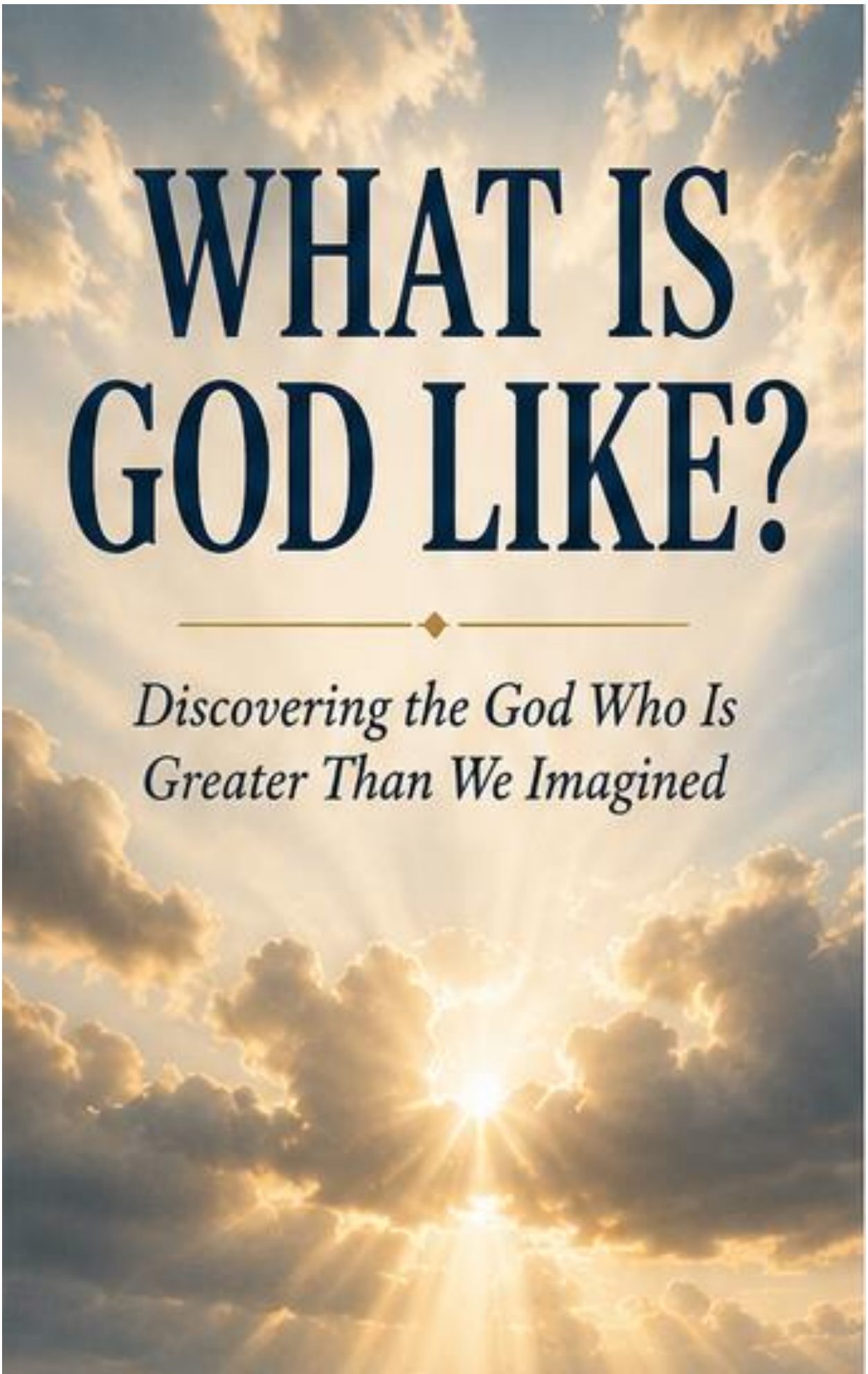
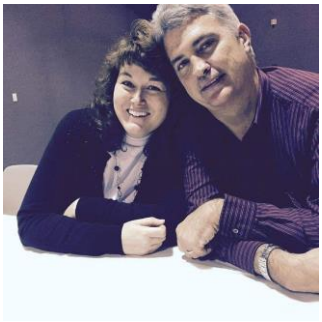

WHAT IS GOD LIKE?
Discovering the God Who Is Greater Than We Imagined

Dedication

Dedication



To my wife, Kristi,

for her love, patience, encouragement, and faithful support through every season of ministry. Whatever God has accomplished through my life and ministry, you have been an essential part of it. I could never have made this journey without you.

And to the people of West Columbia First Church of the Nazarene,

who twenty-nine years ago took a chance on a young preacher with little experience and gave me the privilege of becoming your pastor. Thank you for allowing me to preach God's Word, share life with you, make mistakes, grow alongside you, and discover together more and more of what God is like.

With all my love and gratitude,

Pastor Bill



Introduction

Introduction

What Is God Like?

What is God like? It sounds like a simple question. It isn't.

If I asked a group of Christians to describe God, I would probably hear some familiar answers. God is loving. God is gracious. God is faithful. God is holy. God is powerful. God is good.

And every one of those answers would be right.

But none of them would be enough.

God has more facets to His character than we can possibly comprehend. He is loving, kind, patient, powerful, and gracious. Yet Scripture also describes Him as jealous, holy, and a consuming fire. Sometimes He seems incredibly near. At other times He seems strangely distant. Sometimes He comforts us. Sometimes He challenges us. Sometimes He does exactly what we expect, and every once in a while He completely surprises us.

That realization became the inspiration for a summer sermon series at West Columbia First Church of the Nazarene.

I wanted our congregation to look at some characteristics of God that we don't talk about quite as often. Not because we had discovered something new about Him, but because Scripture sometimes reveals God in ways that don't fit neatly into the boxes we have created for Him.

So throughout the summer we asked one question:

What is God like?

We discovered the God who sometimes steps back when His people continually reject Him.

We met the God who finally shows up after we've almost given up waiting.

We encountered the God who sees people others overlook.

We wrestled with the God who sometimes asks us to do things that scare us to death.

We considered the God whose kingdom gives us hope for our nation.

We saw the God who keeps sowing seeds in lives that others might have given up on.

We encountered the God who searches for us and refuses to mind His own business.

And finally, we discovered the God who still surprises ordinary people by calling them into something they never imagined.

These chapters grew out of those sermons.

I have intentionally left some of the sermon in them. I don't want this to sound like a theology textbook because I didn't preach these messages in a theology classroom. They were preached to people I love—people who were celebrating, grieving, questioning, laughing, struggling, growing, and trying to follow Jesus in everyday life.

So you will find some stories in these pages. You will find some humor. You may even find an occasional line that makes you wonder, "Did a pastor really say that?"

Probably.

But beneath all of it is a serious conviction: **What we believe God is like changes everything about how we live.**

If we believe God is waiting for us to fail, we will hide from Him.

If we believe God has forgotten us, we will stop waiting for Him.

If we believe God doesn't see us, we will wonder whether our lives matter.

If we believe God only calls extraordinary people, we will miss what He wants to do through ordinary people like us.

But when we begin to see God as Scripture reveals Him, something changes.

We begin to trust Him.

And maybe that is the real purpose of this book.

I don't expect eight chapters to answer completely the question, "What is God like?" Eight hundred chapters couldn't do that. God is simply too great.

My hope is much simpler.

I hope these pages cause you to see something about God you haven't noticed before.

I hope they challenge some assumptions.

I hope they encourage you when God seems distant.

I hope they remind you that He sees you when you feel forgotten.

I hope they give you courage when God asks you to do something frightening.

And I hope they leave you open to the possibility that the God who created the universe might still have a surprise or two waiting for you.

Because after spending an entire summer asking, "What is God like?" I came away convinced of this:

He is better than we imagined, greater than we understood, and far less predictable than we would sometimes like Him to be.

So don't put God in a box.

Open His Word.

Open your heart.

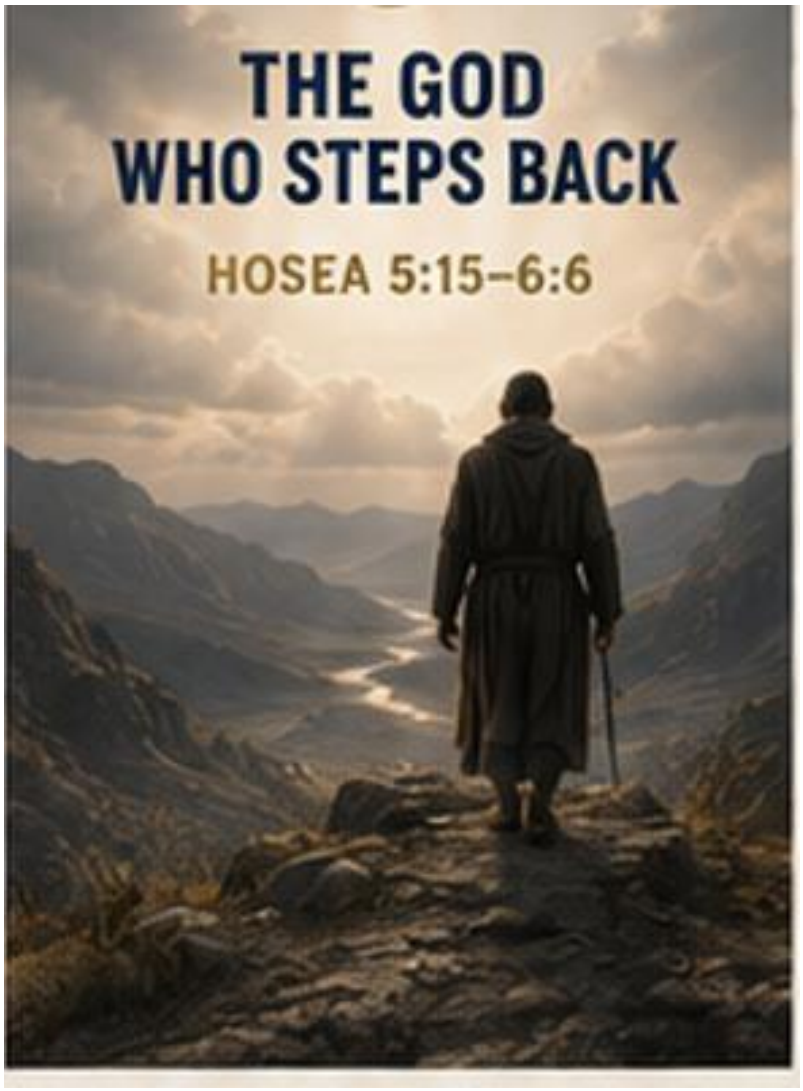
And let's discover together what God is like.



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CHAPTER 1



Sometimes God steps back—not because He has stopped loving us, but because He loves us too much to let us remain comfortable in our rebellion.

Hosea 5:15 Then I will return to my lair. until they have borne their guilt. and seek my face—in their misery they will earnestly seek me." 6 "Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. 2 After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence. 3 Let us acknowledge the Lord; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth."

4 "What can I do with you, Ephraim? What can I do with you, Judah? Your love is like the morning mist like the early dew that disappears. 5 Therefore I cut you in pieces with my prophets, I killed you with the words of my mouth— then my judgments go forth like the sun.[a] 6 For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.

Big Idea

Sometimes God steps back—not because He has stopped loving us, but because He loves us too much to let us remain comfortable in our rebellion.

Sermon:

Are you a rebel? James Dean made the phrase famous in the movie "Rebel Without a Cause". I had a friend who had the poster hanging in his room even though we weren't even born when the movie came out.

I have to admit that I've been accused of being a rebel myself, especially at certain Nazarene district meetings. I've been known to speak my mind and occasionally vote against a resolution or report being presented.

Personally, I don't think there is anything wrong with being a rebel for the right cause.

But rebelling without a cause can be dangerous.

The Israelites of the eighth century B.C. were rebels.

God had done so much for them, yet for decades they worshiped other gods. The interesting thing is that they never completely forgot about the Lord. The temple was still open. Sacrifices were still being made. Priests were still offering prayers. Religious services continued.

They simply worshiped other gods too.

That doesn't sound terribly different from today.

People can still attend church occasionally while worshiping at plenty of other altars. We may not bow before statues of Baal, but possessions, pleasure, success, hobbies, habits, relationships, and our own desires can become gods just as easily.

Hosea gives rebels like us a warning.

And it reveals something about God that might surprise us.

God sometimes steps back.

In Hosea 5:15, God says:

"I will return again to my place, until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face, and in their distress earnestly seek me."

Those are frightening words.

We talk often about the God who pursues us, and rightly so. God is incredibly persistent. He desires a relationship with us. His grace reaches toward us again and again.

But Hosea reminds us that if we consistently resist God, there may come a time when He allows us to experience what life is like without the guidance we have continually rejected.

God Steps Back After He Has Done Everything He Can

God isn't quick to step back.

That's important.

The Israelites didn't make one bad decision and suddenly discover that God had disappeared. This wasn't one failure, one mistake, or one terrible weekend.

This was **decades of rebellion.**

For years, God had pursued them.

For years, God had warned them.

For years, God had rescued them.

And for years, they kept returning to their idols.

They especially enjoyed worshiping Baal. Compared with worshiping the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Baal worship seemed like a lot more fun. It appealed to their desires and allowed them to satisfy their lusts while calling it religion.

Yet whenever trouble came, guess whom they called?

God. Enemy nations would attack them. The Israelites would cry out to the Lord. God would rescue them. Then, once everything settled down, they would go right back to their other gods.

Sound familiar?

How many times has God saved our day?

We get into trouble and suddenly become people of prayer.

"Lord, help me!"

God intervenes.

The crisis passes.

And before long, we're right back at the same old altars.

Our hobbies.

Our habits.

Our hang-ups.

Our ambitions.

Our pleasures.

God gets whatever is left over.

Hosea shows us that God will pursue His people for an incredibly long time. But eventually He may allow us to experience the consequences of the life we insist on living.

That is a scary place to be.

His Spirit has been guiding us, convicting us, correcting us, and directing us. If we continually tell Him no, there may come a point when God says, in effect, "Then I will let you experience where this road leads."

Please don't misunderstand this.

I'm not talking about those seasons when God simply feels distant. Every Christian experiences dry periods when God's presence isn't as obvious as it was at another time.

Hosea is describing something much more serious.

God's people had consistently rejected Him.

After decades of rebellion, God stepped back.

God Steps Back to Wake Us Up

God wasn't abandoning Israel because He hated them.

He stepped back because He wanted them to wake up.

Listen again to His purpose:

"…until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face, and in their distress earnestly seek me."

God wanted His absence to accomplish what His blessings had not.

The Israelites had become comfortable. They assumed that because they were God's chosen people, He was obligated to protect them.

They could live however they wanted, and God would still come running whenever they got into trouble.

There are Christians who live with the same assumption.

We want enough God to rescue us but not enough God to rule us.

We want Him available in an emergency but preferably out of the way when everything is going well.

Sometimes God steps back to wake us from that kind of casual Christianity.

And it apparently worked with Israel—at least initially.

Their response in Hosea 6 sounds wonderful:

"Come, let us return to the Lord; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up."

They were frightened by the possibility of losing God's presence.

They knew the story of Samson. Samson's strength wasn't ultimately in his hair. His strength came from the presence and power of God's Spirit. Once that presence departed, Samson discovered just how weak he really was.

Israel understood that without God, they were in trouble.

So they decided to return.

But these Israelites were a lot like us.

They immediately became confident that everything would quickly return to normal:

"After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up…"

In other words:

"We'll say we're sorry. God will forgive us. Give it a couple of days and everything will be fine."

They had been through this cycle before.

Rebel.

Get into trouble.

Ask for forgiveness.

Get rescued.

Repeat.

They even made some promises.

“Let us press on to know the Lord.”

They knew the right words.

Surely God would come back now.

Isn’t that sometimes what we do?

“God, if You get me out of this, I’ll change.”

“God, I’ll start going to church.”

“God, I’ll quit.”

“God, I’ll do better.”

And sometimes we mean it—in the moment.

But God isn’t merely listening to our words.

He knows our hearts.

God Steps Back Because He Knows Our Hearts

God’s response in Hosea 6 is one of the most surprising parts of the passage.

We expect Him to say, “Welcome home!”

Instead, He says:

“What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away.”

That’s quite a response.

God wasn’t questioning whether they felt something in the moment.

He was questioning whether it would still be there next week.

Their love was like morning dew.

It appeared.

Then it disappeared.

There are plenty of people we can fool.

We can fool our friends.

We can fool our family.

We can even fool the pastor.

But there is no deceiving God.

He knows when our repentance is real and when we're simply trying to make the pain go away.

He knew Israel had repeatedly ignored His warnings. God had sent prophets to speak truth to them.

Again and again He confronted them with His Word. They had been warned.

And they ignored it.

God also knew that they preferred religious activity to an actual relationship with Him.

They were perfectly willing to bring sacrifices. They would spend time at the temple.

They would participate in religious ceremonies.

But God wanted something deeper.

Hosea 6:6 says:

"For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."

God wasn't looking for religious performance.

He wanted a relationship.

That remains true.

Church attendance is good.

Giving is good.

Serving is good.

Singing worship songs is good.

But none of those things can substitute for knowing God.

We can go through all the motions and still keep our hearts at a distance.

God wants us.

Has God Stepped Back?

So let me return to the uncomfortable question with which we began:

Are you a rebel?

You don't need to raise your hand.

You know.

And God knows.

Maybe something else has slowly become more important than Him.

Maybe you've heard His warnings but ignored them.

Maybe you've made promises you never intended to keep.

Maybe you're going through the religious motions while your heart is somewhere else.

And perhaps lately God seems distant.

You don't sense His presence like you once did.

His guidance doesn't seem as clear.

If you're truthful, you've mostly been winging it.

And it isn't working very well.

There is good news.

Hosea's story doesn't end with God stepping back forever.

Think about it.

The fact that God warned them meant He still cared.

The fact that He sent Hosea meant He still loved them.

The fact that He told them why He was stepping back meant the door was still open.

God's purpose wasn't to get rid of His people.

He wanted them to come home.

Maybe that's what He wants from you too.

Stop running.

Stop pretending.

Stop straddling the fence.

Come home.

The God who steps back is still the God who wants you near.

And maybe the distance you've been feeling isn't evidence that God has stopped loving you.

Maybe it is the very thing He is using to awaken in you a hunger to seek His face again.

Think About It

1. Are there areas of your life where God has repeatedly spoken to you but you have resisted Him?
2. What is the difference between genuinely knowing God and simply going through religious motions?
3. Have you ever experienced a season when God seemed distant? Looking back, what did that season produce in you?
4. Is there an "altar" in your life—success, possessions, pleasure, relationships, habits, or something else—that has begun competing with God for first place?
5. What would genuinely returning to God look like for you right now?

Listen & Reflect

Featured Song: "Give Us Clean Hands" — Charlie Hall

Watch on YouTube

As you listen, consider this question:

Is there anything in my life that I have allowed to become more important than knowing and loving God?

Prayer

Father,

I don't want to merely go through the motions of knowing You.

Search my heart and show me where I have allowed other things to take Your place. Forgive me for the times I have ignored Your warnings, made promises I didn't keep, or called for You only when I needed to be rescued.

If I have wandered, awaken me.

If my love has grown cold, rekindle it.

If I have been straddling the fence, give me the courage to come home completely.

More than Your blessings, I want You.

Teach me to love You with a steadfast love and to know You more deeply every day.

Amen.

CHAPTER 2



God may seem slow in fulfilling His promises,
but the God who seems absent may be working the entire time.

Big Idea

God may seem slow in fulfilling His promises, but the God who seems absent may be working the entire time.

Scripture

Genesis 18:1–15 (NIV)

18 The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. **2** Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

3 He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord,[a] do not pass your servant by. **4** Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. **5** Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant." "Very well," they answered, "do as you say."

6 So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three seahs[b] of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread." 7 Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. 8 He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them.

While they ate, he stood near them under a tree. 9 "Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him. "There, in the tent," he said. 10 Then one of them said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son."

Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. **11** Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. **12** So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?"

13 Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' **14** Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son."

15 Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh." But he said, "Yes, you did laugh."

Sermon

What is God like? What would be your first response to that question? Mine would probably be, "He is loving." Maybe you would say He is faithful, holy, gracious, powerful, or good. Those are all great answers.

But I doubt many people would describe Him as the God who finally shows up. That almost sounds sacrilegious. Maybe even a little irreverent. If it is, I hope God forgives me. But let's be truthful. Sometimes God seems slow. Sometimes we pray and nothing happens. We hold onto a promise until our hands get tired. Eventually, some of us begin wondering whether what we thought God was going to do will ever happen.

Few people in Scripture understood that feeling better than Sarah.

So rather than simply telling you about her, I'm going to let Sarah tell you her story.

My Name Is Sarah

Hello. My name is Sarah, and I thank you for giving me the opportunity to share my story.

I was born and raised in a town called Ur. My parents named me Sarai, which means "princess." Maybe they thought I was beautiful as a baby. I'm not sure, but I had a wonderful upbringing. When I was a teenager, my looks attracted the attention of a well-thought-of young man named Abram. His family was well-to-do, and he was charismatic and strong. He had my heart from the first "hello."

We married and assumed we would spend the rest of our lives in Ur just like our parents had. Eventually, Abram's father moved our family to Haran. There Abram and I tried to start a family. And tried. And tried.

In my day, no matter how beautiful a woman might have been, much of her worth in the eyes of society was tied to having children. Looks are helpful, but babies are better. And I couldn't have one. It was heartbreaking watching our friends have babies while Abram and I remained childless. Thankfully, Abram continued treating me like a princess.

He had a strong belief that the God who created the universe was also involved in our personal lives. Abram prayed to this God and believed that someday his prayers would be answered. I wish I could tell you I had that kind of faith.

Forty Years of Tears

For forty long years, I remained childless in Haran. Every month, hoping. Every month, wondering. Every month, crying. Eventually, I gave up on my dream. Abram still loved me. We found joy in helping raise our nephew and his children. We had servants whose children became almost like our own.

Then something happened that changed everything.

God spoke to Abram. My husband came home excited and probably a little confused. He told me the Lord had instructed us to leave everything familiar and travel to a place He would show us. That's quite a moving plan. "Where are we going?" "I don't know." "How long will it take?" "I don't know." "Where will we live?" "I don't know." But there was more.

Abram said God had promised to make him into a great nation. A great nation? There were only two of us, and I couldn't have children. It sounded impossible. But after all those years, it was something I hadn't felt in a long time. Hope. Only a glimmer. But sometimes a glimmer is enough to keep you going.

God Kept Promising

We packed our belongings and left. Eventually we arrived in Canaan, where Abram said the Lord spoke to him again. God promised that his offspring would someday possess that land.

There was still one obvious problem. We didn't have any offspring. Not one. And by then, powerful people already occupied the land God supposedly planned to give our descendants. Abram built an altar and worshiped.

Then, surprisingly, we kept moving and ended up in Egypt. That's where my godly husband came up with one of the worst ideas of his life. Abram was convinced that because I was beautiful, someone would kill him and take me. So he decided we should tell everyone I was his sister.

Men, please understand something: If your plan involves asking your wife to pretend she isn't your wife, you probably need another plan. His scheme failed miserably. I ended up in Pharaoh's household. But then terrible plagues began affecting Pharaoh's court, and eventually everyone discovered that I was Abram's wife. Pharaoh returned me to my husband and ordered that Abram not be harmed.

We left Egypt a little wiser. And I began realizing something. Maybe this Creator God really did care about us.

Another Encounter, the Same Promise

But we still didn't have a child. I was now in my late seventies. Not exactly the season of life when you're decorating a nursery.

Then Abram had another encounter with God. The Lord promised to be his shield and reward. Abram suggested that perhaps our servant Eliezer could become his heir. God said no. His own son would inherit the promise, and his descendants would become as numerous as the stars.

Abram came back from that encounter convinced that we were going to have a baby. I thought he was crazy. Although I have to admit, I enjoyed the extra attention. But month after month passed. Still no baby.

That's when I decided God needed some help.

When We Try to Help God

I told Abram to take my servant Hagar and have a child through her. This wasn't unheard of in our culture. It made sense to me. If God had promised Abram a son and I couldn't give him one, perhaps this was how God's promise would be fulfilled. In my mind, God had the right plan. He just needed my help carrying it out. That didn't go well.

Hagar became pregnant, and our relationship deteriorated terribly. I became jealous and bitter. Eventually, I mistreated her so severely that she ran away.

Then something happened that surprised me. Hagar came back saying that God had spoken to her.

God spoke to Hagar? My servant? My rival?

Up to that point, I thought God mostly spoke to Abram. I sensed God's presence when we worshiped, but I had never experienced Him speaking to me like that. Yet God saw Hagar too.

Nine months later, Ishmael was born. Abram was thrilled. He loved playing with the boy, teaching him, and finally getting to be the father he had always wanted to be. Part of me was happy for him. But another part still hurt. I was still childless.

Ten More Years

Nearly ten more years passed. No special encounters. No new revelations. Life simply went on. We worshiped God. Abram told us the old stories about creation, Adam and Eve, Noah and the flood. And we learned to live with the life we had.

That's something people don't always understand about waiting. Eventually, you stop expecting tomorrow to be different. You adjust. You make peace with disappointment. You learn to live around the empty place.

Then God showed up again. This time God changed Abram's name to Abraham, because he would become the father of many nations. And then God mentioned me. God said I was going to have a baby.

He even changed my name from Sarai to Sarah—a princess who would become the mother of nations. Abraham reacted about like you would expect. He laughed. Could a man nearly one hundred years old and a woman nearly ninety really become parents? God said yes.

But by then, I had lived with disappointment for so long that I didn't know how to hope anymore.

Then God Came to Dinner

A few months later, visitors appeared outside our tents. The moment Abraham went out to meet them, I sensed something was different. He insisted they stay for a meal and came rushing into the tent telling me to make bread. Then he had a servant prepare one of our best calves.

It was going to be quite a feast. While the visitors ate, I did what any respectable wife would do. I eavesdropped. That's when I heard one of them say: "I will return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son." I couldn't help myself. I laughed. Me? A baby? At my age? It was so ridiculous that it was funny.

Apparently, my laugh wasn't as quiet as I thought. The visitor asked Abraham why I had laughed. I denied it. Sorry. I panicked. But He knew. Then came the question that changed everything: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?"

I had spent decades measuring God's promise against my circumstances. My age said impossible. My body said impossible. My experience said impossible. Forty years of disappointment said impossible. But God had never asked my circumstances whether He could keep His promise.

The God Who Seemed Absent

Nine months later, I held our son. We named him Isaac which meant Laughter. How appropriate. For years my laughter had been the laughter of disbelief. Now it became the laughter of joy.

I still don't know why God waited so long. That's one of the questions I would love to ask Him someday. Why make us wait? Why allow all those tears? Why repeat the promise and then allow another year to pass? I don't know.

But looking backward, I discovered something I couldn't see while I was waiting. The God who seemed absent had been working the entire time. He protected me in Egypt. He guided Abraham. He cared for Hagar. He blessed Ishmael. He kept speaking. He kept promising. He kept leading.

And even during those long stretches when nothing seemed to be happening, He had not forgotten us.

It simply took me years to recognize what He was doing.

When God Finally Shows Up

Maybe you understand my story better than you wish you did. Maybe you've prayed for a child. A marriage. A healing. A prodigal son or daughter. A job. A breakthrough. A restored relationship.

Maybe you've held onto something for so long that you no longer know whether you're exercising faith or simply refusing to give up. Maybe you've wondered whether God forgot your address.

Sarah's story doesn't promise that God will give us everything we have requested if we wait long enough.

But it does reveal something about God's character.

God's silence does not necessarily mean God's absence.

Waiting does not mean He has forgotten.

And God's timetable doesn't have to make sense to us for God to remain faithful.

Sometimes we don't recognize what God has been doing until we can look backward. Sarah waited decades.

Then one day she realized: God had been there all along. And when He finally showed up in the way she had been waiting for, He was right on time.

So if you're waiting today, don't give up simply because you can't see what God is doing. Keep trusting.

Keep praying.

Keep listening.

Keep following.

Because the longest wait of your life may someday become the greatest testimony of God's faithfulness.

Think About It

1. What are you waiting for God to do right now?
2. Have you ever interpreted God's silence as God's absence?
3. Sarah tried to "help" God fulfill His promise through Hagar. When are you most tempted to force something instead of waiting for God?
4. Looking backward, can you identify a season when God was working even though you couldn't see it at the time?
5. How does the question "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" speak to your present circumstances?

Listen & Reflect

Featured Song: "Way Maker" — SINACH

Watch on YouTube
As you listen, consider:

Where do I need to trust God's faithfulness even though I cannot yet see what He is doing?

Prayer

Father,

Waiting is hard.

Sometimes I wonder why You don't move more quickly. Sometimes Your silence feels like absence, and I begin to wonder whether You have forgotten me.

Help me trust You when I cannot see what You are doing.

Keep me from forcing my own solutions when Your timing seems too slow. Give me enough faith for the next step, enough patience for another day, and enough grace to believe that You are working even when I cannot see it.

And someday, when I look backward, help me recognize all the places where Your hand was present even when I didn't know it.

Nothing is too hard for You.

I will trust You while I wait.

Amen.

CHAPTER 3

THE GOD WHO SEES YOU

Genesis 16 & 21



No matter who you are, where you came from, or how others have treated you, you matter to God. He sees you. He cares about you.

A guest message by Dr. Geoff Kunselman

Chapter Three

The God Who Sees You

Genesis 16:1–10; 21:1–3, 8–21

A Word About Dr. Geoff Kunselman

This chapter is a little different from the others in this book. **"The God Who Sees You"** was preached on Father's Day by my friend and mentor, Dr. Geoff Kunselman.

Geoff is a powerful and insightful speaker. His winsome, conversational style has made him one of our favorite "fill-in" preachers whenever I am away. When he speaks, you can see his pastoral heart. It is evident that he knows God personally. Who he is in the pulpit is exactly who he is in everyday life. Being around Geoff makes you a better person. You are always glad he stopped by.

Professionally, Geoff has played an important role in my life and ministry. When I became pastor of West Columbia First Church of the Nazarene, I was young and inexperienced, but Geoff took me under his wing. He made me feel important. For the next couple of years, we met for breakfast almost every week. Those conversations helped shape the pastor I would become.

Geoff has always been an incredible encourager, and I am grateful not only for his ministry but also for his friendship. We have shared sermons, prayers, golf rounds, and countless conversations over the years. Through it all, he has consistently pointed me—and many others—toward Christ. So it is especially meaningful to me that one of the messages in this series came from him.

I am honored to include his sermon, **"The God Who Sees You,"** in these pages.

—Bill Harmon

Big Idea

No matter who you are, where you came from, or how others have treated you, you matter to God. He sees you. He cares about you.

Scripture

Genesis 16:1–10; 21:1–3, 8–21 (NIV)

16 Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; 2 so she said to Abram, "The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her." Abram agreed to what Sarai said. 3 So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. 4 He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. 5 Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the Lord judge between you and me." 6 "Your slave is in your hands," Abram said."Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her. 7 The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. 8 And he said, "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?"

"I'm running away from my mistress Sarai," she answered. 9 Then the angel of the Lord told her, "Go back to your mistress and submit to her." 10 The angel added, "I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count."

21 Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised. **2** Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. **3** Abraham gave the name Isaac[a] to the son Sarah bore him.

8 The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast. **9** But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, **10** and she said to Abraham, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."

11 The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. 12 But God said to him, "Do not be so distressed about the boy and your slave woman. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring[b] will be reckoned. 13 I will make the son of the slave into a nation also, because he is your offspring." 14 Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the Desert of Beersheba. 15 When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. 16 Then she went off and sat down about a bowshot away, for she thought, "I cannot watch the boy die." And as she sat there, she[c] began to sob. 17 God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. 18 Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation." 19 Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. 20 God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer. 21 While he was living in the Desert of Paran, his mother got a wife for him from Egypt.

Sermon

You've heard of "Dad Jokes."

They are the kind of jokes that make you laugh and cringe at the same time.

They sound something like this:

I used to hate facial hair, but then it grew on me.

I used to work at a calendar factory, but I got fired for taking a couple of days off.

My doctor told me I was going deaf. That news was hard to hear.

And one of my favorites:

I went to buy some camouflage pants, but I couldn't find any.

Dad jokes may be silly, but the reality is that being a dad is no joke. It is one of life's most solemn responsibilities. The passages we just read tell us about a dad—a very famous dad. Abraham is a big name for Jews and Christians alike. He did many things right.

But he also struggled at times as a father.

And the consequences were painful.

A Painful Family Story

If we were sitting together in a Sunday School class or Bible study, I might ask, "What stands out to you from these stories?"

But since I'm on the clock, let me suggest a few things.

God doesn't need our help being God.

Family mistakes and sins often hurt the most.

Don't blame others for problems you initiated.

Just because someone has the right to do something doesn't mean doing it is right.

And perhaps most painfully:

Children often live with the consequences of adult choices.

These stories are difficult to read.

They may be especially difficult because they can bring some of our own family pain to the surface.

Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac were real people living in a complicated and sometimes dysfunctional family.

Sarah couldn't have a child, so she gave her Egyptian slave Hagar to Abraham in hopes of building a family through her.

Hagar became pregnant.

Jealousy followed.

Relationships deteriorated.

Hagar was mistreated and ran away.

Years later, after Isaac was born, Hagar and Ishmael were sent away again.

There is plenty of blame to go around.

But thankfully, this story is not ultimately about the failures of earthly parents.

It is about the faithfulness of our heavenly Father.

The God Who Sees

In the wilderness, driven away from her home, Hagar experienced God's personal presence, awareness, and care. Her experience was so real that she gave God a name:

El-roi — "the God who sees me."

Think about that.

Hagar was a slave.

She had little power over what happened to her.

Other people made decisions that radically affected her life.

She was used.

She was mistreated.

She was sent away.

But she was never invisible.

God saw her.

And that means something for us.

No matter how you got here, **you matter to God.**

No matter your parents, your lineage, or the circumstances surrounding your birth, **you matter to God**.

No matter your family dynamic, **you matter to God.**

Maybe your family story includes conflict, addiction, abuse, neglect, divorce, disappointment, or things you wish had never happened.

No matter how you have been treated by people who should have cared for you:

You matter to God.

He sees you.

He cares about you.

The God Who Provides

Hagar and Ishmael also discovered something else about God.

The God who sees is also the **God who provides**.

Years after Hagar's first wilderness encounter, she found herself in the wilderness again.

This time she had her son with her.

Their water ran out.

Hagar became convinced Ishmael was going to die. She placed him beneath a bush and walked away because she couldn't bear to watch.

Then God showed up.

God heard the boy crying.

God spoke to Hagar.

God reminded her of His promise.

And God opened her eyes to see a well.

The God who saw her pain provided what she needed.

Hagar's circumstances had changed.

God's character had not.

No One Is Beyond God's Sight

A few years ago, while I was serving in northwestern Ohio, one of our pastors called me with an unusual proposal.

An independent Baptist chaplain at the Allen-Oakwood Correctional Institution in Lima had a group of inmates who believed God had called them into ministry.

The chaplain had looked at different approaches to ministerial preparation and believed the Church of the Nazarene's Course of Study would serve these men well.

Would we consider helping train them?

I've learned something over the years:

Sometimes when an opportunity is so unusual that nobody would have planned it, the Holy Spirit may be doing something new.

A group of pastors went to meet the men.

Before long, we developed a schedule.

Every Tuesday evening, one of us would enter the prison and teach.

It became one of my favorite places to go.

Sometimes I brought several extra-large pizzas. I've never seen men eat that much pizza.

During the holidays, we shared meals together.

They became dear brothers to me.

The youngest was a man named Diontai.

He had grown up in foster homes, eventually entered juvenile detention, and later was transferred to an adult prison. By the time he turned thirty, he had spent roughly half his life in an institution.

But Diontai was extremely bright.

Eventually he was granted parole.

He found work and began rebuilding his life. One of the women who had helped teach the men later helped him obtain his driver's license.

And, well, love blossomed.

They eventually married.

Then another remarkable opportunity appeared. Diontai learned of a scholarship at Wheaton College for promising students who had previously been incarcerated.

He applied.

He was accepted.

And his story continued in ways few people could have imagined when he was sitting inside a prison.

I am incredibly proud of him.

But even more than that, I am grateful for Jesus Christ, who through the Holy Spirit can make everything new.

Diontai's story reminds me of Hagar's.

The world may look at someone and see a prisoner.

A slave.

A mistake.

A problem.

A statistic.

God sees a person.

If They Matter to God, They Should Matter to Us

And that brings this message uncomfortably close to home.

If Hagar and Ishmael matter to God, **they should matter to us.**

West Columbia First sits in Lexington School District Two. My family lived in this community for more than twelve years. Our younger daughter began first grade at Pineview Elementary and eventually graduated from Brookland-Cayce High School.

So I don't say what follows as an outsider.

I love this community.

These are our neighbors.

There are children and parents all around us carrying difficult family stories. There are single mothers doing everything they can to raise their children. There are families facing financial hardship. There are children living with consequences they did not create.

Statistics can help us understand the need, but God never sees statistics.

God sees people.

And if the God we worship sees them, His church must learn to see them too.

Maybe that means encouragement.

Maybe practical help.

Maybe mentoring.

Maybe supporting a struggling parent.

Maybe simply noticing someone whom everybody else walks past.

You never know how much difference one act of grace can make in someone's life.

"You're a Child of God"

The late preacher Fred Craddock told a story about meeting an older gentleman while vacationing in Tennessee.

Craddock and his wife were eating when the man began making his way from table to table talking with people. Craddock hoped the man wouldn't come to theirs.

Of course, he did.

After learning that Craddock taught at a seminary, the gentleman pulled up a chair and said he wanted to tell him a preacher story.

The man explained that he had grown up in the Tennessee mountains carrying the shame of being born outside of marriage. Other children said cruel things to him, and he learned to keep to himself.

As a boy, he began attending a small church. He would arrive just in time for the sermon and leave quickly afterward so he wouldn't have to talk to anyone.

One Sunday he didn't escape quickly enough.

The preacher caught him.

The man remembered the preacher placing a heavy hand on his shoulder and looking intently at him.

"Who are you, Son? Whose boy are you?" The preacher asked.

He felt the old weigh come on him. It was like a big black cloud.

Even the preacher was putting him down.

But as he looked down at him, studying his face, he began to smile a big smile of recognition. "Wait a minute," he said, "I know who you are. I see the family resemblance. **You are… a son of God"**

The boy walked out of that church differently than he had walked in.

Years later, Craddock learned the identity of the man sitting across from him.

His name was Ben Hooper.

He would eventually become governor of Tennessee.

One person looked at a boy whom society had labeled and saw something different.

Maybe that's because he had learned something about God.

God sees people differently.

Hagar knew it.

Ishmael knew it.

Diontai discovered it.

Ben Hooper discovered it.

And maybe today you need to discover it too.

You are more than your family history.

You are more than what someone did to you.

You are more than your worst decision.

You are more than a statistic.

You are more than the label someone placed on you.

You matter to God.

He sees you.

He knows you.

He cares about you.

He is a good Father.

And because He sees people that way, those of us who call Him Father must learn to see them that way too.

Think About It

Have you ever felt invisible or overlooked? What does Hagar's name for God—El-roi, "the God who sees me"—mean to you?

What parts of your family story have been difficult for you to understand or accept?

Who around you might feel unseen right now?

What is one practical way you or your church could communicate to someone, "You matter to God, and you matter to us"?

What label from your past do you need to stop allowing to define your future?

Listen & Reflect

Featured Song: "He Knows My Name" — Francesca Battistelli

Watch on YouTube

As you listen, consider:

Do I really believe that my heavenly Father sees me, knows me, and cares about the details of my life?

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Thank You for being the God who sees.

You see the parts of my story that others know and the parts no one knows. You see the wounds I carry, the mistakes I have made, the circumstances I could not control, and the places where I sometimes feel invisible.

Help me believe that I matter to You.

Thank You that my past does not determine my worth and that the labels other people have placed upon me do not determine my identity.

Open my eyes to the people around me who feel unseen. Teach me to notice them, encourage them, serve them, and love them as You do.

Because You see them, help me see them.

And because You are a good Father, teach me to live every day as Your deeply loved child.

Amen.

CHAPTER 4



Sometimes God interrupts our comfortable lives with a frightening assignment—not to destroy us, but to teach us to trust Him more completely

Big Idea

Sometimes God interrupts our comfortable lives with a frightening assignment—not to destroy us, but to teach us to trust Him more completely.

Scripture

Genesis 22:1–19 (NIV)

22 Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. **2** Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you." **3** Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. **4** On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. **5** He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you." **6** Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, **7** Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" **8** Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.

9 When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. **10** Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. **11** But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. **12** "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." **13** Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram[a] caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. **14** So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided." **15** The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time **16** and said, "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, **17** I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, **18** and through your offspring[b] all nations on earth will be blessed,[c] because you have obeyed me."

Sermon

"Living happily ever after."

That had to be what Abraham was feeling at the beginning of Genesis 22.

Think about everything that had finally fallen into place.

After decades of waiting, Sarah had given birth to Isaac, the son God had promised. The boy was growing up and bringing his aging father tremendous joy.

Abraham's relationship with the people around him had stabilized. A powerful Canaanite king had entered into a treaty with him. Abraham could travel through the region without constantly looking over his shoulder.

Life was good.

Really good.

If you had walked up to Abraham and asked, “How are things going?”

I imagine he might have smiled and answered:

“I’m living the dream.”

I hope there are seasons when you can say the same thing.

The family is doing well.

Your health is good.

The bills are getting paid.

You enjoy your work.

Your relationship with God is strong.

Things have finally settled down.

Enjoy those seasons.

But don’t become too comfortable.

Because sometimes, right in the middle of “living the dream,” God interrupts everything.

God Interrupts Our Comfort

Genesis 22 begins with four words that should get our attention:

“God tested Abraham.”

God apparently believed there was still something Abraham needed to learn.

After all Abraham had experienced with God, there was still room for growth.

That’s encouraging and a little frightening.

It means spiritual maturity doesn’t eventually graduate us from being challenged by God.

Sometimes the deeper our relationship becomes, the deeper God asks us to trust.

And this was no ordinary assignment.

God told Abraham to take Isaac—the son he loved, the son he had waited decades to receive, the son through whom God had promised to build a nation—and offer him as a sacrifice.

I can’t imagine what Abraham felt.

The text doesn’t tell us much about that night.

But I have a hard time believing Abraham rolled over, slept eight peaceful hours, and woke up refreshed.

Surely he wrestled.

“God, this doesn’t make sense.”

“You gave me this boy.”

“You said Your promise would come through him.”

“How can this possibly be Your will?”

Yet somehow Abraham became convinced that the voice he heard was God’s.

That brings us to an important distinction.

Not Everything Is a Test From God

Christians sometimes call practically every inconvenience a “test.”

The rude cashier isn’t necessarily your test.

Traffic isn’t your test.

The difficult person at work isn’t necessarily your test.

Sometimes that’s just life.

And temptation isn’t a test sent by God either. James makes it clear that God does not tempt us to sin.

So what do I mean when I say God tests us?

God’s test is an opportunity to trust Him.

It is often a situation in which obedience requires us to depend upon God more deeply than we have before.

Maybe God is calling you into a ministry you don’t feel qualified to do.

Maybe He is asking you to have a conversation you’ve been avoiding.

Maybe you sense Him leading you toward generosity that feels uncomfortable.

Maybe He is directing you toward a change you would never have chosen yourself.

Your first response may be:

“No way.”

“This is going to disrupt everything.”

“I like my life right now.”

“Surely God wouldn’t ask me to do that.”

But the more you pray, the more the conviction remains.

That is when faith becomes more than something we sing about on Sunday.

It becomes trust.

When You Know, Obey

Abraham’s response amazes me.

Genesis says he got up early the next morning.

He didn’t wait a week.

He didn’t form a committee.

He didn’t ask twelve people until someone finally told him what he wanted to hear.

He got up.

He saddled the donkey.

He gathered the wood.

He took Isaac.

And he started walking.

There is a lesson there.

When we truly know God is leading us, it is usually best to obey quickly.

The longer we delay obedience, the easier it becomes to talk ourselves out of it.

I've discovered that delayed obedience can easily become disobedience.

We start with:

"I'll do it tomorrow."

Then:

"Maybe next month."

Eventually:

"I'm not sure God really told me that."

Abraham didn't have all the answers.

He simply knew who had spoken.

Sometimes that has to be enough.

The Journey May Be Long

Abraham's obedience didn't immediately bring resolution.

He had to walk for three days.

Three days.

Think about that.

Three days looking at Isaac.

Three days carrying the wood.

Three days replaying God's words.

Three nights wondering how this could possibly end.

Some of God's frightening assignments aren't accomplished quickly.

Sometimes the hardest part isn't saying yes.

It is continuing to say yes while the journey stretches on.

I learned something about that in my own life.

Several years ago, God scared me to death.

I became convinced He was calling me to leave pastoral ministry and enter full-time evangelism.

I did not want to do it.

I love being a pastor.

I love the local church.

I love West Columbia First.

But I knew what I sensed.

I remember where I was when the conviction came. I remember how strongly it settled upon me.

So I reluctantly began taking steps.

I spoke with pastors.

I talked with district superintendents.

Most of them looked at me like I had lost my mind.

That was encouraging.

I began thinking through how evangelistic ministry might work at a time when fewer churches were holding traditional revivals and evangelists were leaving the field.

But I believed that if God was calling, somehow God would make a way.

I even believed He had given me a timetable for when I should announce my resignation to the congregation.

As that day approached, I began grieving.

I didn't want to leave.

I told members of my family. They couldn't understand it either.

But what could I do?

If God was calling, I had to obey.

Then something happened I didn't expect.

About a month before I planned to make the announcement, God released me from the call.

I didn't understand it at first.

Why put me through all that?

Why make me wrestle with leaving a ministry I loved if He wasn't actually going to send me?

Eventually, I realized what God had been doing.

God wasn't trying to move me into evangelism.

God was making sure He still had all of me.

That experience changed me.

I discovered that there is something more important than knowing where God is leading.

It is knowing that wherever He leads, my answer is yes.

Maybe Abraham's three-day journey was doing something similar in him.

Scary Assignments Force Us to Have Faith

Imagine the conversation somewhere along that road.

"Father?"

"Yes, son?"

"We have the fire."

Pause.

"We have the wood."

Another pause.

"Where is the lamb?"

What does a father say?

Abraham answered:

"God himself will provide."

I don't think Abraham knew exactly how.

But he believed somehow God would remain faithful.

The New Testament gives us a little more insight. Hebrews says Abraham reasoned that God could even raise Isaac from the dead if necessary.

Abraham didn't understand the plan.

He trusted the Planner.

There is a difference.

We often want God to explain everything before we obey.

"Show me how it will work."

"Tell me where the money will come from."

"Guarantee that I won't fail."

"Let me know how everybody will react."

"Then I'll go."

Faith rarely works that way.

Usually God gives enough light for the next step.

Then another.

Then another.

And somewhere along the journey we discover that our faith has become stronger because we had no choice but to depend upon Him.

Faith Eventually Requires Courage

Faith isn't merely believing something in our heads.

Eventually, it requires action.

Abraham reached the mountain.

He built the altar.

He arranged the wood.

Then came the part I can barely imagine.

He bound Isaac.

He placed him upon the altar.

He reached for the knife.

This isn't a comfortable Bible story.

It isn't supposed to be.

None of us expects God to ask us to do what He asked Abraham to do. But at some point, every serious follower of Jesus will discover that obedience takes courage.

You may have to take a risk other people don't understand.

You may have to change careers.

You may have to apologize first.

You may have to forgive someone who doesn't deserve it.

You may have to surrender something you desperately want.

You may have to step into ministry while feeling completely inadequate.

You may have to say yes when every comfortable part of you wants to say no.

God's scary assignments require courage and action.

There is a moment when faith must get off the couch.

The Test Reveals Our Hearts

Just before Abraham's knife fell, God stopped him.

"Abraham! Abraham!"

And then came these words:

Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld your son, your only son.

We need to understand what happened here.

The test didn't teach an all-knowing God something He didn't already know.

The test revealed to Abraham what occupied first place in Abraham's heart.

Isaac was God's gift.

But even God's gifts can become more important to us than God Himself.

That may be one of the most difficult spiritual lessons we ever learn.

God doesn't merely want first place over sinful things.

He wants first place over good things too.

Our children.

Our marriages.

Our careers.

Our churches.

Our dreams.

Our ministries.

Our reputations.

Even blessings God Himself has given us.

Can we hold all of those with open hands and say:

"God, I love this. I treasure this. I thank You for this.

But I love You more."

That was the real issue on Mount Moriah.

Did Abraham love God's promise more than the God who made the promise?

By the end of the test, Abraham knew the answer.

Then Abraham Saw the Ram

Abraham lifted his eyes.

There was a ram caught in the thicket.

God provided.

Not before Abraham left home.

Not on day one.

Not on day two.

Not while Abraham was still at the bottom of the mountain.

God provided when Abraham had followed Him all the way to the point of complete surrender.

Abraham named that place:

The Lord Will Provide.

Some things about God can only be learned theoretically.

Others have to be experienced.

Abraham already knew God was powerful.

He already knew God was faithful.

He already knew God could do the impossible.

But now Abraham knew God as Provider in a way he never could have learned from someone else's testimony.

Sometimes God's frightening assignments bring us to places where we discover something about Him we could have learned nowhere else.

Our Obedience Can Outlive Us

God then repeated His promise to Abraham.

His descendants would multiply.

They would become as numerous as the stars and the sand.

And through Abraham's offspring, the nations of the earth would be blessed.

Abraham's obedience wasn't only about Abraham.

It affected generations.

That should make us stop and think.

We rarely know how far our obedience will travel.

Our children may remember watching us trust God.

Our grandchildren may benefit from a decision we made decades earlier.

A ministry we reluctantly accepted may touch someone we will never meet.

A conversation we were afraid to have may change an entire family.

We don't know what effect Abraham's experience had on Isaac.

But Isaac certainly knew one thing:

God was first in his father's life.

Do our children know that about us?

Not because we've told them.

Because they've seen it.

Maybe one of the greatest gifts we can give the next generation is letting them watch us do something difficult simply because God asked us to do it.

When God Scares You

So what do we do with a story like this?

We don't go looking for frightening assignments.

Trust me. They'll find us.

But when life is comfortable and God suddenly puts something on our hearts that seems far outside our plans, we shouldn't immediately dismiss it.

Pray.

Listen.

Seek wise counsel.

Make sure what you're sensing is consistent with Scripture and the character of God.

But once you know—

obey.

The journey may be long.

You may not understand where the provision will come from.

Other people may think you've lost your mind.

You may have moments when you wonder whether you've lost your mind.

But God's test can become an opportunity to trust Him like never before.

An opportunity to watch Him provide like never before.

An opportunity to discover whether He truly has first place in our hearts.

I learned that when I thought God was calling me away from the pastorate.

Abraham learned it on Mount Moriah.

And sooner or later, we all learn it in our own way.

God's scariest assignments often become our greatest blessings.

So when God interrupts your comfortable life—

trust Him.

Obey Him.

And watch God provide.

Think About It

Has God ever asked you to do something that frightened you? How did you respond?

What is the difference between an ordinary difficulty, a temptation, and an opportunity from God to trust Him more deeply?

Is there anything good in your life that could become more important to you than God Himself?

Why do you think delayed obedience so easily becomes disobedience?

What frightening step of obedience might God be asking you to take right now?

Listen & Reflect

Featured Song: "Oceans (Where Feet May Fail)" — Hillsong UNITED

Watch on YouTube

The original worship service included "Oceans (Where Feet May Fail)"

As you listen, consider:

Do I trust God enough to follow Him even when I cannot see how the journey will end?

Prayer

Father,

I am thankful for the comfortable seasons of life, but I confess that sometimes I love comfort more than I love obedience.

When You ask me to do something that frightens me, help me recognize Your voice.

Give me wisdom so I don't confuse every difficulty with Your leading, but when I know You are calling, give me courage to say yes.

Keep me from delaying obedience because I don't understand the entire plan.

Teach me to trust You for the next step.

Show me anything in my life—even something good—that has begun to occupy the place that belongs only to You.

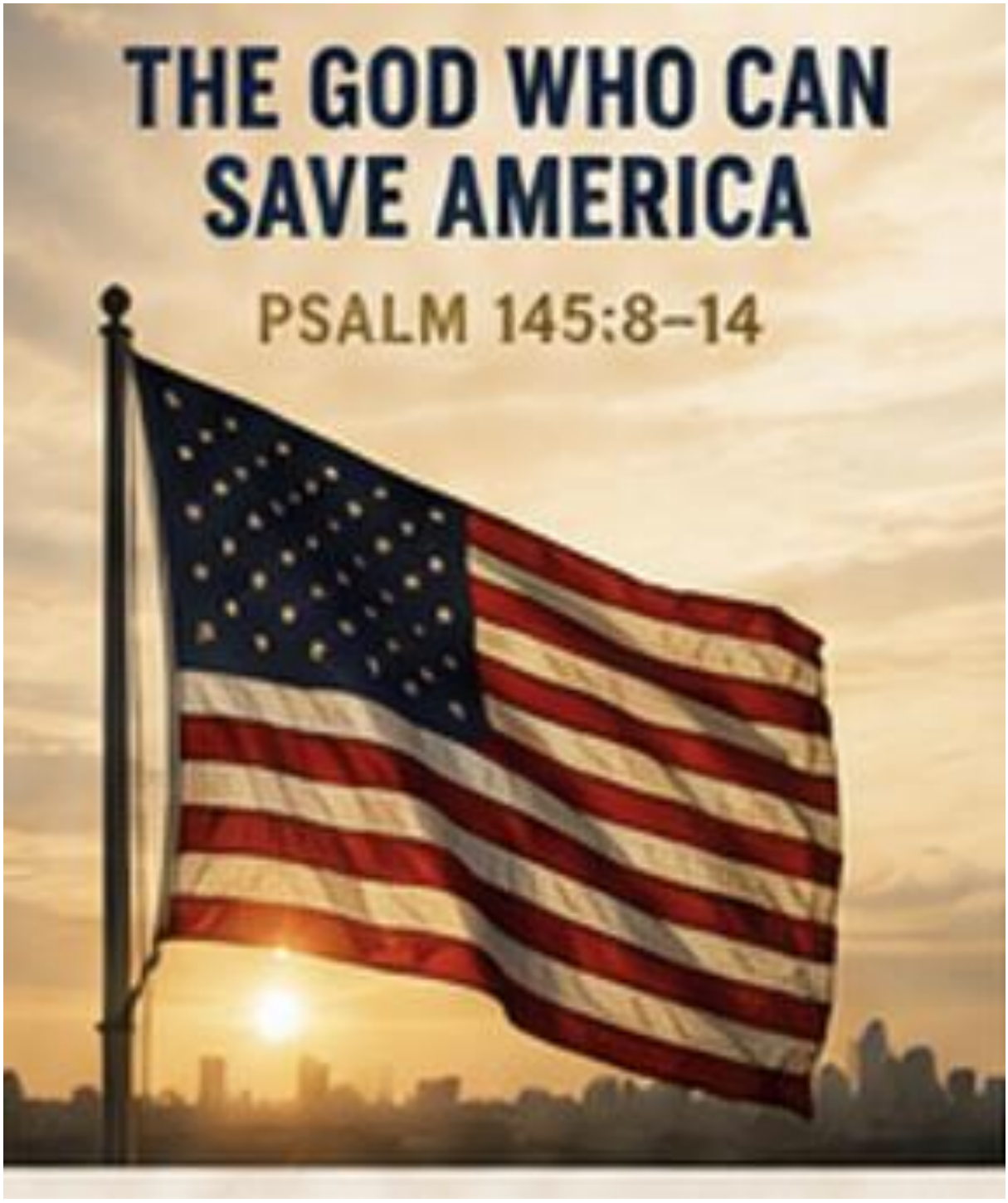
I want You to have all of me.

And when the journey is long and I cannot see the provision, remind me that You are still the God who provides.

May my obedience bless not only my life, but the generations that come after me.

Amen.

CHAPTER 5



Our hope for our nation does not rest in politics, prosperity, or power. It rests in the character of God and the everlasting nature of His kingdom.

Big Idea

Our hope for our nation does not rest in politics, prosperity, or power. It rests in the character of God and the everlasting nature of His kingdom.

Scripture

Psalm 145:8–14 (NIV)

8 The LORD is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and rich in love.
9 The LORD is good to all;
he has compassion on all he has made.
10 All your works praise you, LORD;
your faithful people extol you.
11 They tell of the glory of your kingdom
and speak of your might,
12 so that all people may know of your mighty acts
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.
13 Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and your dominion endures through all generations.
The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises
and faithful in all he does.[c]
14 The LORD upholds all who fall
and lifts up all who are bowed down.

Sermon

I have always believed there is nothing wrong with loving your country.

At West Columbia First, we normally spend fifty-one Sundays of the year talking about a different citizenship—the heavenly citizenship we possess through Jesus Christ. We preach about the kingdom of God and pray that His kingdom will continue expanding throughout our community and world.

But around the Fourth of July, I think it is appropriate to spend one Sunday thanking God for the nation in which He has allowed us to live.

I love America.

We have much for which to be grateful.

We enjoy freedoms that millions of people throughout history could only dream of possessing. Men and women have sacrificed greatly to preserve those freedoms. We should never take them for granted.

But loving America doesn't require pretending America is perfect.

Far from it.

Our culture has become increasingly vulgar and harsh.

We can be rude.

We can be arrogant.

The gap between those with tremendous wealth and ordinary working people concerns me.

Even more troubling, we appear to be losing our spiritual conscience.

Increasingly, the question is not:

“What is right?”

It is:

“What is convenient?”

Or:

“What helps my side?”

We are deeply divided.

And a nation that continually tears itself apart cannot remain healthy forever.

So when I look at our country, I find myself asking:

Is there hope for America?

I believe there is.

Not because I trust Americans to fix everything.

Not because I believe the right political party is eventually going to ride to our rescue.

I have hope because I believe in the God who can save America.

Psalm 145 tells us why.

God Is Gracious

David begins:

“The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love.”

If America is ever rescued spiritually, it will not be because we deserve it.

We don’t.

We are a mess.

Our culture worships plenty of gods.

We bow before possessions.

Pleasure.

Popularity.

Power.

Success.

Comfort.

But what concerns me most isn’t simply what secular society does.

It is what those of us who claim to follow Jesus sometimes do.

The American church has not always fulfilled its calling.

Too often we have become more interested in winning arguments than winning people.

We have sometimes confused political influence with spiritual power.

We have sometimes shouted when we should have served.

We have sometimes demanded our rights while neglecting our responsibility to love our neighbor.

And yet—

God is gracious.

Grace means God gives what we have not earned.

That is good news for sinners.

And it is good news for nations.

Maybe America can experience another spiritual awakening—not because we've earned one, but because God remains gracious.

God Is Slow to Anger

I am also thankful that God is slow to anger.

If God had a short fuse, none of us would be here.

Thankfully, God has tremendous patience.

That doesn't mean sin doesn't matter.

It doesn't mean judgment never comes.

It means God's first impulse isn't destruction.

He waits.

He warns.

He calls.

He gives opportunities to repent.

Our nation has certainly tested that patience.

There are things our culture celebrates today that should break the hearts of God's people. Entertainment can normalize behavior that damages families and children. Vulgarity has become ordinary. Cruelty has become entertainment. We frequently confuse freedom with having no moral boundaries whatsoever.

And Christians haven't always responded well either.

Sometimes we become just as angry, insulting, and arrogant as the culture we're criticizing.

Yet God remains slow to anger.

Maybe the fact that we still have time to repent is itself evidence of God's mercy.

God Is Rich in Love

Why is God so gracious?

Why is He patient?

Because He is rich in love.

God doesn't reluctantly love people.

Love isn't something He has to work up.

It is His character.

God sees humanity—all of our rebellion, selfishness, foolishness, and wasted potential—and still loves us.

He sees what we could become under His grace.

That gives me hope.

If God looked at people the way we sometimes look at one another, He would have given up on humanity a long time ago.

But He hasn't.

And maybe He hasn't given up on our nation either.

God Is Good to Everyone

David continues:

"The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made."

Notice the word all.

Not just Americans.

Not just Christians.

Not just people who think like us.

God is good to all.

As much as I love America, we should never imagine that Americans occupy some special category in God's heart.

God loves Russians.

God loves Chinese people.

God loves Iranians.

God loves Ukrainians.

God loves Israelis.

God loves Palestinians.

God loves people living under governments we oppose and people whose cultures we barely understand.

The same God we ask to bless America desires to show goodness and compassion to all He has made.

That matters.

Patriotism becomes dangerous when we begin believing God loves our nation more than He loves everybody else.

The kingdom of God has never carried an American passport.

God's compassion crosses every border.

God's Goodness Should Lead to Praise

Psalm 145 says God's goodness should produce praise.

Creation seems to understand this naturally.

Every morning birds sing without anyone reminding them.

A sunset spreads glory across the evening sky.

The ocean crashes against the shore.

Trees stretch their branches toward heaven.

Creation continually declares something about its Creator.

Human beings are the ones who seem to forget.

And perhaps one of America's greatest problems isn't merely political or economic.

Perhaps it is doxological.

We have forgotten to worship.

We have become very good at consuming.

Very good at complaining.

Very good at debating.

Very good at demanding.

But have we remembered how to worship?

A nation does not experience spiritual renewal merely because Christians become louder.

Revival begins when God's people become more devoted to God.

Before we point at Washington, Hollywood, Nashville, corporations, universities, or anybody else, maybe the church needs to ask:

Are we worshiping God with our whole lives?

The Kingdom of God Is Already Here

The greatest reason I have hope isn't ultimately what might happen to America.

It is the reality of the kingdom of God.

Jesus did not come simply to improve society.

He came proclaiming:

The kingdom of God is at hand.

God's kingdom is His rule and reign breaking into this world.

Where Jesus becomes King, things change.

Marriages change.

Families change.

Neighborhoods change.

Schools change.

Communities change.

Cities change.

And sometimes nations change.

That kingdom is now expressed through the church.

God places communities of grace in the middle of a dark and lonely world.

Every local church should become a little outpost of the kingdom of God.

A place where forgiveness happens.

A place where racial and economic barriers are broken.

A place where lonely people become family.

A place where children are loved.

A place where hurting people are restored.

A place where holiness and compassion live together.

A place where Jesus is King.

That is how the church changes society.

Not primarily through political power.

Through kingdom presence.

God's Kingdom Is Bigger Than America

Psalm 145 contains one statement we desperately need to remember:

"Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations."

Nations rise.

Nations fall.

Empires appear powerful and then disappear into history books.

Rome couldn't stop God's kingdom.

Persecution couldn't stop it.

The Enlightenment couldn't stop it.

Communism couldn't stop it.

The gates of hell cannot stop it.

And neither the success nor failure of the United States will determine the future of God's kingdom.

Let me put it bluntly:

America isn't carrying the Kingdom.

The Kingdom is carrying America.

That distinction matters.

Sometimes Christians become so anxious about the future of America that you would think Jesus' throne is decided in an election booth.

It isn't.

God's kingdom was here before the United States existed.

It will remain if someday the United States no longer exists.

Our ultimate confidence doesn't come from believing America will last forever.

It comes from knowing God's kingdom will.

Will We Be the Kingdom Here?

That brings the question much closer to home.

Instead of simply asking:

"Will God save America?"

Maybe we should ask:

"Will we allow God to establish His kingdom through us?"

That question isn't left to pastors.

It isn't left to church boards.

It isn't left to politicians.

It's for all of us.

Will Jesus truly be Lord?

Will we seek the infilling and power of the Holy Spirit?

Will we love our neighbors?

Will we care for the poor?

Will we tell people about Jesus?

Will our marriages reflect Christ?

Will our businesses operate with integrity?

Will we forgive our enemies?

Will we treat people with whom we disagree as people created in the image of God?

If God's people live like citizens of His kingdom, the influence will spread far beyond a church building.

And that gives me hope for America.

America Needs Humble Saints

When we look at our country, it is easy to become discouraged.

But David points our eyes away from the strength of nations and toward the character of God.

Our hope rests there.

God is gracious.

God is compassionate.

God is slow to anger.

God is rich in love.

God is good.

His goodness extends to everyone.

And His kingdom lasts forever.

Then David says something beautiful:

The Lord upholds all who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down.

Maybe that tells us something about the kind of people God can use to bring renewal.

America doesn't need better slogans nearly as much as she needs humble saints.

America doesn't need louder Christians.

America needs holy Christians.

Christians who pray.

Christians who worship.

Christians who love.

Christians who serve.

Christians who tell the truth without becoming cruel.

Christians who care more about God's kingdom than winning.

Christians willing to bow before the King of Kings.

Maybe America will experience another awakening.

I pray that she does.

But revival won't begin when we finally convince everybody else to bow.

It begins when we do.

So perhaps this is the prayer God's people need most:

"Lord, begin with us."

Because if God's people bow low—

perhaps God will once again lift this nation high.

Think About It

Where do you personally tend to place your hope for the future of the nation—in God or in political and cultural circumstances?

What is the difference between healthy patriotism and treating a nation as though it has a special claim upon God?

What do you think it means to say that America's greatest problem may be doxological—we have forgotten to worship?

In what practical ways can your local church become an "outpost of the kingdom of God" in your community?

Which is more difficult for you: being a louder Christian or becoming a holier Christian? Why?

Listen & Reflect

Featured Song: "Build Your Kingdom Here" — Rend Collective

Watch on YouTube

This song was part of the original worship service and captures the heart of this chapter particularly well: not merely asking God to improve our nation, but asking Him to establish His reign through His people.

As you listen, consider:

Instead of simply asking God to change my country, where does His kingdom need to become more fully established in me?

Prayer

Father,

Thank You for the nation in which You have allowed me to live and for every freedom and blessing I enjoy.

Forgive me when gratitude becomes pride.

Forgive me when I place more hope in political power than in Your everlasting kingdom.

Forgive Your church when we care more about winning arguments than winning people.

Begin Your work in us.

Make us gracious because You are gracious.

Make us compassionate because You are compassionate.

Make us patient because You are slow to anger.

Fill us with Your love.

Teach us to worship again.

Make our churches communities where Your kingdom becomes visible to the world around us.

And bring spiritual awakening to our nation—not simply so America can become stronger, but so Jesus may be glorified and people may come to know Him.

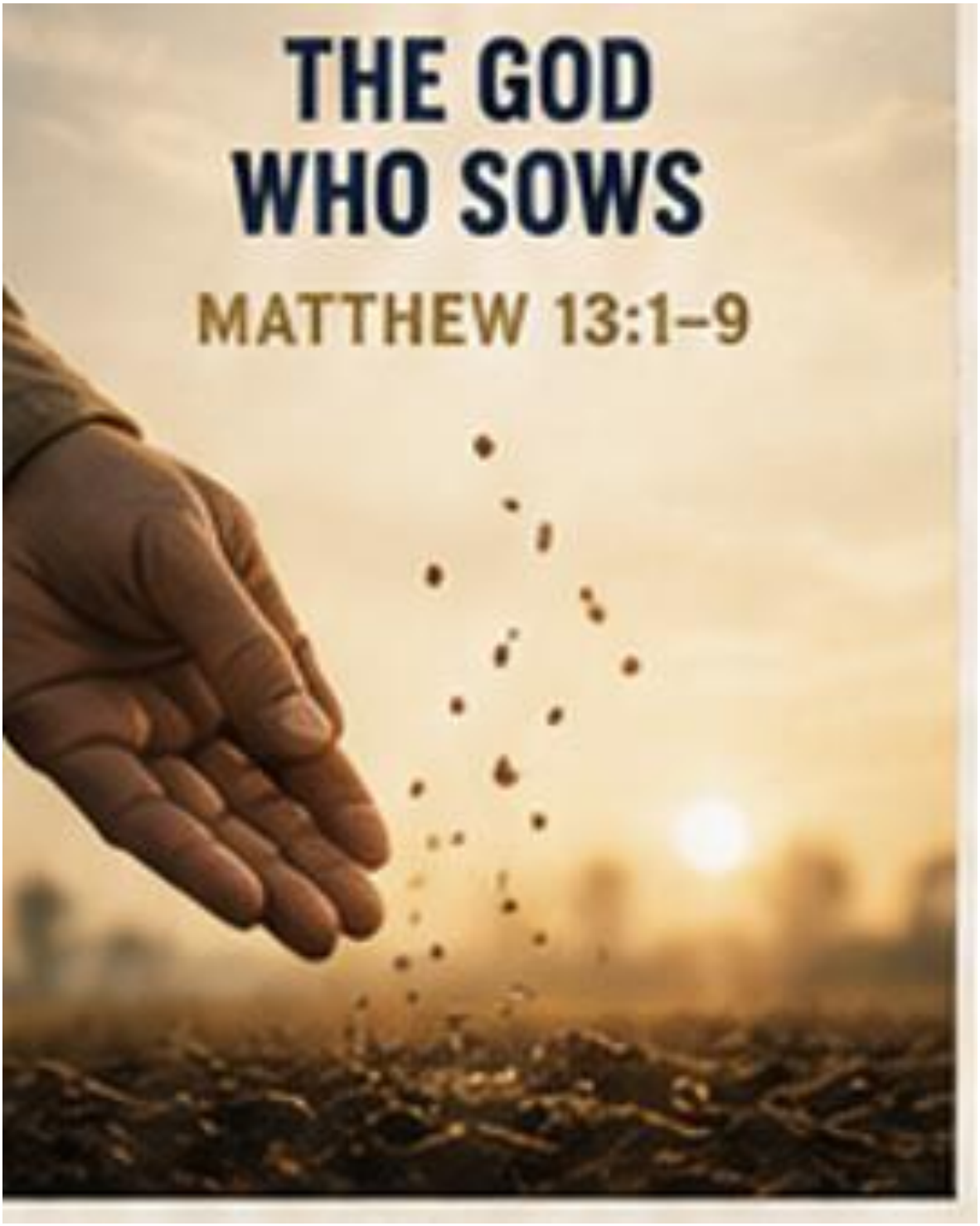
Let Your kingdom come.

Let Your will be done.

And begin with me.

Amen.

CHAPTER 6



God refuses to give up on people. He keeps scattering the seed of His grace—even in places where we might have stopped trying long ago.

Big Idea

God refuses to give up on people. He keeps scattering the seed of His grace—even in places where we might have stopped trying long ago.

Scripture

Matthew 13:1–9 (NIV)

13 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. **2** Such large crowds gathered around
him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. **3** Then he told them
many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. **4** As he was scattering the seed,
some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. **5** Some fell on rocky places, where it did not
have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. **6** But when the sun came up, the
plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. **7** Other seed fell among thorns,
which grew up and choked the plants. **8** Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a
hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. **9** Whoever has ears, let them hear."

Sermon

Have you ever had someone in your life you desperately wanted to see come to know Jesus?

Maybe it is your husband.

Your wife.

A son or daughter.

A grandchild.

A friend.

You've prayed.

You've invited.

You've talked about Jesus.

You've tried not talking about Jesus because you thought maybe you were talking too much about Jesus.

You've watched for signs that something might be changing.

And sometimes it becomes discouraging.

The person may seem farther from God today than when you first started praying.

Jesus told a story for people like us.

It is normally called the Parable of the Sower.

A farmer walks into his field carrying seed and begins scattering it.

Some lands on a hard path.

Some falls on rocky ground.

Some lands among thorns.

And some falls into good soil and eventually produces an enormous harvest.

We've heard the story so many times that we normally concentrate on the soils.

But this time, I want us to look at the Sower.

Because if you want one sentence that describes God's heart in this parable, it is this:

God refuses to give up on people.

I'm glad God believed in me before I believed in Him.

God Sows Everywhere

Jesus' farmer does something that probably made the real farmers in His audience shake their heads.

He wastes seed.

At least that's what it looks like.

Why throw good seed onto a hard path?

Why scatter it where rocks will prevent roots from growing?

Why put seed among thorns that will eventually choke it?

Seed was valuable.

An ordinary farmer would protect it.

But this farmer keeps throwing it everywhere.

Why?

Because Jesus isn't really teaching us about agriculture.

He's teaching us about God.

God isn't an ordinary farmer.

Ordinary farmers protect their seed.

God gives His away freely.

He spreads the good news among people who already love Him and among people who don't want anything to do with Him.

He sows among people who grew up in church.

He sows among people who have never darkened the door of a church.

He sows among people who praise Him.

He even sows among people who deny that He exists.

God just keeps throwing seed.

Second Peter tells us that God is patient because He doesn't want anyone to perish. He wants people to come to repentance.

That's the heart of the Sower.

God Is the Eternal Optimist

I like to think of God as the eternal optimist.

Now, God obviously doesn't need optimism in the same sense we do. He already knows the end from the beginning.

But when I look at the way He treats people, I don't know a better way to describe it.

God continually sees possibilities where we see hopelessness.

We look at someone and think:

"They'll never change."

God throws another seed.

We think:

"They've had enough opportunities."

God throws another seed.

We say:

"They're too hard."

Another seed.

"They're too angry."

Another seed.

"They've rejected God too many times."

Another seed.

The Almighty just can't help Himself.

He keeps scattering seed even where most of us would have quit.

God sees potential in every one of us.

Maybe this will be the moment.

Maybe this will be the conversation.

Maybe this will be the difficulty that finally causes someone to look toward heaven.

Maybe this will be the Sunday when the words suddenly make sense.

Maybe this seed will take root.

That should encourage anyone who is praying for someone who seems far from God.

Keep praying.

God is still sowing.

Everyone Gets a Chance

God sows generously because He wants everyone to have an opportunity to respond to Him.

That means we should be very careful about deciding who is worth reaching.

Churches can become pretty good at identifying what we think is "good soil."

A nice family moves into the neighborhood.

“They would make a great addition to the church!”

Someone is successful, respectable, friendly, and seems to have their life together.

Good soil.

But then we encounter somebody whose life is a mess.

Addiction.

Broken relationships.

Bad language.

A difficult reputation.

We quietly wonder whether it’s worth the effort.

God doesn’t seem to think that way.

He throws seed there too.

The gospel isn’t reserved for people who look promising.

Grace goes everywhere.

And thank God it does.

Because some of us probably didn’t look terribly promising either.

Our Circumstances Never Determine Our Soil

This leads to something else we often get wrong when reading Jesus’ parable.

We assume a person’s circumstances determine what kind of soil they will become.

If someone grows up surrounded by dysfunction, addiction, vulgarity, and people who have no interest in God, we assume that person will probably reject the gospel.

Not so fast, my friend.

Our circumstances never determine our soil.

I know that personally because of my dad.

My father was not raised in a Christian home.

His family didn’t attend church. In the language people used in those days, they would have called themselves “heathens.”

His father fought in World War II and was injured in the Battle of the Bulge. When he came home, he struggled with alcoholism and womanizing.

My dad told some crazy stories about going into bars as a teenager to retrieve his mom, dad, and even his older brother when they had too much to drink.

If you had looked at my dad’s family from a distance, you probably wouldn’t have identified him as prime soil for the gospel.

But somebody kept throwing seed.

One day, a lady invited my dad to Vacation Bible School.

He went.

And there, as a teenager, he gave his life to Jesus.

His life changed forever.

Eventually, that decision affected a family that didn't even exist yet.

It affected his children.

It affected me.

It affected my calling.

It affected the churches where I would someday preach.

Think about that.

A woman invited a teenage boy from a non-Christian home to Vacation Bible School.

I don't know whether she had any idea what that seed would eventually produce.

But I'm here because somebody sowed it.

Never look at someone's circumstances and decide what God can or cannot do with their life.

Growing Up in Church Doesn't Guarantee Good Soil

The opposite is also true.

Being raised by saints doesn't automatically produce good soil.

We've all seen it.

Two children can grow up in the same home.

They hear the same Bible stories.

Attend the same church.

Sit under the same pastor.

Have the same praying parents.

One grows into a devoted follower of Jesus.

The other wants nothing to do with God.

What changed?

Not the seed.

The seed was the same.

The difference was the soil.

That's why Christian parents can't simply assume that because our children are surrounded by church, they will automatically develop a deep relationship with Jesus.

We sow.

We pray.

We model.

We teach.

But eventually every person has to decide what to do with the seed God places in his or her life.

Your circumstances don't determine your soil.

So what does?

How Much of Jesus Do We Really Want?

I believe one of the major differences is our consumption of Jesus.

That may sound like an unusual phrase.

I don't mean simply knowing facts about Him.

I mean allowing Jesus to become the center of our thoughts, priorities, decisions, relationships, time, and ambitions.

People respond very differently when they encounter Jesus.

Some want nothing to do with Him.

Some want just enough Jesus to ease their conscience.

Some want Jesus—as long as He doesn't interfere too much with the rest of life.

And some want everything He has for them.

Jesus describes those responses through four soils.

Some Barely Notice God

The first soil is the path.

The seed lands, but the ground is so hard that it never penetrates. Birds quickly carry it away.

There are people who barely take notice of God.

They can sit in a worship service where the Holy Spirit is moving powerfully, yet the only thing on their mind is:

"When is this going to be over?"

They don't want God getting too close.

They don't want their emotions involved.

They don't want their priorities challenged.

The seed lands.

But it never gets inside.

Jesus says the evil one quickly snatches away what was sown.

That's path soil.

Some Want Just Enough Jesus

Then there is rocky soil.

These people don't ignore the seed.

They receive it quickly and joyfully.

They respond to Jesus.

Their sins are forgiven.

They're excited.

But that's about as far as they want to go.

They want a clear conscience without deep roots.

Private time with God never becomes important.

Worship is good unless something more exciting appears on the calendar.

Serving is optional.

Jesus is Savior, but they haven't really allowed Him to become Lord.

Then trouble comes.

Someone criticizes them.

A prayer isn't answered the way they wanted.

Someone at church disappoints them.

Life gets difficult.

And because the roots never grew deep, their faith withers.

In Jesus' day, following Christ could result in imprisonment or rejection by your family.

Our reasons for quitting are often considerably smaller.

But shallow roots produce the same result.

Some Allow Life to Choke God Out

The third group goes farther.

They genuinely begin growing.

They worship.

They spend time with Jesus.

God makes a difference in their lives.

But slowly, something happens.

Life gets crowded.

There is money to make.

Children to raise.

Places to go.

Activities to attend.

Vacations.

Hobbies.

Responsibilities.

None of those things are necessarily wrong.

That's what makes the thorns so dangerous.

The things choking our spiritual lives aren't always sinful.

Sometimes they're simply too important.

Little by little, Jesus gets pushed toward the edge.

We don't wake up one morning and announce:

"I've decided to make God unimportant."

It is a slow drift.

Prayer becomes less frequent.

Scripture becomes occasional.

Worship becomes negotiable.

Ministry disappears.

The cares of life slowly wrap themselves around the spiritual life until they choke it.

That's thorny soil.

Some Become Consumed by God

Then there is good soil.

These are people who encounter Jesus and eventually give Him everything.

God isn't merely part of their lives.

He becomes Lord of all.

Private time with Him isn't a chore.

It is a joy.

Worship isn't something they squeeze into the schedule.

It is life-giving and essential.

Ministry isn't an obligation.

It becomes the natural overflow of loving Jesus.

They want more of God.

They are consumed by Him.

And Jesus says the result is a harvest—thirty, sixty, even a hundred times what was planted.

You can see it in their lives.

People are helped.

Ministries begin.

Doors open.

Lives change.

The kingdom of God expands.

The seed didn't merely survive.

It multiplied.

That's what God wants for every one of us.

Don't Dig Up the Seed

There is one final thing we need to remember about sowing.

Growing takes time.

A farmer doesn't scatter seed in the morning, return after lunch, see an empty field, and announce: "Well, that didn't work."

He knows better.

Rain has to fall.

Roots have to develop.

Seasons have to pass.

A lot happens underground before anything becomes visible above the surface.

The same is true spiritually.

So don't give up on that husband.

Don't give up on that wife.

Don't give up on that son or daughter.

Don't give up on that grandchild.

Don't give up on that neighbor.

Don't give up on that friend who seems completely uninterested in Jesus.

God's seed often works underground long before anyone sees a harvest.

I'm grateful God didn't throw His seed only once in my life.

He kept sowing when I ignored Him.

He kept sowing when I wandered.

He kept sowing when I wasn't listening.

That's the kind of God He is.

He refuses to give up.

And if God hasn't given up on someone, neither should we.

What Kind of Soil Are You?

Of course, this parable isn't only about everybody else.

It's about us.

What are we doing with the seed God keeps placing in our lives?

Maybe you've barely noticed Him.

Maybe you've accepted Jesus but never allowed your roots to grow.

Maybe you love God, but life has become so crowded that the thorns are choking your spiritual life.

Or maybe you realize that you simply aren't producing the harvest God desires for you.

Here's the good news:

Soil can change.

Your past doesn't have to determine your future.

Your family doesn't determine your soil.

Your failures don't determine your soil.

Your present circumstances don't determine your soil.

You can surrender yourself completely to Jesus.

And when the seed of God's grace falls into a surrendered life, there's no telling what God might produce.

Just ask my dad.

A teenage boy from a family that didn't attend church walked into Vacation Bible School because somebody invited him.

A seed was planted.

Years passed.

Roots grew.

And generations were changed.

Never underestimate a seed.

And never underestimate the God who keeps sowing them.

Surrender produces a bountiful harvest.

Think About It

Who in your life have you been tempted to give up praying for? How does the picture of God continuing to sow change the way you see that person?

Have you ever judged someone's spiritual potential by their family background or circumstances?

Which of Jesus' four soils best describes your spiritual life right now: hard, shallow, crowded, or fruitful?

What "thorns"—even good things—may be crowding Jesus out of your life?

What would being completely consumed by God look like in your daily life?

Listen & Reflect

Featured Song: "Don't Stop Praying" — Matthew West

Watch on YouTube

This song fits the chapter's central hope especially well: no person is beyond God's saving grace.

As you listen, think about the person you've almost stopped believing will ever respond to God.

Then ask yourself:

If God hasn't stopped sowing into that person's life, why should I stop praying?

Prayer

Father,

Thank You for never giving up on people.

Thank You for every seed of grace You scattered into my life—even the ones I ignored.

Forgive me for the times I have looked at someone else's circumstances and decided they were unlikely to respond to You.

Keep sowing.

Keep speaking.

Keep reaching the people I love who seem far from You.

And Lord, examine the soil of my own heart.

Break up the hard places.

Deepen my roots.

Remove the thorns that are crowding You out.

I don't want just enough of You to ease my conscience.

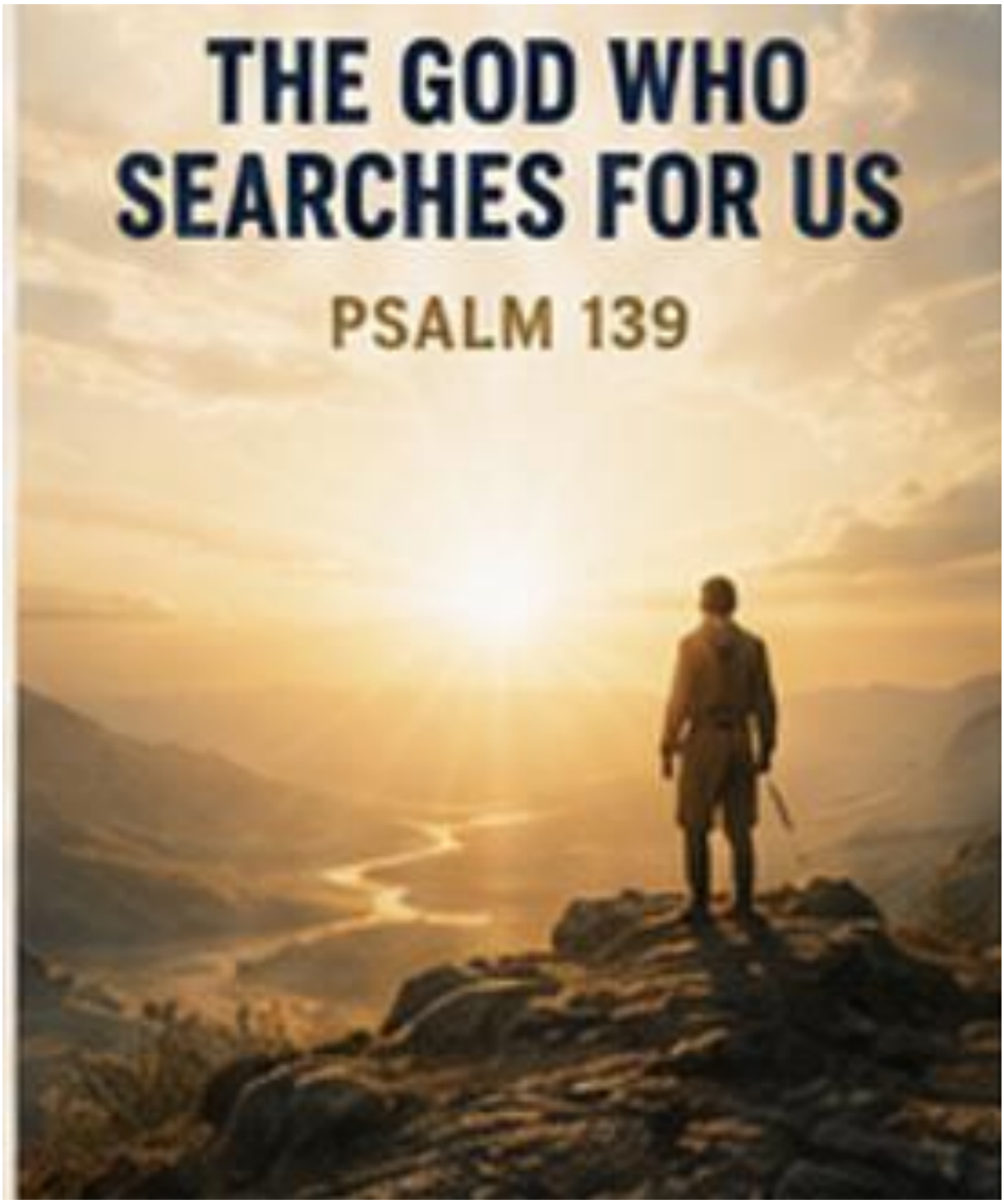
I want to be completely surrendered to You.

Take every part of my life and produce whatever harvest You desire.

And help me never forget that a seed planted today may change generations tomorrow.

Amen.

CHAPTER 7



God searches us because He loves us. He knows us completely, stays with us continually, and invites us to trust Him enough to reveal what is happening inside us.

Big Idea

God searches us because He loves us. He knows us completely, stays with us continually, and invites us to trust Him enough to reveal what is happening inside us.

Scripture

Psalm 139:1–12, 23–24 (NIV)

1 You have searched me, LORD,
and you know me.
2 You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
3 You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.
4 Before a word is on my tongue
you, LORD, know it completely.
5 You hem me in behind and before,
and you lay your hand upon me.
6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.
7 Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
10 even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.
11 If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,"
12 even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.
23 Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
24 See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

Sermon

"Mind your own business!"

How long has it been since you told someone that?

Most of us value our privacy.

We don't appreciate people sticking their noses into our affairs. We have passwords on our computers, passcodes on our phones, locks on our doors, and privacy settings on our social media accounts.

We even pay companies every month to keep strangers from stealing our identities.

There are parts of our lives that simply aren't anybody else's business.

Then we meet the God of Psalm 139.

Apparently, God doesn't mind His own business.

David tells us that God knows when we sit down and when we get up. He knows where we go. He knows what we're thinking. He knows what we're going to say before we say it.

Try hiding from Him.

Go to heaven.

He's there.

Go to the depths.

He's there.

Travel to the other side of the sea.

He's there too.

Turn off all the lights and hide in the darkness.

That doesn't work either.

God just won't leave us alone.

As youth pastor Mike O'Hair likes to say:

"God loves you, and there's nothing you can do about it!"

Psalm 139 reveals the God who searches for us.

God Intentionally Searches for Us

David begins:

"You have searched me, Lord, and you know me."

Notice that God didn't accidentally discover David.

He searched him.

There is intention behind it.

Like a parent searching for a lost child.

Like a shepherd looking for one missing sheep.

Like Jesus stopping beneath a tree and calling Zacchaeus by name.

God takes an interest in people.

Including you.

That may initially sound uncomfortable.

We know ourselves well enough to realize there are things we'd prefer God didn't investigate too closely.

But God's searching isn't the curiosity of a nosy neighbor.

It is the attention of Someone who loves us.

He isn't gathering evidence so He can embarrass us.

He wants to know us.

God Searches Us to Know Us Intimately

The language David uses throughout this psalm emphasizes just how thoroughly God knows us.

This isn't the kind of knowledge we have about a celebrity or athlete.

I can know who the Gamecock quarterback is without knowing him personally.

God's knowledge is different.

He knows us intimately.

He has done His research.

He has been watching.

Not because He's waiting for us to mess up.

Because we matter to Him.

He Understands How We Think

God understands why we make the decisions we make.

That's significant because people misunderstand us all the time.

They misunderstand our motives.

They misunderstand our personalities.

They misunderstand our decisions.

Sometimes we don't even understand ourselves.

Have you ever done something and later wondered:

"Why in the world did I do that?"

God knows.

He understands what makes us tick.

He knows the experiences that shaped us.

He knows our insecurities.

He knows the things that excite us and the things that frighten us.

He knows why certain comments hurt us more than others.

Nobody understands you as completely as God does.

And that isn't something to fear.

It's something to celebrate.

He Understands Our Past

David says God discerns his going out and lying down and is familiar with all his ways.

God has seen the whole story.

Not simply the highlight reel we show everybody else.

He knows what happened when nobody was watching.

He knows the experiences we have almost forgotten.

He knows the disappointments that changed us.

He knows the people who influenced us.

He knows the wounds we carry.

Our past often influences the decisions we make today.

God understands those connections better than we do.

That means when God directs our lives, He isn't giving generic advice.

He knows the whole story.

He understands where we've been.

And He knows exactly where we need to go.

He Understands Our Language

David says:

"Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely."

My wife usually knows what I'm going to say before I say it.

She knows how I'm going to answer somebody's question.

Rarely do I surprise her.

Kristi isn't omniscient.

But when it comes to me, she's pretty close.

God knows us even better.

He has heard every word we've spoken.

He even knows the thoughts we never said aloud.

That could be terrifying.

But David doesn't describe God's knowledge as threatening.

God knows us so completely that we can trust His direction.

There is nothing He will discover about us tomorrow that He doesn't already know today.

And He still wants us.

God Searches for Us Because He Wants to Be With Us

This may be the most amazing part.

The Almighty Creator of the universe wants a front-row seat to our lives.

Some of us must be boring Him to death.

Think about it.

He's watched the same morning routine thousands of times.

The same breakfast.

The same commute.

The same job.

The same television programs.

The same recliner.

And apparently God has never once looked at heaven and said:

"I need something more interesting to do."

He wants to be with us.

That's crazy when you think about it.

He Is With Us on the Good Days

When life is going wonderfully, God is there.

You get the promotion.

The relationship blossoms.

A child is born.

The medical report comes back clear.

You accomplish something you've worked toward for years.

God is there.

He doesn't demand attention.

Sometimes we barely acknowledge Him.

Yet He remains.

He would love for us to share the moment with Him, but He is patient enough to stay in the background until we turn toward Him.

He Is With Us on the Bad Days

And when life stinks, He's still there.

God doesn't bail when things fall apart.

When the relationship ends.

When the diagnosis comes.

When the job disappears.

When someone dies.

When the future we imagined suddenly vanishes.

God is there.

In fact, those are often the moments when we become most aware of His presence.

We finally stop long enough to notice the One who was there all along.

He Shines Light Into Our Darkness

David says that even darkness isn't dark to God.

That's one of my favorite images in this psalm.

There have been times when God has shined His light into our darkness.

He gave hope when we had no hope.

He gave help when we couldn't help ourselves.

He held us together when we were ready to fall apart.

The darkness that overwhelms us never overwhelms Him.

God is always with us.

The Greatest Miracle in Psalm 139

But I think the greatest miracle in Psalm 139 isn't that God searches David.

It's what happens at the end.

David asks Him to do it again.

The psalm begins:

"You have searched me."

It ends:

"Search me, God."

Do you see the difference?

At the beginning, God's searching is simply a fact.

By the end, it has become an invitation.

What changed?

David discovered something about the One doing the searching.

He loves him.

Once David understood that God's knowledge came from love, he no longer wanted to hide.

He opened the door.

"Go ahead, God."

"Search me."

"Show me what You find."

That takes courage.

"Search Me" Means Show Me Who I Really Am

Human beings are remarkably good at lying to ourselves.

We exaggerate our strengths.

We rationalize our weaknesses.

We excuse attitudes in ourselves that drive us crazy when we see them in somebody else.

We can explain almost anything away.

David certainly knew something about that.

His own life included moral failures that produced devastating consequences.

That's why the prayer at the end of Psalm 139 is so important.

"Search me."

In other words:

"God, show me what I can't—or won't—see about myself."

That's a dangerous prayer.

But it can change everything.

God Reveals Our Fears

David asks God to know his anxious thoughts.

We all have them.

Things that scare us.

Things we replay in our minds at two o'clock in the morning.

Things we imagine happening even though they haven't happened.

Sometimes our fears are obvious.

Sometimes they're buried so deeply that we don't understand why certain situations produce such strong reactions.

God does.

He knows where the fear began.

He knows what feeds it.

And He knows how to heal it.

Jesus invited burdened people to come to Him and find rest.

But receiving that rest may first require the courage to admit what is actually frightening us.

"Search me, God."

"Show me what I'm afraid of."

That's not weakness.

That's the beginning of freedom.

God Reveals the Sin Holding Us Back

David continues:

"See if there is any offensive way in me."

Everybody has something God is still working on.

We aren't perfect.

Sometimes the issue is obviously sinful.

Other times it's an attitude.

A pattern of thinking.

A prejudice we inherited.

A habit we've excused for years.

A response that seems woven into our personality.

Parts of our humanity have been damaged by the fall and desperately need God's grace and healing.

God wants to keep transforming us into the likeness of Jesus.

But often transformation begins when we give Him permission to point out what needs changing.

That isn't always pleasant.

I've never heard anyone say:

"I really enjoyed God showing me how selfish I've been."

But there is a difference between conviction and condemnation.

Condemnation says:

"Look what a terrible person you are."

Conviction says:

"This doesn't belong in the person I'm helping you become."

God searches us because He intends to transform us.

God Reveals the Best Path Forward

David's prayer ends:

"Lead me in the way everlasting."

That's where all the searching is headed.

God doesn't expose our fears simply so we can stare at them.

He doesn't reveal sin merely so we can feel guilty.

He searches us because He wants to lead us.

God knows us intimately enough to know the best path forward.

He knows our personalities.

Our gifts.

Our histories.

Our wounds.

Our temptations.

Our strengths.

Our weaknesses.

Our possibilities.

Who could possibly be more qualified to guide our lives?

We spend enormous amounts of energy trying to figure ourselves out.

God already knows.

Maybe instead of constantly asking:

“What do I want to do with my life?”

we should ask:

“God, since You know me better than I know myself, where do You want to lead me?”

Stop Hiding

So maybe God needs to get into your business.

Maybe there is something you’ve tried to keep behind a locked door.

A fear.

A wound.

A habit.

An attitude.

A decision.

Something from your past.

You already know hiding it from God isn’t working.

He knows.

The question isn’t whether God will discover it.

The question is whether you will trust Him enough to let Him deal with it.

David eventually did.

The God who had searched him became the God he invited to search him.

And that can happen for us too.

You are not alone.

God is with you.

He understands you.

He knows the parts of your story nobody else understands.

He knows what frightens you.

He knows what needs to change.

And He knows the best path forward.

He’s getting into your business because He loves you.

So maybe the prayer we need isn’t:

“God, mind Your own business.”

Maybe it’s:

“Search me, O God.”

It might be the prayer that changes everything.

Think About It

Does the idea that God knows everything about you make you feel comforted, uncomfortable, or a little of both? Why?

What part of your past has most influenced the person you are today?

What anxious thought would you most hesitate to invite God to examine?

Is there an attitude, habit, or "offensive way" that God may be asking you to surrender?

If God knows you better than you know yourself, what would it look like to trust Him more completely with your future?

Listen & Reflect

Featured Song: "Known" — Tauren Wells

Watch on YouTube

As you listen, consider the remarkable truth at the heart of Psalm 139:

God completely knows the real me—and He still wants to be near me.

Then make David's prayer your own:

"Search me, O God."

Prayer

Father,

You know me.

You know what I think before I say it. You know where I've been, what I've experienced, what has hurt me, what frightens me, and what I try to hide.

And still You love me.

Thank You for refusing to leave me alone.

Search me.

Show me the fears that are controlling me.

Reveal anything in my life that doesn't look like Jesus.

Give me the courage not to rationalize or hide what You reveal.

Heal what needs healing.

Forgive what needs forgiving.

Change what needs changing.

And then lead me.

You know me better than I know myself, so I trust You with the road ahead.

Search me, O God, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Amen.

CHAPTER 8



God has a way of doing things we never expected, through people who never imagined He would use them. When God surprises us, our best response is a humble yes.

Big Idea

God has a way of doing things we never expected, through people who never imagined He would use them. When God surprises us, our best response is a humble yes.

Scripture

1 Kings 3:1–15 (NIV)

3 Solomon made an alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt and married his daughter. He brought her to
the City of David until he finished building his palace and the temple of the LORD, and the wall around
Jerusalem. **2** The people, however, were still sacrificing at the high places, because a temple had not yet
been built for the Name of the LORD. **3** Solomon showed his love for the LORD by walking according to
the instructions given him by his father David, except that he offered sacrifices and burned incense on
the high places.

4 The king went to Gibeon to offer sacrifices, for that was the most important high place, and Solomon
offered a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. **5** At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon during the
night in a dream, and God said, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you."

6 Solomon answered, "You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he
was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him
and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day.

7 "Now, LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a
little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. **8** Your servant is here among the people you
have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. **9** So give your servant a
discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to
govern this great people of yours?"

10 The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. **11** So God said to him, "Since you have
asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies
but for discernment in administering justice, **12** I will do what you have asked. I will give you a
wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever
be. **13** Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for—both wealth and honor—so that in your
lifetime you will have no equal among kings. **14** And if you walk in obedience to me and keep my
decrees and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life." **15** Then Solomon
awoke—and he realized it had been a dream.

Sermon

If I gave you one hundred guesses and asked you to describe God, I doubt this characteristic would make your list.

We would say God is loving.

Holy.

Faithful.

Powerful.

Gracious.

Good.

But here's another answer:

God is surprising.

He has a way of doing things we never saw coming.

Ask Abraham and Sarah.

You're going to have a baby at your age?

Hello! Surprise!

Ask Moses.

You're a wanted murderer hiding in the wilderness, and suddenly a bush catches fire without burning up. Then God announces that you're going back to Egypt to lead His people out of slavery.

Surprise!

Ask Mary.

You're a teenage girl planning a wedding when an angel announces that you're going to give birth to the Messiah.

Probably didn't see that coming.

The Bible is filled with people whose lives were interrupted by God.

And so, after an entire summer of asking, "What is God like?", we arrive at one final answer:

He is the God of surprises.

Solomon Didn't See This Coming

King David had died.

One of his younger sons, Solomon, had taken the throne.

That alone created problems.

Solomon had plenty of half-brothers who weren't exactly thrilled with the arrangement.

But Solomon followed David's instructions, established his rule, and began the enormous responsibility of leading Israel.

Then God surprised him.

Solomon went to Gibeon to worship. During the night, God appeared to him in a dream and essentially handed the young king a blank check:

"Ask for whatever you want me to give you."

Imagine hearing that from God.

Anything?

Solomon could have asked for wealth.

Long life.

Military victory.

The death of his enemies.

More territory.

Instead, Solomon looked at the responsibility before him and basically admitted:

"I don't know what I'm doing."

He asked God for a discerning heart so he could govern God's people and distinguish between right and wrong.

God was pleased.

So God gave Solomon the wisdom he requested.

Then came another surprise.

God gave him things he hadn't requested as well.

Wealth.

Honor.

Influence.

Solomon went to sleep as an overwhelmed young king.

He woke up having encountered the God who surprises us.

We Can't Manufacture God's Surprises

Now, let me make something clear.

We can't manipulate God into surprising us.

There isn't a spiritual formula:

Pray this many minutes.

Read this many chapters.

Give this much money.

Attend this many church services.

And—boom!—God owes you a surprise.

God doesn't work that way.

Grace can't be manipulated.

But when we look at Solomon's story, we do see characteristics that placed him in a posture where he was receptive to what God wanted to do.

The first was simple.

Solomon loved God.

Love God

First Kings tells us plainly that Solomon showed his love for the Lord.

That's important.

Yes, there are occasions when God surprises someone who is running away from Him.

Ask Saul on the road to Damascus.

He certainly wasn't looking for Jesus.

But much of the time, God's surprising work occurs in the lives of people who are already seeking Him.

Solomon demonstrated his love in two important ways.

Love Shows Up in Obedience

Solomon followed the instructions his father David had given him.

David had taught his son God's ways.

And Solomon obeyed.

Jesus would later say that if we love Him, we will keep His commands.

Love for God is more than an emotion.

It eventually shows up in how we live.

We can sing beautifully about loving Jesus.

We can talk about loving Jesus.

But obedience reveals whether our love has actually reached our lives.

Love Shows Up in Worship

Solomon also worshiped extravagantly.

He went to Gibeon and offered an enormous number of sacrifices.

A thousand burnt offerings.

That's a lot of worship.

It took time.

It cost something.

But Solomon didn't seem to mind.

He wanted to express gratitude for what God had done.

Worship is often a pretty good gauge of our love for God.

When we love someone, we want to be near them.

We want to express affection.

We want to give.

The same is true in our relationship with God.

God Doesn't Wait for Perfect People

But I love the honesty of the Bible.

Solomon loved God.

And Solomon wasn't perfect.

Those two things were true at the same time.

He had already married Pharaoh's daughter, despite God's warnings about Israel's kings entering marriages that would pull their hearts toward other gods.

He was also offering sacrifices at the high places.

There were already warning signs in Solomon's life.

Yet Scripture still says:

Solomon loved the Lord.

That encourages me.

It means God isn't waiting for perfect people before He begins working through them.

If He were, He'd be waiting forever.

God works with people who genuinely love Him while He is still working on them.

That's most of us.

Probably all of us.

There are areas where we've grown tremendously.

And there are places where Jesus is still saying:

"We need to work on this."

Don't assume God can't use you because you haven't arrived.

Love Him.

Obey what you know.

Keep worshiping.

And let Him continue changing you.

Stay Humble

There was something else about young Solomon that made his response so beautiful.

He was humble.

His prayer begins with gratitude.

He talks about God's kindness to his father David.

He recognizes that the throne he occupies is ultimately a gift from God.

Then Solomon admits his inadequacy.

Before Solomon became the wisest man in the world, he was wise enough to admit he didn't know what he was doing.

That's a pretty good starting point.

Humility says:

"I need help."

"I don't have all the answers."

"I can't do this without God."

Solomon looked at the enormous nation he was expected to lead and realized the assignment was bigger than he was.

And instead of pretending otherwise, he admitted it.

God can do remarkable things with people who understand their need for Him.

Today's Humility Doesn't Guarantee Tomorrow's Humility

Unfortunately, we know the rest of Solomon's story.

He started wonderfully.

But humility today doesn't guarantee humility tomorrow.

Somewhere along the journey, Solomon changed.

The man who once said, "I can't do this without You," began living as though he could.

His wealth increased.

His wives multiplied.

His compromises grew.

The king who had once depended upon God began relying more heavily upon himself.

And eventually his decisions helped create conditions that would tear the nation apart after his death.

That's a warning for all of us.

Never outgrow your dependence upon God.

The longer we serve Him, the easier it can become to rely on experience.

We've done this before.

We know how church works.

We know how marriage works.

We know how business works.

We know how ministry works.

And slowly:

"God, I can't do this without You"

becomes:

"God, I've got this."

Be careful.

The humility that opened Solomon to God's surprising grace needed to remain with him for a lifetime.

So does ours.

God's Surprise Was Bigger Than Solomon

But I think there is an even greater reason God surprised Solomon.

God was keeping a promise.

Ultimately, this story isn't about Solomon getting something from God.

It is about God doing something through Solomon.

God didn't give Solomon wisdom merely so Solomon could become famous for being wise.

God had a nation to lead.

Centuries earlier, He had promised Abraham that his descendants would become a great nation and that through them all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

Now Israel needed a king capable of leading during an extraordinary moment in its history.

Solomon's surprise was part of something much larger than Solomon.

That's often how God works.

We think the surprise is about us.

God may be thinking about people we've never met.

God Is Still Surprising Ordinary People

God has made one promise that keeps Him surprising people.

He intends to redeem this world.

He doesn't want people to perish.

He wants people to turn toward Him.

And because God remains committed to that mission, He continues surprising ordinary people like you and me and inviting us to participate.

I know something about that personally.

I will never forget the night God surprised me.

I was a freshman in high school.

I was socially awkward.

I didn't speak particularly well.

I wasn't exactly showing tremendous academic potential.

I had a plan for my life.

I was going to become an accountant.

Work in a cubicle.

Play basketball for as long as my knees allowed it.

It wasn't an exciting plan.

But it was mine.

Then one night, God surprised me.

His Spirit impressed upon me that He wanted me to preach.

Preach?

I had grown up in a parsonage.

I knew what pastors did.

I knew enough about ministry to have a pretty good list of reasons God should find somebody else.

But that night I knew.

God was calling me to preach.

And thankfully, I said:

"Yes."

I had no idea where that yes would take me.

I couldn't have imagined the people I would meet.

The churches where I would preach.

The weddings.

The baptisms.

The hospital rooms.

The funerals.

The children I would watch grow into adults.

The people who would allow me to walk with them through the greatest and hardest moments of their lives.

I certainly couldn't have imagined spending nearly three decades with one congregation that took a chance on a young preacher with very little experience.

Forty years later, I'm still living inside God's surprise.

Sometimes I wonder:

What if that awkward freshman had said no?

Some of God's Greatest Surprises Begin With One Word

Yes.

Moses had to say it.

Mary had to say it.

Solomon had to say it.

And sooner or later, so do we.

God may put something on your heart that you never expected.

He may open a door you never saw coming.

He may ask you to do something that scares you.

He may bring someone into your life you never expected to meet.

He may redirect plans you thought were settled.

And the more you pray, the more convinced you become:

This is God.

What will you do?

Don't dismiss the surprise simply because it wasn't part of your plan.

Don't assume God can't be in it because you've never done anything like it before.

Don't assume God chose the wrong person because you don't feel qualified.

Maybe the surprise isn't an interruption of your life.

Maybe it's the beginning of the life God has been preparing you to live.

The Best Life Isn't Always the Life We Planned

Solomon became known for his wisdom.

Moses became a liberator.

Mary became the mother of the Messiah.

None of them could have predicted where God's surprise would lead.

Jesus said He came so that we could have abundant life.

That doesn't mean easy life.

It doesn't mean wealthy life.

It doesn't mean painless life.

It means life under the direction of the One who created us and knows what we were made to become.

I thought I would be an accountant.

God had another idea.

And I'm very glad He did.

Responding to God's surprise doesn't guarantee the life we imagined.

It may lead to something better.

What Is God Like?

And that brings us back to the question that began this book.

What is God like?

After spending these weeks together, maybe we've learned enough to know that the answer can't fit neatly into one sentence.

Sometimes God is the God who steps back.

There are moments when He allows us to experience the consequences of repeatedly pushing Him away.

Sometimes He is the God who finally shows up.

We wait and wait and wonder whether He has forgotten us, only to discover He was working in ways we couldn't see.

Sometimes He is the God who sees us.

When other people overlook us, God doesn't.

Sometimes He is the God who scares us.

He asks us to trust Him with something we would rather hold onto.

Sometimes He is the God who can save a nation.

Not because any country is His kingdom, but because His grace, goodness, and everlasting kingdom remain our hope.

Sometimes He is the God who sows.

He keeps scattering grace into lives long after we would have given up.

Sometimes He is the God who searches for us.

He refuses to mind His own business because He loves us too much to leave us alone.

And sometimes—

He surprises us.

But through all of it:

He is God.

Don't Put God in a Box

Maybe that is the final lesson.

Don't put God in a box.

Don't assume that because He has never done it before, He can't do it now.

Don't assume that because you don't feel qualified, He can't use you.

Don't assume that because you can't see what He is doing, He doesn't have a plan.

Don't assume that because you've been waiting a long time, He has forgotten you.

Don't assume that because someone seems far from God, He has stopped sowing.

Don't assume that because your life has taken an unexpected turn, you've somehow wandered outside His reach.

God is bigger than our categories.

More gracious than we imagined.

More patient than we deserve.

Closer than we realize.

And far less predictable than we sometimes wish He were.

So love Him.

Stay humble.

Trust Him.

And when God surprises you—

say yes.

Because some of the greatest chapters of your life may begin with something you never saw coming.

Think About It

When has God surprised you with something you never expected?

Solomon's love for God showed itself through obedience and worship. What does your love for God look like in practice?

Where are you most tempted to rely on your experience instead of admitting, "God, I need You"?

Is there something God may be asking you to do that you have dismissed because you don't feel qualified?

Looking back over all eight chapters, which description of God do you most need to remember in your present season?

Listen & Reflect

Featured Song: "Made For More" — Josh Baldwin

Watch on YouTube

This song was part of the final worship service of the series, and its theme fits the conclusion beautifully. God's surprises often call us beyond the small version of life we had imagined for ourselves and into the purposes for which He created us.

As you listen, ask:

Where might God be inviting me beyond what I planned and into what He has prepared for me?

And if He surprises you—

say yes.

Prayer

Father,

Thank You that You are greater than anything I could ever say about You.

Thank You for the times You have stepped back and allowed me to learn.

Thank You for showing up when I thought You had forgotten me.

Thank You for seeing me.

Thank You for challenging me to trust You.

Thank You for the hope of Your everlasting kingdom.

Thank You for continuing to sow grace into my life.

Thank You for knowing me completely and refusing to leave me alone.

And thank You for the surprises.

Keep me from putting You in a box.

Give me a heart that loves You, hands that obey You, and a spirit humble enough to admit how desperately I need You.

When You lead somewhere I never expected, give me courage.

When You open a door I never imagined, give me faith.

When You call me to something for which I feel completely inadequate, remind me that Your call has never depended upon my adequacy.

I don't know what surprises are still ahead.

But I know You.

And so my answer is:

Yes.

Amen.

Epilogue: So, What Is God Like?

After eight chapters, we have not finished answering the question. We have only begun.

God is better than we imagined, greater than we understood, and far less predictable than we would sometimes like Him to be.

He is not a doctrine to master or a formula to control. He is the living God who calls us into relationship.

Sometimes He steps back.

Sometimes He finally shows up.

He sees us when others overlook us.

He asks us to trust Him when obedience scares us.

His kingdom remains our hope when nations shake.

He keeps sowing when we would quit.

He searches us because He loves us.

And sometimes He interrupts everything with a surprise we never saw coming.

So don't put God in a box.

Keep reading.

Keep praying.

Keep worshiping.

Keep listening.

Keep saying yes.

The question "What is God like?" is not merely a sermon-series question.

It is the adventure of a lifetime.

Ministry Appendix

A Lectionary Sermon Series: Proper 5–12, Year A
These sermons grew from the Year A lectionary texts during the season after Pentecost. They demonstrate that following the lectionary does not prevent sermon-series preaching. Sometimes the series is already there; we simply need to find the question that connects the texts.

Proper 5 — June 7, 2026

The God Who Steps Back — Hosea 5:15–6:6
Original worship set: House of the Lord; Give Us Clean Hands; Lord, I Need You
Featured reflection song: Give Us Clean Hands

Sermon Outline:

Sermon Series: What Is God Like?

Sermon Title: The God Who Steps Back

Scripture: Hosea 5:15-6:6

God Steps Back

After He's done everything He can.

Decades of rebellion

Decades of rescuing

To wake us up.

We are scared to lose his presence.

We make promises.

Because He knows our hearts.

We have ignored the warnings

We are just going through the motions

Closing: Are you a rebel?

Proper 6 — June 14, 2026

The God Who Finally Shows Up — Genesis 18:1–15
Original worship set: We Believe; Waymaker; In Christ Alone; God Will Make A Way
Featured reflection song: Way Maker

Sermon Outline:

Sermon Series: “What Is God Like?”

Sermon Title: “The God Who Finally Shows Up”

Scripture: Genesis 18:1-15

Sarai means “princess of my family”

Looks are helpful but babies are better.

Forty long years of tears

God Gave Us A Glimmer of Hope

God kept promising Abram

Hairbrain idea almost ruins everything

Another encounter, same promise

Tired of waiting, I came up with a plan

God spoke to my rival

Ishmael brought Abram Much Joy

10 more years before another promise and a new covenant

Sarah means “princess of many nations”

The longest wait might be the greatest testimony!

Proper 7 — June 21, 2026

The God Who Sees You — Genesis 16 & 21
Original worship set: Praise; Good, Good Father; How Deep The Father’s Love For Us; God, You’re So Good
Featured reflection song: He Knows My Name

Proper 8 — June 28, 2026

The God Who Scares Us — Genesis 22:1–19
Original worship set: 10,000 Reasons; Oceans; Take My Life and Let Me Be
Featured reflection song: Oceans

Sermon Outline:
Series: “What Is God Like?”

Sermon Title: “The God Who Scares Us”

Scripture: Genesis 22:1-19 2026

When God scares us…

He interrupts our comfort.

God’s Test Is An Opportunity to Trust

It is best to immediately obey.

Because the journey might be long

It forces us to have faith.

Our faith requires action and courage

It reveals our hearts.

It results in generational blessings

Closing: God’s scariest assignments often become our greatest blessing

Proper 9 — July 5, 2026

The God Who Can Save America — Psalm 145:8–14
Original worship set: Build Your Kingdom; Forever Reign; What A Beautiful Name
Featured reflection song: Build Your Kingdom

Sermon Outline:

Sermon Series: “What is God Like?”

Sermon Title: “The God Who Can Save America”

Scripture: Psalm 145:8-14

God can save America because

He is gracious

Slow to anger

Rich in love

He is good.

His goodness extends to everyone

His goodness leads to praise

His kingdom reigns forever.

His kingdom is established through His Mighty Acts.

His dominion will last for all generations

Closing: If God's people bow low...perhaps God will once again lift this nation high.

Proper 10 — July 12, 2026

The God Who Sows — Matthew 13:1–9
Original worship set: Mighty to Save; Glorious Day (Out of the Grave); I'd Rather Have Jesus
Featured reflection song: Don't Stop Praying

Sermon Outline:

Series: What is God like?

Title: A God who Sows

Scripture: Matthew 13:1-9

Points:

God sows seeds everywhere.

- He is the eternal optimist
- He gives everyone a chance.

Our circumstances never determine our soil

- People raised by heathens can be good soil
- Kids raised by saints can be bad soil.

Our consumption of God always determines our soil.

- Barely take notice of God equals path soil.
- Partial consumption of God produces rocky soil
- Mostly consumption of God produces thorny soil.
- Fully consumption of God produces good soil.

Closing: Surrender Produces A Bountiful Harvest

Proper 11 — July 19, 2026

The God Who Searches for Us — Psalm 139:1–12, 23–24
Original worship set: My Savior Love; This Is Amazing Grace; Holy Forever; Gratitude
Featured reflection song: Known

Sermon Outline:

Sermon Series: "What Is God Like?"

Sermon Title: "The God Who Searches For Us"

Scripture: Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24

The God Who Searches For Us!

He searches for us to intimately know us!

- To Understand how we think
- To Understand our past
- To Understand our language

He searches for us to be with us!

- He is with us on our good days
- He is with us on our bad days
- He is with us to shine light in the darkness

He searches for us to reveal who we are.

- He Reveals our fears
- He Reveals our sins
- He Reveals the best path forward

Closing: Search Me, O God!

Proper 12 — July 26, 2026

The God Who Surprises Us — 1 Kings 3:1–15
Original worship set: Hosanna (Praise Is Rising); Made For More; Worthy / Who Can Satisfy; I Love You, Lord
Featured reflection song: Made For More
Sermon Outline:

Sermon Series: “What Is God Like?”

Sermon Title: “The God Who Surprises Us”

Scripture: 1 Kings 3:1-15

Slides:

God’s surprises often occur when…

We love Him.

By Keeping His Commandments

By Worshipping Him Sincerely

We humble ourselves.

By Being Grateful To God

By Acknowledging Our Need

God Is Fulfilling His Promise

To Redeem The World

To Give Us Abundant Life

Closing: Say Yes to God’s Surprises

A Word About Dr. Geoff Kunselman

About Dr. Geoff Kunselman

Dr. Geoff Kunselman



Dr. Geoff Kunselman has served the Church of the Nazarene in pastoral, district, and denominational leadership for more than four decades. His ministry has included pastorates in Kentucky and Ohio as well as Columbia First Church of the Nazarene in South Carolina. He later served as superintendent of the Northwest Ohio District and has continued serving the denomination in broader leadership roles.

More personally, Geoff became an important mentor to Bill Harmon when Bill began his ministry at West Columbia First. For several years, the two met regularly for breakfast, where Geoff's wisdom, encouragement, and friendship helped shape Bill's pastoral ministry.

Geoff is also an accomplished golfer—or at least he and Bill prefer to remember it that way. As a team, they remain undefeated, including a first-place finish at an MVNU PALCON golf tournament. Their most treasured victory, however, came several years later when they defeated Bill's brother and East Ohio District Superintendent Dave Lutz—a victory whose importance has apparently increased with every passing year.



About the Author



Bill Harmon

Bill Harmon has served as pastor of West Columbia First Church of the Nazarene since 1997. He loves preaching, pastoral ministry, and walking with people through the ordinary and extraordinary moments of life. The sermons in this book were first preached to the congregation he has been privileged to call family for nearly three decades.

West Columbia First Church of the Nazarene



350 Wattling Road, West Columbia, South Carolina.
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