries later. Like Joseph, you may have to live in a culture that doesn't share your faith. You can take part in it, and even serve it well, without losing who you are.

Joseph marries an Egyptian woman named Asenath and has two sons. He names the first Manasseh, because "God has made me forget all my toil, and all my father's house." He names the second Ephraim, because "God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction." Notice that phrase: the land of my affliction. Joseph didn't pretend the pain never happened. But God made him fruitful right there, in the place that hurt.

When the seven good years come, Joseph gathers so much grain that it's like the sand of the sea, and they stop measuring because it's beyond measure. Then the famine hits, and it spreads across the whole region. All the world comes to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph. The boy his brothers tried to get rid of is now the one person who can save them, and save the world.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Joseph and Jesus**

Christians have long noticed how many ways Joseph's story points ahead to Jesus. Both were loved by their fathers. Both were rejected by their own brothers. Both were sold for pieces of silver. Both were falsely accused and suffered though they were innocent. Both were counted among criminals; Joseph was in prison with two men, one of whom was restored and one condemned, and Jesus was crucified between two criminals, one of whom was promised paradise. Both were raised from the lowest place to the highest, at the right hand of the king. Both forgave those who had wronged them, and both became the source of life and bread for the world. Genesis never says Joseph is a prophecy of Jesus, and it's important not to force every

detail. But the pattern of suffering first, then glory, which Jesus explained to His disciples in Luke 24:26, is written all over Joseph's life.

KEY VERSE

The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a prosperous man.
He was in the house of his master the Egyptian.

Genesis 39:2 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. How do you think favoritism shaped Joseph and his brothers? Where do you see jealousy causing damage today?
2. Joseph ran from temptation. What are some situations where running away is the wisest choice for you?
3. Joseph was faithful in a pit, in Potiphar's house, and in prison. What would it look like for you to be faithful where you are right now?
4. How did Joseph change between age seventeen and age thirty? What do you think God was teaching him?

TRY THIS *Joseph named his son Ephraim because God made him fruitful in the land of his affliction. Write down one hard thing you've gone through, and then write down one good thing that has grown out of it, or ask God to show you one.*

CHAPTER 9

God Meant It for Good

Genesis 42–50

The famine Joseph predicted comes, and it's severe, not only in Egypt but in Canaan too. Back home, Jacob hears there's grain in Egypt, and he sends ten of his sons to buy some. He keeps Benjamin, Rachel's only other son, at home. He's not about to lose another son of Rachel's.

The brothers arrive in Egypt and bow down before the governor, with their faces to the ground. They have no idea it's Joseph. More than twenty years have passed. He's dressed like an Egyptian, speaking Egyptian through an interpreter. But Joseph recognizes them immediately, and he remembers his dreams. The bundles of grain are bowing down.

If you count, Joseph weeps at least seven times in these chapters: when he hears his brothers admit their guilt, when he sees Benjamin, when he reveals himself, when he embraces Benjamin, when he meets his father, when his father dies, and when his brothers ask for forgiveness. The most powerful man in Egypt is also one of the most tender men in the Bible. Being strong and being able to cry aren't opposites.

Joseph could have taken revenge right then. Instead, he tests them. He accuses them of being spies, and throws them in prison for three

days. Then he lets them go home with grain, but keeps Simeon as a hostage until they bring their youngest brother back to prove they're telling the truth. And the brothers, not knowing Joseph can understand them, say to one another, "We are certainly guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us, and we wouldn't listen." Joseph turns away and weeps.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why All the Tests?**
>
> Why didn't Joseph just tell his brothers who he was right away? He may have wanted to see whether they had changed. Would they abandon another brother, Simeon in prison or Benjamin, the new favorite, the way they abandoned him? He may also have been struggling with his own feelings, wanting reconciliation but not ready to trust them yet. Forgiveness and trust aren't the same thing. You can forgive someone and still need time to see whether they've really changed. Joseph's tests gave his brothers a chance to show that they had.

At home, the brothers find that their money has been returned in their grain sacks, and they're terrified. When they tell Jacob that the governor demands to see Benjamin, Jacob refuses. Joseph is gone, Simeon is gone, and now you want to take Benjamin? But the famine gets worse. Finally Judah, the same brother who suggested selling Joseph, offers himself as a guarantee for Benjamin's safety. If he doesn't bring Benjamin back, he'll bear the blame forever. Judah is changing.

The brothers return to Egypt with Benjamin, double the money, and gifts. Joseph invites them to a feast at his house. When he sees Benjamin, his little brother, he's so overcome that he rushes out to weep in private. Then he washes his face, comes back, and seats them in birth order, to their astonishment, and gives Benjamin five times as much food as everyone else. Will they be jealous of the new

favorite? Twenty years earlier, a father's favoritism had driven them to violence. Now Joseph deliberately shows favoritism to see how they'll respond. Genesis says they drank and were merry with him. No grumbling, no plotting. Something has changed in them.

> **REAL TALK** **Has Someone Really Changed?**
>
> Maybe someone has hurt you and now says they're sorry. How do you know if they've really changed? Joseph's tests give some clues. Real change shows up over time, not just in words. It shows up when the person faces the same temptation again and chooses differently. It shows up when they take responsibility without making excuses, as the brothers did when they said they were guilty. And it shows up when they care about the people they once hurt. You don't owe anyone instant trust, especially if they hurt you badly. If you're not sure whether a relationship is safe, ask a trusted adult to help you think it through.

Then comes the final test. Joseph has his silver cup hidden in Benjamin's sack. The brothers leave, and Joseph's steward chases them down and finds the cup. Benjamin will have to stay as Joseph's slave; the rest can go home. This is the brothers' chance to do exactly what they did to Joseph: abandon Rachel's son and go home free. Instead, they all tear their clothes and go back to the city with him.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Silver Cup**
>
> Joseph's steward tells the brothers that the cup is the one his master uses for divination. In Egypt, some fortune-tellers poured water or oil into a cup and read the patterns to predict the future. Did Joseph actually practice divination? Probably not; Genesis has already shown that he gave God all the credit for interpreting dreams, and later Israel's law forbade divination (Deuteronomy 18:10). He may have simply been playing the part of an Egyptian official to keep his disguise. Either way, the cup is the bait in the final test, and the brothers pass.

Then Judah steps forward and gives the longest speech in Genesis. He tells Joseph about their father, how he lost one son he loved and how losing Benjamin would kill him. And then he makes an offer: "Now therefore, please let your servant stay instead of the boy, my lord's slave; and let the boy go up with his brothers." The man who once sold his brother into slavery now offers to become a slave so his brother can go free. Judah has completely changed.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Judah, a Picture of Christ**

Judah offering himself in Benjamin's place is one of the most moving moments in Genesis, and many Christians see it as a picture of what Jesus would do. Jesus, the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Revelation 5:5), came from Judah's family line. And like Judah, He offered Himself in place of others. But where Judah offered to become a slave, Jesus went even further: He gave His life. Genesis 49:10 also promises that a king will come from Judah, and the scepter will not depart from him. Judah's transformation shows that God can change even someone who did terrible things.

Joseph can't hold it in anymore. He sends all the Egyptians out of the room and weeps so loudly the Egyptians hear it, and so does Pharaoh's household. Then he says, in Hebrew, "I am Joseph! Does my father still live?" His brothers are speechless and terrified. The brother they sold is now the most powerful man in Egypt, and their lives are in his hands.

But Joseph says, "Come near to me, please." And then he says one of the most profound things in the Bible: "I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. Now don't be grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life." Joseph doesn't pretend what they did wasn't real. He names it: you sold me. But he sees something bigger. "So now it wasn't you who sent me here, but God."

REAL TALK **Forgiveness Isn't Pretending**

Joseph's forgiveness didn't mean pretending nothing happened. He named what his brothers did. He tested them to see if they had changed. And he didn't forgive them because they deserved it, but because he trusted that God was bigger than their evil. Forgiveness means letting go of your right to get even and leaving justice in God's hands. It doesn't mean saying abuse was okay, and it doesn't mean you have to keep trusting or spending time with someone who's still hurting you. If someone has seriously hurt you, talk with a trusted adult about how to stay safe while you work through forgiveness. It's often a long process, not a single moment.

Joseph sends his brothers home loaded with gifts and Egyptian wagons to bring Jacob and their families down to Egypt. When they tell Jacob that Joseph is alive and ruling Egypt, he doesn't believe them at first. His heart goes numb. But when he sees the wagons, his spirit revives. "Joseph my son is still alive. I will go and see him before I die."

On the way, Jacob stops at Beersheba to worship, and God speaks to him in a vision at night, the only time God speaks directly in the Joseph story. "I am God, the God of your father. Don't be afraid to go down into Egypt, for there I will make of you a great nation. I will go down with you into Egypt. I will also surely bring you up again." So seventy members of Jacob's family move to Egypt. Remember the number seventy from the Table of Nations in Genesis 10? Israel is a little picture of the whole world, being saved from famine through one man.

When Jacob arrives, Joseph rides out in his chariot to meet him, throws his arms around his father, and weeps for a long time. Jacob says that now he can die in peace, because he has seen Joseph's face. Joseph introduces his father to Pharaoh, and Jacob, a shepherd from Canaan, blesses the most powerful king on earth.

Think about that. Pharaoh had the palaces, the armies, and the gold. Jacob had a limp and a long list of regrets. But Jacob carried God's blessing, and the promise to Abraham said that through his family all nations would be blessed. Here it's happening in a small way: an old Hebrew shepherd blessing the king of Egypt, whose country had been saved through Jacob's son. Pharaoh asks how old he is, and Jacob gives a sad, honest answer: "The years of my pilgrimage are one hundred thirty years. The days of the years of my life have been few and evil." He's had a hard life, much of it his own doing.

REAL TALK **Pilgrims**

Jacob called his life a pilgrimage. Abraham called himself a stranger and a foreigner. None of the patriarchs ever owned more than a burial plot in the promised land. Hebrews 11:13 says they all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them from far away, admitting that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. Christians have always seen themselves that way too. This world is good, and we're called to love it and care for it, but it isn't yet our final home. If you sometimes feel like you don't quite fit in, like you're made for something more, you're in good company. You're a pilgrim too, on your way home.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Goshen and the Famine Policy**

Pharaoh settles Jacob's family in Goshen, fertile land in the Nile Delta, good for flocks. Meanwhile, as the famine drags on, Joseph sells grain to the Egyptians in exchange for their money, then their livestock, then their land, until most of the land belongs to Pharaoh and the people pay a fifth of their harvest. The Egyptians thank Joseph for saving their lives. Some modern readers find this troubling, since Joseph concentrated enormous power in Pharaoh's hands, and that power will later be used to enslave Israel in Exodus. Genesis doesn't say whether this policy was right or wrong. It's one of those places where it's worth thinking carefully and discussing honestly.

Before Jacob dies, he adopts Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, as his own. And once again, the younger son gets the greater blessing: Jacob crosses his arms and puts his right hand on Ephraim, the younger. Joseph tries to correct him, but Jacob knows what he's doing. Jacob, who stole a blessing by pretending in his blindness, now gives one with full knowledge in his. He blesses them in the name of "the God who has fed me all my life long to this day." The shepherd who spent his life wrestling has come to see God as his Shepherd.

Then Jacob gathers all twelve sons and speaks over each of them, a mixture of blessings and warnings that look ahead to the twelve tribes of Israel. Reuben loses his place as firstborn. Simeon and Levi are condemned for their violence at Shechem. And Judah gets the royal promise: "The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs. The obedience of the peoples will be to him." Jewish and Christian readers alike have long read this as a promise of a coming king, the Messiah. The New Testament sees it fulfilled in Jesus, the Son of David from the tribe of Judah.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Twelve Tribes at a Glance**
>
> Jacob's last words in Genesis 49 are poetry, full of puns and images, and they're not all easy to understand. Here's a quick guide. Reuben is unstable as water and loses his place as firstborn because he slept with his father's concubine. Simeon and Levi are cursed for their anger, and scattered; later Simeon was absorbed into Judah, and Levi became the priestly tribe, so even a curse was turned toward blessing. Judah is a lion, and the royal line will come from him. Zebulun will live by the sea. Issachar is a strong donkey who will work hard. Dan will provide justice, but is also pictured as a snake by the road. Gad will be attacked but will strike back. Asher will have rich food. Naphtali is a doe let loose. Joseph is a fruitful vine by a spring, blessed by the

Mighty One of Jacob. Benjamin is a wolf, fierce and strong; the apostle Paul would later come from the tribe of Benjamin (Philippians 3:5).

Jacob dies, and Joseph throws himself on his father's face and weeps.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Embalming**

Joseph orders the Egyptian physicians to embalm his father, a process Genesis says took forty days, followed by seventy days of mourning. Egyptian mummification involved removing the internal organs, drying the body with a natural salt called natron, and wrapping it in linen. It was usually reserved for royalty and the wealthy, so embalming Jacob was a huge honor. The Greek historian Herodotus, writing much later, described the process and said it took seventy days in all. Egyptians did it because they believed the body was needed in the afterlife. Jacob and Joseph were embalmed for a more practical reason: so their bodies could be carried back to the promised land. The Egyptians mourn for him seventy days, and Joseph leads a huge procession to bury Jacob in the cave of Machpelah, alongside Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, and Leah, in the land God promised.

But with their father gone, Joseph's brothers get scared. "It may be that Joseph will hate us, and will fully pay us back for all the evil which we did to him." They send a message claiming that Jacob had asked Joseph to forgive them, and then they come and throw themselves down before him and offer to be his slaves. And Joseph weeps again.

Then Joseph says the words that sum up the whole book of Genesis: "Don't be afraid, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to save many people alive." Joseph doesn't call evil good. What they did was evil. But God is so powerful and so good that He can take even the worst things people do and weave them into His plan to save. Then Joseph comforts them and speaks kindly to them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Where Was God in Joseph's Story?**

As we noticed earlier, God never appears to Joseph in a vision or speaks to him out loud. There are no burning bushes or wrestling matches. And yet Joseph sees God's hand in everything. Theologians call this providence: God's quiet, constant care and guidance of everything that happens, working through ordinary events, human choices, and even human sins, without being the author of evil. Most of your life will probably look more like Joseph's than like Moses' at the burning bush. You may never hear God's voice out loud. But you can look back, like Joseph did, and see His fingerprints. Keeping a journal of answered prayers and unexpected turns can help you notice them.

REAL TALK **Does Everything Happen for a Reason?**

People sometimes say everything happens for a reason in a way that can sound cold, especially to someone who's hurting. Joseph's words are different. He doesn't say the evil was good, or that his suffering didn't matter. He says God was at work even through it. Romans 8:28 says, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God." That doesn't mean everything that happens is good. It means God can bring good out of anything, and that He'll have the last word. It's okay to grieve and be angry about what's happened to you. And it's okay to hope that God isn't done yet.

Joseph lives to see his great-grandchildren. Before he dies, he makes his brothers promise something: "God will surely visit you, and bring you up out of this land to the land which he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." And he makes them swear to carry his bones back to Canaan when that day comes. Hebrews 11:22 lists this as an act of faith. Joseph had all the power and wealth Egypt could offer, but his heart was in the promise.

BACKGROUND CHECK **From Genesis to Exodus**

Genesis ends with seventy people in Egypt, honored guests of Pharaoh. Exodus begins centuries later with a huge nation, now enslaved by a new king who didn't know Joseph. But the promises of Genesis are still at work. God

told Abraham that his descendants would be foreigners and slaves for four hundred years, and that afterward He would judge the nation they served and bring them out with great possessions (Genesis 15:13–14). That's exactly the story of Exodus. God told Abraham his descendants would be as many as the stars, and Exodus 1:7 says the Israelites multiplied and grew exceedingly mighty. God promised to give them the land, and Exodus is the start of the journey home. If Genesis is the book of promises, Exodus is where God starts keeping them in a big way.

REAL TALK **Grief in Genesis**

Genesis is full of funerals. Abraham weeps for Sarah. Jacob mourns Rachel on the road to Bethlehem. Jacob refuses to be comforted for Joseph. Joseph throws himself on his dead father and weeps, and a whole nation mourns for seventy days. People of faith in Genesis don't pretend death doesn't hurt. They cry, sometimes loudly, and the Bible honors their tears. If you've lost someone you love, a grandparent, a friend, a pet, or a parent, it's okay to grieve hard and for a long time. Jesus Himself wept at His friend's tomb (John 11:35). If grief feels too heavy, or it's not getting any lighter, talk to a parent, pastor, school counselor, or other trusted adult. You don't have to grieve alone.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Genesis in One Breath**

Here's the whole book in a few sentences. God made a good world and made people in His image to live with Him and care for it. People chose to trust a lie instead of God, and sin and death spread, through murder, violence, the flood, and Babel. But God didn't give up. He chose one family, Abraham's, and promised to bless the whole world through them. Through barren wives, scheming brothers, a stolen blessing, a wrestling match, a pit, and a prison, God kept His promise. Genesis ends with that family alive but far from home, waiting. The rest of the Bible tells how God brings them home, and how, through Abraham's offspring, Jesus, He opens the way home for everyone.

The very last verse of Genesis says, "So Joseph died, being one hundred ten years old, and they embalmed him, and he was put in a

coffin in Egypt." The book that began with God creating life in a garden ends with a coffin in a foreign land. It's a cliffhanger. Will God keep His promise? Will Abraham's family ever go home? Hundreds of years later, in Exodus 13:19, Moses carries Joseph's bones out of Egypt. God keeps His promises. He always does.

REAL TALK **You Can Change**

Judah's story might be the most hopeful one in Genesis. He came up with the idea of selling his brother. He broke his promise to Tamar and was ready to have her killed. And yet by the end, he's the brother who offers his own life for Benjamin, and he receives the royal blessing. People can change. That includes people who've done really wrong things, and it includes you. Your worst moment doesn't have to be the end of your story. God specializes in rewriting stories, and the family line of Jesus runs straight through people like Judah, Tamar, and Jacob. If you've done something you're deeply ashamed of, talk to God, talk to a trusted adult, and take the next right step. God isn't finished with you.

KEY VERSE

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to save many people alive, as is happening today.

Genesis 50:20 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Joseph tested his brothers before revealing who he was? Was that fair?
2. Judah went from selling his brother to offering himself in his brother's place. What do you think changed him?
3. How is forgiveness different from pretending something didn't happen? How is it different from trusting someone again?
4. Think of something hard in your life. How might Genesis 50:20 change the way you see it, even if you can't see the good yet?

TRY THIS *Read Genesis 45 and Genesis 50:15–21 slowly. Then write a short letter to God about someone who has hurt you, telling Him honestly how you feel and asking Him to help you begin to forgive. You don't have to send it to anyone else.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

Genesis begins with a garden and ends with a coffin in Egypt. Joseph dies, and his body is placed in a coffin, waiting. The promises God made are still open. Someone from the woman's offspring will crush the serpent (3:15). Through Abraham's family, every people on earth will be blessed (12:3). A ruler will come from Judah (49:10). Genesis leaves you asking: who? when? how?

Jewish readers have long read these promises as God's commitment to Israel, and many have looked for a future Messiah in them, in a variety of ways. The New Testament writers, who were Jewish themselves, believed the answer had arrived. Paul says that when God promised Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him, He was announcing the gospel in advance (Galatians 3:8). John begins his Gospel with In the beginning, and says that all things were made through Jesus (John 1:1–3). Paul calls Jesus a second Adam, who undid what the first Adam did (Romans 5:12–19). And Christians have seen in Isaac carrying the wood up the mountain, and in Joseph, rejected by his brothers and raised up to save lives, pictures of what Jesus would do.

Here's what the Bible says about where that story leads, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, in His image, and He loves you more than you can imagine. He wants you to know Him.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We've all turned away.

Ever since the garden, we've all gone our own way instead of God's, just like Adam and Eve. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus came for you.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again. God didn't wait for us to love Him first.

> *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus, the way Abraham trusted God's promise.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. Thank You for loving me first. Thank You that Jesus died for me and rose again. I believe You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me and make me clean. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Thank You for making me in Your image. Help me trust Your promises, even when they seem impossible, like Abraham did. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Genesis straight through, a few chapters a day. Then read Exodus, where Joseph's family becomes a nation and God rescues them from slavery.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Remember who made you. Genesis says you're made in God's image. Start each day by thanking Him for that, and treat others as people who bear His image too.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Genesis was written so that every generation could know where they came from and who God is. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Genesis is right, you're not an accident. You were made on purpose, by a God who keeps His promises.

> *We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose.*
>
> **Romans 8:28 (WEB)**

THE BOOK OF EXODUS

The King Who Breaks Chains

Exodus, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Who Breaks Chains: The Book of Exodus, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the WEB. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You know the saying by now: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” Exodus is another book people think they already know. A baby in a basket, a burning bush, frogs everywhere, a sea that splits in half, and an old man coming down a mountain with two stone tablets. Maybe you’ve seen the movies. Maybe you’ve seen the memes.

But Exodus is so much more than a Sunday school story. It’s the story of a nation of slaves and a God who hears them. It’s about a superpower that thinks it can own people, and a God who proves it can’t. It’s about freedom, and about what freedom is for. It asks huge questions. Who is God, really? What’s His name? Can He be trusted when life is brutal? And how can a holy God live with people who keep messing up?

Exodus is also the story the rest of the Bible keeps coming back to. The prophets retell it. The psalms sing it. Jewish families still celebrate it every year at Passover. And when Jesus sat down for His last supper with His friends, He was celebrating the exodus, and He gave it a whole new meaning.

Genesis ended with a coffin in Egypt and a promise that God would bring His people home. Exodus is where God starts keeping that promise in a big way. So grab your sandals and your staff. It’s time to get out of Egypt.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Exodus in nine chapters: Israel enslaved and Moses' birth (Exodus 1–2), the burning bush (3–4), the plagues (5–10), Passover (11–13), the crossing of the sea (14–15), manna and the wilderness (16–18), Mount Sinai and the Ten Commandments (19–20), the laws and the plans for the tabernacle (21–31), and the golden calf and God's glory (32–40). The law and tabernacle chapters are summarized more briefly than the story chapters, so you can see the big picture without getting lost in the details.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what kind of book Exodus is, where it fits, and the world it came from. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as what it means that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, where the sea crossing happened, and when the exodus took place, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. Exodus also tells some painful stories of oppression and violence. When it does, you'll find a box with a safety note. This book quotes Exodus in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Read each section of Exodus first, then the chapter here. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the second book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Exodus raises questions teens will ask, and some they'll hear from skeptical friends. I've presented the main Christian views fairly, without endorsing one, on the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, the location of the sea crossing (the Red Sea or the Sea of Reeds), and the date of the exodus (the early date of about 1446 BC and the late date in the 1200s BC), and I've noted that some scholars doubt the story can be confirmed historically at all. I'd encourage you to share your own church's view with your teen, and to explain why other Christians see it differently.

Exodus contains hard material: slavery and forced labor, an order to kill newborn boys, the death of Egypt's firstborn, and violence after the golden calf. These are handled carefully and age-appropriately, without graphic detail. Where it's relevant, a safety box tells readers that abuse and exploitation are always wrong, that it is never the victim's fault, and that they should tell a trusted adult; the boxes on

slavery and oppression include the National Human Trafficking Hotline.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how the New Testament sees Exodus fulfilled in Jesus, the Passover Lamb, the true bread from heaven, and the Word who "lived among us," while acknowledging that Jewish readers celebrate and read the exodus in their own rich ways. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will meet in Exodus a God who hears the cry of the oppressed, who sets captives free, and who wants to live among His people.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

The Way Out

The name Exodus comes from a Greek word meaning a way out or a departure. In Hebrew, the book is called Shemot, which means names, from its first line: These are the names of the sons of Israel. Both titles fit. Exodus is about a people with names, not just numbers, and about the way out God makes for them.

Part Two of the Torah

Exodus is the second of the five books of Moses, the Torah. It picks up where Genesis left off. Genesis ended with Jacob's family, about seventy people, living in Egypt as honored guests. Exodus opens centuries later, when that family has become a huge nation, and the guests have become slaves. Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy continue the story as Israel travels through the wilderness toward the promised land.

Three Big Movements

Exodus has three main parts. In chapters 1–15, God rescues Israel from slavery in Egypt. In chapters 16–24, God leads them through the wilderness to Mount Sinai and makes a covenant with them. In chapters 25–40, God gives instructions for the tabernacle, His tent, and comes to live among them. You could sum it up in three words: rescue, relationship, residence. God saves His people, binds Himself to them, and moves in.

Who Wrote Exodus?

Like Genesis, Exodus doesn't name its author in a title line, but it does say that Moses wrote down certain things God said (Exodus 17:14; 24:4; 34:27). Jewish and Christian tradition has long held that Moses wrote the Torah, and Jesus refers to "the book of Moses" (Mark 12:26). Many scholars, following the documentary hypothesis or newer theories, believe the books were assembled from several sources over a long period. Others hold that Moses is the main author, with later editing. Christians with different views agree that Exodus is God's Word.

The World It Came From

Egypt in the second millennium BC was the greatest superpower on earth, with pyramids already a thousand years old, a god-king called Pharaoh, a huge army with chariots, and armies of workers who built cities and temples. Egyptians worshiped many gods: the sun god Ra, the Nile god Hapi, the cow goddess Hathor, and others. Pharaoh himself was considered divine. That's the backdrop for Exodus. The question isn't just whether Israel will be free. It's who the real God is.

When Did It Happen?

Christians and scholars disagree about the date. One view, the early date, uses 1 Kings 6:1, which says Solomon began building the temple 480 years after the exodus, and places the exodus around 1446 BC. Another view, the late date, points to the city of Raamses that the Israelites built (Exodus 1:11), named after a family of pharaohs who ruled in the 1200s BC, and takes the 480 years as a symbolic number (twelve generations of forty years), placing the exodus around 1260 BC. A stone inscription from Pharaoh

Merneptah, from about 1208 BC, mentions a people called Israel already living in Canaan. Some scholars think the story can't be confirmed historically at all, since no Egyptian record mentions it; others reply that Egypt rarely recorded its defeats, and that a desert journey leaves little for archaeologists to find. Faithful Christians hold different views on the date.

The Name

In Exodus, God reveals His personal name to Moses. In Hebrew it's four letters, YHWH, probably pronounced something like Yahweh. Out of reverence, Jewish readers stopped saying the name aloud and said Adonai, which means Lord, instead. Most English Bibles, including the one quoted in this book, follow that tradition by printing the name as LORD, in small capital letters. So whenever you see LORD in small caps, you're looking at God's personal name. When you see Lord with lowercase letters, it's the ordinary word for master.

Hard Stories and Safety Notes

Exodus begins with slavery and an order to kill babies, and it includes plagues, death, and war. Including a story in the Bible doesn't mean God approves of everything in it. When we come to these stories, you'll find a safety box. Here's what they all say: oppression and abuse are always wrong, it's never the victim's fault, and if something like it is happening to you or a friend, tell a trusted adult. In the United States you can call or text the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888, or call 911 in an emergency.

Rescued for a Reason

Exodus isn't just about getting out of something. It's about being brought into something. God doesn't just free Israel from Pharaoh; He frees them so they can know Him and serve Him. The same Hebrew word can mean both to serve and to worship. Israel trades slavery to a cruel king for service to a good one. That's one of the big ideas of Exodus, and of the whole Bible: true freedom isn't having no master. It's belonging to the right one.

The Map

Chapter 1 (Exodus 1–2): Slaves in Egypt and a baby in a basket.

Chapter 2 (Exodus 3–4): The burning bush and the name of God.

Chapter 3 (Exodus 5–10): The plagues and Pharaoh's hard heart.

Chapter 4 (Exodus 11–13): Passover.

Chapter 5 (Exodus 14–15): Through the sea.

Chapter 6 (Exodus 16–18): Manna, water, and the wilderness.

Chapter 7 (Exodus 19–20): Sinai and the Ten Commandments.

Chapter 8 (Exodus 21–31): The laws and the tabernacle plans.

Chapter 9 (Exodus 32–40): The golden calf and the glory of God.

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CHAPTER 1

Born Under Pharaoh

Exodus 1–2

Exodus opens with a list of names: the sons of Jacob who came down to Egypt with their families, seventy people in all. Then Joseph dies, his brothers die, and that whole generation dies. But the family doesn't disappear. "The children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and grew exceedingly mighty; and the land was filled with them." If that sounds familiar, it should. It's the language of Genesis 1, when God told humans to be fruitful and multiply. God's promise to Abraham, that his descendants would be as many as the stars, is coming true, even in a foreign land.

Then comes one of the most ominous sentences in the Bible: "Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who didn't know Joseph." Joseph had saved Egypt from famine. But history has a short memory. This new Pharaoh doesn't care what an Israelite did hundreds of years ago. All he sees is a huge foreign population, and it scares him. What if they join Egypt's enemies in a war? So he decides to deal with them shrewdly.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Which Pharaoh?**
>
> Exodus never tells us the name of the Pharaoh who enslaved Israel, or the one Moses confronted. That may be on purpose. In Egypt, Pharaoh's name was everything; inscriptions celebrated it on temples and monuments. In Exodus,

the midwives get names (Shiphrah and Puah), but the most powerful man on earth doesn't. Scholars who hold the late date for the exodus often suggest Seti I as the oppressor and Ramesses II, the most famous of all the pharaohs, as the Pharaoh of the exodus. Those who hold the early date often suggest Thutmose III and Amenhotep II. Either way, Exodus makes a point: God knows the names of slaves. The great king is just Pharaoh.

Pharaoh's plan starts with forced labor. He puts slave masters over the Israelites to crush them with heavy work, and they build storage cities for Pharaoh, Pithom and Raamses. Egyptian art from this era actually shows foreign workers making mud bricks under the eye of overseers with sticks.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Semites in Egypt**

Archaeologists digging at Tell el-Dab'a in the eastern Nile Delta, the site of the ancient city of Avaris, have found evidence of a large population of Semitic people, people from Canaan and Syria, living there in the second millennium BC, with Canaanite-style houses, pottery, and burials. Later, Pharaoh Ramesses II built a great new capital nearby called Pi-Ramesses, the house of Ramesses. An Egyptian document called Papyrus Leiden 348 even mentions Apiru people hauling stones for one of Ramesses' building projects. None of this proves the exodus happened as Exodus describes. But it shows that the world of Exodus 1, with foreigners living in the Delta and forced into royal building projects, fits what we know of ancient Egypt. But the plan backfires. "The more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and the more they spread out." So Pharaoh makes it even worse. The Egyptians make their lives bitter with hard labor in brick and mortar and in the fields, and they work them ruthlessly.

SAFETY NOTE **Slavery and Forced Labor**

Slavery isn't just ancient history. Today, millions of people around the world, including in the United States, are trapped in forced labor or sex trafficking. Traffickers often target teenagers, sometimes through social media, fake job offers, or someone pretending to be a boyfriend or girlfriend who then

controls them. Warning signs include someone who takes your ID or phone, controls where you go, makes you work to pay off a debt, or pressures you into sexual acts for money or a place to stay. If anything like this is happening to you or someone you know, it is not your fault. Tell a trusted adult right away. In the United States you can call the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888 or text 233733, any time. In an emergency, call 911.

When forced labor doesn't stop the Israelites from growing, Pharaoh moves to something far worse. He calls in two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, and orders them to kill every baby boy born to a Hebrew woman, while letting the girls live. It's genocide, an attempt to wipe out a people. And it's aimed at the most defenseless people there are.

But the midwives have a problem with that. "The midwives feared God, and didn't do what the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the baby boys alive." When Pharaoh calls them in to explain, they tell him the Hebrew women are so strong and lively that they give birth before the midwives can get there. Did they bend the truth? Probably. But God blessed them for protecting the babies, and gave them families of their own. Two women with no political power defied the most powerful man on earth, and God honored them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Brave Women of Exodus**

Count the heroes in Exodus 1–2, and you'll notice almost all of them are women. Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives, refuse to kill the babies. Jochebed, Moses' mother, hides her son and then builds the basket. Miriam, his sister, watches over him and comes up with a brilliant plan. Pharaoh's daughter rescues a Hebrew baby in defiance of her own father. And later, Zipporah, Moses' wife, saves his life. Pharaoh was afraid of Hebrew men, so he let the girls live. He never imagined the women would be the ones to bring down his plan. God loves to use the people the powerful overlook.

REAL TALK **When Authorities Command Evil**

The Bible generally tells people to respect and obey those in authority (Romans 13:1). But the midwives show that there's a limit. When a ruler commands you to do something clearly evil, like harming innocent people, you must obey God rather than people (Acts 5:29). This has inspired believers through history, from Christians who refused to worship the Roman emperor to people who hid Jews from the Nazis, like Corrie ten Boom's family in the Netherlands. Most of the time, for you, obeying parents, teachers, and laws is the right thing. But if anyone, even an adult in authority, tells you to hurt someone, lie to cover up abuse, or do something seriously wrong, you don't have to go along. Talk to another trusted adult about it.

Finally Pharaoh drops the pretense. He commands all his people: "You shall cast every son who is born into the river." The Nile, the river that gave Egypt life, is turned into a weapon of death.

SAFETY NOTE **When Children Are Harmed**

Pharaoh's command to kill baby boys is one of the darkest moments in the Bible. Sadly, children are still harmed by adults today, sometimes by people who are supposed to protect them. If you or someone you know is being hurt, threatened, or neglected by an adult, it is never the child's fault, and it should never be kept secret. Tell a trusted adult, like a teacher, school counselor, pastor, or relative. In the United States you can also call or text the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453. God cares deeply about children; Jesus said, Let the little children come to Me (Matthew 19:14).

Into this nightmare, a baby is born. A man and a woman from the tribe of Levi have a son. (Later we learn their names: Amram and Jochebed.) "When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him three months." Hebrews 11:23 says they did it by faith, and weren't afraid of the king's command. But you can only hide a baby for so long. So his mother takes a basket made of papyrus reeds, coats it with tar and pitch to make it waterproof, puts her son inside, and

sets it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. His older sister, Miriam, stands at a distance to see what will happen.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Little Ark**
>
> The Hebrew word for Moses' basket is tevah. It appears only one other place in the Bible: Noah's ark. That's no accident. Just as God saved Noah and his family through the waters of the flood in an ark sealed with pitch, He saves baby Moses through the waters of the Nile in a tiny ark sealed with pitch. The water that was supposed to kill Hebrew boys becomes the place where God rescues the one who will lead them all to freedom.

Then the most unlikely person comes down to the river to bathe: Pharaoh's daughter. She sees the basket, opens it, and the baby is crying. "She had compassion on him, and said, 'This is one of the Hebrews' children.'" She knows exactly whose child this is, and she knows her father's command. But she has pity on him anyway. Then Miriam, thinking fast, runs up and asks if she should go find a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby. The princess says yes, and Miriam brings... the baby's own mother. Pharaoh's daughter even pays her to nurse her own son. You can't make this up. Pharaoh tried to kill Hebrew babies; now his own daughter is paying a Hebrew mother to raise one, in safety.

When the boy is older, his mother brings him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he becomes her son. She names him Moses, saying, "Because I drew him out of the water." The name sounds like the Hebrew word for draw out, and it may also be related to an Egyptian word meaning born of or son, found in pharaohs' names like Thutmose and Ramesses. Either way, the name is a prophecy. The one drawn out of the water will one day draw his people out through the water.

REAL TALK **Adoption**

Moses was raised by an adoptive mother, Pharaoh's daughter, while his birth mother nursed him. He had two mothers, two names, maybe two languages. If you're adopted or in foster care, you might relate to Moses more than most people. His story shows that God works through adoptive families, and that your story matters to Him from the very beginning. The Bible even uses adoption to describe what God does for everyone who trusts Jesus: He adopts us as His own children (Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:5). Being adopted isn't second-best in God's eyes. It's how He builds His whole family. If you have big questions about your story, it's okay to ask them, and to talk with a trusted adult or counselor.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Raised in the Palace**

Stephen says in Acts 7:22, "Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians." Growing up in Pharaoh's household, Moses probably learned to read and write hieroglyphics, studied mathematics, law, and literature, and maybe learned military skills. Egyptian royal households did raise children of foreign nobility, so a Hebrew boy in the palace isn't as strange as it might sound. God was preparing Moses for a job no one else could do. Someday he would need to stand before Pharaoh, write down God's law, and lead a nation. Nothing in your life, even the parts that don't make sense yet, is wasted in God's hands.

Moses grows up. One day he goes out to see his own people, the Hebrews, and watches them at their hard labor. Then he sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, "one of his brothers." Moses looks this way and that way, sees no one, kills the Egyptian, and hides the body in the sand. It's a shocking scene. Moses' heart for justice is real, but his method is violent and secret.

SAFETY NOTE **Anger and Violence**

Moses saw a real injustice, and he was right to be angry about it. But he responded by killing a man and hiding the body. Wanting justice is good; taking violent revenge into your own hands is not. If you see someone being

> bullied or hurt, the best thing you can usually do is speak up, get help from a trusted adult, or call 911 if someone's in danger. And if you ever feel so angry that you're afraid of what you might do, talk to a counselor or trusted adult before you act.

The next day, Moses sees two Hebrews fighting, and he asks the one in the wrong why he's hitting his fellow Hebrew. The man snaps back: "Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you plan to kill me, as you killed the Egyptian?" Moses is afraid. His secret is out. When Pharaoh hears about it, he tries to kill Moses, and Moses runs for his life to the land of Midian, in the desert east of Egypt. Acts 7:25 says Moses thought his people would understand that God was using him to rescue them, but they didn't. He tried to save them his own way, and it failed.

The New Testament gives Moses' choice a deeper meaning. Hebrews 11:24–26 says that by faith Moses, when he grew up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, "choosing rather to share ill treatment with God's people than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a time." He gave up the treasures of Egypt because he was looking ahead to a greater reward. Moses' method was wrong, but his choice to stand with the oppressed instead of enjoying privilege was an act of faith. It cost him everything he had.

In Midian, Moses sits down by a well, and history repeats itself. (Remember how Isaac's wife and Jacob's wife were both found at wells?) Seven daughters of a priest of Midian come to water their father's flock, and some shepherds drive them away. Moses stands up and rescues them, and waters their flock. Their father, Reuel, also called Jethro, invites Moses to dinner, and Moses ends up marrying one of the daughters, Zipporah. They have a son, and Moses names him Gershom, saying, "I have lived as a foreigner in a

foreign land." The prince of Egypt is now a shepherd in the desert. He'll stay there for forty years.

It's worth pausing on how far Moses has fallen. He grew up in the most powerful household on earth, with servants, the best education, and every comfort. Now he's a fugitive, living in a tent, taking care of someone else's sheep. Egyptians actually looked down on shepherds (Genesis 46:34). Moses has gone from the top of society to the bottom. But that's exactly where God will meet him.

> **REAL TALK** **Wilderness Years**
>
> Moses spent forty years in the palace thinking he was somebody, then forty years in the desert learning he was nobody, and then forty years learning what God can do with somebody who knows he's nobody. (That's an old saying, not a Bible verse, but it fits.) Maybe you're in a season that feels like the desert, where nothing exciting is happening and you feel forgotten. Moses' wilderness years weren't wasted. He learned humility, patience, and how to survive in the very desert he'd one day lead his people through. God often prepares people in hidden places before He uses them in public ones.

Meanwhile, back in Egypt, the king dies, but nothing changes for the Israelites. They groan under their slavery and cry out, and their cry for help goes up to God. And then come four short sentences that change everything. God heard their groaning. God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. "God saw the children of Israel, and God understood." God hears. God remembers. God sees. God knows.

> **REAL TALK** **Your Family Story**
>
> Moses grew up between two worlds: born a Hebrew slave, raised an Egyptian prince, living as a Midianite shepherd. He named his son Gershom because he felt like a foreigner. Maybe you know what that's like. Maybe you're adopted, or your parents are divorced and you move between two homes, or your family immigrated and you feel caught between two cultures. Moses'

complicated story didn't disqualify him from God's plan; it prepared him for it. He could speak to Pharaoh because he knew the palace. He could lead people through the desert because he'd lived there. God can use every part of your story, including the parts that feel confusing or painful. If parts of your story are really heavy, find a trusted adult to talk them through with. The people may have thought God had forgotten them. He hadn't. He was about to act.

REAL TALK **When God Seems Silent**

Israel spent generations in slavery, and for most of that time there's no record of God speaking. No visions, no prophets, no miracles. It must have felt like God had forgotten them. Maybe you've felt that way too, praying for something for a long time with no answer. Exodus 2 doesn't explain why God waited so long. But it does say He was listening the whole time, and that He remembered His promises. God's silence isn't the same as God's absence. Keep crying out to Him. And if your situation is unsafe or overwhelming, don't wait silently; tell a trusted adult.

KEY VERSE

God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.

Exodus 2:24 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Pharaoh forgot what Joseph had done for Egypt. Why do you think people and nations forget the good things others have done for them?
2. The midwives disobeyed Pharaoh because they feared God. Can you think of a time when doing the right thing meant disobeying someone in authority?
3. Moses tried to rescue his people his own way, and it went badly. Why do you think God made him wait forty years?
4. Exodus 2:23–25 says God heard, remembered, saw, and knew. Which of those do you most need to remember about God right now?

TRY THIS *Look up the National Human Trafficking Hotline's list of warning signs online, together with a parent or youth leader, so you know what to watch for. Then pray for people who are enslaved today, the way Israel was in Egypt.*

CHAPTER 2

The Bush That Wouldn't Burn Up

Exodus 3–4

Forty years have passed. Moses is eighty years old, tending his father-in-law's sheep in the wilderness. One day he leads the flock far into the desert and comes to Horeb, "God's mountain," also called Sinai. He doesn't know it yet, but he's about to stand on the most important ground of his life.

"The LORD's angel appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the middle of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed." A bush catching fire in the desert heat wasn't so unusual. But this one keeps burning without burning up. Moses is curious. "I will go now, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burned."

When God sees that Moses has turned aside to look, He calls to him from the bush: "Moses! Moses!" And Moses answers, "Here I am." Then God says, "Don't come close. Take off your sandals, for the place you are standing on is holy ground." The ground isn't holy because of the dirt. It's holy because God is there. Then God introduces Himself: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And "Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Fire in the Bible**

Fire is one of the Bible's favorite ways of showing God's presence. God passed between the pieces of Abraham's sacrifice as a smoking furnace and a flaming torch. He'll lead Israel through the wilderness in a pillar of fire. He'll come down on Mount Sinai in fire. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit will come as tongues of fire. Fire is beautiful, warm, and bright, but also dangerous and powerful. You can't control it or tame it. That's a pretty good picture of God. Hebrews 12:29 says our God is a consuming fire. And yet at the bush, the fire doesn't destroy. Many readers have seen the burning bush as a picture of Israel, suffering in Egypt but not consumed, because God was in the middle of it.

Then God tells Moses why He's come. "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows." God isn't distant or unaware. He sees, He hears, He knows. And He's not just sympathetic. "I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey."

And then comes the twist. "Come now therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh." God is going to rescue His people, and He's going to use Moses to do it.

Moses' response is the first of five objections. "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh?" Forty years earlier, Moses thought he was the man to save Israel. Now he can't imagine it. God's answer is beautiful. He doesn't tell Moses how great he is. He tells Moses who will be with him: "Certainly I will be with you." The question isn't who Moses is. It's who God is.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Where Is Mount Sinai?**

Nobody knows for sure where Mount Sinai is. The traditional location is Jebel Musa (Mountain of Moses) in the southern Sinai Peninsula, where St.

Catherine's Monastery has stood since the sixth century AD; some monks there even point out a bush they say descends from the burning bush. Other scholars suggest mountains in the northern Sinai, closer to Egypt and Canaan. Still others point to Saudi Arabia, since the Bible places Midian east of the Gulf of Aqaba, and Paul mentions "Mount Sinai in Arabia" (Galatians 4:25), though Arabia in Paul's day could include the Sinai Peninsula. Like the location of the sea crossing, the location of the mountain is debated. What matters most is what happened there.

REAL TALK **Who Am I?**

Maybe you've felt like Moses. Who am I to lead this group? Who am I to tell my friends about Jesus? Who am I to stand up for someone who's being bullied? Notice that God never argues with Moses about his weaknesses. He just promises His presence. That's the same promise Jesus gave His followers when He sent them out: I am with you always (Matthew 28:20). You don't have to be impressive. You have to be willing, and you have to trust the One who goes with you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Holy Ground**

Why did Moses have to take off his sandals? In the ancient Near East, removing your shoes was a sign of respect and humility, the way a servant would go barefoot before a master. Priests in Israel's tabernacle seem to have served barefoot too. Even today, people remove their shoes before entering mosques, many Hindu and Buddhist temples, and some homes. Taking off your sandals means: this place is different, and I'm not in charge here. Worship begins with recognizing that God is holy and we are not. You don't need to go barefoot at church, but you might ask: do I come to God with any sense of awe?

Moses' second objection is a big one. If the Israelites ask, "What is his name?" what should I tell them? In the ancient world, a name wasn't just a label. It told you something about who a person was. Egyptians had hundreds of gods with hundreds of names. Which god are you talking about, Moses?

And God answers with the most mysterious and important name in the Bible. "God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM,'" and told him to tell the Israelites, "I AM has sent me to you." Then God adds that He is the LORD, the God of their fathers, and "This is my name forever, and this is my memorial to all generations."

BACKGROUND CHECK **I AM WHO I AM**

What does I AM WHO I AM mean? The Hebrew phrase is ehyeh asher ehyeh, and it can also be translated I will be what I will be. Readers have found several layers of meaning in it. God simply is; He depends on nothing and no one, and He has always existed. God is faithful; He will be who He has always been, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And God is free; He can't be controlled or boxed in by a name the way people thought they could control their idols. God's personal name, YHWH, sounds like the Hebrew verb to be, and it's connected to I AM. It appears about 6,800 times in the Old Testament.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Bibles Print LORD**

Look at almost any English Bible, and you'll see the word LORD printed in small capital letters thousands of times. That's not a typo. It stands for God's personal name, YHWH. Hebrew was originally written without vowels, so we're not completely sure how the name was pronounced; most scholars think it was something like Yahweh. Over time, out of deep reverence and a desire not to misuse God's name (one of the Ten Commandments), Jewish readers stopped saying it aloud and said Adonai, which means my Lord, instead. Ancient Greek translations used kyrios, Lord, and most English Bibles have followed that tradition, using small caps to show that the Hebrew has God's name. When you see Lord GOD, with GOD in small caps, the Hebrew says Adonai YHWH. The older English form Jehovah came from combining the consonants of YHWH with the vowels of Adonai. So when you read LORD, remember: it's not a title. It's a name. God has told us who He is.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jesus and I AM**

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says I am again and again: I am the bread of life, the light of the world, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the

way and the truth and the life. And once He says something even bolder: "Most certainly, I tell you, before Abraham came into existence, I AM." His listeners immediately picked up stones to kill Him (John 8:58–59). They knew exactly what He was claiming. He was taking the name God gave Moses at the burning bush.

Moses' third objection: what if they don't believe me? So God gives Moses three signs. "What is that in your hand?" Moses says, "A rod." Just a shepherd's staff. God tells him to throw it down, and it becomes a snake; when Moses grabs it by the tail, it turns back into a staff. In Egypt, the cobra was a symbol of Pharaoh's power, worn on his crown. God is showing Moses that Pharaoh's power is in His hands. The second sign: Moses puts his hand inside his cloak, and it comes out diseased with a skin condition; he puts it back, and it's healed. The third: water from the Nile will turn to blood. God is about to use ordinary things, a stick, a hand, some water, to show His power.

REAL TALK **What's in Your Hand?**

When Moses said he couldn't do what God asked, God asked him a simple question: what's that in your hand? It was just a shepherd's staff, something Moses used every day. But in God's hands, that ordinary stick would turn into a snake, split the sea, and bring water from a rock. You may think you don't have much to offer God. But what's in your hand? Maybe it's a talent for music, a knack for making people laugh, a skill with computers, a kind heart, or simply time. God doesn't need you to have something impressive. He needs you to put what you have in His hands.

REAL TALK **Signs and Proof**

God gave Moses miraculous signs so people would believe. Sometimes we wish God would do the same for us: if He'd just show me a sign, I'd believe. But notice how the story goes. Pharaoh saw sign after sign and only got harder. The Israelites saw the sea split and were complaining three days later.

> Signs can point to God, but they can't force anyone to trust Him. Jesus once said that people who won't listen to Moses and the prophets won't be convinced even if someone rises from the dead (Luke 16:31). If you're looking for evidence for God, it's a great question to pursue; there's a lot to explore, from history to the resurrection to the experience of believers. But faith in the end isn't just about proof. It's about trust in a Person.

Moses' fourth objection: "I am not eloquent." I'm slow of speech and tongue. Some think Moses had a speech problem; others think he'd just been out of practice with Egyptian for forty years. God answers with a question: "Who made man's mouth?" God made Moses' mouth, and He'll help him speak.

And then Moses' fifth objection, which isn't really an objection at all. It's just the truth: "Oh, Lord, please send someone else." Moses doesn't want to go. And God's anger burns against him. But even then, God doesn't give up on Moses. Notice that God was already a step ahead. Aaron was on his way to meet Moses before Moses ever objected. God had a plan for Moses' weakness before Moses even admitted it. He sends Moses' brother Aaron to be his spokesman, and Aaron is already on his way to meet him.

> **REAL TALK** **Please Send Someone Else**
>
> It's comforting that Moses, one of the greatest leaders in history, tried five different ways to get out of what God asked him to do. Most of us have felt that way. But notice the difference between Moses' honest questions and his final refusal. God patiently answered every question. It was only when Moses said, basically, I don't want to, that God got angry. It's okay to have questions and fears. Bring them to God. But don't let them become excuses for saying no to Him.

Moses asks Jethro for permission to go back to Egypt, and he sets off with his wife and sons, carrying "God's rod" in his hand. God tells

him to say to Pharaoh, Israel is my firstborn son. Let my son go, so he may worship Me. If you refuse, I will kill your firstborn son. That's a preview of the final plague. Pharaoh had been killing Israel's sons. Now God is calling Israel His son, and He'll protect His son.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Strangest Story in Exodus**

On the way to Egypt, there's a short, puzzling scene. "The LORD met Moses and wanted to kill him." Zipporah, Moses' wife, quickly circumcises their son, touches Moses' feet with the foreskin, and God lets Moses go. What's going on? Most readers think Moses had failed to circumcise his son, neglecting the sign of the covenant God made with Abraham. The leader of God's covenant people couldn't ignore the covenant in his own family. Some think the attack was on Moses' son, not Moses. Scholars admit the passage is one of the hardest in the Bible to understand. What's clear is that Zipporah saves the day, and that God takes His covenant seriously.

Aaron meets Moses at the mountain of God, and together they go to Egypt. They gather the elders of Israel, Aaron tells them everything God said, and Moses performs the signs. "The people believed, and when they heard that the LORD had visited the children of Israel, and that he had seen their affliction, then they bowed their heads and worshiped." After four hundred years, God has come. Hope is alive. The next chapter will test that hope to the limit.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Moses and Aaron**

Aaron was three years older than Moses, and he'd stayed in Egypt the whole time Moses was in the palace and in Midian, living as a slave among his people. God brings the two brothers together for this mission. Moses would speak for God to Aaron, and Aaron would speak for Moses to the people and to Pharaoh. God tells Moses, you will be like God to him, and he will be your mouth. It's a team. Later, Aaron becomes Israel's first high priest. God rarely calls people to serve Him alone. Moses had Aaron and Miriam. Later he'd have

Joshua, Hur, and seventy elders. Jesus sent His disciples out two by two. If God is calling you to something, look for the people He's put alongside you. But Aaron will also fail badly in the story of the golden calf. Like everyone in Exodus except God, he's a mix of faith and weakness.

KEY VERSE

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM," and he said, "You shall tell the children of Israel this: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

Exodus 3:14 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Moses had to turn aside to see the burning bush. What might you need to turn aside from in order to notice God?
2. God answered "Who am I?" with "I will be with you." How does that change the way you face something scary?
3. What does it mean to you that God has a personal name? How might that change the way you pray?
4. Which of Moses' five objections do you relate to most?

TRY THIS *This week, every time you see* LORD *in small caps in your Bible, stop and remember that it's God's personal name. Read Exodus 3 and John 8:48–59, and write down every connection you see between the burning bush and Jesus.*

CHAPTER 3

Let My People Go

Exodus 5–10

Moses and Aaron walk into Pharaoh's palace with God's message: "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says, 'Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.'" And Pharaoh laughs in their faces. "Who is the LORD, that I should listen to his voice to let Israel go? I don't know the LORD." That's the question the next six chapters will answer. By the end, Pharaoh, Egypt, and Israel will all know exactly who the LORD is.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Pharaoh the God-King**
>
> In Egyptian belief, Pharaoh wasn't just a king. He was considered the son of the sun god Ra and the living embodiment of the god Horus. His job was to maintain ma'at, the cosmic order that kept the Nile flooding, the sun rising, and Egypt's enemies defeated. So when Pharaoh said he didn't know the LORD, he was speaking as a god himself. The plagues are a direct challenge to that claim. One by one, the very things Pharaoh was supposed to control, the river, the land, the health of the herds, the sun, fall apart. By the end, it's clear who really rules creation, and it isn't Pharaoh.

Pharaoh's response is to make life even harder for the Israelites. He accuses them of being lazy: that's why they want to go worship their God. Give them more work, he says, so they won't have time to listen to lies. It's an old tactic of oppressors: keep people too exhausted to think about freedom. Until now, the Egyptians had

supplied straw for making bricks (straw helped hold the mud together). Now the slaves have to gather their own straw, and still make the same number of bricks. When they can't, their Israelite foremen are beaten. The foremen turn on Moses and Aaron: "May the LORD look at you and judge," they say, because you've made us stink in Pharaoh's eyes. And Moses turns to God and basically says, why did you send me? Since I came, things have only gotten worse.

> **REAL TALK** **When Obeying God Makes Things Worse**
>
> Moses did exactly what God told him to do, and everything got worse. Have you ever had that experience? Maybe you stood up for what was right and lost a friend, or you started following Jesus and your family thought you'd gone weird. Obeying God doesn't always make life easier right away. Sometimes the darkness gets darker just before the dawn. Moses did the right thing with his frustration: he took it straight to God. And God answered him with a promise.

God tells Moses that He is the LORD, and that He will act. He makes seven great I will promises: I will bring you out. I will rid you out of their bondage. "I will redeem you with an outstretched arm." "I will take you to myself for a people. I will be your God." I will bring you into the land. I will give it to you. To redeem means to buy back, like paying the price to free a slave or a family member. God isn't just going to free Israel. He's going to claim them as His own family. Jewish families still drink four cups of wine at the Passover meal, each one connected to these promises.

But when Moses tells the Israelites, "they didn't listen to Moses for anguish of spirit, and for cruel bondage." They're too crushed to believe. Sometimes pain is so heavy that even good news can't get through. God doesn't scold them. He just keeps working.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Bricks Without Straw**

Mud bricks were the main building material in ancient Egypt for homes, walls, and storehouses. Workers mixed mud from the Nile with water and chopped straw or other plant material, pressed it into wooden molds, and dried the bricks in the sun. The straw helped the bricks hold together and keep from cracking. An Egyptian document from the time of Ramesses II, called Papyrus Anastasi, mentions a quota of bricks for workers and complains about a lack of men and straw. Making slaves gather their own straw while keeping the same quota was a deliberate way to crush them. Some ancient mud bricks found in Egypt actually contain no straw at all.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Magicians of Egypt**

When Moses and Aaron go back to Pharaoh, Aaron throws down his staff and it becomes a snake. Then Pharaoh calls his wise men, sorcerers, and magicians, and they do the same with their staffs. “But Aaron’s rod swallowed up their rods.” Egyptian magicians were famous in the ancient world, and some ancient texts describe magicians handling snakes, possibly by putting them into a rigid, trance-like state that made them look like staffs. Later Jewish tradition named two of these magicians Jannes and Jambres, and Paul mentions them in 2 Timothy 3:8. Whether by trickery or dark power, the magicians can copy the first few signs. But they can’t stop them, and they can’t undo them. And soon they can’t keep up at all.

Then the plagues begin. There are ten of them, and they come in a pattern of three groups of three, plus the final, devastating tenth. Here’s a quick tour.

The first plague turns the Nile, and all the water in Egypt, into blood. The fish die, the river stinks, and the Egyptians can’t drink the water. The Nile was Egypt’s lifeline, worshiped as a god (Hapi). The river where Hebrew babies were drowned is now full of blood. The magicians do the same thing on a small scale, and Pharaoh’s heart is hardened.

The second plague is frogs. Frogs in the houses, frogs in the beds, frogs in the ovens and the mixing bowls. (Imagine waking up with a frog on your pillow.) The Egyptian goddess Heqet, who helped women in childbirth, had the head of a frog. Pharaoh asks Moses to pray for the frogs to go away, and Moses asks when. Pharaoh says, "Tomorrow." Why not now? Maybe he hoped they'd go away on their own. Moses agrees, so that Pharaoh will know there's no one like the LORD. When the frogs die, the Egyptians pile them up in heaps, and the land stinks. And Pharaoh hardens his heart.

The third plague is gnats, or lice, from the dust of the ground. This time the magicians try and fail. And they tell Pharaoh, "This is God's finger." Even Pharaoh's own experts recognize that this is something only God could do. But Pharaoh won't listen.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Plagues and the Gods of Egypt**

God says in Exodus 12:12, "I will execute judgments against all the gods of Egypt." Many readers see each plague as an attack on a particular Egyptian god or something Egypt trusted. The Nile, worshiped as a source of life, turns to blood. Frogs, sacred to Heqet, become a disgusting pest. Livestock, connected with gods like the bull Apis and the cow goddess Hathor, die. The sun, worshiped as Ra, the greatest god, goes dark. And Pharaoh himself, supposedly a god, can't protect his own son. Scholars debate how many of these connections the original writer intended. But the big point is clear: the gods of Egypt are powerless against the LORD.

The fourth plague is swarms of flies, and for the first time, God makes a distinction. The flies cover Egypt, but not the land of Goshen, where the Israelites live. From here on, many of the plagues fall on Egypt but spare Israel. Pharaoh starts to bargain: you can worship your God, but do it here in Egypt. Then: you can go, but not very far. As soon as the flies leave, he changes his mind.

The fifth plague strikes Egypt's livestock with disease, horses, donkeys, camels, cattle, sheep, and goats. Israel's animals are untouched. The sixth plague is boils, painful sores on people and animals; the magicians can't even stand in front of Moses because they're covered with boils.

The seventh plague is the worst hailstorm Egypt has ever seen, with fire flashing down to the ground. But this time God gives a warning: anyone who brings their servants and animals inside will be safe. Some of Pharaoh's officials, who feared the word of the LORD, listened, and their servants and livestock survived. Even in judgment, God offers mercy to Egyptians who will listen. Exodus doesn't paint every Egyptian as a villain. Pharaoh's daughter saved Moses. Some of Pharaoh's officials feared God's word. Later, Egyptians would leave with Israel. God's judgment fell on a system of oppression and a king who refused to repent, but His mercy was available to anyone who would turn to Him. Pharaoh admits, "I have sinned this time. The LORD is righteous, and I and my people are wicked." But when the hail stops, he hardens his heart again.

The eighth plague is locusts, so many that they cover the ground until it's black, and they eat every plant the hail left. Pharaoh's own officials beg him: Don't you realize Egypt is ruined? Pharaoh confesses again, "I have sinned against the LORD your God, and against you." And again he changes his mind.

> **REAL TALK** **Crisis Promises**
>
> Pharaoh kept saying the right words when he was in trouble: I have sinned. Pray for me. I'll let you go. But as soon as the pressure was off, he went right back. Have you ever made a promise to God in a crisis? God, if you get me out of this, I'll never do it again. Those prayers aren't wrong; God hears people in trouble. But real repentance doesn't disappear when the crisis does. It's a change of direction, not just a change of words. If you've made God a promise

in a hard moment, it's worth asking whether you meant it, and what keeping it would look like now.

The ninth plague is darkness, darkness so thick it can be felt, for three days. No one can see anyone else or leave their place. "But all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings." The sun god Ra, the chief god of Egypt, has been blotted out. Pharaoh tells Moses to get out and never come back: the day you see my face, you'll die. And Moses agrees: you won't see my face again.

Notice how the plagues escalate. The first ones are disgusting and annoying. Then they start destroying property and livestock. Then they hurt people's bodies. Then they wipe out the food supply. Then even the sun goes dark. Each one is a little more serious, and each one comes with a chance for Pharaoh to change his mind. God's judgments in Exodus aren't sudden and random. They're patient, gradual, and full of warnings. That's how God usually works. He'd rather people turn than be destroyed (Ezekiel 33:11).

BACKGROUND CHECK **Natural Explanations?**

Some people have tried to explain the plagues as a chain of natural events: red algae or red soil turns the Nile red and kills the fish, so the frogs leave the river and die, so flies and gnats multiply, spreading disease to animals and people, followed by a hailstorm, a locust swarm, and a sandstorm (the khamsin) that darkens the sky. Some Christians find this helpful, and think God may have used natural processes in a supernatural way, with miraculous timing, intensity, and precision (like sparing Goshen). Others think such explanations miss the point or don't fit the details of the text, and see the plagues as direct miracles. Skeptics see them as legend. Either way, Exodus presents them as God's mighty acts, announced in advance by Moses, coming and stopping at God's command.

Now let's tackle one of the hardest questions in Exodus. Over and over, the text says that Pharaoh's heart was hard, or that Pharaoh hardened his heart, or that the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart. Before the plagues began, God told Moses, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt." So was Pharaoh responsible for his choices? Or was he a puppet?

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Hardened Pharaoh's Heart?**

Christians have read this in different ways. Some point out that in the first five plagues, the text says Pharaoh hardened his own heart or his heart was hardened, and only from the sixth plague on does it say God hardened it. In this view, God gave Pharaoh many chances, and then confirmed the choice Pharaoh had already made, giving him over to his own stubbornness (compare Romans 1:24). Others, often in the Reformed tradition, point to God's announcement before the plagues and to Paul's comment in Romans 9:17–18, "he has mercy on whom he desires, and he hardens whom he desires," and see God as sovereign over Pharaoh's heart, while Pharaoh remained fully responsible for his evil. Still others suggest that God hardened Pharaoh's heart in the sense of strengthening his resolve, giving him the courage to do what he already wanted to do. Jewish commentators, like Rashi and Maimonides, also wrestled with this, and many concluded that Pharaoh's repeated wickedness eventually cost him the freedom to repent. All of these views agree that Pharaoh was a cruel tyrant who chose to oppress and kill, and that God used even his stubbornness to show His power and make His name known.

REAL TALK **Hardened Hearts**

Whatever you think about how God was involved, notice how Pharaoh's hardness grew. Each time he refused, the next refusal got easier. He made promises in a crisis and broke them as soon as the pressure was off. That's how hearts get hard. It doesn't usually happen in one big decision. It happens through lots of small ones, ignoring your conscience, pushing away the people who love you, saying not yet to God over and over. Hebrews 3:15 says,

> Today, if you hear His voice, don't harden your heart. If you sense God nudging you about something, don't wait. A soft heart is a gift. Protect it.

God also explains why He didn't just wipe out Egypt with one plague: "to show you my power, and that my name may be declared throughout all the earth." The plagues weren't just about getting Israel out. They were about showing the whole world who the real God is. And it worked. Forty years later, people in Jericho were still talking about what God had done in Egypt (Joshua 2:10). And three thousand years later, you're reading about it.

KEY VERSE

I will take you to myself for a people. I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who brings you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

Exodus 6:7 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Pharaoh asked, "Who is the LORD?" How would you answer that question?
2. Moses obeyed God and things got worse. How do you keep trusting God when that happens?
3. Which view of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart makes the most sense to you? Why?
4. Pharaoh kept making promises during the plagues and breaking them afterward. Have you ever made a promise to God in a crisis? What happened?

TRY THIS *Make a chart of the ten plagues. For each one, write down what it attacked (the Nile, the land, the livestock, the sky, and so on) and how*

Pharaoh responded. Then circle the places where God showed mercy or gave a warning.

CHAPTER 4

The Night of the Lamb

Exodus 11–13

Nine plagues have devastated Egypt, and Pharaoh still won't let Israel go. Now God announces one more. It will be the last, and the worst. "All the firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne, even to the firstborn of the female servant who is behind the mill." There will be a great cry throughout Egypt, worse than any before or since. But among the Israelites, not even a dog will bark.

This is the hardest part of the exodus story to read. Before we go any further, it's worth saying that out loud. Many of the firstborn who died were children. Many were ordinary Egyptians who had little to do with Pharaoh's decisions. How can a good God do this?

REAL TALK **The Death of the Firstborn**

Christians have wrestled honestly with this, and there are no easy answers. A few things are worth noticing. First, this judgment didn't come out of nowhere. Pharaoh had been killing Israel's baby boys for decades, and God had warned him from the start: Israel is my firstborn son; if you refuse to let him go, I will kill your firstborn (Exodus 4:22–23). Pharaoh's own cruelty came back on his own house. Second, God gave nine plagues of warning first, and He made a way of escape that was open to anyone, Egyptian or Israelite, who trusted Him; a mixed multitude of non-Israelites left Egypt with Israel. Third, the Bible says God alone is the giver of life, and He alone has the right to take

it; He doesn't give that right to us. And finally, the Bible doesn't ask you to stop feeling the weight of this. It's okay to grieve the losses of that night, and to bring your questions to God. If thinking about death frightens you or keeps you up at night, talk about it with a parent, pastor, or another trusted adult.

Then God gives Moses detailed instructions for a meal unlike any other. On the tenth day of the month, each household is to choose a lamb, "a lamb for a household." It must be "without defect, a male a year old." The family keeps the lamb for four days, which means it would become almost like a pet, before killing it at twilight on the fourteenth day. Then they're to take some of the blood and put it on the doorposts and the top of the doorframe of their houses. That night they're to eat the lamb, roasted over the fire, with unleavened bread (bread made without yeast) and bitter herbs.

And they're to eat it dressed for travel: "with your belt on your waist, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it in haste: it is the LORD's Passover." This is a meal for people who are about to leave.

Then God explains the meaning of the blood. That night He will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn. "When I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will be on you to destroy you." That's where the name Passover comes from. The blood of the lamb is a sign. Every house with blood on the door is protected. A lamb dies so the firstborn can live.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Blood?**

To modern readers, smearing blood on a doorframe sounds strange, even gross. But in the Bible, blood represents life. Leviticus 17:11 says the life of a creature is in the blood, and that God gave it to make atonement. The lamb's blood on the door said: a life has been given here. Death has already come to this house, so judgment passes over it. It wasn't that Israelites were better

people than Egyptians. They were protected because they trusted God's word and put the blood where He told them to. That's why Christians talk about being saved by the blood of Jesus. It doesn't mean there's something magical about blood. It means Jesus gave His life in our place.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Unleavened Bread and Bitter Herbs**

Every part of the Passover meal is a reminder. The unleavened bread, called matzah, reminds Israel that they left in such a hurry that their bread didn't have time to rise. The bitter herbs remind them of the bitterness of slavery. God commands Israel to celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread for seven days every year, removing all yeast from their homes. In the Bible, yeast often becomes a picture of sin, which spreads through everything it touches; Paul says, "Purge out the old yeast, that you may be a new lump." Today, Jewish families still celebrate Passover with a special meal called the Seder, which means order. They eat matzah and bitter herbs, drink four cups of wine, and retell the story, and the youngest child asks, Why is this night different from all other nights?

God makes Passover a permanent memorial. "This day shall be a memorial for you." And He builds in a teaching moment. When your children ask what this ceremony means, tell them: "It is the sacrifice of the LORD's Passover, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when he struck the Egyptians, and spared our houses." God wants the story passed down. Faith isn't supposed to stop with one generation.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Hebrew Calendar**

God tells Moses that the month of the exodus will be the first month of Israel's year. It was later called Abib, which means fresh ears of grain, and after the exile in Babylon it was called Nisan; it falls in March or April. So Israel's calendar was rebuilt around their rescue. Every year would start by remembering that God set them free. Christians have done something similar: our calendar counts years from the birth of Jesus, and many churches organize their year around Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost.

Easter is tied to the date of Passover, which is why it moves around every year. What's the starting point of your year? What do you build your calendar around?

REAL TALK **Ask the Question**

God expected children to ask questions about the faith of their families. He didn't say, if your children ask, tell them to be quiet. He said, when they ask, tell them the story. If you've got questions about God, the Bible, or why your family does what it does at church, ask them. Questions aren't the enemy of faith; they're often the doorway into it. And if you can, ask your parents, grandparents, or youth leader to tell you their own story: when did they first realize God was real?

The Israelites do exactly what God says. Imagine that night. The family huddled inside, dressed and ready, eating roast lamb and flat bread by lamplight. The blood drying on the doorframe outside. Children asking questions. Parents whispering prayers. And then, somewhere in the dark, a cry. And "at midnight, the LORD struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt." From Pharaoh's palace to the prison cell, there's not a house without someone dead. A loud cry goes up all over Egypt. And Pharaoh, finally broken, summons Moses and Aaron in the night. "Rise up, get out from among my people, both you and the children of Israel; and go, serve the LORD, as you have said!" Then he adds something astonishing: And bless me also.

The Egyptians urge the Israelites to hurry. They give them silver and gold jewelry and clothing, so much that the Israelites "plundered the Egyptians." Slaves who had worked for nothing for generations leave with back pay. God had promised Abraham that his descendants would come out with great possessions (Genesis 15:14), and He kept His word. About six hundred thousand men set out on

foot, besides women and children, and "a mixed multitude went up also with them." Not everyone who left Egypt was an Israelite. Some Egyptians and others joined them, trusting Israel's God. God even gave instructions for foreigners who wanted to celebrate the Passover: if they joined the covenant, they would be treated just like native-born Israelites. From the very first Passover, the door was open to outsiders.

BACKGROUND CHECK **How Many People?**

Exodus 12:37 says about 600,000 men left Egypt, which would mean a total of two million or more people including women and children. That's a huge number to survive in the desert, and readers handle it in different ways. Some take it at face value and see God's miraculous provision as the explanation. Others point out that the Hebrew word for thousand, eleph, can also mean a clan or a military unit, which would make the number much smaller, perhaps twenty or thirty thousand. Others think the numbers are meant symbolically or represent a later census. Faithful readers hold each view. Either way, it was a lot of people for God to feed, and He did.

Exodus notes that Israel had lived in Egypt for 430 years, and that they left "to the day." God's timing was exact. And Moses takes something special with him: Joseph's bones. Hundreds of years earlier, Joseph had made his brothers promise to carry his bones out of Egypt when God came to their aid. Now that promise is kept. The coffin that ended Genesis is going home.

God also tells Israel that from now on, every firstborn son and firstborn male animal belongs to Him. They're to be dedicated to God, and the firstborn sons are to be redeemed, or bought back, with a sacrifice. It's a permanent reminder of the night God spared Israel's firstborn. Centuries later, Mary and Joseph would bring their firstborn son, Jesus, to the temple to dedicate Him to the Lord according to this law (Luke 2:22–23).

BACKGROUND CHECK **Christ, Our Passover**

The New Testament sees Passover as one of the clearest pictures of Jesus in the whole Old Testament. John the Baptist called Jesus "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" Jesus was crucified during Passover week, and John's Gospel notes that, like the Passover lamb, none of His bones were broken (John 19:36; Exodus 12:46). Paul writes, "Christ, our Passover, has been sacrificed in our place." And on the night before He died, Jesus ate the Passover meal with His disciples. He took the unleavened bread and said, "This is my body which is given for you." He took the cup and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." When Christians take communion, they're remembering a new and greater Passover. Just as the blood of the lamb protected Israel from death, Jesus' death protects all who trust Him from the judgment their sin deserves.

As Israel leaves Egypt, God doesn't lead them by the shortest route, along the coast through the land of the Philistines. He knows that if they face war too soon, they might change their minds and go back to Egypt. So He leads them the long way, through the desert, toward the Red Sea. And He goes with them visibly. "The LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud, to lead them on their way, and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light." They never had to wonder whether God was with them. They could look up and see.

REAL TALK **Remember**

The word remember shows up again and again in Exodus. God remembers His covenant. Israel is told to remember the day they came out of Egypt, to remember the Sabbath, and to tell their children. Why so much remembering? Because people forget so easily. Within weeks of the Red Sea, the Israelites will forget what God did and complain that He's abandoned them. You probably do the same thing. One of the best ways to grow your faith is to remember what God has done. Keep a journal of answered prayers. Write down the times He came through. When you're struggling, read it again. Your own story of God's faithfulness can carry you through the hard days.

KEY VERSE

The blood shall be to you for a token on the houses where you are. When I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will be on you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

Exodus 12:13 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. How do you feel about the tenth plague? What questions does it raise for you, and how does the rest of the Bible help you think about them?
2. Why do you think God wanted the Israelites to eat the Passover dressed and ready to leave?
3. What does the Passover lamb teach you about what Jesus did on the cross?
4. God told parents to explain Passover when their children asked about it. What question about faith would you like to ask someone in your family?

TRY THIS *If you can, attend a Passover Seder, or a Christian demonstration of one, with your family or church. If not, read Exodus 12 and Luke 22:7–20 side by side, and list every connection between the first Passover and the Last Supper.*

CHAPTER 5

Through the Sea

Exodus 14–15

Israel is finally free. But God tells Moses to do something that seems crazy: turn back and camp by the sea. It looks like a mistake, like they're lost and trapped. And that's exactly the point. God says Pharaoh will think the Israelites are wandering around confused, and he'll chase them. "I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will follow after them; and I will get honor over Pharaoh, and over all his armies; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD."

Sure enough, Pharaoh changes his mind again. What have we done? We let our slaves go! He takes six hundred of his best chariots, plus all the other chariots of Egypt, and races after them. And when the Israelites look up and see the Egyptian army coming, they panic. They have the sea in front of them, the army behind them, and nowhere to run. "The children of Israel cried out to the LORD." And they turned on Moses: "Because there were no graves in Egypt, have you taken us away to die in the wilderness?" It would have been better to stay slaves.

Think about that for a moment. Just days earlier, these people watched God destroy the most powerful nation on earth on their behalf. They walked out of Egypt carrying Egyptian gold. They'd been following a pillar of fire. And the moment they see a threat,

they're ready to go back to slavery. Fear has a way of erasing memory. That's not just Israel's problem. It's a human problem.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Chariots**

Egyptian chariots were the tanks of the ancient world. Light, fast, and pulled by two horses, each carried a driver and an archer, and they could cut through a crowd of foot soldiers in seconds. Egyptian art shows pharaohs like Ramesses II charging into battle in their chariots, firing arrows. For a crowd of escaped slaves on foot, with women, children, and animals, the sight of hundreds of chariots coming at them would have been terrifying. There was no way Israel could fight them.

Moses' answer is one of the great statements of faith in the Bible. "Don't be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today." The Egyptians you see today, you'll never see again. "The LORD will fight for you, and you shall be still."

REAL TALK **Be Still**

Being still is hard. Most of us are used to constant motion and noise, notifications, music, scrolling, and plans. When something scary happens, our instinct is to do something, anything, to fix it. Sometimes that's right. But sometimes the bravest thing you can do is stop, breathe, and trust God to act. Psalm 46:10 says, Be still, and know that I am God. Try it this week. Put your phone in another room for ten minutes, sit quietly, and tell God what you're worried about. Then just be still, and remember that He's fighting for you.

But then God says something surprising to Moses: "Why do you cry to me? Speak to the children of Israel, that they go forward." There's a time to be still, and a time to move. Israel had to trust God to fight for them, and then they had to step forward in faith.

REAL TALK **Stuck Between a Sea and an Army**

Have you ever felt trapped, with no way out? Maybe it's a family situation, a friendship gone bad, anxiety, or a mistake you can't undo. Israel's story shows

that God sometimes leads His people into situations that look impossible, so that they'll see Him do what only He can do. The answer wasn't to panic or to go back to Egypt. It was to trust God and take the next step He gave them. If you feel trapped right now, talk to God about it honestly, and talk to a trusted adult. And if you're feeling hopeless or having thoughts of hurting yourself, please tell someone today; in the United States, you can call or text 988 any time.

Then the angel of God and the pillar of cloud move from in front of Israel to behind them, standing between Israel and the Egyptians. The cloud brings darkness to one side and light to the other, so the armies can't come near each other all night. God has put Himself between His people and their enemies.

Moses stretches out his hand over the sea, "and the LORD caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided." The Israelites walk through the middle of the sea on dry ground, with "the waters were a wall to them on their right hand and on their left." Imagine walking through that, with walls of water on either side, and the sound of chariots somewhere behind you.

REAL TALK **The Next Step**

The Israelites didn't get to see the whole path through the sea before they started. They had to walk forward in the dark, with the wind howling and the waters standing up on either side. Faith often works like that. God doesn't usually show you the whole plan for your life, your college, your career, or your future relationships. He shows you the next step. Psalm 119:105 says God's word is a lamp to my feet, not a floodlight for the whole road. If you're anxious about the future, try asking: what's the next faithful step I can take today? Take that one, and trust God for the rest.

The Egyptians chase them right into the sea. But in the early morning, God looks down on the Egyptian army from the pillar of

fire and cloud and throws them into confusion. Their chariot wheels jam or come off, and they can hardly drive. The Egyptians realize: the LORD is fighting for Israel. Let's get out of here! But it's too late. Moses stretches out his hand again, and at daybreak the sea returns. "The waters returned, and covered the chariots and the horsemen, even all Pharaoh's army." Not one of them survives.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Red Sea or Sea of Reeds?**

The Hebrew name for the sea Israel crossed is yam suph. The same name is used elsewhere in the Bible for the Gulf of Aqaba, an arm of the Red Sea (1 Kings 9:26), and the ancient Greek translation called it the Red Sea, which is where most English Bibles get that name. But suph usually means reeds or rushes (it's the same word used for the reeds where baby Moses' basket was hidden), so many scholars translate it Sea of Reeds. That has led to several proposals about where the crossing happened: one of the marshy lakes near the Suez region, like the Bitter Lakes or Lake Timsah; the Gulf of Suez; or the Gulf of Aqaba, much farther east. Some skeptics suggest the event was a crossing of a shallow marsh that became a legend. Many Christians reply that the text describes deep water, walls of water, and an entire army drowned, and that the point of the story is God's miraculous power, whatever the location. Faithful Christians hold different views on where it happened. All agree on who did it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Pillar of Cloud and Fire**

The pillar of cloud by day and fire by night was Israel's GPS, their shield, and their nightlight. It went ahead of them to show the way, moved behind them to protect them from the Egyptians, and later rested over the tabernacle. Some people have suggested it was something natural, like the smoke and fire of a brazier carried at the front of a caravan, which ancient armies sometimes did. But Exodus presents it as God's own visible presence, the same glory that would fill the tabernacle. The prophet Isaiah looked forward to a day when God would create a cloud by day and fire by night over all of Jerusalem, a canopy of glory over His people (Isaiah 4:5). Christians believe

God's presence now goes with His people through the Holy Spirit, who lives in every believer.

BACKGROUND CHECK **When Did the Exodus Happen?**

We touched on this in Setting the Scene, but it's worth a closer look here. The early date view (around 1446 BC) is based on 1 Kings 6:1, which places the exodus 480 years before Solomon's temple, and on Judges 11:26, where Jephthah says Israel had been in the land 300 years. Supporters connect it with the reigns of Thutmose III and Amenhotep II. The late date view (around 1260 BC) points to the city of Raamses (Exodus 1:11), signs of building in the Nile Delta under Ramesses II, and evidence of new settlements in Canaan's hill country around 1200 BC. Supporters often read the 480 years as twelve generations of forty years each, a round number. The Merneptah Stele (about 1208 BC) proves a people called Israel existed in Canaan by then, which fits both dates. Some scholars think the exodus story grew from a smaller event, or doubt it happened at all, because no Egyptian record mentions it. Others answer that the Egyptians almost never recorded defeats, and that a large group of nomads in the desert would leave very little archaeological trace. You don't have to settle the date to see the point: God rescued His people.

"Thus the LORD saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians." And when Israel sees the great power God has used against Egypt, the people fear the LORD and believe in Him and in His servant Moses. The people who were panicking the night before are now standing on the far shore, safe.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Same Water**

There's a powerful pattern here. The Nile was the water Pharaoh used to drown Hebrew babies, and God turned it to blood. Now the sea is the water that drowns Pharaoh's army. Moses, drawn out of water as a baby, leads his people out through the water. The waters of chaos, which God tamed at creation in Genesis 1 and which flooded the earth in Noah's day, part at His command. In the Bible, God is always Lord of the waters. Jesus showed the

same authority when He calmed the storm, and His disciples asked, Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him? (Mark 4:41).

Then they do what anyone would do after a rescue like that. They sing. Exodus 15 is one of the oldest poems in the Bible, often called the Song of the Sea or the Song of Moses. "I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously. He has thrown the horse and his rider into the sea." The song celebrates God as a warrior who fights for His people: "The LORD is a man of war. The LORD is his name." And it asks a question that rings through the whole Bible: "Who is like you, LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?"

BACKGROUND CHECK **Miriam's Song**

After Moses' song, "Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dances." Miriam is the first woman in the Bible called a prophet. She's probably the same sister who watched over baby Moses in the reeds, now an old woman leading a nation in worship. Her song is short: "Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously. He has thrown the horse and his rider into the sea." Many scholars think Miriam's short song may be one of the oldest pieces of the Bible. In the ancient Near East, women often led victory celebrations with music and dancing (compare 1 Samuel 18:6). Worship in the Bible isn't always quiet and still. Sometimes it's loud and full of dancing.

REAL TALK **Is God a Warrior?**

The Song of the Sea celebrates God as a warrior who defeated Pharaoh's army. That can feel uncomfortable. But remember who God fought against: a slave-owning superpower that had murdered babies and refused to let the oppressed go. For people who have been crushed by cruelty, the news that God fights for the victims is very good news. The Bible pictures God as a warrior against evil, injustice, sin, and death, and ultimately the final battle is

won not by a sword but by a Lamb who was slain (Revelation 5). God is not a bully. He's the defender of the defenseless.

The song doesn't just look back. It looks forward too. God has redeemed His people, and He'll lead them to His holy dwelling, plant them on His mountain, and reign forever. "The LORD will reign forever and ever." In Revelation 15:3, the people of God who have overcome evil stand beside a sea of glass, holding harps, and sing "the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb." The exodus song becomes the song of the end of history.

REAL TALK **Songs for Hard Times**

Israel's first response to rescue was to sing. Music helps people remember what God has done, and it helps carry faith through hard times. Enslaved African Americans in the United States sang spirituals drawn straight from Exodus, like Go Down, Moses, with its refrain, Let my people go, and Wade in the Water. Those songs expressed both faith in God and a longing for freedom, and some may even have carried coded messages about escape on the Underground Railroad. Harriet Tubman, who led many people out of slavery, was called the Moses of her people. What songs carry your faith? Make a playlist of songs that remind you of what God has done, and listen to it when life gets hard.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Through the Waters**

The New Testament sees the crossing of the sea as a picture of baptism. Paul writes that the Israelites were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and "were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (1 Corinthians 10:1–2). Going down into the water and coming up on the other side is a picture of leaving the old life of slavery behind and starting a new life of freedom with God. Luke even uses the word exodus (Greek exodos, translated departure) to describe Jesus' coming death and resurrection in Jerusalem (Luke 9:31). Jesus' death and resurrection is the new exodus, leading His people out of slavery to sin and death.

But three days after the song, the singing stops. The people have walked into the desert of Shur and found no water. When they finally find water at a place called Marah, it's bitter and undrinkable. And the people grumble against Moses: What are we supposed to drink? Moses cries out to the LORD, and God shows him a piece of wood. He throws it into the water, and the water becomes sweet. Then God promises that if they listen to Him and obey His commands, He won't bring on them the diseases He brought on the Egyptians, "for I am the LORD who heals you." Then they come to Elim, an oasis with twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camp by the water.

> **REAL TALK** **Bitter Water**
>
> Marah means bitter. Life sometimes hands you bitter water: a divorce in your family, a friend who betrays you, a diagnosis, a loss. It's okay to say it's bitter. The people's mistake wasn't noticing that the water was bad; it was turning on Moses and doubting God. Moses' response was to cry out to the LORD, and God showed him a way to make the bitter water sweet. Many Christians have seen the piece of wood as a picture of the cross, which turns the bitterest moment in history into the sweetest. And notice what came next: Elim, with twelve springs and seventy palm trees. Bitter seasons don't last forever. God knows where the oasis is.

KEY VERSE

The LORD will fight for you, and you shall be still.

Exodus 14:14 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. The Israelites went from panic to praise in one night. What helps you remember God's faithfulness when you're afraid?
2. God told Moses both to be still and to go forward. When do you think it's time to wait on God, and when is it time to act?
3. Which view of the date or location of the exodus seems most convincing to you? Does it change how you read the story?
4. Why do you think the people started complaining just three days after singing God's praises?

TRY THIS *Write your own song or poem of thanks to God for a time He brought you through something hard. If you play an instrument, put it to music. If not, read it out loud, like Miriam.*

CHAPTER 6

Bread from Heaven

Exodus 16–18

A month after leaving Egypt, the Israelites are deep in the desert of Sin (that's a place name, not a description), and the food is running out. And the grumbling starts again, louder this time. "We wish that we had died by the LORD's hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots, when we ate our fill of bread." That's selective memory. In Egypt they were slaves, beaten and worked to death, with their babies thrown into the river. But hunger has a way of making the past look better than it was.

Notice who they're complaining against. Moses tells them: your grumbling isn't really against us, it's against the LORD. That's often true of complaining. When we complain constantly about our situation, we're often really saying that we don't trust God to take care of us. That doesn't mean we can't be honest about hard things; the psalms are full of honest complaints brought to God. But there's a difference between crying out to God and grumbling about Him.

> REAL TALK **Nostalgia for Egypt**
>
> Have you ever missed something that was actually bad for you? A toxic friendship, an old habit, a relationship you knew you needed to leave? Israel remembered the meat pots of Egypt and forgot the whips. That's how temptation often works: it highlights the pleasure and hides the pain. When you find yourself longing for something God has rescued you from, try to

remember the whole picture. And if you're struggling with something you can't seem to leave behind, like an addiction or an unhealthy relationship, you don't have to fight it alone. Talk to a trusted adult who can help.

God's response to their grumbling isn't to strike them down. It's to feed them. "Behold, I will rain bread from the sky for you." Every day the people are to go out and gather enough for that day. On the sixth day they're to gather twice as much, so they can rest on the Sabbath. God says this will test them, to see whether they'll follow His instructions. That evening, quail cover the camp. And the next morning, when the dew evaporates, thin flakes like frost appear on the ground.

The Israelites look at it and say to each other, "What is it?" In Hebrew, that's man hu, which is where the name manna comes from. Manna literally means What is it? (Imagine eating What-is-it every day for forty years.) Moses tells them, "It is the bread which the LORD has given you to eat." It was white like coriander seed, and "its taste was like wafers with honey."

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Was Manna?**

People have tried to identify manna with something natural. One popular suggestion is a sweet, sticky substance produced by insects feeding on tamarisk trees in the Sinai desert, which local Bedouin still collect and call man. But that substance appears only for a few weeks a year, in small amounts, and doesn't fit many of the details in Exodus: manna appeared six days a week, all year, for forty years, enough for the whole nation; a double portion appeared on the sixth day and none on the seventh; and it bred worms if kept overnight, except on the Sabbath. Most Christians see manna as a miracle. Some think God may have miraculously multiplied something natural. Either way, it came every morning as a gift from God.

God gives clear instructions: gather about an omer (roughly two quarts) per person. "He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack." Everyone had enough. Some people gathered more and some less, maybe depending on how strong or fast they were, but when they measured it, everyone had exactly what they needed. No one went hungry, and no one could hoard. In God's economy, there was enough for everyone. Paul quotes this in 2 Corinthians 8:15 to encourage Christians to share generously with those in need, so that there would be equality.

But some people don't listen. They keep some manna overnight, just in case, and in the morning it's full of worms and stinks. Others go out to gather on the Sabbath, and find nothing. God was teaching them to trust Him one day at a time. They couldn't stockpile. They had to depend on Him every single morning.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Wilderness**

The Sinai wilderness isn't a sea of sand dunes. It's mostly rocky desert, with steep granite mountains, dry riverbeds called wadis, and only a few scattered springs and oases. Temperatures can top 100 degrees in summer and drop near freezing at night. Rainfall is only a few inches a year. Today, only small groups of Bedouin live there, moving their flocks from place to place. For a large crowd of people and animals, survival without God's help would have been impossible. That's the point. The wilderness was where Israel learned that they couldn't make it on their own.

REAL TALK **Daily Bread**

When Jesus taught His followers to pray, He told them to ask, "Give us today our daily bread." Not this year's bread, not a lifetime supply, just today's. That's a manna prayer. It's hard to live one day at a time, especially when you're anxious about the future: grades, college, money, friendships. Jesus said not to worry about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself (Matthew 6:34). God gave Israel exactly what they needed, exactly when they

needed it. He's still that kind of God. If anxiety about the future feels overwhelming, talk to someone you trust; anxiety is common, and it's not a sign of weak faith.

The manna also came with a built-in day off. On the sixth day, they gathered twice as much, and it didn't spoil overnight. On the seventh day, there was none, because it was a Sabbath. Even before the Ten Commandments were given, God was teaching His people to rest. Slaves in Egypt never got a day off. Free people in God's family did.

God tells Moses to keep a jar of manna as a reminder for future generations, so they can see the bread God fed them with in the wilderness. Later it's kept in the ark of the covenant. "The children of Israel ate the manna forty years," until they reached the edge of Canaan.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The True Bread from Heaven**

After Jesus fed five thousand people with five loaves and two fish, the crowd asked Him for a sign, pointing out that their ancestors ate manna in the desert. Jesus answered, "it wasn't Moses who gave you the bread out of heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread out of heaven." And then He said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will not be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." The manna kept Israel alive for forty years. Jesus offers life that lasts forever. And when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, He answered with Deuteronomy 8:3, a verse that looks back on the manna: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of God's mouth" (Matthew 4:4).

BACKGROUND CHECK **Quail**

The quail that covered the camp were probably migrating birds. Every spring and fall, huge flocks of quail fly across the Sinai between Africa and Europe and Asia, and when they're exhausted from flying over the sea, they land and can be caught easily by hand. For centuries, people along the Mediterranean

coast have netted them by the thousands. So the quail may have been a natural event, timed perfectly by God, much like the wind that pushed back the sea. That's a helpful reminder: God's provision doesn't always look like a dramatic miracle. Sometimes it looks like ordinary things arriving at exactly the right moment. Either way, it comes from His hand.

Next, the people camp at Rephidim, and again there's no water. Again they quarrel with Moses, so fiercely that Moses fears they'll stone him. God tells Moses to take his staff, go ahead of the people with some elders, and strike a rock at Horeb. God says, I will stand there before you by the rock. Moses strikes the rock, and water pours out. Moses names the place Massah (testing) and Meribah (quarreling), "because the children of Israel quarreled, and because they tested the LORD, saying, 'Is the LORD among us, or not?'" After all the miracles, they're still asking that question. Paul later writes that the Israelites "drank of a spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:4).

SAFETY NOTE **War with Amalek**

Then the Amalekites, a desert people, attack Israel at Rephidim. Deuteronomy 25:18 adds that they attacked from behind, picking off the weak and exhausted stragglers at the back. Moses sends a young man named Joshua to fight, while he stands on a hill holding up the staff of God. "When Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed. When he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed." When Moses gets tired, his brother Aaron and a man named Hur sit him on a stone and hold up his arms, one on each side, until sunset, and Israel wins. War stories in the Bible can be troubling, and they're not instructions for us to use violence. The New Testament teaches Christians that our real battle is not against flesh and blood (Ephesians 6:12). But notice who Amalek attacked: the weakest, at the back. Preying on people who are vulnerable, whether that's bullying, harassment, or exploitation, is especially wicked in God's eyes. If someone is targeting you because you're younger, weaker, or alone, tell a trusted adult.

REAL TALK **Hold Up Someone's Arms**

Moses was the great leader, but he couldn't do it alone. His arms got tired, and he needed people to hold them up. Who holds up your arms? Who are the people who pray for you, encourage you, and help you keep going when you're exhausted? And whose arms could you hold up? Maybe a friend going through a hard time, a teacher, a parent, or your pastor. Sometimes the most important person in the battle is the one standing beside the leader. Moses built an altar after the victory and named it "The LORD our Banner". The victory belonged to God, but He used ordinary people working together.

In chapter 18, Moses' father-in-law Jethro comes to visit, bringing Moses' wife Zipporah and their two sons. Moses tells Jethro everything God has done, and Jethro, a priest of Midian, rejoices: "Now I know that the LORD is greater than all gods." Then Jethro watches Moses at work. From morning till evening, Moses sits as judge for the people, settling all their disputes alone. And Jethro says, "The thing that you do is not good." You're going to wear yourself out, and the people too. "You are not able to perform it yourself alone."

So Jethro gives Moses some wise advice. Teach the people God's laws. Then choose capable, trustworthy men who fear God and hate dishonest gain, and appoint them as leaders over groups of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. Let them handle the simple cases, and bring the hard ones to you. Moses listens, and it works. The best leaders are teachable. Moses, the man who talked with God, was humble enough to take advice from his father-in-law. Numbers 12:3 even says Moses was more humble than anyone else on earth. Notice that this great advice came from a non-Israelite priest. God's wisdom can come through unexpected people.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jethro the Outsider**

Jethro is a fascinating character. He's a priest of Midian, not an Israelite, yet he rejoices at what God has done, offers sacrifices to God, and eats a meal with Aaron and the elders of Israel in God's presence. Some readers think he became a true worshiper of the LORD that day; others think he already worshiped God in some form, like Melchizedek in Genesis. Either way, Jethro is a reminder that God's people were never meant to be a closed club. From the very beginning, outsiders were welcomed into worship: Jethro, the mixed multitude who left Egypt, and later Rahab and Ruth. God's plan always included the nations.

REAL TALK **You Can't Do It All**

Moses was trying to do everything himself, and it was crushing him. Maybe you know the feeling: school, sports, a job, church, family responsibilities, friends who need you. It's good to work hard and help people. But you're not supposed to carry everything alone, and trying to can lead to burnout, anxiety, and exhaustion. Jethro's advice still works: share the load, ask for help, and let others use their gifts. If you're overwhelmed, talk with a parent, coach, or counselor about what you could let go of. Saying no to some things isn't weakness. It's wisdom.

REAL TALK **Complaining**

Count the complaints in Exodus 14–17: at the sea, at Marah, in the desert of Sin, about the manna, and at Rephidim. Five in a row, each one after God had just provided for them. It's easy to judge the Israelites. But how often do you complain about your food, your school, your parents, your phone, your siblings? Paul uses Israel's grumbling in the wilderness as a warning for Christians (1 Corinthians 10:10), and he also tells believers to do everything without complaining or arguing (Philippians 2:14). That doesn't mean pretending everything is fine. It means bringing your real needs to God, honestly, instead of grumbling about Him. Try a no-complaining challenge for a day. You'll be amazed how hard it is, and how much it changes your attitude.

KEY VERSE

When they measured it with an omer, he who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack.

Exodus 16:18 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the Israelites remembered Egypt as better than it really was? Have you ever done something similar?
2. God gave manna one day at a time. What would it look like for you to trust God for just today?
3. Who holds up your arms? Whose arms could you hold up this week?
4. Jethro told Moses he couldn't do everything alone. Where in your life do you need to ask for help?

TRY THIS *For one week, pray the daily bread prayer every morning: "Give us today our daily bread." Each evening, write down one way God provided what you needed that day.*

CHAPTER 7

Ten Words

Exodus 19–20

Three months after leaving Egypt, Israel arrives at the foot of Mount Sinai, the same mountain where God spoke to Moses from the burning bush. God had promised Moses, "you shall serve God on this mountain." Now here they are. They'll camp here for almost a year, and the rest of Exodus, all of Leviticus, and the first part of Numbers take place at this mountain. It's where Israel becomes a nation.

Moses goes up the mountain, and God gives him a message for the people. It's one of the most beautiful summaries of the gospel in the Old Testament. "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to myself." Notice the order. God doesn't say, obey Me, and then I'll rescue you. He says, I already rescued you; I carried you; I brought you to Myself. Grace comes first. Then God invites them into a covenant: if you obey Me and keep My covenant, "you shall be my own possession from among all peoples; for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Kingdom of Priests**

A priest is someone who stands between God and people, bringing people to God and representing God to people. God wanted the whole nation of Israel to be priests for the world, showing the nations what God is like and bringing

them to Him. That was always the point of God's promise to Abraham: through you, all nations will be blessed. Peter picks up this exact language for Christians: you are "a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (1 Peter 2:9). If you follow Jesus, you're part of a kingdom of priests too. Your job isn't just to be saved. It's to help others know God.

The people answer together, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do." Then God tells Moses to prepare the people for three days. They're to wash their clothes and set boundaries around the mountain. Anyone who touches the mountain will die. God is about to come down, and He's holy.

On the third day, the mountain explodes with God's presence. "There were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain, and the sound of an exceedingly loud trumpet; and all the people who were in the camp trembled." The whole mountain is covered with smoke, "because the LORD descended on it in fire." The mountain shakes violently. The trumpet blast grows louder and louder. Moses speaks, and God answers him with thunder.

REAL TALK **Is God Scary?**

Sinai is terrifying. Fire, smoke, earthquake, thunder, and a voice that makes a whole nation tremble. Some people only want a God who's cozy and safe, like a friendly grandfather. Sinai shows that God is holy, powerful, and not to be taken lightly. But notice that the God of the fire on the mountain is the same God who carried Israel on eagles' wings. He's not scary because He's cruel; He's awe-inspiring because He's so great and so pure. Hebrews 12:18–24 says that, through Jesus, Christians don't come to a mountain of fire and fear, but to a city of joy, and to Jesus, who brings us near. God's holiness is still real. But in Jesus, it's not a threat. It's a welcome.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Covenant Treaties**

Scholars have noticed that the covenant at Sinai follows a pattern similar to ancient treaties between great kings and smaller nations, especially Hittite

treaties from the second millennium BC. Those treaties usually began by naming the great king, then reviewed the history of what he had done for the smaller nation, then listed the obligations of loyalty, then gave blessings and curses, and called for the treaty to be stored and read regularly. Exodus 20 begins the same way: I am the LORD your God (the King's name), who brought you out of Egypt (the history), and then the commands (the obligations). God speaks in a language His people would have understood: He is their great King, and they belong to Him.

Then God speaks the Ten Commandments. In Hebrew they're called the Ten Words. Before He gives a single command, God reminds the people who He is: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." The commandments aren't a ladder to climb up to God. They're the way of life for people God has already rescued. They're not rules to make you a slave. They're instructions for how free people live.

BACKGROUND CHECK **How Do You Count to Ten?**

Exodus doesn't number the commandments, and different traditions count them differently. Jewish tradition often treats "I am the LORD your God" as the first Word and combines no other gods and no idols as the second. Catholic and Lutheran tradition, following Augustine, combines no other gods and no idols as the first commandment and splits the commandment against coveting into two. Most Protestant and Orthodox traditions treat no other gods as the first and no idols as the second. All of them include the same content. This book follows the most common Protestant numbering.

BACKGROUND CHECK **1. No Other Gods**

"You shall have no other gods before me." This was radical in a world with hundreds of gods. Today you probably won't be tempted to worship Ra or Baal. But a god is whatever you trust most, love most, or can't live without. It might be popularity, success, a relationship, money, your phone, your appearance, or your own comfort. Martin Luther said that whatever your heart clings to and relies on, that's really your god. Here's a test: what do you

think about when your mind is free? What would devastate you if you lost it? God doesn't want to be one of many priorities. He wants to be first, because He's the only one who can carry the weight of your whole life.

BACKGROUND CHECK **2. No Idols**

"You shall not make for yourselves an idol." The first commandment is about worshiping the right God. The second is about worshiping Him the right way. Israel wasn't to make any image to represent God, because no created thing can capture Him, and because idols can be controlled, carried, and manipulated. God can't. It's also easy to make mental idols: a version of God shaped the way we want Him to be, who agrees with us about everything. The real God sometimes surprises us, challenges us, and says no. As 1 John 5:21 says, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols."

BACKGROUND CHECK **3. Don't Misuse God's Name**

"You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God." This is about more than swearing, though it includes using God's name as a curse word or a careless expression. In the ancient world, people swore oaths in the name of a god, so misusing God's name included lying while claiming God's backing. Today that might look like using God to win an argument, saying God told me so to manipulate someone, or calling yourself a Christian while living in a way that makes God look bad. God's name represents who He is. Treat it the way you'd want someone to treat the name of someone you love.

BACKGROUND CHECK **4. Remember the Sabbath**

"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy." Six days you work, but the seventh is a day of rest for everyone, including servants, foreigners, and even animals. The reason is creation: God worked six days and rested on the seventh. (In Deuteronomy 5:15, the reason given is the exodus: you were slaves, and slaves never got a day off.) Christians differ on how this applies today. Many keep Sunday, the day of Jesus' resurrection, as a day of worship and rest; others observe Saturday; others see the principle of regular rest and worship as what carries forward. Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." For overworked, overscheduled, always-online

teens, a weekly day to rest, worship, and unplug may be one of the most countercultural and healthy things you can do.

BACKGROUND CHECK **5. Honor Your Parents**

"Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land." Paul notes this is the first commandment with a promise attached (Ephesians 6:2–3). To honor means to treat as weighty, to respect and value. For teens, it means things like speaking respectfully, obeying in the things that matter, listening even when you disagree, and caring for them as they get older. But honoring your parents never means letting them abuse you or helping them do something seriously wrong. If a parent or anyone in your home is hurting you, you can honor God by telling a trusted adult, like a teacher, counselor, or pastor. In the United States, you can call or text the Childhelp hotline at 1-800-422-4453.

BACKGROUND CHECK **6. Don't Murder**

"You shall not murder." Human life is sacred, because every person is made in God's image (Genesis 9:6). But Jesus took this commandment deeper. He said that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister, or calls them a fool, is in danger of judgment (Matthew 5:21–22). Murder starts in the heart, with contempt, hatred, and the belief that another person doesn't matter. That includes cruel words, online pile-ons, and wishing someone were dead. The commandment also invites us to protect life: standing up for the vulnerable, the unborn, the elderly, the bullied. If you're having thoughts of hurting someone else, or yourself, please tell a trusted adult today, or call or text 988 in the United States.

BACKGROUND CHECK **7. Don't Commit Adultery**

"You shall not commit adultery." Adultery means sex with someone other than your spouse, breaking a marriage covenant. God's design is for sex to be a gift within marriage, a lifelong covenant of faithfulness. Jesus again went deeper: "everyone who gazes at a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart." That includes things like pornography, which can be deeply addictive and distorts how we see real people. If you're

struggling with pornography, you're not alone and you're not beyond help; talk to a trusted adult or a pastor. And if anyone, including a boyfriend or girlfriend, pressures you to send sexual images or do anything sexual you don't want to do, that's not love. It's wrong, and in many cases it's a crime. Tell a trusted adult.

BACKGROUND CHECK **8. Don't Steal**

"You shall not steal." This includes shoplifting and taking things that aren't yours, but also cheating on tests, pirating music or movies, plagiarizing a paper, or wasting an employer's time. In Exodus 21:16, kidnapping a person to sell them, the ultimate theft, carries the death penalty. Paul gives a positive version: "Let him who stole steal no more; but rather let him labor, producing with his hands something that is good, that he may have something to give to him who has need." The opposite of stealing isn't just not taking. It's working hard and giving generously.

BACKGROUND CHECK **9. Don't Lie About Others**

"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor." Originally this was about lying in court, which could ruin or even end someone's life. Today it covers gossip, spreading rumors, posting things about people that aren't true, screenshotting out of context, and exaggerating to make someone look bad. Words can destroy reputations in minutes, and online they can last forever. Before you share something about someone, ask: Is it true? Is it necessary? Is it kind? Would I say it to their face?

BACKGROUND CHECK **10. Don't Covet**

"You shall not covet your neighbor's house." Coveting means wanting what belongs to someone else so badly that it eats at you. It's the only commandment that's entirely about what goes on inside you, and it's often the root of breaking the others. It's also especially hard in an age of social media, where you can see everyone's best moments, vacations, clothes, and relationships all day long. Comparison is the fuel of coveting. Paul says covetousness is idolatry (Colossians 3:5), and he also says he learned to be content in any situation (Philippians 4:11). Gratitude is one of the best

weapons against coveting. Try thanking God for three specific things every time you feel the pull of comparison.

After God speaks, the people are terrified. They see the thunder and lightning, hear the trumpet, and see the mountain in smoke, and they tremble and stand at a distance. They say to Moses, "Speak with us yourself, and we will listen; but don't let God speak with us, lest we die." Moses tells them, "Don't be afraid, for God has come to test you, and that his fear may be before you, that you won't sin." Then "the people stayed at a distance, and Moses came near to the thick darkness where God was."

REAL TALK **Is the Law Still for Us?**

Christians agree that the Ten Commandments still matter, but they explain the connection differently. Many traditions distinguish between the moral law, which still applies, and the ceremonial and civil laws of ancient Israel, which were fulfilled in Jesus or applied only to Israel as a nation. Others emphasize that Christians are under the new covenant and the law of Christ, and that the moral teaching of the Ten Commandments is repeated and deepened in the New Testament. Jesus said, "I didn't come to destroy, but to fulfill." He summed up the whole law in two commands: love God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37–39). The first four commandments show how to love God; the last six show how to love people. And no one keeps them perfectly. That's why we need the One who did.

REAL TALK **Why Rules?**

Some people think of God's commands like a strict parent's list of don'ts, designed to keep you from having fun. But think about the rules of a game. Without them, there's no game, just chaos. Or think about the lines on a highway; they don't take away your freedom to drive, they make it possible to drive safely. The Ten Commandments describe what it looks like to live as a free person who loves God and loves people. Psalm 19:7–8 says the law of the

> LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul, and that it gives joy to the heart. God's commands aren't a cage. They're more like a fence at the edge of a cliff.

KEY VERSE

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me.

Exodus 20:2–3 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. God reminded Israel that He had rescued them before He gave the commandments. Why does that order matter?
2. Which of the Ten Commandments do you find hardest to keep? Why?
3. What are some of the gods or idols people your age are tempted to put first?
4. Jesus said anger and lust break the commandments in the heart. How does that change the way you read them?

TRY THIS *Memorize the Ten Commandments this week. Then pick one and, for seven days, practice its positive opposite: if it's do not steal, give something away; if it's do not covet, write down three things you're grateful for every day.*

CHAPTER 8

Laws and a Tent

Exodus 21–31

After the Ten Commandments, Exodus gives a collection of laws, often called the Book of the Covenant, in chapters 21–23. Then, after the covenant is sealed, God gives Moses detailed instructions for building the tabernacle, in chapters 25–31. These chapters aren't action-packed, and many readers skim them. But they're full of surprises, and they answer a big question: what does it look like for a holy God to live with His people? We'll take a quick tour.

The laws cover all kinds of situations: servants, injuries, property, theft, borrowing, lending, justice in court, and festivals. Some look strange to us, like what to do if your ox gores someone. (If an ox was known to be dangerous and the owner didn't keep it penned, the owner was responsible.) But many of them are startlingly humane for the ancient world.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Ancient Law Codes**
>
> Israel wasn't the only ancient nation with written laws. The most famous is the Code of Hammurabi, a Babylonian king who ruled around 1750 BC; his laws were carved on a black stone pillar now in the Louvre in Paris. Many of Exodus's laws deal with similar situations, and some sound alike. But there are striking differences. In Hammurabi's code, punishments often depended on social class; harming a noble was punished far more harshly than harming a commoner or a slave. Property crimes could bring the death penalty.

Exodus treats human life as far more valuable than property, protects slaves, foreigners, widows, and orphans, and grounds everything in a relationship with God, who had rescued Israel from slavery.

One of the most famous laws is "eye for eye, tooth for tooth." That sounds harsh, but it was actually designed to limit revenge. Remember Lamech in Genesis 4, who killed a man for wounding him? This law said the punishment must fit the crime, no more. It was a principle for judges, not permission for personal revenge, and later Jewish law often applied it through payment rather than physical punishment. Jesus quoted it and went further, teaching His followers not to take revenge at all: "whoever strikes you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Does the Bible Approve of Slavery?**

The laws in Exodus 21 regulate servants and slaves, and that troubles many readers, understandably. Here are some things worth knowing. The most common form of servitude in Israel was debt servitude, where a person who couldn't pay a debt worked it off; Exodus says a Hebrew servant was to go free after six years "without paying anything." Exodus also contains protections that were unusual in its world: a master who killed a slave was to be punished (21:20); a slave whose master knocked out an eye or a tooth went free (21:26–27); and kidnapping someone to sell them was a capital crime (21:16). Still, these laws don't abolish slavery, and some passages, especially concerning foreign slaves, are hard to read. Many Christians understand them as God working with a fallen culture step by step, the way Jesus said divorce laws were given because of the hardness of people's hearts (Matthew 19:8), while the whole story of the Bible, beginning with the exodus itself, points toward freedom. Christians like William Wilberforce and Frederick Douglass drew on the Bible to fight slavery, and the exodus story became a rallying cry for enslaved people and for the civil rights movement; Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of seeing the promised land the night before he was killed. Others, sadly, twisted it to defend slavery, which was a terrible

misuse. If you have questions about this, talk them over with a pastor or youth leader. It's an important question, not an off-limits one.

SAFETY NOTE **Modern Slavery**

Slavery still exists today in the form of human trafficking and forced labor, including in wealthy countries. Exodus 21:16 treats kidnapping someone to sell them as one of the worst crimes there is. If someone is controlling you, forcing you to work or perform sexual acts, keeping your documents, or threatening you or your family, it is not your fault, and help is available. In the United States, call the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888 or text 233733. In an emergency, call 911. Tell a trusted adult, too.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Feasts**

Exodus 23 commands Israel to celebrate three great festivals every year, when all the men would gather before God: the Feast of Unleavened Bread, tied to Passover, in spring; the Feast of Harvest, also called Weeks or Pentecost, fifty days later; and the Feast of Ingathering, also called Tabernacles or Booths, in the fall, when the people lived in temporary shelters to remember the wilderness. These feasts turned Israel's calendar into a cycle of remembering and thanksgiving. They matter for the New Testament too. Jesus died at Passover, and the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, when Jerusalem was packed with worshipers from all over the world (Acts 2:1).

Running through these laws is a powerful theme: care for the vulnerable. "You shall not wrong an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." "You shall not take advantage of any widow or fatherless child." If you lend money to the poor, don't charge them interest. If you take someone's cloak as a guarantee for a loan, give it back before sunset, because it might be the only blanket they have. Even if you find your enemy's donkey wandering away, take it back to him. Israel was to remember what it felt like to

be powerless, and treat the powerless the way God had treated them.

> **REAL TALK** **Remember Egypt**
>
> Over and over, God told Israel to treat foreigners well because "you know the heart of an alien, since you were aliens in the land of Egypt." In other words: you know what it's like to be the outsider, so don't treat others the way you were treated. That's a powerful principle for anyone who's ever felt left out, picked on, or looked down on. When you see a new kid, someone eating alone, or someone being mocked for their accent, their clothes, or where they come from, remember your own Egypt. Remember how it felt. And be the person you needed then.

Then, in chapter 24, God seals the covenant. Moses reads the Book of the Covenant to the people, and they answer, "We will do all that the LORD has said, and be obedient." Moses sprinkles blood from sacrifices on the altar and on the people, and says, "Look, this is the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has made with you concerning all these words." Centuries later, Jesus took a cup at the Last Supper and spoke of the new covenant in His blood.

Then something amazing happens. Moses, Aaron, Aaron's sons, and seventy elders go up the mountain, "They saw the God of Israel." Under His feet was something like a pavement of sapphire, as clear as the sky. And they ate and drank in God's presence. It's a covenant meal, like a picnic with God on the mountain. Then Moses goes up alone into the cloud, where "the appearance of the LORD's glory was like devouring fire on the top of the mountain." He stays there forty days and forty nights.

During those forty days, God gives Moses detailed instructions for building a tabernacle, a portable tent where God will live in the middle of the camp. Here's the purpose in one sentence: "Let them

make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them." The God who came down on the mountain in fire wants to move into the neighborhood.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Willing Hearts**

Notice how God asks for the materials for the tabernacle. He doesn't tax the people or force them. He tells Moses to receive an offering "From everyone whose heart makes him willing." The gold, silver, bronze, fine linen, and precious stones probably came from what the Israelites carried out of Egypt. God had given them the wealth of Egypt, and now He invited them to give some of it back freely for His house. Paul says the same thing about giving in 2 Corinthians 9:7: each person should give what they've decided in their heart, not reluctantly or under pressure, because God loves a cheerful giver. God doesn't need your money. But He loves it when you give from a grateful, willing heart.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Tabernacle**

The tabernacle was a large tent, about 45 feet long and 15 feet wide, set inside a courtyard about 150 feet by 75 feet, surrounded by a linen fence. Inside the courtyard stood a bronze altar for sacrifices and a bronze basin for washing. The tent itself had two rooms. The first, the Holy Place, held a golden lampstand, a table with twelve loaves of bread (the bread of the presence), and a small altar for burning incense. The second room, the Most Holy Place, was a perfect cube, and held only one thing: the ark of the covenant, a gold-covered wooden chest containing the stone tablets of the law. Its lid, called the mercy seat or atonement cover, had two golden cherubim on top. A thick curtain, the veil, separated the two rooms. Only the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place, once a year, on the Day of Atonement. Every detail was designed to teach that God is holy, that He wants to be near His people, and that sin has to be dealt with before people can come near Him.

The tabernacle was full of echoes of Eden. Its lampstand was shaped like a tree. Cherubim were woven into the curtains, just as

cherubim guarded the way back into the garden. The entrance faced east, the direction Adam and Eve went when they left Eden. It was as if God was rebuilding a little Eden in the middle of the camp, a place where He could live with His people again. And from above the mercy seat, God says, "There I will meet with you."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Pointing to Jesus**
>
> The New Testament sees the tabernacle as a picture of Jesus. John writes, "The Word became flesh and lived among us." The Greek word for lived literally means pitched His tent, or tabernacled. Then John adds, "We saw his glory," just as Israel saw God's glory fill the tabernacle (John 1:14). Hebrews says the tabernacle was "a shadow of the good to come," and that Jesus entered the true Most Holy Place in heaven with His own blood (Hebrews 9–10). When Jesus died, the veil in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom (Mark 15:38), showing that the way into God's presence was open. Jesus called Himself the light of the world (the lampstand), the bread of life (the bread of the presence), and the way to the Father (the door). And Paul says Christians themselves, together, are now God's temple, where His Spirit lives (1 Corinthians 3:16).

God also gives instructions for the priests, Aaron and his sons, including their special clothing. The priests were to be ordained in a seven-day ceremony, washed, dressed, anointed with oil, and consecrated with sacrifices, so that they could serve God on the people's behalf. Hebrews says Jesus is our great High Priest, who understands our weaknesses because He was tempted in every way we are, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:14–16). Because of Him, we can come boldly to God. The high priest wore a breastpiece with twelve precious stones engraved with the names of Israel's tribes, so he carried the people over his heart whenever he went into God's presence. On his turban was a gold plate engraved "HOLY TO THE LORD." [BOX] The Day of Atonement

Once a year, on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), the high priest would pass through the veil into the Most Holy Place and sprinkle the blood of a sacrifice on the mercy seat of the ark, to atone for the sins of the whole nation. Leviticus 16 describes it in detail, including a second goat, the scapegoat, which symbolically carried the people's sins away into the wilderness. The word atonement means to cover or to make at one. Hebrews 9:12 says that Christ entered the holy place "through his own blood," once for all, "having obtained eternal redemption." Jewish people still observe Yom Kippur today as the holiest day of the year, with fasting and prayer for forgiveness.

Then God names the artists who will build it all: Bezalel and Oholiab. God says, "I have filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all kinds of workmanship." This is the first time in the Bible anyone is said to be filled with the Spirit of God, and it's an artist.

> **REAL TALK** **Art Matters to God**
>
> Bezalel was filled with God's Spirit to design, carve, cast metal, cut stones, and weave. God cares about creativity and beauty, and He gives artistic gifts. If you love to draw, paint, write, film, design, build, sew, or make music, your gifts aren't second-rate compared to preaching or teaching. They can be ways to worship God and serve others. The tabernacle was beautiful because God is beautiful. Use what He's given you.

Finally, God reminds Israel to keep the Sabbath as a sign between Him and them forever, and He gives Moses the two stone tablets, "written with God's finger." Everything is ready. God's people are rescued, the covenant is sealed, and the plans for God's house are drawn up. What could possibly go wrong?

BACKGROUND CHECK **Where Is the Ark Now?**

The ark of the covenant traveled with Israel through the wilderness, into the promised land, and eventually into Solomon's temple in Jerusalem. Then it disappears from the Bible. Most historians think it was destroyed or taken when the Babylonians burned the temple in 586 BC. Legends say otherwise: one says the prophet Jeremiah hid it in a cave on Mount Nebo (2 Maccabees 2), and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church claims it's kept in a chapel in the city of Aksum, guarded by a single monk, though no one else is allowed to see it. And of course there's the movie Raiders of the Lost Ark. The prophet Jeremiah said that one day no one would even miss the ark (Jeremiah 3:16), because God's presence would be with His people in a new way.

KEY VERSE

Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them.

Exodus 25:8 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Many of the laws in Exodus protect the weak and vulnerable. Who are the vulnerable people around you, and how could you protect them?
2. What do you think about the laws on slavery? What questions do they raise for you, and who could you talk to about them?
3. Why do you think God wanted to live in a tent in the middle of His people, instead of staying on the mountain?
4. How does knowing that Jesus tabernacled among us change the way you think about Him?

TRY THIS *Draw or build a simple model of the tabernacle, using the description in this chapter and Exodus 25–27. Label each part, and next to each one, write how it points to Jesus.*

CHAPTER 9

Show Me Your Glory

Exodus 32–40

While Moses is on the mountain receiving instructions for God's house, the people at the bottom are getting restless. Forty days is a long time. Where is Moses? Is he ever coming back? So they gather around Aaron and say, "Come, make us gods, which shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we don't know what has become of him."

Aaron, who should have stopped them, tells them to bring him their gold earrings. He melts the gold, shapes it into a calf, and the people say, "These are your gods, Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt." Aaron builds an altar and announces, Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD. The next day they offer sacrifices, then sit down to eat and drink and get up to party, which probably included drunken and sexual revelry.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why a Calf?**
>
> In the ancient Near East, bulls and calves were symbols of strength and fertility, and they were connected with gods like the Egyptian bull Apis and the Canaanite god Baal. Some scholars think the calf may have been intended as a pedestal for the invisible God to stand on, rather than an image of God Himself, the way the cherubim on the ark were thought of as God's throne. Either way, it broke the second commandment, which the people had heard only weeks earlier. And notice that Aaron calls the festival a feast to the LORD.

They didn't think they were abandoning God. They were just trying to worship Him their own way, in a form they could see and control. That's what makes idolatry so sneaky.

REAL TALK **When God Seems Slow**

The golden calf happened because the people got tired of waiting. Moses was gone, God felt far away, and they wanted something they could see right now. That's a temptation you'll face too. When God seems slow to answer, it's tempting to grab whatever's within reach: a relationship you know isn't right, a shortcut, a habit that numbs the waiting. Waiting is one of the hardest parts of faith. But Isaiah 40:31 says those who wait on the LORD will renew their strength. The people at the bottom of the mountain didn't know that Moses was about to come down with the plans for a place where God would live among them. Something good was coming. They just couldn't wait for it.

On the mountain, God tells Moses what's happening, and His anger burns. He tells Moses to leave Him alone so He can destroy the people, and He'll make a great nation from Moses instead. It's a test, and Moses passes it. He refuses the offer and pleads for the people. "LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, that you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?" Think of what the Egyptians will say! Remember Your promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel! "So the LORD turned away from the evil which he said he would do to his people."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Does God Change His Mind?**

The Bible says God doesn't change (Malachi 3:6), and that He isn't a man that He should change His mind (Numbers 23:19). But here, and in other places like Jonah 3:10, God relents from a judgment He announced. How do these fit together? Many Christians explain that God's character never changes, but His responses to people do change when they repent or when someone intercedes, because that's exactly what His unchanging character of justice and mercy would lead Him to do. Others emphasize that God speaks in

human terms so we can understand Him. Others see this as a genuine give-and-take relationship that God chose to have with His people. All agree on the big lesson: prayer matters. Moses' prayer made a difference.

Moses goes down the mountain with the two stone tablets in his hands. When he gets close enough to see the calf and the dancing, his anger burns, and he throws the tablets down and smashes them at the foot of the mountain. The covenant has been broken, almost as soon as it was made. Moses burns the calf, grinds it into powder, scatters it on the water, and makes the people drink it.

Then Moses confronts Aaron. What did these people do to you, that you led them into such a great sin? And Aaron gives one of the worst excuses in history. They brought me gold, "and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf." As if the calf just jumped out by itself. It's the Genesis 3 blame game all over again.

SAFETY NOTE **The Levites' Violence**

Then the story turns violent. Moses stands at the entrance of the camp and calls, "Whoever is on the LORD's side, come to me!" The Levites gather to him, and at Moses' command they go through the camp with swords, and about three thousand people are killed. This is a deeply troubling passage, and many readers struggle with it. Some see it as a one-time judgment on open rebellion at the very birth of the nation, similar to how serious treason was treated in ancient times. Others emphasize that it shows how deadly idolatry and rebellion are. Whatever we conclude, it's important to be clear: this is not a pattern for Christians. Jesus told Peter to put away his sword (Matthew 26:52), and the New Testament never calls believers to use violence against people who reject God. If you ever hear anyone use religion to justify hurting people, that's wrong. And if you're being threatened or hurt by anyone, tell a trusted adult or call 911.

The next day, Moses goes back up to God. "Oh, this people have sinned a great sin, and have made themselves gods of gold." And

then he prays one of the most selfless prayers in the Bible: "Yet now, if you will, forgive their sin—and if not, please blot me out of your book which you have written." Moses would rather be erased from God's book than live without his people. Centuries later, Paul would say something similar about his own people (Romans 9:3). And Jesus would go further than either of them. He didn't just offer to be blotted out. He actually took the punishment for His people's sin.

God says He'll still give Israel the land, but He won't go with them, because they're a stubborn people and He might destroy them on the way. That's the worst news yet. What's the point of the promised land without God? The people mourn. They take off their jewelry, the same kind of gold they used for the calf, as a sign of grief and repentance.

Moses sets up a tent outside the camp, called the Tent of Meeting, where anyone who wanted to seek the LORD could go. When Moses went in, the pillar of cloud would come down and stand at the entrance, and the people would watch and worship from their own tents. "The LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend." And Moses' young assistant, Joshua, wouldn't leave the tent. He wanted to stay where God was. Joshua was probably still a young man at this point, and one day he'd lead Israel into the promised land after Moses died. His leadership started here, in a young man's hunger to be near God.

> **REAL TALK** **Friends with God**
>
> Exodus says God spoke with Moses like a friend. That's an amazing thing to say about the God of the burning bush and the fire on the mountain. Jesus said to His disciples, I don't call you servants anymore; I call you friends (John 15:15). Friendship with God doesn't mean God becomes your buddy who

always agrees with you. It means real conversation, honesty, time together, and trust. Like Joshua, who didn't want to leave the tent, the more time you spend with God, the more you'll want to stay.

In the tent, Moses pleads with God again. If You won't go with us, don't send us up from here. How will anyone know we're Your people, unless You go with us? And God answers, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." Then Moses asks for something even bigger: "Please show me your glory."

God's answer is gentle and amazing. "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the LORD's name before you." But "You cannot see my face, for man may not see me and live." So God puts Moses in a gap in the rock, covers him with His hand as He passes by, and then takes His hand away, so that Moses sees His back. "But my face shall not be seen."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Seeing God's Back**

What does it mean that Moses saw God's back? Since God is spirit, Christians have generally understood this as a picture: Moses got a glimpse of God's glory, the afterglow of His passing by, but not the full blaze of His face, which no human could survive. Some readers also find a beautiful truth here: we often see God most clearly when we look back, at where He's already been. Later, Jesus' disciples would see the glory of God in a human face. Paul says God's glory shines "in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6), and John says "We saw his glory" (John 1:14). What Moses longed to see, God showed the world in Jesus.

The next morning, Moses chisels two new stone tablets and goes back up the mountain. God comes down in the cloud and stands with him, and passes in front of him, proclaiming His own name. This is God describing Himself, and it's one of the most important passages in the whole Old Testament: "The LORD! The LORD, a

merciful and gracious God, slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness and truth, keeping loving kindness for thousands, forgiving iniquity and disobedience and sin." God doesn't describe Himself first by His power, but by His mercy. And yet He's also just: He "will by no means clear the guilty." The effects of sin can echo through families for generations, but His love lasts for thousands.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Bible's Favorite Description of God**

Exodus 34:6–7 is quoted or echoed more than almost any other Old Testament passage. You'll hear it in Numbers 14:18, Nehemiah 9:17, Psalms 86:15, 103:8, and 145:8, Joel 2:13, and Jonah 4:2, where the prophet complains that he knew God was gracious and merciful and would forgive Nineveh. The Hebrew word translated loving kindness is chesed, a rich word that means loyal, covenant love that never gives up. Notice the proportion: God's punishment reaches to the third and fourth generation, but His love to the thousandth. Mercy outweighs judgment. If you want to know what God is like, start here. And if you want to see what it looks like in a person, look at Jesus.

Moses bows to the ground and worships. Then he asks God once more to go with the people, forgive their sin, and take them as His own. And God answers by making a new covenant with them, promising to do wonders never seen before in any nation. And God renews the covenant, rewriting the Ten Commandments on the new tablets. Moses stays on the mountain another forty days and nights, without food or water. When he comes down, he doesn't know it, but his face is shining because he's been talking with God. The people are afraid to come near him. So after he speaks with them, Moses puts a veil over his face, and takes it off whenever he goes in to speak with God. Paul uses this story in 2 Corinthians 3 to say that in Christ, the veil is taken away, and "we all, with unveiled face

seeing the glory of the Lord as in a mirror, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Moses' Horns**

In the Latin Bible used in the Middle Ages, the Hebrew word for shone was translated as having horns, because the Hebrew word for rays of light is related to the word for horn. That's why some medieval and Renaissance art, including Michelangelo's famous statue of Moses in Rome, shows Moses with two small horns on his head. It's a reminder that translation matters, and why careful study of the original languages is so valuable.

The last six chapters of Exodus describe the people actually building the tabernacle, and they're mostly a repeat of chapters 25–31, with one big difference: now the plans become reality. Moses asks for offerings, and the people respond so generously, "everyone whose heart stirred him up," that the craftsmen have to tell Moses, "The people have brought much more than enough." Moses has to tell them to stop giving. That's probably the only time in history a building campaign had to be shut down because people gave too much. And notice that both men and women brought gifts and worked on the project; skilled women spun the yarn and goat hair with their own hands.

REAL TALK **A Second Chance**

Notice the contrast. In chapter 32, the people gave their gold to make an idol. In chapter 35, they give their gold to build God's house. Same people, same gold, completely different purpose. After the golden calf, Israel deserved to be destroyed. Instead, God forgave them and let them build the place where He would live with them. God's grace gave them a second chance to use their gifts for Him. Whatever you've used your time, money, talents, or body for in the past, God offers you a fresh start. What you once gave to idols, you can now give to Him.

Bezalel and Oholiab and the skilled workers make everything exactly as God commanded: the tent, the ark, the table, the lampstand, the altars, the priests' clothes. When it's all finished, "Moses saw all the work, and behold, they had done it as the LORD had commanded." And Moses blessed them, the way God blessed His creation when it was finished. On the first day of the first month, one year after the exodus, Moses sets up the tabernacle and puts everything in place. "So Moses finished the work."

And then the moment the whole book has been building toward: "the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the LORD's glory filled the tabernacle." The glory is so heavy that even Moses can't go in. The God who came down on the mountain in fire has come down to live among His people. From then on, whenever the cloud lifted from the tabernacle, Israel set out on their journey, and when it stayed, they stayed. "For the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and there was fire in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel, throughout all their journeys."

REAL TALK **Following the Cloud**

Israel didn't decide when to move. They watched the cloud. When it lifted, they packed up and went. When it stayed, they stayed, whether for a night or for a year (Numbers 9:22). That must have been frustrating sometimes, especially for people who liked to plan ahead. But it meant they never had to wonder whether they were going the right way. Christians don't have a visible cloud today, but God still guides His people through His Word, through prayer, through the Holy Spirit, through wise counsel from other believers, and through the circumstances He opens and closes. Following God isn't about having every answer in advance. It's about staying close enough to Him to notice when He moves.

Exodus began with Israel enslaved in Egypt, building cities for Pharaoh. It ends with Israel free in the wilderness, building a house

for God. They've gone from serving a cruel king to serving the true King. And the King has moved in.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Exodus in One Breath**

Here's the whole book in a few sentences. Jacob's family grew into a great nation in Egypt, and a new Pharaoh enslaved them and tried to kill their sons. God heard their cry, called Moses at a burning bush, and revealed His name. Through ten plagues, He showed that He alone is God. On the night of Passover, the blood of a lamb protected Israel's firstborn, and they walked out free. God split the sea, fed them with bread from heaven, and brought them to Mount Sinai, where He gave them His law and made them His people. They broke the covenant almost immediately with the golden calf, but God forgave them, showed Moses His glory, and came to live among them in the tabernacle. Exodus is the story of a God who rescues, who makes covenant, and who comes to dwell with His people. And it's a preview of what He would do for the whole world in Jesus.

KEY VERSE

The LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, "The LORD! The LORD, a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness and truth, keeping loving kindness for thousands, forgiving iniquity and disobedience and sin; and who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, and on the children's children, on the third and on the fourth generation."

Exodus 34:6–7 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. The Israelites made the golden calf because they got tired of waiting for Moses. What are you tempted to do when God seems slow?
2. Moses prayed for people who had badly let him down. Who could you pray for, even though they've hurt or disappointed you?
3. In Exodus 34:6–7, God describes Himself. Which part of that description means the most to you right now?
4. The book ends with God's glory filling the tabernacle. What do you think it means for God to live among His people today?

TRY THIS *Memorize Exodus 34:6. Then look up Psalm 103:8, Joel 2:13, and Jonah 4:2, and see how the Bible keeps coming back to it. Write it on a card and keep it somewhere you'll see it every day.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

Exodus ends with a cloud of glory filling a tent in the desert. God has rescued His people, made a covenant with them, and moved in. But the story isn't finished. The people keep failing. The tent has to be entered carefully, through blood and sacrifice. Even Moses can't go in when the glory fills it. Exodus leaves you longing for something more: a rescue from something deeper than Pharaoh, and a way to live close to God without fear.

Jewish readers have celebrated the exodus for more than three thousand years as the great act of God's love for Israel, and the prophets looked forward to a new exodus, when God would rescue His people again (Isaiah 43:16–19). The New Testament writers, who were Jewish themselves, believed that new exodus had come in Jesus. Paul calls Jesus "our Passover" (1 Corinthians 5:7). John the Baptist called Him "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" Jesus called Himself the true bread from heaven (John 6:32–35). And John says that the Word "became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14); the Greek word means He pitched His tent, or tabernacled, among us. In Jesus, God came to live with His people in a whole new way.

Here's what the Bible says about where that story leads, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He loves you more than you can imagine. Like Israel in Egypt, you're seen and heard by Him.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We're all slaves to something.

Israel was enslaved to Pharaoh. The Bible says all of us have turned from God, and that sin enslaves us in ways we can't escape on our own.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus is the Lamb.

On the first Passover, the blood of a lamb protected every house where it was placed. Jesus died on the cross as our Passover Lamb, and rose again.

> *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Israel didn't free themselves; God did. Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. Thank You for loving me first. Thank You that Jesus died for me as my Passover Lamb and rose again. I believe You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me and set me free. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Thank You for hearing me, the way You heard Your people in Egypt. Lead me the way You led them, and live with me every day. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Exodus straight through, a few chapters a day. Then read the Gospel of John, and watch for the Lamb, the bread, the I AM sayings, and the Word who tabernacled among us.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Remember who set you free. Israel was told to remember the exodus every year. Start each day by thanking God for setting you free, and use your freedom to serve Him and others.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Exodus was written so that every generation would know what God did and who He is. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Exodus is right, the God who heard slaves crying in Egypt hears you too.

The LORD is my strength and song. He has become my salvation. This is my God, and I will praise him; my father's God, and I will exalt him.

Exodus 15:2 (WEB)

THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS

The King Who Draws Near

Leviticus, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

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THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Who Draws Near: The Book of Leviticus, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

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In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You know the saying by now: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” But here’s a confession. Most people don’t think they know Leviticus. They think they know they don’t want to. Leviticus is where read-the-Bible-in-a-year plans go to die. Goats, grain, blood, mold, skin diseases, and long lists of rules. What could that possibly have to do with you?

More than you’d think. Leviticus answers a question that sits underneath the whole Bible: how can a perfectly holy God live right in the middle of messed-up people without destroying them? Exodus ended with God moving into a tent in the middle of Israel’s camp. Leviticus is the house rules, and it turns out they’re mostly about grace. They show how guilty people can be forgiven, how unclean people can be made clean, and how outsiders can be brought near.

Leviticus is also where you’ll find one of the most famous sentences ever written, the one Jesus called the second greatest commandment: love your neighbor as yourself. It’s where the Day of Atonement and the scapegoat come from, and the Year of Jubilee, when debts were canceled and slaves went free. And when the New Testament explains what Jesus did on the cross, it keeps reaching for the language of Leviticus.

So don’t skip it. Read it slowly, ask hard questions, and watch for the God who keeps saying, in one way or another, I want to be with you.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Leviticus in nine chapters: the offerings (Leviticus 1–7), the priests and the tragedy of Nadab and Abihu (8–10), clean and unclean (11–15), the Day of Atonement (16–17), the boundaries of chapter 18 and 20, the great love chapter (19), holy priests and holy days (21–24), the Jubilee and the covenant blessings and warnings (25–27), and finally how Christians read Old Testament law today. The detailed ritual instructions are summarized more briefly than the big ideas, so you can see the whole picture.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what kind of book Leviticus is, where it fits, and the world it came from. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as why some foods were unclean, and how much of the Old Testament law applies to Christians today, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. Leviticus also talks frankly about sexual sin and abuse. When it does, you'll find a box with a safety note. This book quotes Leviticus in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the third book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Leviticus raises questions teens will ask. I've presented the main explanations of the clean and unclean food laws fairly (hygiene, symbolism, separation from pagan practice, and the order of creation), and I've laid out the main Christian approaches to Old Testament law, including the traditional moral, civil, and ceremonial distinction, the view that the whole law is fulfilled in Christ, and the Jewish understanding of Torah as still binding. I'd encourage you to share your own church's view with your teen, and to explain why other Christians see it differently.

Leviticus 18 and 20 address sexual sin, including incest and the abuse of family members. These chapters are summarized briefly and age-appropriately, without graphic detail. A safety box tells readers that sexual abuse is always wrong, that it is never the victim's fault, and that they should tell a trusted adult, with the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline (1-800-422-4453). The harsh penalties in Leviticus 20 are explained in their historical setting,

with the reminder that Christians do not carry out those penalties today.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how the New Testament, especially the letter to the Hebrews, sees the sacrifices, the priesthood, and the Day of Atonement fulfilled in Jesus, while acknowledging that Jewish readers continue to read Leviticus in their own rich ways. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will meet in Leviticus a holy God who makes a way for sinners to come near.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

The Priests' Handbook

The name Leviticus comes from the Levites, the tribe of Israel that served at the tabernacle, and from Aaron's family within it, who were the priests. In Hebrew the book is called Vayikra, which means and He called, from its first words: the LORD called to Moses. That's a good way to think of the whole book. It isn't just a manual. It's God calling His people to come close.

Part Three of the Torah

Leviticus is the third of the five books of Moses, the Torah, and it sits right in the middle of them. Exodus ends with the glory of God filling the tabernacle. Leviticus picks up immediately, with God speaking from that tent. All of it takes place while Israel is camped at Mount Sinai, over about a month. Numbers then continues the journey through the wilderness.

The Big Problem

At the end of Exodus, even Moses couldn't enter the tent when God's glory filled it. That's the problem Leviticus solves. God is holy, which means utterly pure, set apart, and full of life. People are sinful, and they live in a world marked by death and decay. If God is going to live among them, something has to bridge the gap. Leviticus is God's answer: sacrifices to deal with sin, priests to stand between, and purity laws that teach Israel what it means to live near a holy God.

Three Key Words

Three words keep showing up in Leviticus. Holy means set apart for God, belonging to Him. Clean and unclean describe whether a person or thing is fit to come near God's presence; being unclean usually isn't a sin, just a temporary condition. Atonement means covering or wiping clean, making things right between God and people. If you understand those three, Leviticus starts to make sense.

Who Wrote Leviticus?

Leviticus repeatedly says that the LORD spoke to Moses, and Jewish and Christian tradition has long held that Moses wrote it. Many scholars believe it was assembled later from priestly sources, perhaps edited during or after the exile. Others hold that Moses is the main author, with later editing. Christians with different views agree that Leviticus is God's Word.

The World It Came From

Every ancient nation had temples, priests, and sacrifices. Many believed the gods needed food, and that rituals could control them. Leviticus uses similar practices but changes their meaning. Israel's God doesn't need feeding. He can't be manipulated. Instead, He gives the sacrifices to His people as a gift, so they can be forgiven and come near. And unlike many neighbors, Israel's laws protected the poor, foreigners, and the disabled, and forbade child sacrifice.

Hard Passages and Safety Notes

Leviticus talks openly about sexual sin and includes harsh penalties. Including a law in the Bible doesn't mean Christians apply it the same way today, and we'll talk about why. When we come to these

passages, you'll find a safety box. Here's what they say: abuse is always wrong, it's never the victim's fault, and if something like it is happening to you or a friend, tell a trusted adult. In the United States you can call or text the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453, or call 911 in an emergency.

The Map

Chapter 1 (Leviticus 1–7): The five offerings.

Chapter 2 (Leviticus 8–10): Priests and strange fire.

Chapter 3 (Leviticus 11–15): Clean and unclean.

Chapter 4 (Leviticus 16–17): The Day of Atonement.

Chapter 5 (Leviticus 18, 20): Boundaries that protect.

Chapter 6 (Leviticus 19): Love your neighbor.

Chapter 7 (Leviticus 21–24): Holy priests and holy days.

Chapter 8 (Leviticus 25–27): Jubilee.

Chapter 9: Reading Leviticus today.

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CHAPTER 1

Gifts on the Fire

Leviticus 1–7

Leviticus begins with a voice from a tent. At the end of Exodus, the cloud of God's glory filled the tabernacle so completely that even Moses couldn't go in. Now, from inside that tent, God calls Moses and starts explaining how ordinary people can come near. The first answer is offerings. Chapters 1–7 describe five kinds, and if you've ever wondered why the Bible spends so much time on animals and altars, this is where it starts.

Here's the first thing to notice: the instructions begin with when anyone brings an offering. Not when anyone has to. Some offerings were required, but the tone is invitation. God is telling His people how to give Him gifts, how to be forgiven, and how to share a meal in His presence.

The first offering is the burnt offering (chapter 1). The worshiper brought an animal from the herd or flock, a bull, a sheep, or a goat, without any defect. If he was poor, he could bring two birds instead. Then came a simple, powerful action. "He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him." The hand on the head said, this animal stands in for me. Then the animal was killed, and the whole thing was burned on the altar, rising as smoke, "a pleasant aroma to the LORD." Nothing was kept back. It was total surrender.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Does Atonement Mean?**

The Hebrew word for atonement, kipper, probably means to cover or to wipe clean. Some scholars connect it to a ransom price paid to set someone free. Either way, atonement is about repairing the relationship between God and people when sin has broken it. English translators in the 1500s needed a word for it and basically invented one: at-one-ment, being made at one with God. When you see the word in Leviticus, think of reconciliation, two parties who were separated being brought back together.

The second offering is the grain offering (chapter 2). Not every gift involved an animal. A worshiper could bring fine flour mixed with oil and frankincense, or baked bread without yeast. A handful went on the fire, and the rest went to feed the priests. Every grain offering had to be seasoned with salt, which the text calls the salt of the covenant. Salt preserves things, so it was a picture of a lasting relationship. Ancient people sealed agreements by sharing a salted meal.

The third is the peace offering, sometimes called the fellowship offering (chapter 3). This was the happiest one. Only the fat and certain organs were burned for God; the priest got a share, and the worshiper and his family ate the rest in a feast. Imagine it: a barbecue in God's front yard, with God as the host. People brought peace offerings to say thank you, to keep a promise, or just because they wanted to. It's a picture of friendship with God.

REAL TALK **Why So Gross?**

Let's be honest. The sacrifices sound messy and violent. Blood was splashed on the altar. Animals died. If you'd been there, the smell and the sound would have stuck with you. But maybe that was the point. Sin isn't a small thing that can be fixed by saying oops. It destroys lives and relationships and leads to death. The sacrifices made that visible. Every time an Israelite laid a hand on an animal and watched it die, they learned that sin is serious, that it costs a

> life, and that God had provided a substitute. It's also worth knowing that, for most Israelites, eating meat at all was rare, and much of it happened at these sacred meals. Sacrifice was woven into everyday life in a way that's hard for us to picture.

The fourth is the sin offering (chapter 4), sometimes translated purification offering. This one dealt with sins committed unintentionally, by mistake or without realizing it. That might surprise you. Why would you need forgiveness for something you didn't mean to do? Because sin isn't just about intentions. It leaves a stain, on you and on the world around you, even when you didn't see it coming. The bigger the person's responsibility, the bigger the offering: a bull for the high priest or for the whole nation, a goat for a leader, a female goat or lamb for an ordinary person. And the chapter keeps repeating a wonderful promise: the priest shall make atonement for them, "and they shall be forgiven."

The fifth is the guilt offering, also called the reparation offering (chapters 5–6). This was for sins that harmed something or someone, like cheating a neighbor, lying about lost property, or misusing something holy. Here, forgiveness came with restitution. The guilty person had to pay back what he took, plus a fifth extra, and then bring an offering to God. Saying sorry to God wasn't enough if you hadn't made it right with the person you hurt. Before any offering, the sinner had to own up. "He shall confess that in which he has sinned."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Five Offerings at a Glance**
>
> Burnt offering: total surrender to God; the whole animal burned. Grain offering: a gift of thanks from the harvest; shared with the priests. Peace offering: a fellowship meal with God, the priests, and the worshiper's family. Sin or purification offering: cleansing and forgiveness for unintentional sins. Guilt or reparation offering: forgiveness plus repayment when someone was

wronged. Christians see all five fulfilled in Jesus, who gave Himself completely, who is the bread of life, who makes peace between us and God, and who paid for our sins.

REAL TALK **Making It Right**

The guilt offering teaches something we often skip. If you've stolen something, lied about someone, or broken something that belongs to somebody else, God's forgiveness is real and free. But following Him also means going back and making it right where you can: returning what you took, telling the truth, paying for what you broke. Jesus said the same thing: if you remember that someone has something against you, go and be reconciled first (Matthew 5:23–24). It's hard and humbling. It's also one of the most freeing things you'll ever do.

REAL TALK **Giving Your Best**

Notice that the animals had to be without defect. You couldn't bring God the sick sheep you were going to lose anyway. Centuries later, the prophet Malachi scolded people for doing exactly that, offering blind and lame animals and keeping the best for themselves (Malachi 1:8). The principle still applies. It's easy to give God our leftovers: leftover time after everything else, leftover money after we've bought what we want, leftover energy at the end of the day. Leviticus pushes us to give Him the first and the best. That might mean praying before you pick up your phone in the morning, giving part of your paycheck before you spend it, or using your best gifts to serve others. And notice the grace built in too. The poor could bring birds or flour. God never asked for what people didn't have. He asked for their hearts.

Chapters 6–7 go back over the same offerings, this time with instructions for the priests: who could eat what, where, and when. One small detail stands out. "Fire shall be kept burning on the altar continually; it shall not go out." Day and night, the fire on the altar never stopped. The way to God was always open, but it was always costly.

It's worth picturing what this looked like for an ordinary Israelite family. Say a farmer has a bumper crop, or his child recovers from a dangerous fever. He picks out the best young ram from his flock, the one he could have sold for a good price, and leads it to the tabernacle. His family comes with him. At the entrance, he presses his hand on the animal's head, and maybe says a prayer of thanks. A priest helps him with the sacrifice. Part of the animal is burned, the smoke rising into the sky. The priest gets his share. And then the family sits down together near the tent and eats a feast, the kind of meal they might only have a few times a year, in the presence of the God who rescued them. That was worship. It was costly, physical, communal, and joyful all at once.

Now picture a different day. The same farmer realizes he's cheated his neighbor in a land deal. He goes to his neighbor, admits it, and pays him back with an extra fifth on top. Then he brings a ram to the tabernacle as a guilt offering, confesses his sin, and hears the priest declare that he is forgiven. He walks home lighter. That's what the offerings were for: real people, real sin, real gratitude, and a real God who made a way.

What did all this mean? Some Israelites, like people in any religion, probably thought of the sacrifices as a transaction: give God an animal, get forgiveness, carry on. The prophets later blasted that attitude. God says through Hosea that He desires mercy, not sacrifice (Hosea 6:6), and David prays that God wants a broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17). The sacrifices were never magic. They were a gift from God, a way for a humble and trusting heart to come near.

The New Testament takes all of this and points it at Jesus. The letter to the Hebrews says, "apart from shedding of blood there is no

remission," but it also says the animal sacrifices could never fully solve the problem, because they had to be repeated over and over. Jesus is the sacrifice that finished it. Paul uses the same picture for us, urging Christians to present their bodies "a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God." The altar fire now burns in a different way: in lives that belong completely to Him.

KEY VERSE

He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him.

Leviticus 1:4 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God made forgiveness so visible and so costly in Leviticus?
2. Which of the five offerings stands out most to you, and why?
3. The guilt offering required paying back what was taken. Is there anything you need to make right with someone?
4. What would it look like for you to be a living sacrifice this week?

TRY THIS *Make a chart of the five offerings with three columns: what was offered, what it meant, and how it points to Jesus. Use Hebrews 10:1–14 to help you fill in the last column.*

CHAPTER 2

Strange Fire

Leviticus 8–10

Chapters 8–10 are the only real story in Leviticus, and it's a dramatic one. It starts with a week-long ordination, peaks with fire from heaven, and ends in tragedy.

In chapter 8, Moses gathers the whole community at the entrance to the tent and ordains Aaron and his four sons as priests, just as God commanded in Exodus 29. He washes them with water. He dresses Aaron in the high priest's clothes: the tunic, the robe, the ephod, the breastpiece with its twelve stones for the twelve tribes, and the turban with a gold plate engraved Holy to the LORD. "He poured some of the anointing oil on Aaron's head, and anointed him, to sanctify him." Then Moses offers sacrifices and puts some of the blood on Aaron's right ear, right thumb, and right big toe. It's a strange-sounding ritual, but the meaning is beautiful: his ears to listen to God, his hands to serve God, and his feet to walk in God's ways. For seven days the priests stay at the entrance of the tent.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **What Did Priests Do?**
>
> Israel's priests were go-betweens. They represented the people to God by offering sacrifices and praying for them, and they represented God to the people by blessing them and teaching them His law (Leviticus 10:11). They also acted a bit like health inspectors, examining skin diseases and mold, and like judges in difficult cases. All priests came from Aaron's family, part of the

> tribe of Levi. The rest of the Levites helped care for the tabernacle. The New Testament says Jesus is now our great High Priest, and also that all believers are a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9), people who represent God to the world and bring the world's needs to God.

On the eighth day, the priests begin their work. Aaron offers a sin offering and a burnt offering for himself first, then offerings for the people. Then comes the moment everything has been building toward. "Moses and Aaron went into the Tent of Meeting, and came out, and blessed the people; and the LORD's glory appeared to all the people." And then: "Fire came out from before the LORD, and consumed the burnt offering and the fat upon the altar. When all the people saw it, they shouted, and fell on their faces." God accepts the offering. The system works. A holy God and a sinful people can meet.

Then, almost immediately, it goes horribly wrong. "Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer, and put fire in it, and laid incense on it, and offered strange fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them." And the same fire that had just consumed the offering comes out again. "Fire came out from before the LORD, and devoured them, and they died before the LORD."

What did they do wrong? The text doesn't spell it out, and Jewish and Christian interpreters have offered several ideas. Maybe they took fire from somewhere other than the altar. Maybe they went where only the high priest could go, or at the wrong time. Maybe they were drunk; right after this story, God tells Aaron that priests must not drink wine or strong drink before serving (10:8–9), which some see as a clue. Maybe it was pride, trying to grab a moment of glory on the biggest day in Israel's history. What's clear is that they

did something God had not commanded, in the place where God's holiness was most intense.

REAL TALK **Is God Scary?**

This story can be hard to read. Two young men die instantly for what looks like a worship mistake. Does that mean God is harsh, or looking for a reason to strike people down? Here's another way to see it. Holiness is like the sun. It's the source of light and life, and without it nothing on earth would survive. But you can't treat it casually. Nadab and Abihu were priests who had been told exactly how to approach, and they ignored it on day one. The point of the story isn't that God is touchy. It's that He is real, and that coming near Him is only possible on His terms. That's why the good news of Jesus is such good news: He made a way for us to come near without fear.

Moses explains it with words from God. "I will show myself holy to those who come near me, and before all the people I will be glorified." And then comes one of the saddest lines in the Bible: "Aaron held his peace." A father who has just watched two of his sons die says nothing. Moses tells Aaron and his remaining sons not to tear their clothes and mourn publicly while they're on duty, but the whole community is allowed to grieve for them.

SAFETY NOTE **When Someone Dies**

If you've lost a family member or friend suddenly, you might relate to Aaron's silence. Grief can leave you numb, angry, or confused, sometimes all at once. That's normal. It helps to talk with someone you trust, like a parent, pastor, school counselor, or grief group. If you ever feel hopeless or think about hurting yourself, call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time. God doesn't need you to hold your peace. The psalms are full of people who cried out to Him in grief, and Jesus Himself wept at a friend's grave (John 11:35).

REAL TALK **Worship Your Way?**

Some people say it doesn't matter how you worship God, as long as you're sincere. Nadab and Abihu were probably sincere about something. But they

did what God had not commanded. That doesn't mean every worship style has to look the same. The New Testament gives churches lots of freedom: different music, different languages, different buildings, different times. Christians from different traditions worship in very different ways. But it does mean worship is about God, not about us. We come on His terms, through Jesus, honoring what He's said. The question isn't whether worship feels exciting or impressive. It's whether it honors the God who is actually there. Next time you're at church or youth group, ask yourself: am I here to perform, to be entertained, or to meet with God?

The chapter ends with another tense moment. Aaron's surviving sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, fail to eat part of a sin offering the way they were supposed to, and Moses gets angry. But Aaron answers gently: after what happened today, would God really be pleased if I ate it? And Moses accepts that. It's a small, human scene. God's holiness is serious, but He also sees the heart of a grieving father.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Nadab and Abihu Before This**

Nadab and Abihu weren't random priests. They were Aaron's oldest sons, the next in line to lead Israel's worship. Back in Exodus 24, they had gone partway up Mount Sinai with Moses and seventy elders, and the text says they saw the God of Israel and ate and drank in His presence. Few people in history had such a privilege. That makes their story even more sobering. Being close to holy things, growing up in a godly family, or having a spiritual experience doesn't guarantee you'll take God seriously. Every generation, and every person, has to choose to honor Him.

God also gives the priests their job description in this chapter. "You are to make a distinction between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean." That's exactly what the next section of Leviticus is about.

KEY VERSE

Fire came out from before the LORD, and consumed the burnt offering and the fat upon the altar. When all the people saw it, they shouted, and fell on their faces.

Leviticus 9:24 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. The same fire that accepted the offering also destroyed Nadab and Abihu. What does that teach you about God's holiness?
2. Why do you think the Bible doesn't tell us exactly what Nadab and Abihu did wrong?
3. What would it mean to take God seriously without being terrified of Him?
4. Peter says all Christians are priests. What does that mean for how you treat the people around you?

TRY THIS *Look up Hebrews 4:14–16. Write down three differences between Aaron as high priest and Jesus as High Priest. Then use verse 16 as a prayer.*

CHAPTER 3

Clean and Unclean

Leviticus 11–15

If people give up on Leviticus, it's usually here. Chapters 11–15 deal with clean and unclean animals, childbirth, skin diseases, mold on walls, and bodily discharges. It can sound random, or even embarrassing. But there's a logic to it, and once you see it, these chapters say something surprisingly important.

First, a key point: unclean doesn't mean sinful. In Leviticus, a woman who gave birth was unclean for a time. So was anyone who touched a dead body, even when burying a loved one was the right thing to do. Being unclean was a temporary condition, not a moral failure. It mostly meant you couldn't enter the tabernacle until you'd been cleansed, often by washing and waiting until evening. Being clean meant you were ready to come near God. Being holy meant you belonged to Him in a special way. Sin was a separate problem, dealt with by sacrifice and forgiveness.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Holy, Clean, Unclean**
>
> Scholars often picture three zones. Holy is God's zone: the tabernacle, the priests, the offerings. Clean is the normal state of everyday life, people and things free to approach. Unclean describes things touched by death, decay, or disorder, which had to be kept away from the holy. Sin and uncleanness could move things down the scale. Sacrifice and cleansing moved them back

up. The whole system was a giant picture lesson: God is life, and everything connected with death has to be dealt with before you come near Him.

Chapter 11 lists clean and unclean animals. Land animals were clean if they had split hooves and chewed the cud, like cows, sheep, and goats. Pigs, camels, and rabbits were out. Sea creatures needed fins and scales, so no shrimp or lobster. Many birds of prey and scavengers were unclean, along with most insects, though locusts and grasshoppers were allowed. God gives the reason in a sentence that sums up the whole book. "For I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why These Foods?**

People have argued about the food laws for a long time, and there are several main theories. The health theory says the laws protected Israel from disease; pork can carry parasites, and shellfish can spoil fast. But many clean animals carry disease too, and the Bible never gives health as the reason. The symbolic theory, held by some early Jewish and Christian writers, says the animals were living lessons; for example, animals that chew the cud picture someone who thinks deeply about God's word. The separation theory says the laws set Israel apart from its neighbors, some of whom used pigs in pagan rituals. The order-of-creation theory, made famous by anthropologist Mary Douglas, says clean animals fit their category perfectly, like fish with fins and scales, while unclean ones blurred the lines, and that this taught wholeness and order. Many scholars think more than one of these is true. Christians differ on which is most convincing.

Chapter 12 deals with childbirth. After giving birth, a mother was unclean for a period of time, then brought a burnt offering and a sin offering. That doesn't mean having a baby was sinful. Childbirth involves blood, which the Bible connects with life, and a woman's body went through a powerful change. The offering marked her

return to worship. And look at the grace built in: "If she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two young pigeons." Centuries later, Mary and Joseph brought exactly that offering when Jesus was born (Luke 2:24). They were poor.

Chapters 13–14 deal with skin diseases, often translated leprosy, though it covered many conditions, not just what we call leprosy today. A priest examined the person, sometimes isolating them for a week to see whether it spread. If it did, the person was declared unclean. "He shall dwell alone. His dwelling shall be outside of the camp." The same chapters cover mold or mildew in clothes and houses, which the priest also inspected. Chapter 15 deals with bodily discharges, natural and unusual, for both men and women.

REAL TALK **Outside the Camp**

Imagine being told to live outside the camp, to wear torn clothes, and to call out Unclean whenever someone came near. It must have been terribly lonely. Some people today feel like that, because of an illness, a disability, their family's situation, or just the way others treat them at school. Now look at Jesus. A man with leprosy came to Him, and Mark says, "Being moved with compassion, he stretched out his hand, and touched him." By the rules, touching the man should have made Jesus unclean. Instead, the man was made clean. Jesus reversed the direction of contagion. His holiness was more powerful than the man's uncleanness. Who is outside the camp in your world? How could you move toward them?

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Woman Who Touched Jesus**

Leviticus 15 says a woman with an ongoing flow of blood was unclean for as long as it lasted. In Mark 5, we meet a woman who'd had that condition for twelve years. She'd spent everything on doctors and only gotten worse. For twelve years she would have been kept at a distance from worship and, in many ways, from people. She pushed through a crowd and touched the edge of Jesus' clothes, hoping no one would notice. She was healed instantly.

> Jesus stopped, found her, and called her daughter. He didn't just heal her body. He restored her place among God's people, in public, for everyone to see.

These chapters also show why it mattered so much. "Thus you shall separate the children of Israel from their uncleanness, so they will not die in their uncleanness when they defile my tabernacle that is among them." God lived among them. That was the privilege, and that was the danger. You don't wander into a holy place carrying death with you.

> **REAL TALK** **Bodies Matter**
>
> It might feel awkward that the Bible talks about periods, discharges, and skin conditions. But think about what that says. God isn't embarrassed by bodies. He made them. Leviticus doesn't treat the body as dirty or bad; it treats it as something that matters to God. The purity laws dealt with the facts of life in a fallen world, where blood, disease, and death are part of everyday experience. If you've ever felt ashamed of your body, remember that God created it, cares about it, and in Jesus took on a human body Himself. And if something about your health worries you, talk to a parent, a doctor, or a school nurse. That's not shameful. It's wise.

There's one more thread running through these chapters that's easy to miss. Every one of the conditions that made someone unclean was connected in some way with death or the loss of life: a corpse, a dead animal, blood leaving the body, skin that looked like it was wasting away, mold slowly eating into a wall. God is the living God, the source of all life. Death was never part of His original design; it entered the world through sin (Genesis 3). The purity laws kept reminding Israel that the God who lived among them was on the side of life, and that everything touched by death had to be dealt with before coming near Him. That's why it matters so much that Jesus touched lepers, was touched by a bleeding woman, and took

hold of a dead girl's hand (Mark 5:41). Death and uncleanness didn't defeat Him. He defeated them. And when He rose from the dead, He showed that death itself would one day be undone.

So do Christians keep the food laws? The New Testament says no, and it says it clearly. Jesus taught that what goes into a person doesn't make them unclean, and Mark adds a note in his Gospel that Jesus was "making all foods clean." Later, God gave Peter a vision of unclean animals and told him, "What God has cleansed, you must not call unclean." The point was bigger than food: the gospel was for Gentiles too. Many Jewish people today still keep kosher, out of faithfulness to God's commands, and Christians should respect that. But for Christians, the purity laws find their fulfillment in Jesus, who makes people clean from the inside out. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us the sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

KEY VERSE

For I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.

Leviticus 11:45 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between being unclean and being sinful in Leviticus? Why does it matter?
2. Which explanation of the food laws do you find most convincing, and why?
3. Jesus touched the man with leprosy. Who are the people at your school who get treated as outsiders?
4. What does it mean to you that Jesus can make you clean from the inside out?

TRY THIS *Read Mark 1:40–45 and Mark 5:25–34. In both stories, someone unclean meets Jesus. Write down what happens to the uncleanness, and what happens to the person.*

CHAPTER 4

The Day of Atonement

Leviticus 16–17

Leviticus 16 is the center of the book, and many scholars think it's the center of the whole Torah. It describes the most important day of Israel's year, the Day of Atonement, in Hebrew Yom Kippur. Jewish people still observe it today as the holiest day of the year, with fasting, prayer, and repentance.

The chapter opens with a reminder of Nadab and Abihu. The LORD tells Moses to warn Aaron "not to come at just any time into the Most Holy Place within the veil, before the mercy seat which is on the ark; lest he die." The Most Holy Place was the inner room of the tabernacle, where the ark of the covenant sat behind a thick curtain. It was the place where heaven touched earth. Only one person could go in, the high priest, and only on one day a year.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Mercy Seat**
>
> The ark of the covenant was a gold-covered wooden chest holding the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments. Its lid was called the mercy seat, or the atonement cover, with two golden cherubim facing each other above it. God said He would meet with His people there. Think about the picture: God's law inside the box, and on top of it, the place where blood was sprinkled for forgiveness. Mercy literally covered the law. Paul uses the same Greek word for the mercy seat when he says God put Jesus forward as an atoning sacrifice (Romans 3:25).

On this day, Aaron takes off his glorious high priest's robes and puts on plain white linen. He doesn't come in splendor. He comes humbly. First he offers a bull as a sin offering for himself and his family, because the high priest is a sinner too. He fills the Most Holy Place with a cloud of incense, and sprinkles the bull's blood on and in front of the mercy seat.

Then come two goats. Aaron casts lots over them. One is for the LORD; the other is for Azazel, often translated the scapegoat. The first goat is killed as a sin offering for the people, and its blood is brought behind the curtain and sprinkled like the bull's. This cleanses the sanctuary itself from all the uncleanness and rebellion of Israel that had built up over the year.

Then comes the most memorable part. "Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, even all their sins; and he shall put them on the head of the goat, and shall send him away into the wilderness." A man leads the goat out, far away. "The goat shall carry all their iniquities on himself to a solitary land."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who or What Is Azazel?**

The Hebrew word Azazel appears only in this chapter, and nobody is completely sure what it means. Some think it means the goat that goes away, which is where the English word scapegoat comes from. Some think it's the name of a rugged, remote place in the desert. Others, following some ancient Jewish writings, think Azazel was the name of a demon thought to live in the wilderness, so that sin was sent back where it belonged. All the views agree on the main point: the people's sins were removed, carried far away, never to return.

Why two goats? Because sin has two problems. It deserves death, and it pollutes. The first goat showed that sin had to be paid for with a life. The second showed that sin could be taken away completely. Together they paint a picture of total forgiveness. A psalm puts it like this: "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."

> **REAL TALK** **Scapegoats**
>
> Today, a scapegoat is someone blamed for things that aren't their fault. Maybe you've seen it happen in a family, a team, or a group chat. Someone becomes the easy target, the one everybody dumps on. That's the opposite of what Leviticus 16 means. The original scapegoat carried sins willingly provided by God to set people free, not to make one person miserable while everyone else feels better. If you're the one who always gets blamed, that's not okay, and it's worth talking to a trusted adult about. And if you're the one doing the blaming, the cross is a reminder that someone already carried the blame. You don't have to put it on anybody else.

The whole community took part. On the tenth day of the seventh month, they were to humble themselves, which Jewish tradition understood as fasting, and do no work. And then came the promise: "for on this day shall atonement be made for you, to cleanse you. You shall be clean from all your sins before the LORD." Imagine hearing that, once a year, and knowing it was for you.

> **REAL TALK** **Carrying Guilt**
>
> Some people carry guilt for years: something they said, something they did, something nobody else even knows about. They replay it at night. They wonder if God could ever really forgive it. The Day of Atonement was God's way of saying, I don't want you carrying this. Bring it, confess it, and let it go. Once the goat had gone into the wilderness, nobody went looking for it. In the same way, when God forgives you through Jesus, He doesn't keep a file on you, waiting to bring it up again. If you've confessed something to God and

still feel crushed by it, it can help to tell a pastor, youth leader, or trusted Christian friend, and let them remind you of what's true. And if the guilt is about something that hurt someone else, the guilt offering in chapter 5 is a reminder that making it right, where you can, is part of moving forward.

Chapter 17 adds instructions about blood. Israelites were to bring their sacrifices to the tabernacle, not offer them in the fields to goat demons, as some had apparently been doing. And they must never eat blood. God explains why, in one of the most important verses in the Bible for understanding sacrifice. "For the life of the flesh is in the blood. I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement by reason of the life." Blood stands for life. When blood was shed on the altar, a life was given in place of a life.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Blood and Life**

Ancient people understood that when blood drained out of a body, life drained out with it. That's why the Bible treats blood as sacred. Noah was told not to eat meat with its blood (Genesis 9:4), and Jewish kosher practice still drains blood from meat. The early church, at the Jerusalem Council, asked Gentile Christians to avoid blood too, mostly out of respect for their Jewish brothers and sisters (Acts 15:20). When Christians speak of the blood of Jesus, they don't mean anything magical about the liquid. They mean His life, poured out for us.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Yom Kippur Today**

Yom Kippur is still the holiest day of the Jewish year. It falls in September or October. Many Jewish people fast for about twenty-five hours, from sunset to the next nightfall, and spend much of the day in synagogue praying prayers of confession and repentance. Many wear white, a reminder of purity, and some echo the high priest's plain linen. The service ends with a long blast on the shofar, the ram's horn trumpet. Jewish tradition teaches that Yom Kippur atones for sins against God, but that for sins against other people, you must

first go to the person you hurt and ask their forgiveness. That's a lesson Christians can learn from too.

Hebrews draws a direct line from this chapter to Jesus. The high priest went into the Most Holy Place once a year, with the blood of animals, and had to do it again the next year. But Christ, "through his own blood, entered in once for all into the Holy Place, having obtained eternal redemption." Like the bodies of the sin offerings, which were burned outside the camp, "Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people through his own blood, suffered outside of the gate." Jesus is both goats: the one who died, and the one who carried our sins far away.

KEY VERSE

for on this day shall atonement be made for you, to cleanse you. You shall be clean from all your sins before the LORD.

Leviticus 16:30 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the high priest wore plain linen instead of his glorious robes on the Day of Atonement?
2. What do the two goats teach about forgiveness?
3. Have you ever been a scapegoat, or made someone else one? What happened?
4. How does it feel to know your sins can be carried as far as the east is from the west?

TRY THIS *Read Hebrews 9:11–14 and 10:19–22. Write a short prayer of confession, then write Psalm 103:12 under it. Tear up the confession and throw it away as a reminder that your sins have been carried off.*

CHAPTER 5

Not Like Egypt

Leviticus 18 and 20

Starting in chapter 17, Leviticus shifts its focus. The first half of the book is mostly about holy places and holy rituals. The second half, often called the Holiness Code (chapters 17–26), is about holy living, in families, in fields, in business, and in the bedroom. It's no longer just the priests who must be holy. Everyone is.

Chapter 18 opens with a powerful framing. "You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived. You shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. You shall not follow their statutes." Israel had been shaped by Egypt for centuries, and soon they'd be surrounded by Canaanite culture. God says, you're going to be different. You belong to Me. And He adds a promise: "You shall therefore keep my statutes and my ordinances, which if a man does, he shall live in them." God's ways aren't designed to crush life. They're designed to give it.

The chapter goes on to list sexual relationships that are off-limits. Most of the list is about family members: parents, stepparents, siblings, half-siblings, aunts and uncles, in-laws, grandchildren. Then it forbids adultery, offering children to the god Molech, sex between men, and sex with animals. Chapter 20 repeats many of the same laws and adds penalties, many of them severe, including death.

SAFETY NOTE **Abuse in Families**

Leviticus 18 makes something very clear. Sexual contact between family members is wrong, and so is any sexual contact forced on someone who can't say no. If anyone, including a parent, stepparent, sibling, cousin, relative, coach, or family friend, has touched you in a sexual way, asked you to keep a secret like that, or shown you sexual images, it is not your fault. You haven't done anything wrong, and you don't have to protect them. Tell a trusted adult, like a teacher, school counselor, pastor, or relative outside the situation. If the first person doesn't listen, tell another. In the United States you can call or text the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453, any time, day or night. If you're in danger right now, call 911. God sees, He cares, and He is on your side.

Why such a long list about family? In the ancient world, extended families often lived together in one large household. Without clear lines, the most vulnerable people, especially women and children, were easy targets for the men with power over them. These laws drew a protective fence around the family home. They said: the people you live with must be safe with you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Molech**

Molech was a god worshiped by some of Israel's neighbors, and the Bible connects his worship with child sacrifice. Leviticus 18:21 and 20:2–5 forbid it in the strongest terms. Sadly, later kings of Judah did it anyway, and the prophets were horrified (Jeremiah 32:35). Archaeologists have found evidence of child sacrifice in the ancient Mediterranean world, especially in the Phoenician city of Carthage. Israel's God says, never. Children are not to be used for anyone's gain, not even in the name of religion.

Some readers are surprised by how plainly the Bible talks about these things. But silence often protects abusers. When families, churches, or schools refuse to talk about sexual sin and abuse, victims are left confused, ashamed, and alone. Leviticus does the

opposite. It names what is wrong, out loud, in front of the whole community. It tells every Israelite that these things are not private family business. They matter to God. That's a model for Christians today: we should be the kind of people who are safe to talk to, who believe those who come forward, and who make sure abuse is reported and stopped, not covered up to protect someone's reputation.

What about the penalties in chapter 20? They're hard to read, and it's okay to say so. Several things help. First, these were laws for Israel as a nation, governed directly by God, at a specific time in history. Second, many scholars believe the death penalty in ancient law often worked as the maximum sentence rather than the usual one, and in later Jewish practice the rules for applying it became so strict that it was rarely carried out. Third, the New Testament never asks Christians to carry out these penalties. When a woman caught in adultery was brought to Jesus, He refused to condemn her, while also telling her to leave her life of sin (John 8:1–11). Christians today agree that the church's role isn't to punish people physically, but to call everyone, including ourselves, to repentance and grace.

> **REAL TALK** **Different on Purpose**
>
> Leviticus says God's people should be different from the culture around them, and it starts with sex. That's still true today, and it's not easy. You're surrounded by messages that say sex is no big deal, that whatever feels right is right, and that porn is harmless. God's design is different: sex is a gift meant for the lifelong covenant of marriage. Christians disagree about how some of these laws apply today, especially the verses about same-sex relationships, and those conversations should be had with honesty, humility, and kindness. But all Christians agree that following Jesus means letting Him shape your choices about your body. If you've messed up, there's forgiveness. If you're

struggling with porn, talk to a trusted adult or youth leader. You're not the only one, and you don't have to fight it alone.

REAL TALK **Consent and Pressure**

If someone pressures you into anything sexual, online or in person, through threats, guilt, money, or promises, that's wrong, and it's not your fault. This includes being asked to send nude photos. If someone threatens to share images of you unless you send more or pay them, that's called sextortion, and it's a crime. Don't pay, don't send more, and don't deal with it alone. Tell a trusted adult right away, save the messages, and report it to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children at CyberTipline.org or 1-800-843-5678. They can also help get images taken down. You won't be in trouble. You'll be helped.

Chapter 20 ends by explaining the reason behind it all. "You shall be holy to me, for I, the LORD, am holy, and have set you apart from the peoples, that you should be mine." Holiness isn't just about avoiding the wrong things. It's about belonging to the right Person.

KEY VERSE

You shall therefore keep my statutes and my ordinances, which if a man does, he shall live in them. I am the LORD.

Leviticus 18:5 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. God told Israel not to live like Egypt or Canaan. What parts of today's culture do you think Christians should be different from?
2. How do the laws in Leviticus 18 protect vulnerable people?
3. How did Jesus treat the woman caught in adultery? What does that teach you about both truth and grace?
4. What does it mean to you that God has set you apart to be His?

TRY THIS *Write down the names of three trusted adults you could go to if you or a friend were ever unsafe. Save the Childhelp number, 1-800-422-4453, in your phone.*

CHAPTER 6

Love Your Neighbor

Leviticus 19

If you only read one chapter of Leviticus, make it this one. Leviticus 19 is where the Holiness Code shows what holiness looks like on a regular Tuesday. It opens with God's big command. "You shall be holy; for I, the LORD your God, am holy." Then it gets very practical, very fast.

The chapter jumps from one topic to another. Respect your parents. Keep the Sabbath. Don't make idols. Don't steal or lie. Pay workers on time. Don't trip up the blind. Be fair in court. Don't spread rumors. Respect the elderly. Use honest scales. At first it seems random. But look closer and you'll see a pattern. Almost every section ends with the same phrase: I am the LORD. Holiness isn't a list of religious extras. It's what happens when God is in charge of every part of your life.

Some of the laws are surprisingly kind. "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field, neither shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest." Farmers had to leave some of their crop for "the poor and for the foreigner." It wasn't a handout; the poor did the work of gathering. It was a built-in social safety net. That's exactly how Ruth, a poor foreign widow, met Boaz, generations later.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Gleaning Today**

The gleaning laws inspired real-world ideas. Many food banks and charities run gleaning programs, where volunteers collect leftover crops from farms after harvest and give them to people who need food. Some grocery stores and restaurants donate unsold food the same way. You could volunteer with one. It's one of the easiest ways to live out Leviticus 19 literally.

Then come laws that protect people who can't protect themselves. "You shall not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind." The deaf can't hear the insult. The blind can't see the stumbling block. Only God sees. That's the point: holiness shows up in what you do when you think nobody's watching. The same goes for judges. "You shall not be partial to the poor, nor show favoritism to the great." Justice can't be bought, and it can't be bent by pity either.

REAL TALK **Paying People Fairly**

Leviticus 19:13 says not to hold back a hired worker's wages overnight. Day laborers lived paycheck to paycheck, and waiting even one day could mean a family went hungry. Today, if you babysit, mow lawns, or work a part-time job, you know how much it matters to get paid on time and fairly. And someday you might be the one paying others. Holiness shows up in business: paying what you promised, being honest about what you sell, and not taking advantage of people who need the work. James later warned rich people who cheated their workers that the cries of those workers had reached the Lord's ears (James 5:4). God notices who gets paid and who doesn't.

Next comes a warning about gossip. "You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people." Then, "You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor." In other words, don't let anger simmer in secret. If someone wrongs you, talk to them honestly.

REAL TALK **Gossip and Group Chats**

Leviticus 19:16 could have been written for social media. Spreading rumors, screenshotting private messages, posting about someone behind their back, or piling on in a group chat are all modern versions of going around as a slanderer. And the next verse tells you what to do instead: if you have a problem with someone, go to them directly, in private, and be honest. That's harder than venting to your friends. It's also how relationships actually get fixed. Before you post or forward something about someone, ask: would I say this to their face?

Then comes the verse that changed the world. "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people; but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD." Centuries later, when someone asked Jesus which commandment was greatest, He quoted Deuteronomy 6:5 about loving God, and then added, "A second likewise is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" Paul said the same: "For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, in this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Notice what comes right before it: don't take revenge, and don't hold a grudge. Love starts with letting go. And notice who it's for. A lawyer once asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus answered with the story of the good Samaritan, a man from a hated group who stopped to help a stranger. At the end, Jesus asked which one had been a neighbor, and the lawyer said, "He who showed mercy on him." Then Jesus said, "Go and do likewise."

Leviticus 19 already pushes in that direction. "The stranger who lives as a foreigner with you shall be to you as the native-born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you lived as foreigners in the land of Egypt." Israel knew what it felt like to be the outsider. So they were commanded to love outsiders the way they loved themselves.

REAL TALK **Loving Yourself?**

Some people read love your neighbor as yourself and think it means you first have to learn to love yourself. That's not really the point of the verse. It assumes you already care about your own needs: you feed yourself, protect yourself, and want good things for yourself. It says to want the same for others. But if you struggle to see any value in yourself, that matters too. You're made in God's image and loved by Him. If you feel worthless or hopeless, please talk to someone you trust, or call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. Loving your neighbor doesn't mean hating yourself.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Golden Rule Before Jesus**

Love your neighbor as yourself was well known among Jewish teachers by Jesus' day. A famous story tells of a man who asked Rabbi Hillel, who lived shortly before Jesus, to teach him the whole Torah while standing on one foot. Hillel replied that what is hateful to you, you should not do to your neighbor; that is the whole Torah, and the rest is commentary; go and learn it. Jesus put it in a positive form: "whatever you desire for men to do to you, you shall also do to them; for this is the law and the prophets." Not just avoiding harm, but actively doing good.

The chapter also includes some puzzling laws, like not mixing two kinds of seed in a field or two kinds of fabric in a garment, and not cutting the edges of your beard. Some of these probably taught Israel about being set apart, and some may have been aimed at pagan mourning or religious practices. Others remain a bit mysterious. It's okay to admit that. What's clear is that the chapter never lets holiness float away from ordinary life. Holy people respect the elderly: "You shall rise up before the gray head and honor the face of the elderly." Holy people run honest businesses: "You shall do no unrighteousness in judgment, in measures of length, of weight, or of quantity." Holy people look like God.

KEY VERSE

You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people; but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.

Leviticus 19:18 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Leviticus 19 mixes worship and everyday life. Why do you think God put them side by side?
2. Who are the deaf and the blind in your world, people who can't defend themselves? How can you protect them?
3. Is there someone you're holding a grudge against? What would it take to let it go?
4. Who is the foreigner or outsider at your school, and what would loving them as yourself look like?

TRY THIS *Read Leviticus 19 and pick one command to practice every day this week. At the end of the week, write about what happened.*

CHAPTER 7

Holy Priests, Holy Days

Leviticus 21–24

Chapters 21–22 return to the priests. Because they served closest to God's presence, they were held to higher standards. They had to avoid contact with dead bodies except for close family, marry carefully, and keep the holy food holy. The high priest had the strictest rules of all.

These chapters also say that a priest with a physical defect, such as blindness, a disability, or a skin condition, could not offer sacrifices at the altar. That can sound unfair, even hurtful. But the same passage says that such a priest could still eat the holy food, the bread of his God (21:22). He was still a priest, still part of the family, still fed from God's table. Many scholars think the rule was symbolic: everything at the altar, priests and animals alike, had to picture wholeness and perfection, pointing to the perfect God.

> REAL TALK **Disability and Belonging**
>
> If you or someone you love has a disability, Leviticus 21 might sting. It helps to see the whole Bible's story. In 2 Samuel 9, King David brings Mephibosheth, who couldn't walk, to eat at the king's table like one of his sons. Jesus went out of His way to welcome and heal people with disabilities, and He told His followers to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind to their feasts (Luke 14:13). And Jesus, our perfect High Priest, rose from the dead

> with scars still in His hands. In God's family, nobody is less valuable because of their body. Churches should be places where everyone belongs and serves.

These chapters also include rules for the animals offered as sacrifices: they had to be without defect, just like the priests at the altar. And they add a beautiful detail about how God sees His people's gifts. Even a foreigner living in Israel could bring an offering, and it would be accepted (22:18). God's house had room for outsiders.

Chapter 23 is God's calendar. "The set feasts of the LORD, which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations, even these are my set feasts." Israel's year was built around worship, rest, and remembering what God had done. Here's the lineup.

The Sabbath, every seventh day, came first: a day of rest from work. Then the spring feasts. Passover remembered the night God rescued Israel from Egypt, followed immediately by the Feast of Unleavened Bread, a week without yeast. The Firstfruits offering gave God the first sheaf of the barley harvest, trusting Him for the rest. Fifty days later came the Feast of Weeks, a harvest celebration. In Greek it's called Pentecost.

Then came the fall feasts. The Feast of Trumpets opened the seventh month with trumpet blasts; Jewish people call it Rosh Hashanah, the new year. The Day of Atonement followed ten days later. Then came the Feast of Booths, or Tabernacles, one of the most joyful weeks of the year. "You shall dwell in temporary shelters for seven days." Families camped out in huts made of branches, remembering how God cared for them in the wilderness. Jewish families still build these huts, called sukkot, every fall.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jesus and the Feasts**

The New Testament connects many of Israel's feasts with Jesus. He died at Passover, as the Passover Lamb. He rose on the day after the Sabbath following Passover, when the firstfruits of the harvest were offered, and Paul calls Him "the first fruit of those who are asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20). The Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, the Feast of Weeks, and three thousand people were brought in, like a harvest. At the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus stood up and invited the thirsty to come to Him and drink (John 7:37). Some Christians think the fall feasts point to Jesus' return. Christians don't have to keep these feasts, but many find it moving to learn about them, and some churches celebrate a Christian Passover meal.

Even in the middle of the festival calendar, God remembers the poor. Right after the harvest feasts comes a reminder: "You must leave them for the poor and for the foreigner." Celebration and generosity go together.

REAL TALK **A Day Off**

God built rest into the calendar, every week. For Israel, that was radical. Slaves in Egypt never got a day off. The Sabbath said: you're not a machine, and your worth isn't measured by your productivity. That's a word for teens today, with school, sports, jobs, and screens that never turn off. Christians differ on how to observe a day of rest; many treat Sunday as a day of worship and rest, while others hold that every day belongs to God (Romans 14:5). But all of us need rhythms of rest. Try a few hours each week with no homework, no phone, and no hustle. It's not lazy. It's trust.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Pentecost Then and Now**

The Feast of Weeks came fifty days after Firstfruits, at the end of the grain harvest. Later Jewish tradition also connected it with the day God gave the law at Mount Sinai, which by the Bible's timeline came about fifty days after the exodus. So when the Holy Spirit came on the first followers of Jesus at Pentecost (Acts 2), it was a powerful echo. At Sinai, God came down in fire and gave His law on tablets of stone. At Pentecost, the Spirit came with

tongues of fire and wrote God's law on human hearts, just as the prophets had promised (Jeremiah 31:33). At Sinai, about three thousand people died after the golden calf (Exodus 32:28). At Pentecost, about three thousand people came to life.

Chapter 24 includes instructions for the lamp and the bread in the tabernacle, and then a short, hard story. During a fight, a man with an Israelite mother and an Egyptian father blasphemes God's name. The people bring him to Moses, who waits for God's answer, and the man is stoned. God then states that the same law applies to the native-born and the foreigner alike. The chapter also includes the famous rule, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

BACKGROUND CHECK **An Eye for an Eye**

An eye for an eye sounds brutal, but in the ancient world it was actually a limit on revenge. It meant the punishment must fit the crime, no more. You couldn't kill someone for knocking out your tooth. Judges, not angry victims, applied it, and in practice it was often settled by payment rather than injury. Jesus later went further, telling His followers not to take personal revenge at all, but to turn the other cheek and love their enemies (Matthew 5:38–44). The legal principle of fair punishment still guides courts today.

KEY VERSE

The set feasts of the LORD, which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations, even these are my set feasts.

Leviticus 23:2 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God built Israel's calendar around feasts and rest?
2. How do the feasts point to Jesus? Which connection surprises you most?
3. What would a weekly rhythm of rest look like in your life?
4. How should churches make sure that people with disabilities belong and serve?

TRY THIS *Plan a simple celebration of something God has done for you or your family. Invite people, share food, and take turns telling the story.*

CHAPTER 8

The Year of Jubilee

Leviticus 25–27

Leviticus 25 describes one of the most remarkable laws ever given. Every seventh year was a Sabbath year for the land. Fields weren't planted and vineyards weren't pruned, and whatever grew on its own was for everyone to eat, including the poor, servants, and even wild animals. The land got to rest, just as people rested every seventh day.

Then, after seven Sabbath years, came the fiftieth year, the Jubilee. It began on the Day of Atonement with a blast of the ram's horn trumpet across the land. "You shall make the fiftieth year holy, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee to you; and each of you shall return to his own property, and each of you shall return to his family." In the Jubilee, land that had been sold went back to the family that originally owned it. Israelites who had sold themselves into servitude because of debt went free.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Liberty Bell**
>
> The words of Leviticus 25:10, in the King James Version, are engraved on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia: Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof. The bell was cast in 1752, and later abolitionists, who fought to end slavery in the United States, adopted it as a symbol and gave it

its name. More recently, a worldwide campaign called Jubilee 2000 drew on Leviticus 25 to call for canceling the debts of the world's poorest countries.

Why would God do this? He explains: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and live as foreigners with me." Nobody really owned the land. God did. The Israelites were more like tenants. So no family could lose its inheritance forever, and no one could build up endless wealth by buying up everybody else's land. Every fifty years, the system reset.

The chapter is full of protections for the poor. "If your brother has become poor, and his hand can't support himself among you, then you shall uphold him." You couldn't charge him interest or make a profit on the food you sold him. If a relative had to sell land, a family member called a redeemer could buy it back. If an Israelite fell so deep into debt that he had to work for someone else, he wasn't to be treated harshly as a slave, but as a hired worker, and he went free in the Jubilee. God gives the reason: they are My servants, whom I brought out of Egypt.

REAL TALK **What About Foreign Slaves?**

Leviticus 25:44–46 allowed Israelites to buy slaves from the nations around them, and those slaves didn't go free in the Jubilee. That's a hard passage, and Christians have wrestled with it, especially since slaveholders in American history used verses like this to defend slavery. Several things help. Ancient servitude was usually based on debt or war, not on race, and Israel's laws gave servants protections that many nations didn't, including the Sabbath rest. Many scholars see these laws as God regulating a widespread practice in a fallen world, much as Jesus said some laws were given because of the hardness of people's hearts (Matthew 19:8), while the Bible's larger story of the exodus, the Jubilee, and the gospel pushes toward freedom for all. Paul says in Christ there is neither slave nor free (Galatians 3:28), and

Christians led many of the movements to end slavery. If you're wrestling with this, you're not alone. Ask a pastor or youth leader to talk it through with you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Redeemer**

In Leviticus 25, when someone became poor and had to sell land or even himself, a close relative could step in and buy back what had been lost. That relative was called the go'el, the redeemer. The book of Ruth tells the most famous story of a redeemer: Boaz, who bought back the land of Naomi's family and married Ruth, a poor foreign widow, so that the family line would continue. Their great-grandson was King David. The Bible later calls God Himself Israel's Redeemer (Isaiah 43:14), and the New Testament says Jesus redeemed us, buying us back at the cost of His own life (1 Peter 1:18–19). He's the close relative who pays what we owe.

Did Israel ever actually keep the Jubilee? We don't know. There's little evidence in the Old Testament that it was regularly practiced, and the prophets later accused Israel of ignoring the Sabbath years (2 Chronicles 36:21). But the hope of the Jubilee never died. Isaiah looked forward to a day when someone anointed by God's Spirit would proclaim liberty to captives (Isaiah 61:1–2). And in His first sermon, in His hometown synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus read from that very passage: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." Then He sat down and said that the passage was fulfilled that day (Luke 4:21). Jesus is the Jubilee.

REAL TALK **Enough**

The Sabbath year asked Israel to trust God enough to stop working the fields for a whole year. God promised that the harvest of the sixth year would be big enough to last (25:21). That's the opposite of how most of us live. We worry there won't be enough, so we work more, buy more, and hold on tighter. The Jubilee said: you don't have to grab. God provides, and He wants you to share. It also says something to anyone who feels stuck because of their

family's money problems. In God's eyes, nobody is supposed to be trapped forever. If your family is going through hard times, you're not less valuable, and it's okay to accept help from your church or community. That's exactly what Leviticus 25 was designed for.

Chapter 26 is about blessings and warnings. If Israel follows God, the rain will come, the harvests will be good, and they'll live in peace. And God makes the best promise of all: "I will set my tent among you, and my soul won't abhor you. I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you will be my people." That's what Leviticus is really about. Then comes a long list of disasters if Israel turns away, ending in exile from the land. But even then, God promises not to abandon them. "Then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham." Judgment isn't God's last word. Faithfulness is.

REAL TALK **If I Obey, Will Life Go Well?**

Leviticus 26 promises blessing for obedience and trouble for disobedience. Does that mean if you follow God, nothing bad will happen to you? Not exactly. These promises were made to Israel as a nation in the land, and the Bible itself shows that faithful people often suffer, like Job, Jeremiah, and Jesus. But the principle still stands: God's ways lead to life, and turning away from Him leads to brokenness. Sometimes that's obvious right away. Sometimes it takes years. And sometimes the blessing is not an easier life, but God's presence with you in a hard one.

Chapter 27 closes the book with rules for vows and gifts dedicated to God, including the tithe. "All the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the trees, is the LORD's. It is holy to the LORD." It's an odd, quiet ending, but maybe a fitting one. Leviticus began with people bringing gifts to God, and it ends the same way.

KEY VERSE

You shall make the fiftieth year holy, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee to you; and each of you shall return to his own property, and each of you shall return to his family.

Leviticus 25:10 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What do you think the world would look like if the Jubilee were practiced today?
2. God said the land belonged to Him. How would it change the way you use your money and stuff if you believed everything you have belongs to God?
3. How did Jesus describe His mission in Luke 4? How is it like the Jubilee?
4. What do you do with hard passages like the laws on foreign slaves?

TRY THIS *Pick one thing you own and give it away to someone who needs it more than you, or help a family member with a debt or a chore with no strings attached. Call it your own small jubilee.*

CHAPTER 9

Reading Leviticus Today

Leviticus 1–27

By now you might be asking: so what am I supposed to do with all this? Do Christians have to keep these laws? Should I avoid bacon and shrimp, poly-cotton shirts, and tattoos? What about the Sabbath and the tithe? If not, why do we still quote love your neighbor as yourself? This is one of the biggest questions in the whole Bible, and sincere Christians have answered it in different ways.

Start with Jesus Himself. "Don't think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I didn't come to destroy, but to fulfill." Jesus didn't throw out Leviticus. He fulfilled it, which means He brought it to its goal. At the same time, the New Testament is clear that some laws no longer apply in the same way. The letter to the Hebrews says that in speaking of a new covenant, God "has made the first obsolete." The food laws are set aside, and the sacrifices have ended because Jesus offered Himself once for all. Paul writes that the feasts and Sabbaths "are a shadow of the things to come; but the body is Christ's." So how do you sort it out?

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Three Kinds of Law**
>
> The most common traditional approach, taught by Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and many others, divides the Old Testament law into three kinds. Moral laws, like do not steal and love your neighbor, reflect God's character and still apply to everyone. Civil laws, like penalties and land rules, governed

> Israel as a nation and don't apply directly today, though their principles of justice still teach us. Ceremonial laws, like sacrifices, food laws, and purity rules, pointed forward to Christ and are fulfilled in Him. Critics point out that the Bible itself doesn't divide the law this neatly; Leviticus 19 mixes all three in a single chapter. But many Christians find the framework helpful.

Other Christians take different approaches. Some say the entire law of Moses was a covenant for Israel that ended with Christ, and that Christians now live under the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2), so Old Testament commands apply only as they are repeated or renewed in the New Testament. "For Christ is the fulfillment of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." Others say the whole law, all of it, still teaches Christians, as long as we read it through Jesus, asking what each command reveals about God and how it is fulfilled in Him. And some Christians, especially Messianic Jews, still keep many of the laws as an expression of their Jewish identity and faith. Paul says Christians shouldn't judge one another over such things (Romans 14:1–6).

Jewish readers, of course, have their own understanding. For observant Jews, the Torah is still God's living covenant with Israel. Since the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70, sacrifices haven't been offered, and Jewish teachers taught that prayer, repentance, study, and acts of kindness take their place. Many Jewish families keep kosher food laws and celebrate the feasts of Leviticus 23 every year. Christians should read Leviticus with deep respect for the people who first received it.

> **REAL TALK** **What About Tattoos?**
>
> Leviticus 19:28 forbids cutting your body for the dead or getting tattoo marks. Does that mean Christians can't get tattoos? Christians disagree. Some think the command still applies, and that it reflects a respect for the body God made. Many others note that the verse appears in the context of pagan

mourning practices, and think it was about rejecting those practices rather than banning all body art forever. Either way, Paul's principle applies: your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). If you're thinking about a tattoo, talk to your parents, think about what it says and why you want it, and remember that laws in most places don't allow tattoos for minors without a parent's permission.

REAL TALK **What About Mixed Fabrics?**

Leviticus 19:19 says not to wear a garment made of two kinds of material. You'll sometimes see this verse in memes mocking Christians who quote other parts of Leviticus. So what's going on? Interestingly, the priests' clothing did mix materials, and so did the curtains of the tabernacle. Many scholars think mixtures were reserved for holy things, so that ordinary Israelites keeping their fields, animals, and clothes unmixed was a daily reminder that they were set apart and that God's holiness was unique. Christians generally see this as a ceremonial law fulfilled in Christ. The lesson underneath it still stands: every part of your life, even what you wear, can remind you that you belong to God.

It may help to think about how you read any old letter or document. If you found a letter your great-grandparents wrote to each other, you'd learn a lot about them, their love, their values, and their struggles. But you wouldn't think the instructions in it, like when to milk the cows or what to bring to the church potluck, were addressed directly to you. Christians read Leviticus a bit like that, but with an important difference: it's not just an old letter. It's God's Word, and the God who spoke it is still speaking through it. So the question to ask of every law isn't just do I have to do this? but what does this show me about God, how does it point to Jesus, and how does it shape the kind of person I'm becoming?

That way of reading changes how you see even the strangest chapters. The food laws show a God who cares about the details of

everyday life. The skin disease laws show a God who takes illness and isolation seriously, and who sent Jesus to touch the untouchable. The sacrifices show a God who provides a substitute. The Jubilee shows a God who hates permanent poverty and loves freedom. You might never eat a meal in a booth or bring a goat to an altar, but you can still learn from every page.

Here's what nearly all Christians agree on. First, Leviticus reveals God's character. He is holy, He hates sin, He loves the poor and the outsider, and He wants to live with His people. That never changes. Second, Leviticus shows our need. Nobody could keep it perfectly, which is why the sacrifices were needed in the first place. Paul calls the law "our tutor to bring us to Christ." Third, Leviticus finds its fulfillment in Jesus. He is the sacrifice, the priest, the scapegoat, the Passover Lamb, the Jubilee, and the presence of God living among us.

And fourth, the heart of the law is love. "Love doesn't harm a neighbor. Love therefore is the fulfillment of the law." Jesus summed up everything Moses taught in two commands: love God with everything you have, and love your neighbor as yourself. Peter quotes Leviticus directly when he tells Christians how to live: "You shall be holy, for I am holy." That's still the call. Not holy as in stuck-up or weird, but holy as in set apart, belonging to God, and looking like Him.

> **REAL TALK** **Cherry-Picking?**
>
> Skeptics sometimes say Christians cherry-pick Leviticus, quoting the verses they like and ignoring the rest. It's a fair question, and you should be ready for it. The honest answer is that Christians don't ignore any of it; we read all of it through Jesus, as the New Testament teaches us to. That's not a trick invented to dodge hard verses. It's how the earliest Christians, who were Jewish, read their own Scriptures. If someone pushes back, don't get

defensive. Explain how you read the law, admit what you're still figuring out, and keep the conversation going.

KEY VERSE

Don't think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I didn't come to destroy, but to fulfill.

Matthew 5:17 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Which approach to Old Testament law makes the most sense to you, and why?
2. What does Leviticus teach you about God's character that you hadn't noticed before?
3. How would you answer a friend who says Christians cherry-pick Leviticus?
4. What would it look like for you to be holy this week, set apart for God and looking like Him?

TRY THIS *Pick three laws from Leviticus. For each one, write down what it shows about God, how it points to Jesus, and how it might shape the way you live today.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

Leviticus ends with a holy God living among His people, but at a distance. Only priests could enter the tent. Only the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place, once a year, never without blood. The sacrifices had to be repeated again and again, day after day and year after year. Leviticus leaves you longing for a sacrifice that would finish the job, and a way into God's presence that would never close.

Jewish readers have treasured Leviticus for thousands of years; Jewish children traditionally began their Bible study with it, and after the temple was destroyed, prayer, repentance, and kindness took the place of sacrifice. The New Testament writers, who were Jewish themselves, believed that Leviticus pointed to Jesus. John the Baptist called Him "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" The letter to the Hebrews says the old sacrifices were a shadow, because "it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins." But Jesus, our great High Priest, "offered one sacrifice for sins forever" (Hebrews 10:12). When He died, the veil of the temple "was torn in two from the top to the bottom" (Matthew 27:51). The way in is open.

Here's what the Bible says about where that story leads, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He wants to be with you. That's the heartbeat of Leviticus: a holy God who comes to live among His people.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We all fall short of His holiness.

Leviticus shows how seriously God takes sin. The Bible says all of us have turned from God and can't make ourselves clean.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. That's why the sacrifices involved blood and death. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus is the sacrifice.

Like the scapegoat, Jesus carried our sins away. Like the sin offering, He died in our place. And He rose again, never to die again.

> *For him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* **2 Corinthians 5:21 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

The Israelites brought sacrifices God provided. Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, You are holy, and I'm not. I've sinned against You, and I can't make myself clean. Thank You for loving me anyway. Thank You that Jesus died for me as the perfect sacrifice and carried my sins away, and that You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me and make me clean. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Thank You that I can come near to You. Make me holy, and teach me to love my neighbor as myself. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Leviticus 16 and 19, then read the letter to the Hebrews, and watch for the High Priest, the sacrifice, and the open way into God's presence.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Come near. You don't need a priest or an animal to approach God. Take time every day to pray, confess, and thank Him, with confidence, because of Jesus.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Leviticus was written so that God's people would know how to come near to Him. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Leviticus is right, the holy God who lived in a tent in the desert wants to live with you too.

I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you will be my people.

Leviticus 26:12 (WEB)

THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

The King Who Leads the Way

Numbers, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Who Leads the Way: The Book of Numbers, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

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In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You know the saying by now: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” The book of Numbers sounds like it was named to scare readers away. Census lists, tribal totals, camp layouts, and more lists. If you’ve ever tried reading the Bible straight through, this might be where you started skimming.

Don’t. Numbers is one of the wildest books in the Bible. There’s fire from heaven, a plague of quail, a ground that opens up and swallows a rebellion, a staff that sprouts almonds overnight, a bronze snake on a pole, and a donkey that talks back to its owner. There are spies, giants, and a whole generation that walks right up to the edge of the promised land and then turns around.

Underneath all that action is a story about something you know well: the long, frustrating middle. Israel has been rescued from Egypt, but they’re not home yet. They’re stuck in the wilderness, complaining, afraid, and wondering whether God really knows what He’s doing. Numbers is about what happens when people are in between, and about a God who keeps leading, keeps providing, and keeps His promises even when His people don’t.

If you’ve ever felt stuck, afraid of failing, or tempted to go along with the crowd, this book is for you. Pack your tent. We’re heading into the wilderness.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Numbers in nine chapters: the census and the camp (Numbers 1–4), the priestly blessing and the journey begins (5–10), complaining and quail (11–12), the twelve spies (13–14), Korah's rebellion (15–19), the rock and the bronze serpent (20–21), Balaam and his donkey (22–24), Phinehas and the new generation (25–30), and the edge of the promised land (31–36). The lists and laws are summarized more briefly than the stories.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what kind of book Numbers is, where it fits, and the world it came from. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as how to understand the huge numbers in the census, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. Numbers also includes violence and judgment. When it does, you'll find a box with a safety note or an honest Real Talk. This book quotes Numbers in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the fourth book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Numbers raises questions teens will ask. I've presented the main views fairly on the size of Israel's population, including the traditional reading of about two million people and the view that the Hebrew word elef can mean a clan or military unit rather than a thousand. I'd encourage you to share your own church's view with your teen, and to explain why other Christians see it differently.

Numbers includes hard material: plagues and judgments, the story of Phinehas, and the war against Midian. These are handled carefully and age-appropriately, without graphic detail, with honest discussion of why they are troubling and why Christians do not take them as a model for violence today. Real Talk boxes address peer pressure, anxiety about failure, leadership, and grief, and point readers to trusted adults and, where relevant, the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how the New Testament sees Numbers fulfilled in Jesus, the true bread from

heaven, the rock that followed Israel, and the one lifted up like the bronze serpent, while acknowledging that Jewish readers read Numbers in their own rich ways. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will meet in Numbers a God who leads His people through the wilderness and never gives up on His promises.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

In the Wilderness

The English name Numbers comes from the Greek and Latin titles, which focus on the two censuses that bookend the book. In Hebrew it's called Bemidbar, which means in the wilderness, from its first verse. That's a better summary. Numbers covers about thirty-nine years of Israel's life between Mount Sinai and the edge of the promised land, most of it spent wandering in the desert.

Part Four of the Torah

Numbers is the fourth of the five books of Moses. Exodus brought Israel out of Egypt to Mount Sinai. Leviticus gave them the laws for living with a holy God. Numbers picks up with Israel getting ready to leave Sinai and march toward Canaan, the land God promised Abraham. Deuteronomy, the last book, records Moses' final speeches as they wait to cross the Jordan River.

Two Generations

Numbers is really a tale of two generations. The first census counts the generation that came out of Egypt. Because of their unbelief, they don't get to enter the land; they die in the wilderness over forty years. The second census, in chapter 26, counts their children, the new generation who will go in. The question hanging over the whole book is whether the kids will trust God more than their parents did.

Who Wrote Numbers?

Numbers says Moses recorded the stages of Israel's journey (Numbers 33:2), and Jewish and Christian tradition has long held that Moses wrote the Torah. Many scholars believe Numbers was assembled from several older sources, with priestly material added later. Others hold that Moses is the main author, with later editing. Christians with different views agree that Numbers is God's Word.

The World It Came From

The wilderness between Egypt and Canaan, including the Sinai Peninsula and the Negev desert, is a harsh land of rock, sand, and scarce water. Bedouin people still live there with flocks of goats and sheep. To the east of Canaan lay the kingdoms of Edom, Moab, and Ammon, distant relatives of Israel, along with the Midianites and the Amorites. Numbers takes Israel through or around all of them on the way to the Jordan River.

How Big Was Israel?

The census in Numbers 1 counts 603,550 fighting men, which suggests a total population of perhaps two million people. Many Christians take that number at face value, as a sign of God's miraculous care. Others point out that the Hebrew word elef, usually translated thousand, can also mean a clan or a military unit, and suggest that the numbers were much smaller, perhaps twenty thousand or so. We'll look at both views in chapter 1. Faithful Christians hold different views.

Hard Stories and Safety Notes

Numbers includes rebellion, plagues, and war. Including a story in the Bible doesn't mean God approves of everything people do in it,

and it doesn't mean the violence in it is a model for us. When we come to these stories, you'll find a box. If anything you read brings up something painful in your own life, talk to a trusted adult, like a parent, pastor, or school counselor. If you ever feel hopeless or think about hurting yourself, call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

The Map

Chapter 1 (Numbers 1–4): The census and the camp.

Chapter 2 (Numbers 5–10): The blessing and the journey begins.

Chapter 3 (Numbers 11–12): Complaints, quail, and family conflict.

Chapter 4 (Numbers 13–14): The twelve spies.

Chapter 5 (Numbers 15–19): Korah's rebellion.

Chapter 6 (Numbers 20–21): The rock and the bronze serpent.

Chapter 7 (Numbers 22–24): Balaam and his donkey.

Chapter 8 (Numbers 25–30): Phinehas and the new generation.

Chapter 9 (Numbers 31–36): On the edge of the promise.

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CHAPTER 1

Counting the Camp

Numbers 1–4

Numbers opens about a year after the exodus. Israel has been camped at the foot of Mount Sinai for months. They've received the Ten Commandments, built the tabernacle, and learned the laws of Leviticus. Now it's time to move. And the first thing God tells Moses to do is count. "Take a census of all the congregation of the children of Israel, by their families, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of the names, every male, one by one."

Why count? Partly for the army. The census lists the men twenty years old and older who could fight, because Israel was about to march into hostile territory. But there's something more. The census goes tribe by tribe, family by family, name by name. Each tribe has a leader, and every leader is named. In Egypt, the Israelites were just labor, a mass of slaves. Here they're counted because they matter. They belong to God's people, and God knows who they are.

> **REAL TALK** **You Count**
>
> It's easy to feel like just a number: a student ID, a score on a test, a follower count, a stat on a team. Numbers starts with a census, but the point isn't that people are numbers. It's that God counts people because each one matters. Jesus said that even the hairs on your head are numbered (Matthew 10:30), and He told a story about a shepherd who left ninety-nine sheep to look for

one that was lost. If you ever feel invisible, remember that the God who counted the tribes knows your name, and you count to Him.

The total is huge. "All those who were counted were six hundred three thousand five hundred fifty." If that's the number of fighting men, then the whole population, counting women, children, and older men, could have been two million or more. That's bigger than most cities in the United States today, walking through a desert.

BACKGROUND CHECK **How Big Were the Numbers?**

Christians have two main ways of reading the numbers in Numbers. The traditional view takes them at face value: about 600,000 men and around two million people. That would mean God miraculously fed and watered a city-sized crowd for forty years, which fits a book full of miracles. Others point out that it's hard to fit that many people into the wilderness, or to imagine them outnumbering the nations of Canaan, which the Bible elsewhere describes as larger than Israel (Deuteronomy 7:7). These scholars note that the Hebrew word elef, normally translated thousand, can also mean a clan, a family group, or a military unit, as it does in Judges 6:15. On that reading, a tribe of 46 elef and 500 men might mean 46 units with 500 men in total, and Israel's army might have been closer to twenty thousand. Neither view questions that God rescued and led His people. Faithful Christians hold both views, and you can be one without calling the other unfaithful.

The Levites aren't counted with the army. They have a different job. "But the Levites shall encamp around the Tabernacle of the Testimony, that there may be no wrath on the congregation of the children of Israel." They're the tabernacle crew. They take it down, carry it, and set it back up whenever Israel moves, and they guard it so nobody stumbles into God's holy presence by accident.

REAL TALK **Counted for a Purpose**

The census counted men who could go to war, and some readers notice that women and children weren't counted. That reflected the ancient military

purpose of this list, not God's view of their worth; Numbers itself goes on to tell the stories of Miriam and of the daughters of Zelophehad, and God's care for every family runs through the book. But the census also carried a sense of calling. Being counted meant being ready to serve. Today, every follower of Jesus, young or old, male or female, is counted in God's people and has a part to play. You don't have to wait until you're older to matter in God's plan.

Chapter 2 describes the layout of the camp, and it's beautiful when you picture it. "The children of Israel shall encamp every man by his own standard, with the banners of their fathers' houses. They shall encamp around the Tent of Meeting at a distance from it." In the very center is the tabernacle, God's tent. Around it, in a close ring, are the Levites and priests. Then come the twelve tribes, three on each side: Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun on the east, facing the sunrise, where the entrance was; Reuben, Simeon, and Gad on the south; Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin on the west; and Dan, Asher, and Naphtali on the north. When they march, they keep the same order, with the tabernacle in the middle.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Banners and Standards**

Each tribe had its own banner, and each group of three tribes had a lead standard. The Bible doesn't describe what they looked like, but later Jewish tradition suggested that Judah's banner had a lion, Reuben's a human, Ephraim's an ox, and Dan's an eagle. Interestingly, those are the same four faces described on the living creatures around God's throne in Ezekiel 1 and Revelation 4. Whether or not the tradition is right, the picture of a camp gathered around God's presence on all four sides is a preview of heaven, where people from every nation gather around the throne.

Think about what this meant for an ordinary Israelite. Every morning, when you stepped out of your tent, you could look toward the middle of the camp and see the tabernacle, with the cloud of God's presence hanging over it. Wherever your tribe was camped,

north, south, east, or west, you were the same distance from God's dwelling as everyone else on your side. No tribe got to be first in every direction. Judah led the march, but the tribes behind them were just as close to the center. The camp was a living picture of what God wanted: a people gathered around Him, each with a place, each with a role, none forgotten.

The point of the camp was simple: God at the center. Everything else was organized around Him. "Thus the children of Israel did." For a moment, at least, everything was in order.

Chapter 3 explains why the Levites belong to God in a special way. Back in Egypt, God spared Israel's firstborn sons on the night of Passover, and He claimed every firstborn as His. Now He takes the Levites instead. "I have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of all the firstborn." The tribe serves in place of the firstborn of every family. Chapter 4 gives the three Levite clans their jobs: the Kohathites carried the holy furniture, covered so they wouldn't see or touch it directly; the Gershonites carried the curtains and coverings; the Merarites carried the frames, posts, and bases.

> **REAL TALK** **Every Job Matters**
>
> The Kohathites got to carry the ark. The Merarites carried tent pegs. Guess which job sounds cooler? But the tabernacle couldn't stand without the pegs. Paul says the church is like a body, and the parts that seem weaker are actually essential (1 Corinthians 12:22). In your youth group, your family, or your team, you might not get the job that gets noticed. Maybe you stack chairs, run the slides, or text the new kid to see how they're doing. That's not a lesser job. That's holding the tent up.

REAL TALK **Is Your Life Centered?**

Look at the camp again: God's tent in the middle, everything else arranged around it. Now picture your life as a camp. What's in the center? Maybe it's your phone, your friends, a relationship, sports, grades, or what people think of you. None of those are bad, but they make terrible centers. When something other than God sits in the middle, everything else gets pulled out of shape. Numbers invites you to set up camp around Him, and let Him organize the rest.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Life in the Camp**

What was daily life like in a camp that size? Families lived in tents made of goat hair, like the black tents Bedouin people still use. Each morning, people gathered manna before the sun got hot. Women ground and baked it, and kids probably helped herd the flocks. Water was always a worry. Sanitation mattered too; Deuteronomy 23:12–14 told the Israelites to go outside the camp and bury their waste, which was remarkably good public health for the ancient world. When the trumpets sounded and the cloud lifted, everything had to be packed and loaded, tribe by tribe, in the order God had set. It was noisy, dusty, crowded, and exhausting, and yet God was right there in the middle of it all.

KEY VERSE

Thus the children of Israel did. According to all that the LORD commanded Moses, so they encamped by their standards, and so they set out, everyone by their families, according to their fathers' houses.

Numbers 2:34 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God had the census done name by name, family by family?
2. Which view of the big numbers in Numbers makes more sense to you, and why?
3. What would it look like to put God at the center of your life, like the tabernacle in the camp?
4. What's a behind-the-scenes job in your church or family that people don't notice enough?

TRY THIS *Draw a map of Israel's camp from Numbers 2, with the tabernacle in the center. Then draw a map of your own life, and put what's actually at the center. Compare them.*

CHAPTER 2

The Blessing and the Cloud

Numbers 5–10

Before Israel leaves Sinai, God gives some final instructions. Chapter 5 deals with keeping the camp clean, making restitution for wrongs, and a strange ritual for a husband who suspected his wife of unfaithfulness. That last one sounds harsh to modern readers, but in its setting it may actually have protected women. Instead of a jealous husband taking matters into his own hands, the case went to God, and a woman who was innocent would be cleared publicly.

Chapter 6 describes the Nazirite vow, a special promise an Israelite man or woman could make to be set apart for God for a period of time. A Nazirite didn't drink wine or eat anything from grapes, didn't cut their hair, and didn't go near a dead body. The most famous Nazirite was Samson, though he wasn't exactly a great example. Samuel and John the Baptist may have been Nazirites too. The point was that anyone, not just priests, could choose to give themselves wholly to God.

> REAL TALK **Set Apart by Choice**
>
> The Nazirite vow was voluntary. Nobody was forced to take it. People chose to say, for this season, I'm giving myself to God in a special way. Some Christians today do something similar: they fast from social media for a month, take a break from certain music, commit to purity, or set aside time to serve. The point isn't to earn God's love or to look holier than others. It's to

say yes to Him with your whole life. Is there something you might want to set aside for a season, to make more room for God?

Then comes one of the most beloved passages in the Bible. God tells Moses to give Aaron and his sons a blessing to speak over the people:

"The LORD bless you, and keep you. The LORD make his face to shine on you, and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up his face toward you, and give you peace." Then God adds, "So they shall put my name on the children of Israel; and I will bless them."

Look closely at those three lines. Each one gets a little longer in Hebrew, like a wave building. Each one starts with the LORD, God's personal name, three times. The blessing asks for protection: keep you. It asks for God's favor: His face shining on you, like a parent beaming at a child. And it asks for peace, the Hebrew word shalom, which means far more than the absence of trouble. It means wholeness, everything as it should be.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Oldest Bible Verses**

In 1979, archaeologists excavating ancient tombs at Ketef Hinnom, just outside Jerusalem, found two tiny silver scrolls, small enough to wear as amulets around the neck. When they were finally unrolled and read, they turned out to contain a version of the priestly blessing from Numbers 6. They date to around 600 BC, before the Babylonian exile, which makes them the oldest known copies of any text from the Bible. Someone more than 2,600 years ago wore God's blessing close to their heart.

The blessing ends with a remarkable line. By speaking it, the priests would put God's name on the people. In the ancient world, putting your name on something meant it belonged to you, the way you might write your name in a book or a jersey has a player's name on the back. God was saying, these people are Mine, and I'm not

ashamed to say so. The New Testament says something similar about believers: Jesus is not ashamed to call them His brothers and sisters (Hebrews 2:11). If you belong to Him, His name is on you too. You're never nameless, and you're never unclaimed.

Chapters 7–8 describe the leaders of the tribes bringing gifts for the tabernacle, one tribe per day for twelve days, with every gift listed in detail, even though they're all identical. That might seem repetitive, but it makes a point: every tribe's gift mattered to God. Then the Levites are dedicated to their work. Chapter 9 describes Israel's second Passover, one year after the first, with an extra provision for anyone who couldn't celebrate on time because they were unclean or traveling. They got a second chance a month later.

Then comes the cloud. Over the tabernacle, God's presence appeared as a cloud by day and a fire by night. "Whenever the cloud was taken up from over the Tent, then after that the children of Israel traveled; and in the place where the cloud remained, there the children of Israel encamped." Sometimes it stayed two days, sometimes a month, sometimes a year. "At the commandment of the LORD they encamped, and at the commandment of the LORD they traveled."

> **REAL TALK** **Waiting**
>
> Imagine having your bags packed and not knowing whether you're leaving tomorrow or next year. That was life following the cloud. Waiting is hard, especially when you're waiting to hear back from a college, a coach, a job, or a friend, or waiting for something in your family to get better. The Israelites learned that waiting wasn't wasted time. God was still with them in the waiting; the cloud was right there over the camp. If you're in a waiting season, you're not forgotten. Keep doing the next faithful thing, and keep your eyes on Him.

REAL TALK **Blessed to Bless**

The priestly blessing wasn't something the people earned. It was spoken over them, every day, simply because they belonged to God. You might be used to hearing what you need to do better, from teachers, coaches, parents, maybe even yourself. But before God asks anything of you, He speaks a blessing over you. And blessing is meant to spread. You can bless other people with your words: thank a teacher, encourage a friend who's struggling, tell your parents something you appreciate about them, pray for someone by name. The world is full of people who rarely hear anything good said about them. Be the one who says it.

Chapter 10 adds silver trumpets to signal the camp to gather or march, and then, finally, Israel sets out from Sinai. Moses invites his brother-in-law Hobab, a Midianite who knew the desert, to come along and be their guide. And every time the ark moved forward, Moses prayed, "Rise up, LORD, and let your enemies be scattered!"

KEY VERSE

The LORD bless you, and keep you. The LORD make his face to shine on you, and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up his face toward you, and give you peace.

Numbers 6:24–26 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Which line of the priestly blessing means the most to you right now, and why?
2. What would it mean for God's face to shine on you?
3. Why do you think God made Israel follow the cloud instead of giving them a map?
4. What are you waiting for right now, and how can you trust God in the waiting?

TRY THIS *Memorize the priestly blessing. Then pray it over three people this week, by name, and tell at least one of them you did.*

CHAPTER 3

Complaints and Quail

Numbers 11–12

Israel has been on the road for three days, and the complaining has already started. "The people were complaining in the ears of the LORD." God's fire burns at the edges of the camp until Moses prays and it dies down. They name the place Taberah, which means burning.

Then it gets worse. Some of the foreigners traveling with them start craving other food, and soon everyone is crying. "Who will give us meat to eat? We remember the fish, which we ate in Egypt for nothing; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic; but now we have lost our appetite. There is nothing at all except this manna to look at."

Notice what's happening. They remember the food in Egypt but not the whips. They describe it as free, but it cost them their freedom. And they're bored with manna, the miracle bread God sent from heaven every single morning. It's like complaining that your free lunch from a billionaire is the same every day.

> REAL TALK **The Good Old Days**
>
> Nostalgia can play tricks on you. When things get hard, it's easy to remember the past as better than it really was: your old school, your old friends, an old relationship, even old habits you've left behind. The Israelites wanted to go back to slavery because they missed the cucumbers. Sometimes the pull to

> go back to something unhealthy is strongest right after you've left it. If you've walked away from something that was hurting you, a toxic friendship, a bad habit, a dangerous situation, expect some cravings. That doesn't mean you made the wrong choice. It means you're in the wilderness. Keep going, and talk to someone you trust when it's hard.

Moses hits a wall. He pours out his frustration to God, and it's raw. "Why have you treated your servant so badly?" He asks whether he gave birth to these people, that he should carry them like a baby. "I am not able to bear all this people alone, because it is too heavy for me." He even asks God to take his life if things are going to continue like this.

> **SAFETY NOTE** **When It's Too Much**
>
> Moses was one of the greatest leaders in history, and he still got to the point where he wanted to die. If you're ever feeling crushed, like you're carrying more than you can handle, you're not weak and you're not alone. Notice that God didn't scold Moses for being honest. He gave him help. You need help too, and asking for it is a sign of strength. Talk to a parent, a school counselor, a pastor, or another trusted adult. If you ever think about ending your life, call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time, day or night. In an emergency, call 911.

God answers Moses in two ways. First, He shares the load. He takes some of the Spirit that was on Moses and puts it on seventy elders, so they can help lead. Two of them, Eldad and Medad, stayed in the camp instead of coming to the tent, but the Spirit came on them anyway, and they began to prophesy. Joshua, Moses' young assistant, wants Moses to stop them. Moses' reply is wonderful: "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" Centuries later, at Pentecost, that wish came true (Acts 2:17–18).

Second, God gives them meat, and more than they bargained for. Moses wonders how God could possibly feed so many, and God answers, "Has the LORD's hand grown short?" Then "a wind from the LORD went out and brought quails from the sea." The quail pile up around the camp, and the people gather them for two days straight. But the story ends badly. "While the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the LORD's anger burned against the people, and the LORD struck the people with a very great plague." They name the place Kibroth Hattaavah, the graves of craving.

> **REAL TALK** **Getting What You Want**
>
> The quail story is a warning: sometimes the worst thing that can happen is getting exactly what you're demanding. The problem wasn't that the Israelites wanted meat. It was that they rejected God and His gift, wishing they'd never left Egypt. Psalm 106:15 puts it sharply: God gave them what they asked for but sent a wasting disease among them. Ever wanted something so badly that you were angry at God for not giving it to you? A relationship, an opportunity, a thing? Sometimes His no is protection. It's okay to ask God for what you want. It's not okay to treat Him like a vending machine, or to decide He's not good when He doesn't deliver.

Paul later points back to these wilderness stories and says they were written as warnings for us. "Don't grumble, as some of them also grumbled, and perished by the destroyer." He isn't saying it's wrong to be honest with God about how you feel; Moses was, and the psalms are full of honest complaints. Lament brings your pain to God. Grumbling turns your back on Him, deciding He isn't good and you'd be better off without Him. The difference isn't how strong your feelings are. It's which direction you're facing.

In chapter 12, the conflict hits Moses' own family. His older sister Miriam and his brother Aaron start criticizing him. Their complaint starts with his wife, a Cushite woman, probably from Ethiopia or

Sudan, but the real issue comes out next: has the LORD spoken only through Moses? Hasn't He spoken through us too? It's jealousy, dressed up as concern.

The text adds an important note right here. "Now the man Moses was very humble, more than all the men who were on the surface of the earth." Moses doesn't defend himself. God does. He calls all three to the tent and says that He speaks to prophets in visions and dreams, "My servant Moses is not so. He is faithful in all my house." God speaks to Moses face to face. When the cloud lifts, Miriam's skin has become diseased, white like snow.

Aaron begs Moses for help, and Moses, the one who was attacked, prays for his sister. "Heal her, God, I beg you!" God heals her, but she has to stay outside the camp for seven days. And here's a touching detail: the whole nation waits. They don't move on until Miriam is brought back in.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Moses' Cushite Wife**
>
> Cush was the region south of Egypt, roughly modern Sudan and southern Egypt. Scholars debate whether this wife was Zipporah, the Midianite woman Moses married in Exodus 2, or a second wife. Either way, Miriam and Aaron seem to have used her foreign background against Moses. Some readers note the irony: Miriam complains about a dark-skinned woman, and she's struck with skin that's white as snow. Whatever the details, God sides with Moses, and the story offers no support for prejudice against people of other ethnicities. If anything, it rebukes it.

KEY VERSE

The LORD said to Moses, "Has the LORD's hand grown short? Now you will see whether my word will happen to you or not."

Numbers 11:23 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What do you tend to complain about? What would it look like to replace complaining with gratitude?
2. Why do you think the Israelites remembered Egypt as better than it was?
3. Moses told God honestly that he couldn't handle it anymore. How honest are you with God about how you feel?
4. How did Moses respond when his family criticized him? What can you learn from that?

TRY THIS *Go one full day without complaining. Every time you catch yourself starting to, stop and name one thing you're thankful for instead. Write down how it went.*

CHAPTER 4

Grasshoppers and Giants

Numbers 13–14

Israel has reached the southern edge of Canaan, near a place called Kadesh. The promised land is right there. God tells Moses to send twelve men, one leader from each tribe, to scout it out. Two of them will become famous: Caleb from the tribe of Judah, and Joshua from the tribe of Ephraim.

For forty days the spies travel through the land, from the southern desert all the way to the far north. At a valley near Hebron, they cut a single cluster of grapes so huge that two men have to carry it on a pole between them. They come back loaded with grapes, pomegranates, and figs, and give their report. “We came to the land where you sent us. Surely it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit.”

Then comes the word that changes everything: however. “However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. Moreover, we saw the children of Anak there.” The descendants of Anak were known as giants. The spies get more and more dramatic. “There we saw the Nephilim, the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim. We were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight.”

BACKGROUND CHECK **Giants?**

The Anakites seem to have been a clan of unusually tall people living around Hebron. Goliath, centuries later, came from the same area of Philistine cities where survivors of the Anakites settled (Joshua 11:22). Ancient Egyptian letters from around this period also describe tall, fierce warriors in Canaan. The mention of the Nephilim is interesting, since the Nephilim in Genesis 6 lived before the flood. Some scholars think the spies were exaggerating, using the scariest word they knew, the way someone today might call a big opponent a monster. Either way, notice who's telling the story: the frightened spies. They said they looked like grasshoppers. That was their own view of themselves.

Caleb tries to calm everyone down. "Let's go up at once, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it!" But the other ten won't have it. "We aren't able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we." And their fear spreads through the camp like wildfire.

That night, the whole community weeps. By morning they're furious. "We wish that we had died in the land of Egypt, or that we had died in this wilderness!" They accuse God of bringing them there to die, and they say their children will be taken as plunder. Then they say to one another, "Let's choose a leader, and let's return into Egypt."

REAL TALK **Ten Against Two**

Ten spies said no. Two said yes. The crowd went with the ten. That's how peer pressure works. When most people around you are saying something is impossible, or that something wrong is no big deal, it's incredibly hard to be the one who disagrees. Caleb and Joshua saw the same giants as everyone else. The difference was that they also saw God. Standing with them cost them: the crowd literally talked about stoning them. If you're the only one in your friend group who won't go along with something, whether it's cheating, vaping, drinking, mocking someone, or sharing something you shouldn't,

you're in good company. And if the pressure ever puts you in danger, get out and call a parent or trusted adult. A real friend will understand.

Joshua and Caleb tear their clothes in grief and plead with the people. "If the LORD delights in us, then he will bring us into this land, and give it to us: a land which flows with milk and honey. Only don't rebel against the LORD, neither fear the people of the land; for they are bread for us." In other words, the giants are lunch. "The LORD is with us. Don't fear them." The crowd responds by picking up stones.

Then God's glory appears at the tent. God tells Moses He will destroy the people and start over with Moses, making a nation from him instead. It's a test, and Moses passes. He prays for the people who have just rejected him. He reminds God of His reputation among the nations, and then he quotes back to God the description God gave of Himself on Mount Sinai: "The LORD is slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness, forgiving iniquity and disobedience."

God forgives them, as Moses asked. But forgiveness doesn't erase consequences. This generation, who saw the plagues of Egypt and the miracles in the wilderness and still refused to trust Him, will not enter the land. They will wander for forty years, a year for every day the spies explored, until that whole generation has died in the wilderness. Their children, the very ones they said would be taken as plunder, will be the ones who go in. And there's a special word for one man. "But my servant Caleb, because he had another spirit with him, and has followed me fully, him I will bring into the land."

REAL TALK **Afraid of Failing**

The Israelites were so afraid of failing that they refused to try. Fear of failure can do that to you too. Maybe you don't try out for the team, don't apply,

don't raise your hand, don't share your faith, don't ask that person to hang out, because you're afraid it won't go well. Fear says: you're a grasshopper. But your worth isn't measured by whether you succeed. And sometimes the bigger failure is never trying. If anxiety about failing is making it hard to sleep, eat, or get through the day, that's worth talking to a parent, counselor, or doctor about. Anxiety is common and treatable, and getting help is a smart move, not a weak one.

Hebrews looks back on this moment and gives the verdict in one sentence: "We see that they weren't able to enter in because of unbelief." It wasn't the giants that kept them out. It wasn't the walls or the weapons. It was that they didn't trust God. The same God who split the sea and sent bread from heaven had promised them the land. The question was never whether the Canaanites were strong. It was whether God was faithful. And because they decided He wasn't, they spent forty years wandering in circles in sight of the place they could have called home.

The story has one more painful twist. When the people hear the verdict, they change their minds. Now they want to go up and fight. Moses warns them that God isn't with them in this, but they go anyway, and they're beaten badly. It's a sad pattern: refusing when God says go, and going when God says stop. Faith isn't just being brave. It's trusting God's timing.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Caleb at Eighty-Five**

Caleb's story doesn't end in Numbers. Forty-five years later, after the wilderness wandering and the conquest of much of Canaan, Caleb comes to Joshua and says he's eighty-five years old and still as strong as the day the spies went out. He asks for the very hill country around Hebron where the giants lived, the place that terrified the other spies. And he takes it (Joshua 14:6–15). The man who followed God fully as a young man was still following Him fully as an old man. That's the kind of faith worth building now.

KEY VERSE

If the LORD delights in us, then he will bring us into this land, and give it to us: a land which flows with milk and honey.

Numbers 14:8 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. The spies all saw the same land. Why do you think they came back with such different reports?
2. When have you felt like a grasshopper? What made you feel that way?
3. Have you ever been the only one in a group to say no? What happened?
4. What would it look like for you to follow God fully, like Caleb?

TRY THIS *Write down one thing you've been too afraid to try. Write down what you're afraid will happen, and then what God says about you. Then take one small step toward it this week.*

CHAPTER 5

Korah's Rebellion

Numbers 15–19

After the disaster at Kadesh, you might expect God to go quiet. Instead, chapter 15 opens with instructions for offerings to bring when you come into the land. It's a quiet promise. Even after the failure, God is still talking about when, not if. The chapter also gives Israel tassels to wear on the corners of their clothes. "It shall be to you for a fringe, that you may see it, and remember all the LORD's commandments, and do them; and that you don't follow your own heart and your own eyes." Observant Jewish men still wear these fringes, called tzitzit, today.

Then comes the biggest rebellion in the book. Korah, a Levite from the Kohathite clan, along with Dathan and Abiram from the tribe of Reuben, and 250 well-known leaders, confront Moses and Aaron. "You take too much on yourself, since all the congregation are holy, everyone of them, and the LORD is among them! Why do you lift yourselves up above the LORD's assembly?"

It sounds almost reasonable. Aren't all God's people holy? Isn't Moses acting like a dictator? But Moses sees what's really going on. He reminds Korah of the incredible privilege he already has. "Is it a small thing to you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to himself?" Korah wasn't fighting for everyone's equality. He wanted the priesthood for

himself. And Dathan and Abiram refuse even to come talk. They call Egypt the land flowing with milk and honey, and accuse Moses of dragging them into the desert to die.

REAL TALK **Jealousy and Power**

Korah's problem wasn't that he had no role. He had one of the most important jobs in Israel. His problem was that he wanted someone else's. Jealousy works like that. It takes something good God has given you and makes it feel like nothing, because someone else has something you think is better. Social media makes it worse, because you're constantly seeing the highlight reels of other people's lives. If you notice yourself resenting someone's position, popularity, or success, ask: what has God already given me? And how can I use it well?

Moses proposes a test. Korah and his 250 followers will bring censers with fire and incense before the LORD the next day, and God will show whom He has chosen. When the moment comes, God tells everyone to move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. Moses says that if these men die a normal death, then God hasn't sent him. But if the ground opens up, everyone will know. As soon as he finishes speaking, "the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with their households, all of Korah's men, and all their goods." Fire comes out from the LORD and consumes the 250 men offering incense.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Korah's Children**

Here's something easy to miss. Numbers 26:11 says that the sons of Korah did not die. Korah's family line survived, and generations later, his descendants became worship leaders in the temple. Eleven psalms are titled for the sons of Korah, including Psalm 42, As the deer pants for the water brooks, and Psalm 46, God is our refuge and strength. The family of a rebel became a family of worshipers. Your family's story doesn't have to be your story. God can write something new.

You'd think that would settle things. But the very next day, the whole community grumbles against Moses and Aaron, accusing them of killing the LORD's people. A plague breaks out. Moses tells Aaron to grab his censer, fill it with fire from the altar, and run into the middle of the crowd to make atonement. And Aaron, the old high priest, runs. "He stood between the dead and the living; and the plague was stayed." It's one of the most powerful pictures in the Bible of what a priest does, and Christians see in it a picture of Jesus, who stands between us and death.

To end the arguments for good, God tells each tribe to bring a staff, with its leader's name written on it. They're left overnight in the tabernacle. "On the next day, Moses went into the Tent of the Testimony; and behold, Aaron's rod for the house of Levi had sprouted, budded, produced blossoms, and bore ripe almonds." A dead stick came to life overnight. Aaron's staff was kept in front of the ark as a reminder.

> **REAL TALK** **Criticizing Leaders**
>
> Is it ever okay to challenge a leader? Absolutely. The Bible is full of prophets who confronted kings, and Paul publicly corrected Peter (Galatians 2:11). If a leader, including a pastor, coach, teacher, or youth leader, is abusing their power or hurting people, it's right to speak up and to tell another trusted adult. Korah's problem wasn't that he asked questions. It was that he was grabbing for power and rejecting the leaders God had chosen. Healthy challenge says, this is wrong and needs to be fixed. Rebellion says, I should be in charge. Know the difference.

Jude, one of Jesus' brothers, later mentions Korah in a warning about people who cause division in the church, saying they "perished in Korah's rebellion." It's a reminder that the danger Korah represents isn't just ancient history. Wherever people are more interested in their own status than in serving God and others,

the same rebellion can grow. Churches, youth groups, and friend groups can be torn apart by someone who wants control. The cure is the opposite of Korah: humility like Moses', who fell on his face before God instead of defending himself, and courage like Aaron's, who ran into the plague to save the very people who had grumbled against him.

Chapters 18–19 return to the priests and Levites. They receive no land, because God Himself is their share. "I am your portion and your inheritance among the children of Israel." Chapter 19 describes the ashes of a red heifer, mixed with water, used to cleanse people who had touched a dead body. After so much death in the camp, God provides a way back to cleanness.

KEY VERSE

He stood between the dead and the living; and the plague was stayed.

Numbers 16:48 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Korah wasn't satisfied with the job God had given him?
2. When is it right to challenge a leader, and when is it rebellion?
3. What does it mean to you that the sons of Korah became worship leaders?
4. How is Jesus like Aaron standing between the dead and the living?

TRY THIS *Read Psalm 42 or Psalm 46, written by the sons of Korah. Write down one line that speaks to you, and put it somewhere you'll see it this week.*

CHAPTER 6

The Rock and the Snake

Numbers 20–21

Chapter 20 jumps ahead almost forty years. Most of the wilderness generation has died. The chapter begins with a funeral: Miriam dies and is buried at Kadesh. Then, once again, there's no water, and once again, the people turn on Moses and Aaron. They wish they had died with their brothers. Why did you bring us to this terrible place? There's no grain, no figs, no grapes, no pomegranates, and no water to drink.

Moses and Aaron go to the tent and fall on their faces, and God's glory appears. God gives clear instructions. "Take the rod, and assemble the congregation, you, and Aaron your brother, and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it pour out its water."

Speak to the rock. That's the command. But Moses has had it. He gathers the people and snaps, "Hear now, you rebels! Shall we bring water out of this rock for you?" Then "Moses lifted up his hand, and struck the rock with his rod twice, and water came out abundantly." The people drink. God still provides. But then He says something devastating to Moses and Aaron. "Because you didn't believe in me, to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Was Striking the Rock So Bad?**

It can seem unfair. Moses led Israel for forty years, and he's banned from the promised land for hitting a rock instead of talking to it? Interpreters have suggested several reasons. Moses disobeyed a direct command. He lost his temper and called God's people rebels. He said, Shall we bring water, as though he and Aaron were the ones doing the miracle. And he failed to show the people God's holiness at a moment when everyone was watching. Leaders are held to a higher standard because their example shapes so many others (James 3:1). Paul later sees something deeper in the rock: "the rock was Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:4). Some Christians think that since the rock had already been struck once, back in Exodus 17, striking it again spoiled a picture of Christ, who was struck once for all.

REAL TALK **One Bad Moment**

Moses blew it in one angry moment, and it cost him. Maybe you've had a moment like that: words you can't take back, a post you shouldn't have made, a choice that had real consequences. It's okay to grieve that. But notice how the story ends. Moses keeps leading. God keeps talking with him. And centuries later, in the Gospels, Moses appears on a mountain in the promised land, talking with Jesus at the transfiguration (Matthew 17:3). One failure didn't define his life, and God still brought him into the land in the end. If you're stuck replaying a mistake, talk to God about it, make things right where you can, and talk to a trusted adult if the guilt or anxiety is overwhelming. Your worst moment is not your whole story.

Moses and Aaron's failure also shows how anger can sneak up on even the most faithful people. Moses had been patient with this people for decades. He had prayed for them, pleaded for them, and carried them. But on this day, worn out and grieving his sister, he snapped. If you're exhausted, stressed, or grieving, you're more likely to lose your temper too. That doesn't excuse it, but it does mean you need to take care of yourself: rest, eat, talk to someone, and ask God for help before you reach your breaking point.

The chapter continues with more hard news. The king of Edom, descended from Jacob's brother Esau, refuses to let Israel pass through his land, even after Moses promises they won't drink a drop of his water without paying for it. Israel has to go the long way around. Then Aaron dies on Mount Hor. Before he dies, Moses takes Aaron's priestly robes and puts them on his son Eleazar. The whole community mourns Aaron for thirty days.

In chapter 21, after their first military victory, the people get impatient on the long detour around Edom, and they complain again. "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no bread, there is no water, and our soul loathes this disgusting food!" That disgusting food is manna, the bread from heaven. God sends venomous snakes among the people, and many die.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Snakes in the Wilderness**
>
> The deserts of the Sinai and the Arabah, the valley south of the Dead Sea where this probably happened, are home to several dangerous snakes, including the carpet viper and the horned viper. Their bites can be deadly. The Hebrew word for these snakes is seraphim, which means burning ones, maybe because their bite burned. It's the same word used for the fiery angels around God's throne in Isaiah 6. Interestingly, archaeologists excavating an ancient copper mining site at Timna, in the Arabah, found a small copper snake in a shrine there.

This time, the people actually admit they were wrong. They come to Moses and say, We sinned. Pray for us. Moses prays, and God gives a surprising answer. "Make a venomous snake, and set it on a pole. It shall happen that everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." So "Moses made a serpent of bronze, and set it on the pole. If a serpent had bitten any man, when he looked at the serpent of bronze, he lived."

Notice also what God didn't do. He didn't remove all the snakes from the camp. The danger was still there, and people were still being bitten. Instead, He provided a remedy for anyone who would use it. That's a lot like life. Following God doesn't mean you'll never face danger, temptation, or pain. The snakes in the camp were real. But God's answer was real too, and it was available to anyone, no matter how badly bitten, no matter how many times they'd complained before. Nobody was too far gone to look.

Think about how strange that is. The cure wasn't medicine. It wasn't a ritual or a sacrifice. It was just looking, trusting God enough to turn your eyes to the thing He provided. And it was a picture of the very thing that was killing them.

Fifteen hundred years later, Jesus used this exact story to explain His mission. Speaking at night to Nicodemus, a respected teacher, He said, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life." Then comes the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16. Like the bronze snake, Jesus would be lifted up on a pole, the cross. Like the snake, He would take the form of the very thing that was killing us; Paul says God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us. And like the Israelites, all we have to do is look to Him and trust.

BACKGROUND CHECK **When Good Things Become Idols**

The bronze serpent has a sad later chapter. Israel kept it for more than seven hundred years, and eventually people started burning incense to it and worshiping it, even giving it a name, Nehushtan. Good King Hezekiah finally smashed it to pieces (2 Kings 18:4). Something God had used to heal His people had become an idol. That can happen to good things in our lives too: a church tradition, a worship experience, a spiritual leader, even a Bible verse

can become something we trust instead of God. The snake was never the point. The God who healed through it was.

REAL TALK **Losing People**

In just one chapter, Moses loses his sister Miriam and his brother Aaron. They'd been through everything together: Egypt, the plagues, the sea, the wilderness. If you've lost someone close to you, a grandparent, a parent, a sibling, or a friend, you know how heavy that can be. Israel took thirty days to mourn Aaron. Grief takes time, and there's no right way to do it. It can help to talk with someone you trust, write about the person you lost, or keep something that reminds you of them. If the sadness feels like too much or you ever think about hurting yourself, call or text 988 any time. God is close to the brokenhearted (Psalm 34:18).

The chapter ends with Israel's victories over two Amorite kings, Sihon and Og, east of the Jordan. After forty years of wandering, the new generation is finally winning battles and gaining ground.

KEY VERSE

The LORD said to Moses, "Make a venomous snake, and set it on a pole. It shall happen that everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live."

Numbers 21:8 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God was so serious about Moses striking the rock?
2. Is there a mistake you keep replaying? What would it take to let God have the last word on it?
3. Why do you think God's cure for the snakebites was simply to look?
4. How does the bronze serpent help you understand John 3:14–16?

TRY THIS *Read John 3:1–21. Rewrite verses 14–16 in your own words, as if you were explaining them to a friend who has never heard of Numbers.*

CHAPTER 7

Balaam and His Donkey

Numbers 22–24

Israel is camped on the plains of Moab, just across the Jordan River from Jericho, and the king of Moab is terrified. His name is Balak, and he's watched Israel defeat two Amorite kings. He knows he can't beat them in battle. So he tries something else: a curse.

Balak sends messengers, with a fat fee, to a famous diviner named Balaam, who lived far to the north, near the Euphrates River. "Please come now therefore, and curse this people for me; for they are too mighty for me." Balak believes Balaam's words have power. "I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Balaam Outside the Bible**
>
> Balaam isn't just a character in Numbers. In 1967, archaeologists working at Deir Alla in Jordan, not far from the plains of Moab, found an inscription written in ink on a plastered wall, from around 800 BC. It begins by calling itself the account of Balaam son of Beor, a seer of the gods, and describes a vision of disaster he received at night. It's one of the few times a person from the Bible appears in an ancient text from outside Israel. Clearly, Balaam was famous across the region, and his reputation lasted for centuries.

That night, God speaks to Balaam. "You shall not go with them. You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed." So Balaam sends the messengers home. Balak sends more important officials with a

bigger offer. Balaam says all the right things: "If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I can't go beyond the word of the LORD my God." But he also invites them to stay the night while he asks God again. That's a red flag. God has already answered. Balaam is hoping for a different answer, because he wants the money. This time God lets him go, but only to speak what God tells him.

Then comes one of the funniest scenes in the Bible. Balaam saddles his donkey and sets off with the Moabite officials. God is angry, and the angel of the LORD stands in the road with a drawn sword. Balaam doesn't see a thing. But the donkey does. She swerves off the road into a field, and Balaam beats her to get her back on the path.

The angel moves to a narrow path between two vineyard walls. The donkey sees him again and presses against the wall, crushing Balaam's foot. Balaam beats her again. Then the angel stands in a spot so narrow there's no way around, and the donkey simply lies down under Balaam. He's furious, and beats her with his staff.

Then "the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, 'What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?'" And here's the best part: Balaam argues back, as if a talking donkey is a perfectly normal thing. "Because you have mocked me, I wish there were a sword in my hand, for now I would have killed you." The great seer, famous for seeing what others can't, is being outseen by his donkey, and he's threatening to kill her with a sword he doesn't have while an angel with an actual sword stands right in front of him.

The donkey's reply is wonderfully calm. "Am I not your donkey, on which you have ridden all your life long until today? Was I ever in

the habit of doing so to you?" And Balaam, defeated in a debate with his donkey, mutters, "No."

REAL TALK **Seeing What Others Don't**

The donkey saw the danger. Balaam, the professional prophet, didn't, because he was blinded by what he wanted. Money, popularity, or a relationship can do that to you. You get so focused on getting what you want that you miss what's obvious to everyone else. Sometimes God sends a donkey: a friend, a parent, a coach, even a little sister who says, are you sure about this? It's annoying. It might even be humiliating. But it might also save your life. Who are the people in your life who see things you don't? Do you listen to them, or do you get angry?

"Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the LORD's angel standing in the way, with his sword drawn in his hand; and he bowed his head, and fell on his face." The angel tells him that if the donkey hadn't turned aside, he'd have killed Balaam and spared her. Peter later summed it up: "A speechless donkey spoke with a man's voice and stopped the madness of the prophet."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Did the Donkey Really Talk?**

Some readers take the talking donkey literally: God, who made donkeys and mouths, can certainly give one words for a moment. Others see the story as told with deliberate humor and irony, maybe even shaped like a fable, to make a serious point about a seer who couldn't see. Both groups agree on the point. And it's worth noticing that the New Testament treats the event as real (2 Peter 2:16). Whatever your view, the joke is on Balaam, and on anyone who thinks they can outsmart God.

Balaam arrives, and Balak takes him up to a high place where he can see the Israelite camp. Seven altars, seven bulls, seven rams. Balak waits for the curse. Instead, Balaam blesses Israel. "How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? How shall I defy whom the LORD has not defied?"

Balaam's confession is ironic, given what we've just seen. He says he can only speak what God puts in his mouth. "I will speak the word that God puts in my mouth." That's exactly what his donkey had just done. God used a donkey to speak to a prophet, and now He uses a greedy prophet to speak blessing over His people. If God can speak through a donkey and through Balaam, He can speak through anyone, including you, on your worst day. It's not about how impressive the messenger is. It's about the God who gives the message.

Balak is horrified. He tries a different mountain, and then another one, as if a better view might change God's mind. Each time, Balaam blesses Israel more. In the second oracle, he declares one of the great truths of the Bible: "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should repent. Has he said, and he won't do it? Or has he spoken, and he won't make it good?" In the third, he looks out over the tribes camped in order around the tabernacle and says, "How goodly are your tents, Jacob, and your dwellings, Israel!" Jewish worshipers still say those words, Mah tovu, when entering a synagogue.

By now Balak is clapping his hands in fury and telling Balaam to go home with no payment. But Balaam has one more oracle, and it reaches far into the future. "I see him, but not now. I see him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob. A scepter will rise out of Israel." Jewish readers came to see this as a prophecy of a coming king, the Messiah, and many Christians connect it with the star the wise men followed when Jesus was born (Matthew 2:2).

> **REAL TALK** **You Can't Be Cursed**
>
> Some people worry about curses, bad luck, or what other people say about them. Maybe someone has said something cruel about you that you can't

shake, or you've been told you'll never amount to anything. The Balaam story says something powerful: nobody can curse those whom God has blessed. People's words can hurt, and it's okay to talk about that with someone you trust. But they don't get the final say over your life. God does. And in Christ, He's already spoken a blessing over you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Balaam's Bad Ending**

After all those blessings, you might expect Balaam to become a hero. He doesn't. Numbers 31 reveals that he advised the Moabites and Midianites to lead Israel into idolatry, and he dies fighting against Israel. The New Testament remembers him as a warning. Peter says he loved the wages of wrongdoing (2 Peter 2:15), and Jesus, in Revelation, warns a church about people who hold the teaching of Balaam. Balaam is a sobering example: someone who said the right words about God, even beautiful ones, but whose heart was set on money. Saying the right things isn't the same as following God.

KEY VERSE

God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should repent. Has he said, and he won't do it? Or has he spoken, and he won't make it good?

Numbers 23:19 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Balaam asked God a second time after God had already said no?
2. What can make people blind to things that are obvious to others?
3. Who in your life is like Balaam's donkey, someone who sees danger you might miss?
4. What does it mean to you that God's blessing can't be reversed?

TRY THIS *Look up Numbers 23:19 and Hebrews 6:18. Make a list of three promises God has made in the Bible that you need to remember this week, and write 23:19 at the top.*

CHAPTER 8

Zeal and a New Generation

Numbers 25–30

Balaam couldn't curse Israel. But he found another way to hurt them. Numbers 31:16 says it was through his advice that what happens next took place. Balaam seems to have realized that if he couldn't turn God against Israel, he could tempt Israel to turn against God.

Israel is camped at Shittim, and Israelite men begin sleeping with Moabite women, who invite them to the sacrifices of their gods. "The people ate and bowed down to their gods. Israel joined himself to Baal Peor, and the LORD's anger burned against Israel." It's a total betrayal, sexual and spiritual, right on the edge of the promised land. A plague breaks out in the camp.

Then, while the leaders and people are weeping at the entrance of the tabernacle, an Israelite man brazenly brings a Midianite woman past them, right into his tent. Phinehas, Aaron's grandson, a priest, takes a spear, follows them, and kills them both. The plague stops. By then 24,000 have died. God says Phinehas "has turned my wrath away from the children of Israel, in that he was jealous with my jealousy among them," and He gives him a covenant of peace.

REAL TALK **Is Phinehas a Role Model for Violence?**

No. This is one of the hardest stories in Numbers, and it needs to be read carefully. Phinehas was a priest acting in a unique moment in Israel's history, when God Himself was judging the nation for open rebellion, and the Bible treats it as a one-time act tied to that judgment. Sadly, throughout history some people have used this story to justify violence in God's name, attacking people they considered sinful. That's a terrible misreading. Jesus told Peter to put away his sword (Matthew 26:52), and the New Testament never calls Christians to use violence to punish sin. Paul says the weapons of our warfare aren't the weapons of the world (2 Corinthians 10:4). What Christians can learn from Phinehas is that sin is serious and that God's honor matters. The way we show that zeal today is in our own repentance, in prayer, in protecting the vulnerable, and in love, never in hurting people. If anyone ever uses religion to justify violence or threats, against you or anyone else, tell a trusted adult or call 911.

REAL TALK **The Pull of the Crowd**

The sin at Baal Peor started with an invitation to a party. Then came the food, then the worship, then everything else. Temptation rarely shows up looking dangerous. It usually shows up looking fun, with people who seem friendly and a crowd that's already doing it. That's why who you spend time with matters so much. It's not about avoiding everyone who doesn't share your faith; Jesus spent time with all kinds of people. It's about knowing where your boundaries are before you get to the party. Paul says, "God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted above what you are able, but will with the temptation also make the way of escape." Sometimes the way of escape is just calling your mom to pick you up.

It's also worth noticing what God did after the judgment at Baal Peor. He didn't abandon His people. He made a covenant of peace, and in the very next chapter He began preparing the new generation to enter the land. Sin was serious, and it had real consequences. But God's plan to bless His people, the plan Balaam

couldn't curse, didn't fail because of their failure. That's a pattern throughout the Bible, and it's good news for anyone who's blown it badly. God's discipline is real, but His promises are stronger.

In chapter 26, God tells Moses and Eleazar to take a second census. Thirty-eight years have passed since the first one. The total is about the same, slightly smaller. But the names are all different. "There was not a man left of them, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh, and Joshua the son of Nun." A whole generation has passed away. Their children are ready. The book of Numbers has turned a corner, from death to new life.

Then come five remarkable young women. Their names are recorded carefully: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, the daughters of Zelophehad. Their father had died in the wilderness with no sons, and under the inheritance system, land passed through sons. That meant their family's share of the promised land would vanish.

So they do something gutsy. They walk up to the entrance of the tabernacle and stand in front of Moses, Eleazar the priest, the tribal leaders, and the whole assembly, and they make their case. "Why should the name of our father be taken away from among his family, because he had no son? Give to us a possession among the brothers of our father."

Moses doesn't know the answer, so he brings their case to God. And God's answer is clear. "The daughters of Zelophehad speak right. You shall surely give them a possession of an inheritance among their father's brothers." God not only grants their request; He makes it a law for all Israel. If a man dies with no son, his inheritance goes to his daughters.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Women and Inheritance**

In the ancient Near East, women generally didn't inherit land, though there were some exceptions in places like Mesopotamia. The daughters of Zelophehad stand out because they spoke up in public, before the most powerful leaders in Israel, and God sided with them. Their story is told again in Numbers 36 and Joshua 17, where they receive their land. Jewish tradition praised them as wise, knowledgeable, and righteous. Their courage changed the law for everyone after them. If you see something unfair, you can speak up respectfully, through the right channels, even if you're young and even if nobody else has.

REAL TALK **Speaking Up**

The daughters of Zelophehad didn't riot, and they didn't stay silent. They showed up, stated their case respectfully, and trusted that God cared about justice. That's a model for you. If you see something unfair at school, at church, or in your community, you don't have to wait until you're an adult to say something. Talk to a teacher, write a letter, bring it to student government, or ask your parents to help you find the right person to talk to. Do your homework, be respectful, and be brave. Sometimes young people see what's unfair more clearly than anyone else.

Notice who these young women were. Their father had died in the wilderness, part of the generation that didn't trust God. They had every reason to be bitter, or to give up on the promised land altogether. Instead, they believed the promise so strongly that they fought for their share of a land they hadn't even entered yet. They were planning for a future they couldn't see. That's faith. The new generation in Numbers isn't just counted. It's characterized by people like these five sisters, who take God at His word.

Moses then asks God to appoint a leader to take his place, "that the congregation of the LORD may not be as sheep which have no shepherd." God chooses Joshua, "a man in whom is the Spirit."

Moses lays his hands on Joshua in front of the priest and the people, giving him some of his authority. Chapters 28–30 then list the offerings for each day, week, month, and festival, and give rules about vows.

KEY VERSE

The daughters of Zelophehad speak right. You shall surely give them a possession of an inheritance among their father's brothers. You shall cause the inheritance of their father to pass to them.

Numbers 27:7 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Balaam's advice to tempt Israel was more dangerous than his curses?
2. How should Christians show zeal for God today, without hurting anyone?
3. What do you admire about the daughters of Zelophehad?
4. Is there something unfair in your world that you could respectfully speak up about?

TRY THIS *Pick one injustice you care about. Find out who has the power to change it, and write them a respectful letter or email stating your case, like the daughters of Zelophehad.*

CHAPTER 9

On the Edge of the Promise

Numbers 31–36

The last chapters of Numbers take place on the plains of Moab, with the promised land in view across the Jordan. Chapter 31 describes a war against the Midianites, who had led Israel into sin at Baal Peor. Balaam is killed in the battle. The chapter includes a harsh command to kill many of the Midianite captives, which is difficult to read.

> **REAL TALK** **The Midianite War**
>
> Numbers 31 is one of the hardest chapters in the Bible, and it's okay to say so. Christians have wrestled with passages like this for centuries. Several things are worth knowing. This was a one-time judgment connected with the events of chapter 25, not a general command for all time. Many scholars note that ancient war accounts often used sweeping, exaggerated language, and Midianites appear again as a powerful people later in Judges 6, so the chapter may not describe total destruction. Above all, Christians read every war passage in the Old Testament through Jesus, who taught His followers to love their enemies and not to take up the sword. No one can use these chapters to justify violence today. If this passage troubles you, that's a sign your conscience is working. Talk about it with a pastor, youth leader, or parent, and don't be afraid to bring your questions to God.

In chapter 32, the tribes of Reuben and Gad, who had huge herds of livestock, notice that the land east of the Jordan is great for grazing.

They ask Moses if they can stay there instead of crossing over. "Don't bring us over the Jordan." Moses explodes. "Shall your brothers go to war while you sit here?" He reminds them of the spies at Kadesh, whose fear discouraged the whole nation and cost them forty years.

The Reubenites and Gadites come back with a better offer. They'll build pens for their flocks and towns for their families, but their fighting men will cross the Jordan and lead the charge until the other tribes have their land too. Moses agrees, but he gives them a warning that has become famous. "But if you will not do so, behold, you have sinned against the LORD; and be sure your sin will find you out." They keep their word; in Joshua 22, they return home after fighting alongside their brothers.

> **REAL TALK** **Don't Sit It Out**
>
> The tribes of Reuben and Gad weren't wrong to want the land east of the Jordan. They were wrong at first to want it while letting everyone else fight. It's easy to do that in a family, a friend group, a team, or a church: enjoy the benefits while others do the hard work. Moses' question still stings. Shall your brothers go to war while you sit here? Where are you sitting it out while others carry the load? Maybe it's chores at home, a group project, or serving at church. Show up for your people.

Chapter 33 lists every stop on Israel's journey from Egypt to the plains of Moab, more than forty campsites. "Moses wrote the starting points of their journeys by the commandment of the LORD." It's like a scrapbook of the wilderness years. Some of the names recall amazing moments, like the crossing of the sea and the water at Elim. Others recall disasters. All of them are part of the story, because God was there at every one.

There's something hopeful about the fact that God told Moses to write all this down. The wilderness years were mostly a story of failure, and yet God wanted them remembered, every campsite, because every one was a place He had been faithful. Your story isn't only made up of victories either. But God doesn't erase the hard chapters. He redeems them, and someday you'll be able to look back and see His hand at every stop.

Chapter 34 marks out the borders of the promised land. Then chapter 35 gives the Levites forty-eight cities scattered throughout the tribes, so that God's teachers and priests would live among all the people. Six of those cities would be special: cities of refuge.

Here's how they worked. In the ancient world, if someone was killed, a relative of the victim, called the avenger of blood, had the duty to take revenge. But what if the death was an accident? What if two men were cutting wood and an axe head flew off and killed one of them (Deuteronomy 19:5)? God made a way to protect the innocent. "You shall appoint for yourselves cities to be cities of refuge for you, that the man slayer who kills any person unwittingly may flee there." The cities were spread out so anyone could reach one quickly. And they were for everyone, "for the children of Israel, for the stranger, and for the foreigner living among them."

BACKGROUND CHECK **How Refuge Worked**

When someone fled to a city of refuge, the elders heard the case. If the death was murder, the killer was handed over for justice; the cities didn't protect the guilty. If it was an accident, the person was safe inside the city. They had to stay there until the death of the high priest. Then they could go home, free. Jewish tradition says that roads to the cities of refuge were kept in good repair, with signs at every crossroad pointing the way: Refuge, refuge. Christians have long seen these cities as a picture of Christ. Hebrews describes believers as those "who have fled for refuge to take hold of the

hope set before us." And it was the death of the high priest that set the refugee free. Jesus, our High Priest, died to set us free.

REAL TALK **A Safe Place**

Everyone needs a city of refuge, a place to run when life is dangerous or overwhelming. If you're not safe at home, if someone is hurting you or threatening you, you need a real, physical safe place and a trusted adult who can help, like a teacher, school counselor, pastor, coach, or relative. In the United States you can call or text the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453, or call 911 if you're in danger. And for the guilt, fear, and pain you carry inside, God Himself is a refuge. Psalm 46 says He is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. You don't have to run alone.

REAL TALK **Looking Back**

When you reach the end of something, a school year, a season, a hard chapter in your life, it's worth looking back the way Numbers 33 does. Not just at the highlights, but at the whole route. Where did you mess up? Where did God provide? Who helped you? What would you do differently? Israel's journey list includes Kibroth Hattaavah, the graves of craving, right alongside Elim with its twelve springs. Both were part of the story. You can't change your past, but you can learn from it, and you can thank God for walking with you through every stop.

The book ends where it began, with the daughters of Zelophehad. The leaders of their tribe worry that if the daughters marry men from other tribes, their land will pass to those tribes. So God allows the daughters to marry whomever they think best, as long as it's within their father's tribe, keeping the land in the family. The five sisters marry their cousins, and their inheritance stays secure. It's a quiet ending, but a hopeful one. The new generation is ready. The land is in sight. And God is still keeping His promises, down to the last field.

KEY VERSE

These six cities shall be refuge for the children of Israel, for the stranger, and for the foreigner living among them, that everyone who kills any person unwittingly may flee there.

Numbers 35:15 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. How do you handle passages like Numbers 31 that trouble you?
2. Where are you tempted to sit it out while others do the hard work?
3. How are the cities of refuge a picture of Jesus?
4. Who are the safe people in your life, and how could you be a safe person for someone else?

TRY THIS *Make your own journey list like Numbers 33: write down ten important places or moments in your life so far, good and bad. Next to each one, write where you see God in it now.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

Numbers ends with Israel camped on the plains of Moab, looking across the Jordan River at the promised land. A whole generation has died in the wilderness. Even Moses won't get to go in. The new generation is ready, but the question remains: can anyone actually trust God enough, and obey Him enough, to receive His promises?

Jewish readers treasure Numbers as the story of God's patience with His people in the wilderness, and Jewish worshipers still recite the priestly blessing. The New Testament writers, who were Jewish themselves, saw Jesus all over Numbers. Paul says the rock that gave Israel water was a picture of Christ: "the rock was Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:4). Jesus called Himself the true bread from heaven, the real manna. And when Jesus explained His mission to a religious leader named Nicodemus, He pointed straight to Numbers 21: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:14–15). Look and live.

Here's what the Bible says about where that story leads, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He loves you. Like Israel in the wilderness, you're never out of His sight.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We've all grumbled and rebelled.

Israel complained, doubted, and turned back. The Bible says all of us have turned from God in our own ways.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. Like the snakebite in the camp, sin is deadly. The Bible says its result is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus was lifted up for you.

Just as the bronze serpent was lifted up on a pole, Jesus was lifted up on the cross. He died for our sins, and He rose again.

> *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

The bitten Israelites didn't heal themselves; they just looked at what God provided. Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've complained, doubted You, and gone my own way. I've sinned against You, and I can't fix that myself. Thank You for being patient with me. Thank You that Jesus was lifted up on the cross for me, and that You raised Him from the dead. I'm looking to Him now. Forgive me and heal me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Lead me through the wilderness and bring me home. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Numbers 13–14 and 21, then read John 3 and 1 Corinthians 10, and watch how the wilderness story points to Jesus.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Follow the cloud. Israel moved when God moved. Spend time with God every day in prayer and Scripture, and ask Him to lead you, one step at a time.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Numbers was written so that God's people would learn from the wilderness and trust Him. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Numbers is right, the God who led His people through the desert hasn't stopped leading, and He hasn't given up on you.

God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should repent. Has he said, and he won't do it? Or has he spoken, and he won't make it good?

Numbers 23:19 (WEB)

THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

The King Who Says Choose Life

Deuteronomy, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Who Says Choose Life: The Book of Deuteronomy, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the WEB. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You know the saying by now: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” Deuteronomy might sound like a rerun. The name even means second law. Haven’t we already heard the Ten Commandments? Didn’t we already cover the wilderness? Why do we need Moses to say it all again?

Here’s why. Deuteronomy is a goodbye. Moses is 120 years old. He’s led Israel for forty years, and he knows he’s about to die without setting foot in the promised land. Standing on the plains of Moab, looking across the Jordan River, he gathers a whole new generation, the kids who grew up in the wilderness, and gives them everything he’s got. If you knew you had one last chance to tell the people you love what matters most, what would you say? Deuteronomy is Moses’ answer.

It’s also the book Jesus quoted more than almost any other. When the devil tempted Him in the wilderness, He answered three times from Deuteronomy. When someone asked Him for the greatest commandment, He quoted Deuteronomy 6. The book is full of love: God’s love for His people, His call to love Him back with everything you have, and His command to love the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner. It also has some of the hardest passages in the Bible, and we’ll face those honestly.

At the end, Moses puts a choice in front of Israel, and in front of you. Life or death. Blessing or curse. Let’s hear him out.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Deuteronomy in nine chapters: Moses' first sermon looking back (Deuteronomy 1–4), the Ten Commandments again (5), the Shema (6), not by bread alone and the hard conquest commands (7–11), worship and care for the poor (12–16), kings, priests, and a prophet like Moses (17–20), laws for everyday life (21–26), blessings, curses, and choose life (27–30), and Moses' song and death (31–34). The detailed laws are summarized more briefly than the big ideas.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what kind of book Deuteronomy is, where it fits, and the world it came from. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as who wrote Deuteronomy and when, and how to understand the commands to destroy the Canaanites, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. This book quotes Deuteronomy in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the fifth book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Deuteronomy raises questions teens will ask. I've presented the main views fairly on its authorship, including the traditional view that Moses wrote it and the scholarly view connecting it with the book of the law found in the temple under King Josiah, and on the commands to devote the Canaanite cities to destruction (the Hebrew herem), including readings that take them as hyperbolic war language, as a unique judgment, or as a deeply troubling text Christians must read through Jesus. I'd encourage you to share your own church's view with your teen, and to explain why other Christians see it differently.

These hard passages are handled carefully and age-appropriately, with the clear statement that they are not a model for violence, prejudice, or hatred toward any people today. Real Talk boxes address memory and faith, money and contentment, the occult, fairness, family, and grief, and point readers to trusted adults and, where relevant, the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how the New Testament sees Deuteronomy fulfilled in Jesus, the prophet like Moses, who answered temptation with Deuteronomy and took the curse of the law on Himself, while acknowledging that Jewish readers treasure Deuteronomy and still pray the Shema daily. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will hear in Deuteronomy the voice of a God who loves them and calls them to choose life.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

Second Law

The name Deuteronomy comes from the Greek for second law, from a phrase in Deuteronomy 17:18 about a copy of the law. That's a little misleading. Deuteronomy isn't a different law; it's the same covenant, retold and applied for a new generation about to enter the land. In Hebrew, the book is called Devarim, which means words, from its first line: These are the words which Moses spoke to all Israel.

Part Five of the Torah

Deuteronomy is the last of the five books of Moses. Genesis tells of creation and the promises to Abraham. Exodus tells of the rescue from Egypt. Leviticus and Numbers cover the laws and the wilderness years. Deuteronomy ties it all together, and it sets up everything that follows. The books of Joshua through Kings tell Israel's history by measuring it against Deuteronomy.

Three Sermons and a Song

Most of Deuteronomy is speeches. Moses gives a first sermon looking back on the wilderness years (chapters 1–4), a long second sermon on the commandments and laws (chapters 5–28), and a third sermon calling Israel to commit to the covenant (chapters 29–30). Then come his song, his blessing on the tribes, and the account of his death (chapters 31–34). It all happens in a few weeks, on the plains of Moab, in the fortieth year after the exodus.

The Treaty Format

Deuteronomy is shaped a lot like an ancient treaty. Kings in the ancient Near East, like the Hittites in the 1300s BC and the Assyrians in the 700s BC, made treaties with smaller nations. Those treaties usually had a preamble naming the great king, a history of his relationship with the smaller nation, the rules the smaller nation had to keep, instructions to store and read the treaty, witnesses, and blessings and curses. Deuteronomy follows a similar outline. It's a covenant document between the great King and His people, except that this King rescued them, loves them, and wants their hearts.

Who Wrote Deuteronomy?

Deuteronomy says that Moses spoke these words and wrote this law (Deuteronomy 31:9), and Jewish and Christian tradition has long held that Moses wrote it, apart from the account of his death. Many scholars believe that Deuteronomy, or an early form of it, was the book of the law found in the temple in Jerusalem in about 622 BC, during the reign of King Josiah (2 Kings 22), and that it was written or edited in that era. Others argue it preserves Mosaic material that was lost and rediscovered. Some point out that its structure resembles the older Hittite treaties more closely, others the later Assyrian ones. Christians with different views agree that Deuteronomy is God's Word.

Hard Passages

Deuteronomy includes commands to destroy the nations of Canaan, which are among the most troubling passages in the Bible. We'll face them honestly in chapter 4. Including a command in the Bible doesn't make it a model for violence today, and Christians read every part of the Old Testament through Jesus. If anything you read

brings up something painful in your own life, talk to a trusted adult, like a parent, pastor, or school counselor.

The Map

Chapter 1 (Deuteronomy 1–4): Looking back.

Chapter 2 (Deuteronomy 5): The Ten Commandments again.

Chapter 3 (Deuteronomy 6): The Shema.

Chapter 4 (Deuteronomy 7–11): Not by bread alone.

Chapter 5 (Deuteronomy 12–16): Worship and the poor.

Chapter 6 (Deuteronomy 17–20): Kings, priests, and a prophet.

Chapter 7 (Deuteronomy 21–26): Laws for everyday life.

Chapter 8 (Deuteronomy 27–30): Choose life.

Chapter 9 (Deuteronomy 31–34): Moses' last day.

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CHAPTER 1

Looking Back

Deuteronomy 1–4

"These are the words which Moses spoke to all Israel beyond the Jordan." That's how Deuteronomy opens. Not with a law, but with a speech. It's the fortieth year since Israel left Egypt. The people are camped on the plains of Moab, east of the Jordan River, across from Jericho. Almost everyone who was an adult at the exodus has died. The crowd in front of Moses is mostly made up of people who were children or teenagers when it all started, or who were born in the desert. They know the stories, but many of them weren't there for the big moments. So Moses tells them again.

His first sermon is a history lesson. He reminds them how God told them to leave Mount Sinai and take the land. He tells them how he appointed leaders and judges to help him, and how he charged the judges to be fair. "You shall not show partiality in judgment; you shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not be afraid of the face of man, for the judgment is God's." Then he tells the painful story of the twelve spies, how their parents refused to go in, even though God had promised to fight for them and had carried them through the desert "as a man carries his son."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Treaty Shape**
>
> Ancient treaties between a great king and a smaller kingdom, like those made by Hittite kings in the 1300s BC, usually began with a preamble naming the

king and then a historical prologue describing everything the king had done for the smaller nation. The point was gratitude: look what I've done for you, so be loyal to me. Deuteronomy 1–4 works the same way. Before Moses gives a single command, he reminds Israel of all God has done. The laws come after the love. Assyrian treaties from the 700s BC, by contrast, often skipped the history and went straight to threats and curses. Scholars debate which kind Deuteronomy resembles more, and what that says about when it was written. Either way, the order matters: God rescues first, then He asks for obedience.

Moses also tells them about the long journey around Edom, Moab, and Ammon. God told Israel not to fight those nations, because they were relatives, descended from Esau and from Abraham's nephew Lot, and God had given them their land too. Then come the victories over Sihon and Og, two Amorite kings east of the Jordan, which gave the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh their land. And Moses sums up the whole forty years in one sentence. "These forty years, the LORD your God has been with you. You have lacked nothing."

Think about that. Forty years in the desert, and they lacked nothing. Not because life was easy. It was hard, hot, and often frightening. But God was there. Every morning there was manna. When there was no water, God gave water. Their clothes didn't wear out, and their feet didn't swell. That's a remarkable way to describe a wilderness.

REAL TALK **Remember**

The word remember shows up again and again in Deuteronomy, and so does its opposite, forget. Moses knew that the biggest danger for the new generation wasn't the giants in Canaan. It was forgetting. "Only be careful, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes saw, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life." It's easy to forget what God has done, especially when life is going well, or when you're

busy. One of the best things you can do for your faith is to keep a record. Write down answered prayers, hard times God brought you through, and moments when you knew He was real. On the days when faith feels distant, you'll have something to look back on.

There's a lesson in how Moses tells the story, too. He doesn't make himself the hero. He admits his own failures and his frustration with the people, and he keeps pointing back to what God did. The victories over Sihon and Og weren't because Israel was strong; God handed those kings over. The forty years of survival weren't because Moses was a great leader; God carried them. When you tell your own story, whether in a testimony at church, a college essay, or just a conversation with a friend, it's worth asking the same question: who's the hero? Gratitude changes the way you remember. It helps you see God's hand in places where you once saw only your own effort, or only your own pain.

Moses also tells the people something personal. He begged God to let him cross the Jordan and see the good land. God said no, because of what happened at the rock in Numbers 20, and told Moses not to bring it up again. Instead, God let him look at the land from the top of a mountain and told him to encourage Joshua, who would lead them in. It's honest and painful. Moses doesn't hide his disappointment. But he obeys.

REAL TALK **When God Says No**

Moses asked God for something good, and God said no. Maybe you know that feeling. You prayed for someone to get better, or for a door to open, or for your family to stay together, and it didn't happen. That can be confusing and painful, and it's okay to say so. Moses did. Notice that God didn't stop loving Moses or talking with him. He gave him a different gift: a view of the land, and a role in preparing the next leader. A no from God isn't the end of the story. If

> you're struggling with an unanswered prayer, talk about it with someone you trust, and keep talking to God about it too. He can handle your honesty.

Moses also says something important about God's word itself. "You shall not add to the word which I command you, neither shall you take away from it." It's tempting to do both. Some people add extra rules to God's commands, making faith a heavy list of dos and don'ts that God never gave. Others take away the parts they don't like, keeping the comforting verses and ignoring the challenging ones. Jesus criticized the religious leaders of His day for doing the first (Mark 7:8), and the prophets criticized Israel for doing the second. The healthiest faith takes God's word as it is, all of it, and lets it shape us rather than the other way around.

Chapter 4 brings the first sermon to its climax, and it's one of the most beautiful chapters in the Old Testament. Moses reminds the people of the day at Mount Sinai, when they heard God's voice from the fire but saw no form. That's why they must never make an idol. God can't be captured in a statue. Then Moses asks two amazing questions. Has any other nation ever had a god so close? "For what great nation is there that has a god so near to them as the LORD our God is whenever we call on him?" And has any god ever rescued a nation from slavery the way God rescued Israel?

Moses warns that if they turn to idols, they will be scattered among the nations. But even then, there will be hope. "But from there you shall seek the LORD your God, and you will find him when you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul." Why? "For the LORD your God is a merciful God. He will not fail you nor destroy you, nor forget the covenant of your fathers." Then Moses delivers the bottom line. "Know therefore today, and take it to heart,

that the LORD himself is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath. There is no one else."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Only One God**

Most ancient peoples believed in many gods, each with its own territory: a god of the storm, a god of the sea, a god of this city or that nation. When Israel conquered a land, their neighbors would have assumed their gods were stronger than the local ones. Deuteronomy says something far more radical: there is only one God, and He rules heaven and earth. That belief, called monotheism, was unusual in the ancient world. Today it's shared by Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and it began, as far as history can tell us, with Israel.

REAL TALK **Seek and Find**

Deuteronomy 4:29 is a promise for anyone who feels far from God. Even if you've wandered away, even if you're in a place you never expected to be, if you seek Him with all your heart, you will find Him. You don't need to be in church, have the right words, or have your life together. You just need to look for Him honestly. If you're not sure where to start, open the Psalms and read one a day, pray even if it feels awkward, and ask a Christian you trust to talk with you. God isn't hiding from you. He's waiting to be found.

KEY VERSE

Know therefore today, and take it to heart, that the LORD himself is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath. There is no one else.

Deuteronomy 4:39 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Moses began with a history lesson instead of the laws?
2. Moses said Israel lacked nothing in forty years of wilderness. Looking back on a hard season in your life, what did God provide?
3. How do you handle it when God says no to something you've prayed for?
4. What helps you remember what God has done in your life?

TRY THIS *Start a remember list. Write down ten things God has done for you or your family. Keep adding to it this month, and read it when you're discouraged.*

CHAPTER 2

Ten Words Again

Deuteronomy 5

Moses' second sermon begins with the Ten Commandments. He gathers all Israel and says something surprising. "The LORD didn't make this covenant with our fathers, but with us, even us, who are all of us here alive today." Technically, most of these people weren't adults at Sinai. Some weren't even born. But Moses insists: this is your covenant. Not your parents' faith. Yours.

> **REAL TALK** **Your Faith, Not Your Parents'**
>
> Maybe you grew up going to church because your parents took you. That's a gift, but at some point the faith has to become your own. Moses wanted the new generation to understand that God wasn't just their parents' God. He was speaking to them, today. The same is true for you. You can't ride on someone else's faith forever. It's okay to have questions and doubts on the way; wrestling honestly is often how faith becomes real. And if you didn't grow up in a Christian home, Deuteronomy 5 is good news too. God's covenant isn't inherited like a last name. It's for anyone who hears His voice and responds.

Then Moses repeats the Ten Commandments, almost exactly as they appear in Exodus 20. They begin the same way, with who God is and what He has done. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." Then come the commands. Have no other gods. Make no idols. Don't misuse God's name. Keep the Sabbath. Honor your father and mother. Don't

murder. Don't commit adultery. Don't steal. Don't give false testimony. Don't covet.

But there are a few differences, and they're interesting. In Exodus, the reason given for the Sabbath is creation: God made the world in six days and rested on the seventh. In Deuteronomy, the reason is the exodus. "You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day." The Sabbath isn't just about rest. It's about freedom. Slaves never got a day off. Israel's servants, animals, and foreign workers had to get one too, so they could rest just like their masters.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Two Versions**

Why are the two versions of the Ten Commandments slightly different? Besides the Sabbath reason, Deuteronomy lists a neighbor's wife before his house in the last commandment, and adds his field to the list of things not to covet. Some scholars think the original tablets had a short form of each command, and that Exodus and Deuteronomy each added explanations for their setting. Others think Moses, retelling them forty years later, adapted the explanations for a people about to own fields and houses. Either way, the commands themselves are the same, and Moses says God wrote them on two tablets of stone and put them in the ark.

REAL TALK **Rest Is for Everyone**

Deuteronomy's version of the Sabbath has a justice angle. The rest wasn't just for you. It was for the people who worked for you, too. Think about who works so that you can rest: parents, cafeteria workers, store clerks, delivery drivers. How could you make their lives a little easier? Say thank you. Clean up after yourself. Be patient when service is slow. And notice whether your own life has any rest in it. If you're constantly busy, stressed, or online, you might be living like a slave in Egypt. God wants you free.

Notice too that the Ten Commandments start with grace. Before God says you shall not, He says I am the one who brought you out. The commands aren't a ladder to climb up to God. They're the way of life for people God has already rescued. That's why Christians can read them with joy rather than fear. They describe what love for God and love for neighbor look like, and Jesus summed them up in exactly those two commands. When you fail to keep them, and everyone does, the answer isn't to try harder to earn God's favor. It's to come back to the God who rescued you, receive His forgiveness, and start again.

> **REAL TALK** **Coveting and Comparison**
>
> The last commandment, don't covet, is the only one that's entirely about what happens inside you. Coveting means wanting what belongs to someone else so badly that it eats at you: their house, their stuff, their relationship, their life. Social media is basically a coveting machine. You scroll through other people's best moments and start feeling like your own life isn't enough. Deuteronomy's version even adds the neighbor's field, the thing a farmer in the new land would be most tempted to envy. The cure for coveting isn't pretending you don't want things. It's gratitude for what God has given you, and trusting that He knows what you need. If comparison is making you miserable, try taking a break from the apps that feed it.

After the commandments, Moses reminds the people what happened at Sinai. They were terrified by the fire and the voice from the mountain, and they asked Moses to go and listen for them, promising to do whatever God said. And God said something tender in response. "Oh that there were such a heart in them that they would fear me and keep all my commandments always, that it might be well with them and with their children forever!" You can almost hear the longing. God doesn't give His commands to make people miserable. He gives them so that it will go well with them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Ten Commandments in Public**

The Ten Commandments have shaped laws and cultures around the world, and they've also been the subject of court cases in the United States about whether they can be displayed in public schools and courthouses. Christians disagree about how much the government should promote religious texts. But almost everyone agrees that many of the commands, like don't murder, don't steal, and don't lie in court, have become foundations of justice in many societies. You can learn them, live them, and talk about them respectfully whatever your school or community decides.

KEY VERSE

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

Deuteronomy 5:6 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Moses said the covenant was made with the people in front of him, not their parents?
2. In what ways is your faith your own, and in what ways are you still relying on someone else's?
3. Why do you think Deuteronomy connects the Sabbath with freedom from slavery?
4. God said He wanted it to go well with His people. How does that change how you think about His commands?

TRY THIS *Write the Ten Commandments in your own words, one sentence each, as if you were explaining them to a ten-year-old. Then pick the one you find hardest and pray about it every day this week.*

CHAPTER 3

Hear, O Israel

Deuteronomy 6

If you had to pick the most important passage in the whole Old Testament, this might be it. It's called the Shema, from its first Hebrew word, which means hear. "Hear, Israel: The LORD is our God. The LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might."

For three thousand years, Jewish people have said these words every morning and every night. Children learn them as soon as they can talk. Jewish tradition says that people facing death have spoken them as their last words. And when someone asked Jesus which commandment was the greatest, He went straight here. "The greatest is: 'Hear, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The LORD Is One**
>
> The first line of the Shema can be translated several ways: the LORD our God, the LORD is one; or the LORD is our God, the LORD alone. Both make the same point. Israel's God isn't one god among many. He's the only one, and Israel belongs to Him alone. Christians, who believe in the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, still affirm the Shema completely. The Trinity isn't three gods; it's one God in three persons. The Hebrew word for one, echad, can describe a

unity, as when Genesis says a husband and wife become one flesh. Jewish and Christian readers have discussed this for centuries, and both say the Shema with all their hearts.

Notice what the Shema asks for. Not just obedience, but love. And not just a little love, but everything: heart, soul, and might. In Hebrew, the heart is the center of your thoughts and choices, not just your feelings. The soul is your whole life, your very self. Might means your strength, your resources, everything you've got. Jesus added mind, making it even clearer: love God with every part of who you are.

That might sound like a lot to ask. But think about who's asking. This is the God who rescued Israel from slavery, carried them through the wilderness, and fed them every day for forty years. He's not a tyrant demanding attention. He's the one who loved them first. Deuteronomy says it plainly in the next chapter: God chose Israel simply because He loved them.

REAL TALK **All of Me?**

What would it look like to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength? It doesn't mean you have to think about God every second, or that you can't love your friends, your family, or soccer. It means God is first, and everything else finds its place around Him. It means your thoughts, your choices, your body, your time, your money, your talents, even your phone, all belong to Him. Nobody does this perfectly. But you can start by asking, each morning: God, what does it look like to love You today? And then try to live it.

Then Moses tells them how to keep these words alive. "These words, which I command you today, shall be on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you

lie down, and when you rise up." Faith isn't meant to stay in church. It's for the kitchen table, the car, bedtime, and breakfast.

"You shall bind them for a sign on your hand, and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the door posts of your house and on your gates." Many Jewish people take this literally. They wear tefillin, small leather boxes containing these verses, on the arm and forehead during morning prayer. And they put a mezuzah, a small case with the Shema written inside, on the doorposts of their homes, touching it as they come and go.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Mezuzah**
>
> A mezuzah is a small decorative case, often made of wood, metal, or ceramic, attached to the right side of a doorframe in Jewish homes. Inside is a tiny handwritten scroll with Deuteronomy 6:4–9 and 11:13–21. Many Jewish people touch the mezuzah and then their lips when they pass through the door, as a sign of love for God's word. Archaeologists have even found tefillin among the Dead Sea Scrolls, from the time of Jesus. Some Christians put Scripture on their doorposts or walls too, as a reminder that their homes belong to God.

The rest of chapter 6 gives a warning and a promise. When Israel enters the land and moves into houses they didn't build and eats from vineyards they didn't plant, they'll be tempted to forget God. "Then beware lest you forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." Comfort can be more dangerous than hardship.

And then comes a beautiful picture. Someday a child will ask, what do all these laws mean? And the answer isn't a list of rules. It's a story. "We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand." The commands only make sense in

light of the rescue. That's still true. Christians obey God not to earn His love, but because He has already rescued us.

> **REAL TALK** **Talking About Faith at Home**
>
> Deuteronomy 6 imagines families talking about God naturally, all through the day. For some teens, that's normal. For others, it feels awkward or impossible, maybe because your family isn't Christian, or because faith is something nobody talks about at home. If that's you, you're not failing. You can still keep God's words on your heart, and you can find other places to talk about faith, with friends, at youth group, or with a mentor. And if your family does talk about God, take part. Ask your parents how they came to faith, what they struggle with, and what they've learned. You might be surprised by the answers.

KEY VERSE

Hear, Israel: The LORD is our God. The LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. These words, which I command you today, shall be on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them for a sign on your hand, and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the door posts of your house and on your gates.

Deuteronomy 6:4–9 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Jesus chose the Shema as the greatest commandment?
2. What does it mean to love God with your heart, your soul, your mind, and your strength? Which is hardest for you?
3. Why might comfort be more dangerous to faith than hardship?
4. How could you keep God's words in front of you during an ordinary day?

TRY THIS *Memorize Deuteronomy 6:4–5. Write it on a card and tape it to your door, mirror, or phone case. Say it every morning and every night this week, like Jewish families have for thousands of years.*

CHAPTER 4

Not by Bread Alone

Deuteronomy 7–11

Chapters 7–11 continue Moses' second sermon, and they swing between some of the most comforting words in the Bible and some of the hardest. Let's start with the hardest, because Moses does.

Chapter 7 tells Israel what to do with the seven nations living in Canaan. "When the LORD your God delivers them up before you, and you strike them, then you shall utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them, nor show mercy to them." The Hebrew word behind utterly destroy is herem, which means to devote something completely to God, often by destroying it. Israel was not to intermarry with these nations or adopt their religion. They were to smash their altars and burn their idols.

REAL TALK **The Hardest Commands**

Let's be honest: commands to destroy whole nations are deeply troubling. Christians have wrestled with them for centuries, and you should know the main ways they've been understood. First, some see them as a unique judgment from God on societies that had become extremely corrupt, including practices like child sacrifice (Deuteronomy 12:31); God had waited centuries for them (Genesis 15:16), and He judged Israel just as severely when they did the same things. Second, many scholars point out that ancient war accounts used sweeping, exaggerated language, the way a fan says their team destroyed the other side; the same books that say the Canaanites were utterly

> destroyed also say many of them were still living there afterward (Judges 1), and the very next verses forbid intermarrying with them, which only makes sense if they would still be around. Some think the focus was on wiping out Canaanite religion and its power more than every person. Third, some Christians say honestly that these passages remain a mystery and a pain they don't fully understand, and that the full picture of God is seen in Jesus, who loved His enemies and died for them. What every Christian view agrees on is this: these commands were for one time and place, they were never a general license for war, and no one can use them to justify violence, racism, or hatred toward any people today. If these passages bother you, that's okay. Keep asking questions, and talk about them with a pastor or youth leader.

It's also worth noticing who in the Bible was spared from these commands. Rahab, a Canaanite woman in Jericho, trusted Israel's God and was welcomed into Israel; she became an ancestor of King David and of Jesus (Joshua 2; Matthew 1:5). The Gibeonites, another Canaanite people, made peace with Israel and lived among them (Joshua 9). Ruth, from Moab, one of the nations Deuteronomy says couldn't enter the assembly, became David's great-grandmother. The door was never completely shut. Again and again, the Old Testament shows outsiders who turned to God and were received. That points forward to the gospel, where people from every nation are invited in.

Right after that hard command comes one of the most tender explanations of grace in the Old Testament. Why did God choose Israel? Not because they were impressive. "The LORD didn't set his love on you nor choose you, because you were more in number than any people; for you were the fewest of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you." That's it. God loves them because He loves them. There's no deeper reason. And Moses adds, "Know therefore that the LORD your God himself is God, the faithful God, who keeps

covenant and loving kindness to a thousand generations with those who love him."

Chapter 9 makes the same point from the other side. Don't think God is giving you the land because you're good. "Know therefore that the LORD your God doesn't give you this good land to possess for your righteousness, for you are a stiff-necked people." Moses goes on to retell the golden calf disaster in painful detail. Israel didn't earn anything. It's all grace.

> **REAL TALK** **Chosen Because Loved**
>
> A lot of people think God loves them because they're good, or that He'll stop loving them if they mess up. Deuteronomy 7 says the opposite. God's love isn't a reward for being impressive. Israel was small, weak, and stubborn, and God loved them anyway. The same is true for you. You don't have to perform to earn God's love: not grades, not looks, not popularity, not being a perfect Christian. He loves you because He loves you. That's not a reason to stop trying to follow Him. It's the reason you can follow Him without fear.

Then comes chapter 8, one of the most important chapters in the book. Moses tells Israel to remember the wilderness, and why God led them through it. "He humbled you, allowed you to be hungry, and fed you with manna, which you didn't know, neither did your fathers know, that he might teach you that man does not live by bread only, but man lives by every word that proceeds out of the LORD's mouth."

The wilderness was a classroom. God let them get hungry, then fed them with something completely new, so they'd learn that their lives depended on Him, not just on food. Fourteen hundred years later, Jesus quoted those words in His own wilderness.

After His baptism, Jesus went into the desert for forty days, fasting. Forty days for Him, like forty years for Israel. At the end, the devil

came to Him and said, if You're the Son of God, turn these stones into bread. Jesus answered from Deuteronomy 8. "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of God's mouth.'" The devil tried twice more: throw Yourself off the temple, and worship me and I'll give You the world. Each time, Jesus answered from Deuteronomy. "You shall not test the Lord, your God," from Deuteronomy 6:16. And, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and you shall serve him only," from Deuteronomy 6:13.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jesus Relives Israel's Story**

The temptation story in Matthew 4 deliberately echoes Israel's story. Israel was called God's son (Exodus 4:22) and went through the waters of the Red Sea, then spent forty years in the wilderness, where they were tested and failed. Jesus, God's Son, went through the waters of baptism, then spent forty days in the wilderness, where He was tested and passed. Where Israel grumbled for bread, tested God, and worshiped an idol, Jesus trusted God, refused to test Him, and worshiped Him alone. He succeeded where Israel failed, and He did it for them, and for us.

REAL TALK **Fighting Temptation**

Jesus fought temptation with Scripture. Not with willpower or a long argument, but with words from God that He knew by heart. That's a strategy you can use too. When you're tempted to lie, to look at something you shouldn't, to lash out, or to give up, it helps to have a verse ready. You might memorize 1 Corinthians 10:13, Philippians 4:8, or Deuteronomy 8:3. It's not magic. But God's words remind you what's true when temptation is shouting lies. And if a temptation feels too strong to fight alone, like an addiction or a habit you can't break, tell a trusted adult. Even Jesus had angels come and care for Him afterward.

Chapter 8 ends with a warning that's especially relevant today. When Israel gets rich in the land, they'll be tempted to say in their

hearts, "My power and the might of my hand has gotten me this wealth." But Moses says, "But you shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth." Success is a gift, not just an achievement.

REAL TALK **Money and Contentment**

Deuteronomy 8 warns that success can make you forget God. You might not feel rich, but compared with most people in history, you probably have more than enough: food in the fridge, a phone, clothes, a place to sleep. It's easy to always want more, especially when ads and influencers are constantly telling you what you're missing. Moses' answer is to remember where it all comes from, and to say thank you. Contentment doesn't mean you can't work hard or have goals. It means you're not ruled by wanting more. Try this: for one week, every time you're tempted to buy something you don't need, thank God for something you already have.

Chapter 10 asks the big question. "Now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul?" Then Moses describes God in a way that might surprise you. He is "God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, the mighty, and the awesome, who doesn't respect persons or take bribes." And what does this mighty God do? "He executes justice for the fatherless and widow and loves the foreigner in giving him food and clothing. Therefore love the foreigner, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt." The God of gods spends His time caring for orphans, widows, and immigrants. If that's what He's like, that's what His people should be like too.

KEY VERSE

He humbled you, allowed you to be hungry, and fed you with manna, which you didn't know, neither did your fathers know, that he might teach you that man does not live by bread only, but man lives by every word that proceeds out of the LORD's mouth.

Deuteronomy 8:3 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. How do you handle the commands to destroy the Canaanites? Which explanation helps you most?
2. What does it mean to you that God chose Israel because He loved them, not because they were impressive?
3. Why do you think Jesus answered every temptation with Deuteronomy?
4. Moses says the mighty God cares for orphans, widows, and foreigners. What does that tell you about Him?

TRY THIS *Pick one temptation you face often. Find a verse that speaks to it, memorize it, and use it the next time the temptation comes, the way Jesus did.*

CHAPTER 5

Open Your Hand

Deuteronomy 12–16

With chapter 12, Moses gets into the details of the laws, and they cover almost every part of life. They begin with worship. When Israel enters the land, they must tear down the Canaanite shrines on every high hill and under every green tree. Instead, they're to worship God at one central place. "But to the place which the LORD your God shall choose out of all your tribes, to put his name there, you shall seek his habitation." Deuteronomy never names the place, but later it became Jerusalem, where Solomon built the temple.

BACKGROUND CHECK **One Place**

Why one place of worship? In the ancient world, every town had its own shrine, and it was easy for worship of the LORD to blend with local gods. A central sanctuary helped keep Israel's worship pure and united the tribes as one people. Scholars who connect Deuteronomy with King Josiah point out that Josiah closed the local shrines and made Jerusalem the only place of sacrifice (2 Kings 23). Others note that Joshua and Samuel worshiped at several places before the temple was built. Either way, Christians believe that Jesus changed the question entirely. He told a Samaritan woman that true worshipers would worship the Father in spirit and truth, not on one particular mountain (John 4:21–24).

Chapter 12 also says something lovely about worship. It's supposed to be joyful. Families are to bring their offerings and tithes to God's

place and eat them there, rejoicing before the LORD with their sons and daughters, servants, and the Levites. Worship is a party, and everyone's invited.

Chapter 13 warns against anyone who tries to lead people away from God, even a prophet who performs signs, or a close friend or family member. Chapter 14 repeats the clean and unclean food laws from Leviticus. Then it adds a remarkable rule about tithes. Every third year, the tithe was to be stored in the towns, so that "the Levite, because he has no portion nor inheritance with you, as well as the foreigner living among you, the fatherless, and the widow who are within your gates shall come, and shall eat and be satisfied." The tithe wasn't just for worship. It was a food bank.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Vulnerable Four**
>
> Again and again, Deuteronomy mentions four groups: the Levite, the foreigner, the fatherless, and the widow. In the ancient world, these people had no land of their own and no man to protect them, which made them easy targets. Deuteronomy builds protections for them into Israel's tithes, harvests, festivals, and courts. James, in the New Testament, says the same thing: "Pure religion and undefiled before our God and Father is this: to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction." If you want to know whether a society is following God, look at how it treats people with no power.

Chapter 15 describes the year of release. Every seventh year, debts owed by fellow Israelites were to be canceled. And Moses anticipates the obvious problem. What if people refuse to lend when the seventh year is close, because they know they'll never get paid back? He addresses it directly. "If a poor man, one of your brothers, is with you within any of your gates in your land which the LORD your God gives you, you shall not harden your heart, nor shut your hand from your poor brother." Then comes an honest admission and a command. "For the poor will never cease out of the

land. Therefore I command you to surely open your hand to your brother, to your needy, and to your poor, in your land."

Jesus quoted the first part of that verse when a woman poured expensive perfume on Him and the disciples complained it should have been sold for the poor. You will always have the poor with you, He said (Mark 14:7). Some people use His words as an excuse not to help, as if poverty is just a fact of life. But in Deuteronomy, it's the opposite. Because there will always be poor people, you must always open your hand.

> **REAL TALK** **Open Hand, Closed Fist**
>
> Deuteronomy 15 talks about the heart and the hand. You can harden your heart and shut your hand, or you can open both. Think about how you react when you see someone in need: a classmate who never has lunch money, someone sleeping outside, a family at church going through a hard time. It's easy to look away, or to assume it's their fault. Deuteronomy says: open your hand. That might mean sharing food, giving some of your money, donating clothes you don't wear, or volunteering at a shelter or food bank. You don't have to fix everything. But you can open your hand to the person in front of you.

The chapter also says that Hebrew servants were to be freed in the seventh year, and not sent away empty-handed. Their masters had to give them generously from their flocks, threshing floors, and winepresses. Why? "You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you." Israel's memory of slavery was supposed to make them generous, not harsh.

Chapter 16 lists the three great pilgrim festivals: Passover, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Booths. At each one, the whole family was to rejoice before God, along with the servants, Levites,

foreigners, orphans, and widows. The chapter closes with a command for judges. They must not twist justice, show favoritism, or take bribes. “You shall follow that which is altogether just, that you may live.” In Hebrew, it’s even stronger: justice, justice you shall pursue.

REAL TALK **Justice at School**

You might not be a judge, but you probably see injustice every day. Somebody gets blamed for something they didn’t do. The popular kids get away with things others don’t. Someone is mocked because of their race, their family’s money, a disability, or the way they talk. Deuteronomy says God cares about justice, and so should His people. You can stand up for someone who’s being treated unfairly, refuse to join in mocking, tell the truth when it matters, and report bullying to a trusted adult. Pursuing justice doesn’t always mean a big protest. Often it means doing the right thing in one hallway, one lunch table, one group chat.

KEY VERSE

For the poor will never cease out of the land. Therefore I command you to surely open your hand to your brother, to your needy, and to your poor, in your land.

Deuteronomy 15:11 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God wanted worship to be joyful, with everyone included?
2. Who are the vulnerable people in your community, like the Levite, foreigner, orphan, and widow?
3. How can you open your hand to someone in need this week?
4. Where have you seen injustice at school or online, and what could you do about it?

TRY THIS *Find a local food bank, shelter, or charity. Volunteer for a few hours, or organize a collection of food or clothes with your friends, family, or youth group.*

CHAPTER 6

A Prophet Like Me

Deuteronomy 17–20

Chapters 17–20 describe the leaders Israel would have in the land: judges, kings, priests, and prophets. They're like a constitution, and they say something important about power. In God's kingdom, nobody is above the law.

Take the king. Israel didn't have one yet, but Moses expected they would want one, like the nations around them. If they did, the king had to be an Israelite chosen by God. He must not build up huge numbers of horses, take many wives, or pile up silver and gold. And here's the most striking rule. "It shall be, when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write himself a copy of this law in a book." He was to keep it with him and read it all his life, "that his heart not be lifted up above his brothers." The king was not a god. He was a brother, under the same law as everyone else.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Kings Who Ignored the Rules**
>
> Centuries later, King Solomon did every single thing Deuteronomy 17 warned against. He imported thousands of horses from Egypt, married hundreds of wives, many of whom led him into worshiping other gods, and accumulated so much gold that silver was considered nearly worthless in Jerusalem (1 Kings 10–11). After his death, the kingdom split in two. The books of Kings tell Israel's whole history with Deuteronomy as the measuring stick, judging each king by whether he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD.

REAL TALK **Power and Humility**

Deuteronomy limits power because power is dangerous. It's easy for people with power to think they're better than others, to take what they want, and to ignore the rules. You might have more power than you think: as the oldest sibling, the team captain, the one with the most followers, the one who decides who sits at the lunch table. How are you using it? The king had to read God's law every day so his heart wouldn't be lifted up above his brothers. Jesus said that among His followers, whoever wants to be great must be a servant (Mark 10:43). Real leadership is about serving others, not using them.

Chapter 18 forbids Israel from consulting the occult in any form. "There shall not be found with you anyone who makes his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who tells fortunes, or an enchanter, or a sorcerer." The list goes on to include casting spells, consulting the dead, and talking with spirits. The Canaanites did these things to try to control the future or the gods. Israel was to listen to God alone.

REAL TALK **Horoscopes and Tarot**

Fortune-telling isn't just ancient history. Horoscopes, tarot cards, Ouija boards, psychics, and manifesting are popular today, sometimes as entertainment, sometimes very seriously. Deuteronomy 18 says God's people shouldn't turn to these things to know the future or find guidance. Partly because they don't work, and partly because some of them can open the door to spiritual darkness. But mostly because they replace trust in God with trust in something else. If you're anxious about the future, bring it to God in prayer, read His word, and talk to wise people who love you. If you've gotten involved in the occult and feel scared, confused, or oppressed, talk to a pastor or trusted Christian adult. You won't be judged. You'll be helped.

Then comes a promise that echoes through the rest of the Bible. Instead of fortune-tellers, God will send prophets. "The LORD your God will raise up to you a prophet from among you, of your

brothers, like me. You shall listen to him." God tells Moses, "I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I shall command him." Moses also gives a test for false prophets. "When a prophet speaks in the LORD's name, if the thing doesn't follow, nor happen, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken."

Who is this prophet like Moses? In one sense, all the true prophets who followed, like Samuel, Elijah, and Isaiah. But the very last chapter of Deuteronomy says no prophet had yet arisen like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. So Israel kept waiting. When John the Baptist appeared, the religious leaders asked him, are you the Prophet? (John 1:21). After Jesus fed five thousand people with bread in the wilderness, the crowd said, "This is truly the prophet who comes into the world." And Peter, preaching in the temple after Pentecost, said directly that Jesus was the prophet Moses had promised (Acts 3:22–26).

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Jesus and Moses**
>
> The Gospels draw many parallels between Jesus and Moses. Both were threatened as babies by a king who killed children. Both came out of Egypt. Both fasted for forty days. Both went up a mountain and taught God's law; Matthew's Sermon on the Mount echoes Sinai. Both fed God's people with bread in the wilderness. And at the transfiguration, Moses himself appeared with Jesus, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him." Those last words, Listen to him, echo Deuteronomy 18:15. Jesus is the prophet like Moses, and more than a prophet: the Son.

Deuteronomy also includes a test for prophets that's still useful. If a prophet's prediction doesn't come true, he wasn't speaking for God, and you don't have to be afraid of him. Chapter 13 adds another test: even if a prophet's sign does come true, if he tells you to follow

other gods, don't listen. In other words, true messages from God match what God has already said, and they lead you toward Him, not away from Him. Today you'll hear plenty of people claiming to speak for God, online, in books, even in churches. Test what they say against Scripture, look at the fruit of their lives, and ask wise Christians you trust. God's voice won't contradict His word.

Chapter 19 sets up the cities of refuge, and warns against moving a neighbor's boundary stone. It also requires at least two or three witnesses to convict anyone of a crime, a principle Jesus and Paul both used (Matthew 18:16; 2 Corinthians 13:1). Chapter 20 gives rules for war. Before battle, priests were to encourage the soldiers not to be afraid. Anyone who had just built a house, planted a vineyard, or gotten engaged could go home. So could anyone who was afraid, so his fear wouldn't spread. Israel had to offer peace to distant cities before attacking them, and they couldn't cut down fruit trees during a siege. The chapter also repeats the command to devote the Canaanite cities to destruction, which we discussed in chapter 4 of this book.

KEY VERSE

The LORD your God will raise up to you a prophet from among you, of your brothers, like me. You shall listen to him.

Deuteronomy 18:15 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God required the king to write and read his own copy of the law?
2. Where do you have power, and how could you use it to serve others?
3. Why do you think God forbade fortune-telling? What do people turn to today to know the future?
4. How is Jesus like Moses, and how is He greater?

TRY THIS *Make a chart comparing Moses and Jesus, using Exodus, Deuteronomy, and the Gospel of Matthew. List at least five similarities and two differences.*

CHAPTER 7

Laws for Everyday Life

Deuteronomy 21–26

Chapters 21–26 are a grab bag of laws. Some will seem strange or harsh to modern readers. Others are surprisingly kind, practical, and ahead of their time. Taken together, they show that God cared about every corner of His people's lives, from the roof of your house to the way you treat a bird's nest.

Start with the roof. "When you build a new house, then you shall make a railing around your roof, so that you don't bring blood on your house if anyone falls from there." In ancient Israel, people used their flat roofs like porches: for drying grain, sleeping on hot nights, and hanging out. A railing kept people from falling off. It's basically an ancient building code. Loving your neighbor means thinking ahead about their safety.

Other laws in these chapters show the same kind of care. If you find your neighbor's lost ox or sheep, you can't pretend you didn't see it; you must return it, or keep it safe until the owner comes looking (22:1–3). If you find a bird's nest, you can take the eggs, but you must let the mother go (22:6–7). A newly married man doesn't have to go to war for a year, so he can stay home and make his wife happy (24:5). You can't take a person's millstone as security for a loan, because that's how they make their daily bread (24:6). If you lend to a poor person and take his cloak as a pledge, you have to

give it back before sunset, so he has something to sleep in (24:12–13). And "you shall not muzzle the ox when he treads out the grain." Even the animals got to eat while they worked.

> **REAL TALK** **Love in the Details**
>
> It's easy to think loving your neighbor means big, dramatic acts. Deuteronomy shows it's often about small, practical things: building a railing, returning something lost, paying people on time, not taking advantage of someone who's struggling. What are the railings you could build in your life? Maybe it's driving carefully when you get your license, not leaving your little brother alone with something dangerous, returning the phone you found in the hallway, or checking on a friend who seems down. Love pays attention to details.

Many of these laws protect the vulnerable again. Workers must be paid the same day, because they're poor and are counting on it (24:14–15). Children must not be put to death for their parents' sins, nor parents for their children's (24:16). And the foreigner, orphan, and widow come up again and again. "You shall not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, nor take a widow's clothing in pledge." At harvest, if a farmer forgot a bundle of grain in the field, he had to leave it. "It shall be for the foreigner, for the fatherless, and for the widow, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands." The same went for olives left on the trees and grapes left on the vines. And every time, Moses gives the same reason: remember that you were slaves in Egypt.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Hard Laws**
>
> Some laws in these chapters are hard to read. Chapter 21 describes how a stubborn, rebellious son who refused to listen to his parents could be brought to the town elders and executed. Chapter 22 includes laws about marriage and sexual crimes with penalties that seem shocking today. How should Christians read these? Several things help. In their ancient setting, many of

these laws actually limited what could happen; for example, parents couldn't punish a son themselves but had to bring the case to the elders, and Jewish teachers later said the rebellious son law was so tightly restricted that it was never actually carried out. These were civil laws for Israel as a nation, and Christians don't apply their penalties today. And Jesus showed a new way when He welcomed sinners, told the story of the prodigal son, and said, let the one without sin cast the first stone. If any of these passages connects with something painful in your life, like abuse at home, please talk to a trusted adult. In the United States you can call or text the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453.

REAL TALK **Parents and Rebellion**

The law about the rebellious son is hard to read, but it does raise a real question: how should you relate to your parents when you disagree with them? The Bible says to honor your father and mother, which means treating them with respect, even when you think they're wrong. It doesn't mean pretending you never disagree, or doing something that's clearly wrong because they told you to. If you're in constant conflict with your parents, try talking at a calm moment, listening as well as speaking, and asking a trusted adult like a youth leader or counselor to help. And if a parent is ever hurting you, that's not about honor. That's abuse, and you should tell someone right away.

Chapter 26 closes this section with a beautiful ceremony. When Israel was settled in the land, each family was to bring the first fruits of their harvest to God's place and say these words: "My father was a Syrian ready to perish. He went down into Egypt, and lived there, few in number. There he became a great, mighty, and populous nation." The wandering Aramean was probably Jacob. The worshiper would then tell the whole story of slavery and rescue, and finish by setting the basket before God and rejoicing with the Levites and the foreigners. Every gift came with a story, and every story ended in thanks.

KEY VERSE

When you reap your harvest in your field, and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go again to get it. It shall be for the foreigner, for the fatherless, and for the widow, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.

Deuteronomy 24:19 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Which of the practical laws in these chapters surprised you most?
2. What are some railings you could build to protect others in your life?
3. Why do you think Moses kept reminding Israel that they had been slaves in Egypt?
4. How do you handle laws in the Bible that seem harsh to you?

TRY THIS *Write your own first-fruits story, like Deuteronomy 26. Tell in a paragraph where you came from, what God has done for you, and what you're thankful for. Read it to someone in your family.*

CHAPTER 8

Choose Life

Deuteronomy 27–30

The second sermon ends with blessings and curses, just like an ancient treaty. In chapter 27, Moses tells Israel that once they cross the Jordan, they must set up large stones covered with plaster, write all the words of the law on them, and build an altar on Mount Ebal. Then half the tribes would stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people, and half on Mount Ebal to pronounce curses, with the Levites calling out and all the people answering, Amen.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim**
>
> These two mountains face each other across a narrow valley near the city of Shechem, in the center of the land. Their slopes form a natural amphitheater, where a voice can carry surprisingly far. Joshua carried out Moses' instructions there (Joshua 8:30–35). In the 1980s, an archaeologist found a large stone structure on Mount Ebal that he identified as an ancient altar, possibly the one Joshua built, though other archaeologists disagree. The site is still debated. Later, the Samaritans built their own temple on Mount Gerizim, which is why the Samaritan woman told Jesus, our fathers worshiped on this mountain (John 4:20).

Chapter 28 is one of the longest chapters in Deuteronomy. It begins with blessings. "It shall happen, if you shall listen diligently to the LORD your God's voice, to observe to do all his commandments which I command you today, that the LORD your God will set you

high above all the nations of the earth. All these blessings will come upon you, and overtake you." Blessed in the city, blessed in the field. Blessed coming in and going out. Good rain, big harvests, healthy children, peace, and victory.

Then come the curses, and they go on for a long time. "But it shall come to pass, if you will not listen to the LORD your God's voice, to observe to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come on you and overtake you." Disease, drought, defeat, siege, famine, and finally exile, scattered among the nations. It's terrifying to read, and it was meant to be. Sadly, the history books that follow describe much of it coming true, when Assyria and Babylon conquered Israel and Judah centuries later.

> **REAL TALK** **Does Obedience Mean an Easy Life?**
>
> Deuteronomy 28 can sound like a deal: obey God and everything goes great; disobey and everything falls apart. But be careful. These blessings and curses were part of God's covenant with Israel as a nation in the land. The rest of the Bible shows that good people often suffer, like Job, Jeremiah, Paul, and above all Jesus, and that bad people sometimes prosper for a while (Psalm 73). Some preachers today teach that if you have enough faith, God will make you healthy and rich. That's not what Deuteronomy, or Jesus, teaches. What's true is that God's ways lead to life, and turning from Him leads to brokenness. And for Christians, the deepest blessing isn't stuff or success. It's knowing God, and being known by Him.

Notice how the curses end. Not with destruction, but with Israel scattered among the nations, longing for home. It's not God's last word. Chapter 30 will show that even after the worst has happened, God's mercy will still be waiting. That's the pattern of the whole Bible. God's judgment is real, but His mercy is deeper. And Paul says that Christ took the curse of the law on Himself when He hung

on a cross (Galatians 3:13), so that the blessing promised to Abraham could come to everyone who believes. The curses of Deuteronomy 28 fell on Him, so the blessings could fall on us.

Chapter 29 begins Moses' third sermon, a call to renew the covenant. Moses admits that the people still don't fully understand. Then he says something wise and humble. "The secret things belong to the LORD our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law." There are things about God we'll never understand. But what He has revealed is enough to live by.

> **REAL TALK** **Unanswered Questions**
>
> You'll probably have questions about God and the Bible that you can't answer, maybe some from this very book. Why did God command what He did in Deuteronomy 7? Why does He allow suffering? What about people who never heard of Jesus? Deuteronomy 29:29 doesn't tell you to stop asking. It tells you that God knows things you don't, and that you can still trust Him with them. Keep asking, keep studying, and keep talking to wise people. But don't let what you don't know cancel out what you do. God has told us enough to know Him, to love Him, and to follow Him.

Chapter 30 is where the whole book has been heading. Moses looks into the future and sees Israel scattered in exile because of their sin. But even there, if they return to God with all their hearts, He will bring them back. And then comes a promise that goes deeper than anything else in the book. "The LORD your God will circumcise your heart, and the heart of your offspring, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." In other words, God Himself will give His people new hearts, so they can do the very thing the Shema commands. The prophets picked up this promise (Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:26), and Christians believe it's fulfilled through the Holy Spirit.

Then Moses says the commandment isn't out of reach. "For this commandment which I command you today is not too hard for you or too distant." It's not up in heaven or across the sea. "But the word is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it." Paul quotes this passage in Romans 10 and applies it to the gospel. "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart;" that is, the word of faith which we preach. You don't have to climb to heaven or search the world to find God. In Jesus, He has come near.

Notice something about how Moses talks here. He doesn't say the choice is easy. He doesn't pretend the people will always get it right; he's just predicted they won't. But he still says the choice is real, and that it matters. You might feel like your choices don't matter much, or that you've already made too many bad ones for anything to change. Deuteronomy 30 says otherwise. Even for people who had been scattered because of their sin, the way back was open. If they returned to God with all their hearts, He would restore them. That's still true. It's never too late to choose life.

Finally, Moses puts the choice in front of them. "Behold, I have set before you today life and prosperity, and death and evil." Then he calls witnesses, just like an ancient treaty did, but instead of calling on the gods, he calls on creation itself. "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Therefore choose life, that you may live, you and your descendants, to love the LORD your God, to obey his voice, and to cling to him; for he is your life."

REAL TALK **Choosing Life**

Choose life. It's one of the most powerful sentences in the Bible. In Deuteronomy, choosing life means choosing God, loving Him, listening to

> Him, and holding on to Him, because He is your life. Every day, in big and small ways, you're choosing between what leads to life and what leads to death: the friends you pick, what you put into your body and mind, how you treat people, whether you turn toward God or away from Him. If you're going through a dark time, and life itself feels hard to choose, please tell someone. Talk to a parent, counselor, pastor, or trusted adult, or call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time. Your life matters, to God and to the people around you. Choose life, and let others help you hold on to it.

KEY VERSE

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Therefore choose life, that you may live, you and your descendants, to love the LORD your God, to obey his voice, and to cling to him; for he is your life, and the length of your days, that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.

Deuteronomy 30:19–20 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Deuteronomy spends so much time on the curses?
2. How would you respond to someone who says that if you have enough faith, God will make you rich and healthy?
3. What questions about God do you have that you can't answer? How do you live with them?
4. What does choosing life look like for you this week?

TRY THIS *Draw two columns, Life and Death. List choices you face regularly, and put each one where you think it leads. Then pick one change you want to make, and ask a friend to help you stick with it.*

CHAPTER 9

Moses' Last Day

Deuteronomy 31–34

The last four chapters of Deuteronomy are Moses' goodbye. He's 120 years old, and he knows his time is up. He calls Joshua in front of all Israel and gives him a charge that every new leader should hear. "Be strong and courageous. Don't be afraid or scared of them, for the LORD your God himself is who goes with you. He will not fail you nor forsake you." Then he says it again, just to Joshua. "The LORD himself is who goes before you. He will be with you. He will not fail you nor forsake you. Don't be afraid. Don't be discouraged."

> **REAL TALK** **Be Strong and Courageous**
>
> Joshua was about to take over from the greatest leader in Israel's history and lead a nation into war. No wonder he needed to hear, don't be afraid. You might be facing something that feels too big for you too: a new school, a move, a family change, a tryout, a performance, a hard conversation. Notice that Moses didn't tell Joshua to be brave because he was strong enough. He told him to be brave because God was going with him. Hebrews quotes the same promise for Christians today: "I will in no way leave you, neither will I in any way forsake you." Courage isn't the absence of fear. It's trusting that God is with you in it. And if your anxiety feels overwhelming, it's wise to talk with a parent, counselor, or doctor.

Moses writes down the law and gives it to the priests, telling them to read it aloud to the whole nation every seven years, at the Feast of

Booths, so that everyone, men, women, children, and foreigners, can hear it and learn. The book was to be kept beside the ark of the covenant as a witness.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Book Found Under Josiah**

Second Kings 22 tells a dramatic story. About 622 BC, during repairs on the temple in Jerusalem, the high priest made a discovery. "I have found the book of the law in the LORD's house." When it was read to King Josiah, he tore his clothes in grief, because Judah hadn't been following it. He led a huge reform, destroying idols, closing local shrines, and celebrating a Passover like none in centuries. Many scholars believe that the book was Deuteronomy, or part of it, because Josiah's reforms match its laws so closely. Some think it had been written recently, in Moses' name, to call Judah back to God. Others think it was an ancient book, written by or from Moses, that had been neglected or hidden during the reign of wicked kings like Manasseh, and was rediscovered. Some take a middle view, that Mosaic teaching was preserved and edited over time. Christians hold different views on this, and agree that the story shows the power of God's word to change a nation when it's finally read and obeyed.

Then God tells Moses something heartbreaking. After Moses dies, the people will turn away to other gods, and disaster will come. So God gives Moses a song to teach them, so that when trouble comes, the song will testify to what God said. Chapter 32 is that song, one of the oldest poems in the Bible. It calls God the Rock. "The Rock: his work is perfect, for all his ways are just. A God of faithfulness who does no wrong, just and right is he." It describes how God found Israel in the desert. "He surrounded him. He cared for him. He kept him as the apple of his eye." It tells of Israel's coming rebellion and God's judgment, and ends with God having compassion on His people and making atonement for His land.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Apple of His Eye**

When Deuteronomy 32:10 says God kept Israel as the apple of His eye, the Hebrew phrase literally means the little man of the eye, the pupil, where you can see your own tiny reflection when you look closely into someone else's eye. The pupil is the part of the body people protect most instinctively. You blink before anything can touch it. So to be the apple of God's eye means you're precious to Him, and He protects you with instinctive, fierce love. The phrase shows up again in Psalm 17:8 and Zechariah 2:8, and it's still used in English today.

Think about what Moses did with his final days. He didn't spend them on himself. He spent them teaching, warning, encouraging, writing, and singing, all for a generation he wouldn't get to lead into the land. He trained Joshua to take his place. He made sure the law would be read aloud for generations to come. That's a picture of what it means to finish well. You don't have to be 120 to think about it. What kind of legacy do you want to leave in your family, your school, your friendships? It starts with how you live now.

Chapter 33 records Moses' blessing on the tribes, like Jacob's blessing on his sons at the end of Genesis. And it ends with words that have comforted people for three thousand years. "The eternal God is your dwelling place. Underneath are the everlasting arms."

Then comes the final chapter. "Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, that is opposite Jericho." God shows him the whole land: Gilead to the north, the hills of the tribes, the Mediterranean in the distance, the Jordan valley, and the city of palm trees, Jericho, below him. And God says, "This is the land which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your offspring.' I have caused you to see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there."

"So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the LORD's word." And then a remarkable detail. "He buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth Peor, but no man knows where his tomb is to this day." God Himself buried Moses. Maybe the grave was hidden so it wouldn't become a shrine. Whatever the reason, God took care of His servant to the very end. "Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died. His eye was not dim, nor his strength gone." Israel mourned him for thirty days.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Wrote About Moses' Death?**

If Moses wrote Deuteronomy, who wrote the chapter about his death? Jewish tradition gives two answers: either Joshua wrote it, or Moses wrote it prophetically, with tears. Many Christians think Joshua or a later editor added the final chapter; the phrase to this day suggests some time had passed. Scholars who believe the Torah was assembled later see this as one sign of that process. Whatever the answer, the chapter is a fitting end to the life of the greatest prophet in Israel's history.

REAL TALK **Not Getting to See It**

Moses spent forty years leading people toward a land he never entered. That's a hard ending. Maybe you've lost someone who didn't get to see something they hoped for: a grandparent who won't see you graduate, a parent who died young, a friend whose life ended too soon. Grief over what someone missed can be one of the heaviest kinds. It's okay to feel that. Talk to someone you trust about it, and if the sadness feels too much, call or text 988. Remember too that Moses' story didn't end on Mount Nebo. Fourteen centuries later, he stood on a mountain in the promised land with Jesus (Matthew 17:3). God keeps His promises, even beyond death.

Deuteronomy 34 also tells us that Joshua was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him, and the people listened to him. The handoff worked. One generation passed the

faith to the next. That's the story of the whole book: an old leader pouring everything he knew into a young generation, so they could carry it forward. Someone did that for you, if you've learned about God at all. Someday, you'll get to do it for someone else.

The book closes with an epitaph. "Since then, there has not arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face." It's a tribute, but it's also a door left open. Israel was still waiting for the prophet Moses had promised, the one God would raise up, the one to whom they must listen. The Torah ends not with arrival, but with hope. And the New Testament says that hope has a name.

KEY VERSE

Be strong and courageous. Don't be afraid or scared of them, for the LORD your God himself is who goes with you. He will not fail you nor forsake you.

Deuteronomy 31:6 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What's something you're facing that requires courage? How does it help to know God goes with you?
2. Why do you think the story of the book found under Josiah matters, whatever view you take of it?
3. What does it mean to you to be the apple of God's eye?
4. How do you feel about Moses not getting to enter the land? How does Matthew 17 change the story?

TRY THIS *Write a letter to someone younger than you, like a sibling, cousin, or kid at church, telling them what you've learned about God so far. Think of it as your own Deuteronomy.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

Deuteronomy ends with Moses dead on a mountain, the promised land in view, and a closing note that no prophet since has been like him. It also ends with a warning. Moses predicts that Israel will turn away and suffer the curses of the covenant. The people needed something more than good laws. They needed new hearts. And Moses himself promised that one day God would "circumcise your heart" (Deuteronomy 30:6), and that God would raise up another prophet like him.

Jewish readers treasure Deuteronomy, and observant Jews still pray the Shema every morning and evening. The New Testament writers, who were Jewish themselves, believed that the prophet like Moses had come. Peter preached that Jesus was the one Moses spoke of (Acts 3:22). Jesus answered the devil with Deuteronomy, called the Shema the greatest commandment, and stood with Moses on a mountain in the promised land, where a voice from the cloud said, "Listen to him." And Paul says, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us."

Here's what the Bible says about where that story leads, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

Deuteronomy says God chose His people simply because He loved them. He made you on purpose, and He loves you too.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We haven't loved Him with all our hearts.

Moses knew Israel would turn away. The Bible says all of us have turned from God in our own ways.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. Deuteronomy sets out blessing and curse. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus took the curse.

Jesus, the prophet like Moses, lived the perfect life of love for God, then died on the cross, taking the curse we deserved. And He rose again.

> *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us.* **Galatians 3:13 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Israel was chosen by grace, not because they were great. Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Choose life.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, You are the one true God, and I haven't loved You with all my heart. I've sinned against You, and I can't fix that myself. Thank You for loving me first. Thank You that Jesus took the curse I deserved on the cross, and that You raised Him from the dead. I choose life. I'm turning to You. Forgive me and give me a new heart. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Help me love You with all my heart, soul, and strength, and love my neighbor too. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Deuteronomy 6, 8, and 30, then read Matthew 4 and 22, and watch how Jesus lived out Deuteronomy.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Talk about it. Moses told parents to talk about God's words at home, on the road, at bedtime, and in the morning. Find someone to talk with about God every day this week.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Deuteronomy was written so that every new generation would hear God's words for themselves. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Deuteronomy is right, the choice in front of you is life or death, and the God who loves you is urging you to choose life.

The eternal God is your dwelling place. Underneath are the everlasting arms.

Deuteronomy 33:27 (WEB)