

January 1

The Scriptures are quite clear that man was made from the dust of the earth, not from animals. And woman was the result of a rather remarkable cloning process from man with genetic modification, not born of some proto-apeman. These two were apparently formed with features of age, appearing to have grown up.

The world, especially the biological world, is of such complexity that it is statistically impossible for it to have been formed by random combinations over a mere 10 billion years. That however implies that there must have been a directional force in forming the complexity that we see in the world today. But once one posits such a directed force to produce the complexity, the question of time it takes disappears. The One who can wield such a force can just as well do it in six days as in 10 billion. Is it out of the question to think that the world itself was created with the appearance of age, just like man was?

There is a saying, "When all else fails, read the instructions." If truly God is the Creator, then it behooves us to pay attention to how he created us to live. He has given us the Scriptures as the ultimate guide book to life. When our life is failing, we need to turn to God's word to find out how to fix it.

January 2

The apostle John wrote that there are three kinds of sins in the world: the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, and the pride in the things we have in life. Our mother Eve was tempted to sin by each of these three: she saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food (desire of the flesh), that it was pleasant to look at (desire of the eyes), and that it would reportedly make one wise (pride in life possessions). She took and ate, and not being satisfied with her own sin and wanting to share, she also gave some to her husband (and he ate).

Our Savior Jesus was also tempted in each of these three ways: the devil wanted him to solve his hunger by misusing his miracle power to turn stones into bread (desire of the flesh); he offered Jesus all the kingdoms he could see if he would just worship him (desire of the eyes); and he dared Jesus to jump off the height of the temple complex to fulfill the slightly twisted scripture (pride in who one is in life). Jesus answered all of these temptations by quoting scripture from Moses' sermon in Deuteronomy. Eve gave in, but Jesus overcame, and thus became our example.

Sometimes I hear that we should pray when tempted. Prayer is always good, but the problem with prayer to counter temptation is that one continues to think about the temptation. When Jesus' example is followed and scripture is brought to mind, the temptation is replaced with God's word. That word is inspired by God's Spirit, and the apostle Paul writes that to set the mind on the things of the Spirit is life and peace.

But just as Eve wanted to share her sin, so Jesus wants to share his righteousness with us all. Paul writes that God will take our faith in Jesus and count that as our righteousness. Thank God that Jesus not only gives us an example of how to overcome temptation but also provides a way to forgive sin and make us righteous before God.

January 3

When God made mankind, he said it was very good. But it was not long before people sinned. It is not exactly clear what the forbidden tree of knowledge of good and evil was. Adam and Eve already knew it was good to do what God said and evil to do what he said not to do. Perhaps it was the ability to decide for themselves what is good and what is evil. Upon eating the fruit, they decided that it was not good to be naked the way he had made them and they made clothes of sorts for themselves. Since that time people have been deciding for themselves what is good and what is evil, often ignoring what God says is good and evil.

Deciding for oneself what is good and evil leads to problems. By the time of Noah the scriptures say that there was great wickedness in the world and that every intention of the thoughts of people's hearts was only evil continually. The world was filled with violence and people had corrupted their way. However, there were a few people who were concerned about God. Enoch walked with God and so did his great-grandson Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his generation. Thus we see that even in a wicked world it is possible to be in communion with God, following His way instead of the paths of those around us.

That was a time of great spiritual darkness, so great that God decided to destroy his creation. But Noah's relationship with God saved both his own self and his family in the ark. Many years have passed since Noah's time, but the world seems once again to be in spiritual darkness. Violence has increased and wickedness abounds. But we are not without hope. Jesus came into this world and gave us an example of what it means to follow God's way of good, not our own. More than that he died and rose again to give us spiritual life. He brought life and light into this world of spiritual darkness. The choice is ours; do we follow our own idea of right and wrong, or do we follow the example of Jesus?

January 4

After God had destroyed the world he made with a flood, he intended to start over with Noah and his family who were in the ark. He accepted Noah's sacrifice of clean animals and resolved never again to destroy the world by flood. He realized that the intention of the hearts of people is evil from the time of their youth, but still he cared for them. He made a covenant with Noah and all his descendents. Now a covenant is a kind of agreement. There are two types of agreements in the Bible. One is where people negotiate the terms, like Judas did with the Jewish leaders when he betrayed Jesus. The other, usually called a covenant, is where one party sets all the terms and the second party can either accept them or reject them. God only makes the second type of agreement; he always sets the terms of the covenant. It is to our advantage to accept the terms he sets.

The covenant with Noah was a covenant of promise. This is a kind of covenant in which God binds only himself with a promise. In the Noahic Covenant God promised never to destroy the whole world with a flood again. As the sign of the covenant he placed the rainbow in the sky. People today have tried to change what the colors of the rainbow mean, but to God and the people who trust him, they will always mean God's promise.

God commanded people to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. Instead, people stayed together and decided to build a tower to heaven to make a name for themselves. God stopped this by confusing their language into multiple forms. But this thing of making a name for themselves is opposed to God. Jesus says that we must do good works so that others will praise God. This seems to require being intentional about how we do good works, for the normal is to get praise for ourselves. But God is the One who deserves praise, for he alone is good.

January 5

God called Abram to leave his country and his family and to go to the country that he would show him. It is hard to leave the familiar surroundings of one's country and go to a new place where the customs and culture are most often different. It is even harder to leave family. Family provides a sense of security. They are "the known" in the midst of the unknown. Missionaries today often respond to the same call. It is not easy to leave family and friends behind and learn a new way of living and often a new language. But the good news of Jesus must be spread throughout the world. The apostle Peter told Jesus that the disciples had left everything to follow him. Are we willing to do that today?

But even though Abram had shown his trust in God by leaving his country for Canaan, he had moments when his thoughts let that trust slip. He had been told that he would be a blessing and that any who blessed or cursed him would receive the same back again. But when the circumstances of famine forced him to go to Egypt, he started to worry about an unlikely outcome: what if the unknown people there would kill him to take his beautiful wife. He devised a lie to deal with that outcome, like a lie would provide more protection than God. Jesus says not to worry about food, drink, clothing, or what tomorrow will bring. If we are honest, we sometimes continue like Abram to worry about the future. Instead, as Jesus says, we just need to seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

Abram's nephew Lot also let circumstances lead to messing with his life. He chose the well watered ground of the Jordan valley for his sheep. But that was close to the wealthy city of Sodom which drew him in and ended up causing all sorts of problems for Lot and his family. Are we drawn in by the glamour of the world instead of God's kingdom? That can only lead to trouble.

January 6

When Abram complained to God that he was childless and a child born in his household would be his heir, God replied that this person would not be his heir. God said that a child from his own body would be his heir. At this time Abram was in his late 70's or early 80's, and he and his wife had never been able to have children. But because God said it, Abram believed God, and that faith was considered by God to be righteousness. The apostle Paul writes about this in the books of Romans and Galatians. His point is that if we have faith, God will also count our faith as being righteousness. No one is perfectly righteous before God by the way we live, so the only way to be righteous is if God makes us righteous. Do we really have the faith to believe God's promise when it seems against our experience? Abram believed God when he had no hope for a child as people count hope. Do we believe God when he says we will rise from the dead when Jesus comes again? That seems to be against human experience. Do we think about the promise or the problem?

Sarai and Abram figured out a way to make God's promise come true. Abram would take Sarai's slave Hagar as wife and have a child. The child Ishmael was born this way. But God was planning on a child born fifteen years later to be the promised child. While God promised Abram that Ishmael would have many descendants, those descendants have been crosswise with the descendants of Isaac, the promised child. Sarai and Abram's plan have led to problems in the world down to this day. They were rushing God. Isaiah speaks of those who wait on the Lord. Do we have the patience to let God work out his promise in our lives?

This plan had originally been Sarai's. Abram consented, and when problems arose with Hagar, Sarai blamed Abram for the problems. She was playing the blame game, just as Adam and Eve had blamed others when confronted by God. Do we make excuses in our lives by blaming others when in fact we are the cause of many of our own problems?

January 7

The apostle Peter says that Lot, the nephew of Abraham, was a righteous man who was tormented by the lawlessness and unrestrained sensuality of those without principles around him. He showed his hospitality when two strangers arrived at Sodom and he insisted on taking them into the safety of his house. His righteousness in the midst of that wicked city did not go unnoticed. When homosexuals wanted to assault the strangers in his care, he tried to stop them by calling them brothers, but they called him a judging foreigner. The strangers turned out to be angels sent by God to destroy the city. They struck physically blind the would-be assailants who were spiritually blind. Even though Lot was grieved by the wickedness around him, his family was affected. The men betrothed to his daughters thought he was joking when he warned them to flee. His wife was so attached to the city that she turned back to view the city. And his daughters got him drunk afterwards and committed incest with him. We must be careful that the wickedness in the world around us does not affect our families.

While Abraham was sojourning in Gerar, an old temptation arose. He had lied in Egypt about his wife being his sister and now he repeated that lie. He thought that there was no fear of God in this place, but God appeared in a dream to the king Abimelech. Abimelech was scandalized by Abraham's lie putting him in danger with God. Abraham offered an excuse for his lie, saying that Sarah was his half-sister, but his intention was to deceive. Do we sometimes twist the truth in order to leave the wrong impression?

When Abraham's son Isaac was born to Sarah, he was very pleased. He was told by God that this was the child he would be remembered for. But when God asked him to sacrifice that child, he did not delay but started early the next morning to go to the place of sacrifice. He told his son that God would provide the sacrifice. God halted the sacrifice because it was a test of Abraham's faith. But God did not halt the sacrifice of His own Son. This is a test of our faith; will we trust him?

January 8

Abraham had dealings with the pagan people around him. When it came time to find a burial place for Sarah, he negotiated for a cave and purchased, not only the cave, but the field containing the cave as well. But when it came to finding a wife for his son, he sent his servant, not to the surrounding pagans, but to his relatives at Haran to find a wife. He knew the importance of being tied in marriage to someone of like faith.

When Abraham's servant came to Haran, he showed that he had learned faith from Abraham. He prayed to the God of his master Abraham and asked for a sign as to who would be a chosen wife for Isaac. The sign was that the woman would not only give him a drink if he asked, but she would also care about his camels. Before he had finished praying, Rebekah, the chosen wife, appeared at the well and fulfilled the sign. Are we, like Abraham, people who share our faith with those around us? Are we, like his servant, people who pray in faith, expecting God to answer our prayers?

Jesus also had dealings with the people around him. The people of Gadara, however, asked him to leave. They were more concerned about their loss of pigs (what else might they lose?) than the demon-possessed men that he had healed. But in contrast, he called the tax-collector Matthew, and he left his tax booth and followed Jesus. Are we the kind of people who would leave a job to follow Jesus? Or are we the kind who are concerned about what we might lose if we follow him?

When Matthew invited his sinful friends to eat with Jesus, the Pharisees were upset. Jesus wanted the Pharisees to learn the meaning of "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice." They were not interested in showing mercy to sinful people. God had told Isaiah that he was not happy with people sacrificing for their sins. He wanted obedience instead. Jesus came to show mercy to sinners. He also called them to obey the will of the Father. More than that, he became the perfect sacrifice for sins. Do we extend the mercy that comes from that sacrifice to those who need it?



January 9

Isaac and Rebekah had twin sons, each with their own problems. Esau was a man concerned only with the present. One day when he came in from the field hungry, he saw that his brother Jacob was making bean soup. He asked Jacob for some soup, but Jacob said he could have some only if he sold him his birthright. The birthright was the right to inherit twice as much as other sons. Thus for a man with two sons, like Isaac, the first child who had the birthright would inherit two-thirds of the property and the other son would inherit one-third. Esau apparently didn't care about what would be coming to him in the future when his father died. He readily sold his birthright and ate his soup and went on his way. Are we like Esau, caring only for this day? Do we forget to think about the future, especially our eternal inheritance with the Father?

Jacob was born holding on to his twin brother's heel so they gave him his name which means something like "heel-grabber." To "grab the heel" was a figure of speech (like "pull the leg") which meant to fool someone. Jacob lived up to his name. Instead of being concerned for his hungry brother, he saw this as an opportunity to get ahead in the world. Are we concerned about the situation of others? Or do we, like Jacob, look for times to take advantage of other's troubles?

Ezekiel makes it clear that a son cannot be held responsible for his father's sins. But the sins of the father are often visited on the children, sometimes because of the situation they grow up in, but also because of the example which their parents set for them. When Abraham became afraid for his life, he lied about his wife, saying she was his sister. Isaac heard about this and did the same later on. His lie was exposed when the king of Gerer saw him "playing" (it wasn't Monopoly or Old Maid) with his wife, something a decent man would not do with his sister. Do we live our lives in such a way to set a good example for our children? Or do we let our sins pass on to the next generation?

January 10

Isaac married Rebekah when he was 40 years old. However, for 20 years she was not able to have children. Isaac prayed for his wife to have a child and God answered his prayer. Rebekah gave birth to twin boys when Isaac was 60 years old. These must have been very special since they were the answer to prayer. But as the boys grew up, it became obvious that they were different. Esau was an outdoorsman who liked hunting while Jacob was a quiet person who liked to stay at home. This led to their parents having favorites. Isaac's favorite was Esau, and Rebekah's favorite was Jacob. This favoritism led to problems. Children are all different, but all are precious. While some may seem closer to one or both parents, we should not show favoritism; rather, we should treat them equally. Paul wrote to the Colossians that servants should be treated justly and equally. How much more does this apply to our children?

Abraham had sent a servant to find a faithful wife for Isaac from his relatives. But Esau married two pagan Hittite women who brought grief to Isaac and Rebekah. Marriage is not just about two people. The families of the ones married are also involved in the marriage, whether for good or for bad. How much better to be bound to a Christian!

When Isaac was old, his eyesight began to fail and he thought his death might be near. So he called his favorite son Esau and sent him out to hunt for him so he could give him a blessing. Rebekah overheard this and convinced her favorite son Jacob to pretend to be Esau so he could get his father's blessing. Now Rebekah had been told by God, "the older shall serve the younger." Undoubtedly, she had shared this with Isaac. But when Isaac blessed Jacob, thinking he was Esau, he said that he should be lord over his brothers. He was trying to overcome the word of God by giving a blessing. He later realized that God's word would come true and Jacob would be blessed. Do we sometimes think that God's teaching needs to be changed to fit what we want? It didn't work out for Isaac, and it won't for us either. God is the one in charge.

January 11

Life is not a steady state. There are events in our lives that are very significant and shape the rest of our lives. Jacob lived the first part of his life content to be a quiet man living in tents. When he defrauded his brother out of his blessing, it became necessary for him to leave. His brother was threatening to kill him. It was on that journey that Jacob had his encounter with God. He stopped along the way at the town called Luz. Sleeping on the ground, he used a rock for a pillow. That night God appeared to him in a dream. He saw angels ascending and descending on steps going from earth to heaven with God at the top. God spoke to him and said that he was the God of Abraham and Isaac. He promised to give Jacob and his descendants the land where he was, to make his descendants as many as the dust of the earth, and to make him and his offspring a blessing for all the families of the earth. Then he promised to be with Jacob and bring him back to this land. When Jacob awoke, he called the place Bethel, that is, the house of God. He had not realized that God was in this place, away from home. He promised that if God would be with him as he traveled, he would give God a tenth of all God gave him. What kind of moments have we had in our lives that make a difference in our commitment to God? What have we pledged to God for his companionship? Is Jesus the blessing in our lives?

There is a saying: What goes around, comes around. Jacob had deceived his father to get his blessing. When he got to his uncle Laban's house, he fell in love with his younger daughter Rachel. Having no money for a bridal gift, he agreed to work for seven years with Laban in order to marry her. But when the seven years were up, Laban brought him, not Rachel, but Leah, his older daughter. The deceiver had been deceived. He would have to work another seven years for Rachel. We can be sure that our lifestyle will affect what happens to us in the future.

When Leah had children and Rachel did not, she was jealous. Both sisters gave Jacob their maids as surrogate mothers in a battle to have the most children. Do we let sibling jealousy affect our families?

Note: I have translated the Hebrew word SLM above as steps rather than ladder or stairway because the HALOT lexicon (1:758) says the word refers to "a series of rising rows of stones, stepped ramp, flight of steps ... entrance way." Since "house of God" is often the Hebrew way of referring to the temple, the picture seems to be one of steps leading up to the heavenly temple where God is.

January 12

Prayer is not magic. Prayer is a request to God. We should always follow Jesus' example of "Your will be done." But having said that, we should pray. God does hear our prayers, but he answers them in his own good time. Rachel prayed for a child and God heard her prayers, but her sister had already given birth to seven children by the time he answered them. Isaac and Rebekah waited twenty years for God to answer their prayer for children. Zachariah and Elizabeth were old when the angel said, "Your prayer has been heard." But all of these children were significant in the plans of God. Do we have the persistence in prayer that Jesus teaches we should have? Are we willing to let God work out his plans in our lives and the lives of our children?

By the time that Leah had given birth to her fifth and sixth child, she had learned to praise God for their births. Laban and Jacob likewise attributed their accumulation of wealth to God. In all these things God worked behind the scenes to bring about the births and wealth. An unbeliever could look at these events and say they were just natural. The believer sees the providential hand of God in the good gifts that he or she receives. Do we praise God for the things that we have? Do we see his hand at work in our lives and share that knowledge with others?

When Jacob returned to his home in Canaan with his family and goods, Rachel stole her father's household gods. When Laban caught up with Jacob's party, he accused Jacob of the crime. Jacob said to search everyone's belongings because he didn't know what Rachel had done. But Rachel deceived her father by hiding the images in the camel's saddle on which she sat and pretending not to be able to get up because she was having her period. The one who deceived Jacob about his bride and about his wages was himself deceived by his daughter. It seems that those who tell lies do not know what the truth sounds like, and they are easily deceived. Are we honest in our dealings? Are we truthful, even to ourselves? Are we truthful to God? He knows the truth anyway.

January 13

Jacob worked hard. He told Laban that for the twenty years he was with him, he had suffered the heat of the day and the cold of the night and lost sleep working. Over that time he had accumulated a large family and great wealth. But he did not attribute his possessions to his labor, but to the blessings of God. And even though Laban had changed his wages "ten times" (is that a figure of speech, like "if I told you once, I've told you a hundred times"?), God had watched over him and kept him safe. Do we attribute the things that we have to our hard work or to the blessings of God?

As Jacob approached Canaan, he sent word to his brother Esau, who had now moved southeast to the land of Seir. The messengers returned with news that Esau was coming with four hundred men. It is not clear why there were four hundred men with Esau; perhaps it was to intimidate Jacob. At any rate, Jacob was intimidated because he had stolen his brother's blessing twenty years before. He made some changes to his possessions, separating them into two groups so that at least one would have a chance to flee. But he also prayed. He told God that he was not worthy of the merciful love and faithfulness that God had shown him. He had left home with a shepherd's staff as his walking stick and now he was returning with two companies. God had told him to return and he was obeying, but still he was afraid. Do we confess our fears to God? Do we obey God in spite of what we fear might happen if we do?

The night before he met Esau he spent the night wrestling with a "man." Jacob understood that the man was God appearing to be a man. Hosea says that it was an angel. At daybreak, the "man," who would not give his name, blessed Jacob and gave him a new name, Israel, which means something like God-wrestler. And so his descendants are called Israelites to this day. How about us? Before a big day coming up that we are worried about, do we spend the night wrestling with our thoughts, if not with God in prayer? Jesus says not to worry about tomorrow. Each day has its own troubles. But God is in control.

January 14

It seems the world is full of violence. Jesus said there would be wars and rumors of wars until the end. But sometimes the violence turns more personal. Dinah, the daughter of Jacob and Leah, went into the nearby town of Shechem to visit the young women of that town. While she was there, the leading man's son raped her. But then he decided he wanted to marry her. Her brothers were angered that this had happened to their sister, and they insisted that she could not be married into a society of uncircumcised men. So because of the influence that the leading man had, all the men of Shechem were circumcised. While they were in debilitating pain, the brothers came and took revenge, killing the men of the city and seizing the women, children, and all their property. How are we affected by the violence around us? Do we want to take revenge? God says that revenge belongs to him and him only. Can we find it in ourselves to forgive those who exercise violence against us?

We should be careful what we wish for. When Rachel finally had a long-awaited son, she named him Joseph, a name that in Hebrew sounds a lot like the word for "add." She said, "May the Lord add another son to me." In the land of Canaan, that finally happened. But this second son proved to produce a difficult childbirth. She died following the birth of this child Benjamin. Do we ask God for the things that we want or for the things that he wants for us? Do we pray, "Your will be done"?

We are influenced by the world around us. The men of Shechem were influenced by Hamor, the leading man of the city. Esau married two pagan women and ended up moving to Seir where one of his wives was from. His children ended up marrying the inhabitants of Seir. They became the Edomites who worshiped false gods (mentioned but unnamed in the Bible). In the New Testament we find that King Herod's step-daughter danced for him at his birthday party and he swore to give her whatever she wanted. She asked for the head of John the Baptist, and against his will he had him beheaded because he was intimidated by the guests at the party. Who influences us? God or the people around us?

January 15

Jacob was the favorite child of Rebekah, and he had a favorite child too. Joseph was the first child of his favorite wife, and so Jacob favored him above the ten sons and one daughter born before him. He made him a special robe (its exact nature is unknown: long sleeves, multicolored, embroidered?), and his brothers were jealous and hated him. When some of them did wrong, Joseph made it a point to tell his father about it. Do we sometimes try to make ourselves look good by comparing ourselves with others who do wrong? Paul wrote to the Corinthians that those who compare themselves with themselves are not wise. God knows our problems as well as those of others.

Jacob's fourth child Judah married a Canaanite woman who bore him three sons. The oldest son also married a Canaanite woman named Tamar. He was wicked and God took his life. According to the levirate custom, the second son was supposed to marry the widow and have a child for his dead brother. However, he realized that the child would inherit the birthright and reduce his inheritance, so he refused to have a child with the widow. God was not pleased and took his life also. Judah thought that Tamar was the reason his sons had died, so he told her to wait to marry the third son until he was of age. But when he grew up, Judah did not let him marry her. She pretended to be a sacred prostitute, and Judah, not realizing she was his daughter-in-law, had sex with her. When he found out she was pregnant, he was going to have her killed for adultery, but she showed him that he was the father. He realized that he had not treated her right. She gave birth to twins, Judah's fourth and fifth sons. Do we, like Judah, rely on human reasoning rather than looking for spiritual reasons? Are we quick to condemn others when we also have the same problems? Jesus says to take the plank out of our eye before we take a speck out of another person's eye.

Joseph's brothers captured him and sold him into slavery in Egypt. They led their father to believe that a wild animal had killed Joseph. Do we make up stories to hide our sin from people? God knows what we do.



January 16

Jesus says that temptations are sure to come. This is especially true in today's world obsessed with sex. But it was also true in the ancient world. Joseph served as a slave in the house of a man named Potiphar. His wife decided that she liked the way Joseph looked and wanted him to commit adultery with her. Joseph replied that his master trusted him with everything in the house except for his wife. He must maintain that trust. His first line of defense against sin was that he saw it would be sin against God. When she persisted, his second line of defense was not to be around her. Finally, one day she grabbed him by his clothes and insisted that he lie with her. His final line of defense was to flee, even if that meant leaving the clothes she would not turn loose of. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that God always provides a way of escape. He didn't say that this way would always be easy. Do we look for the way of escape when we are tempted? Or do we put ourselves in situations where the temptations are sure to come?

Potiphar's wife was angry with Joseph for not sinning with her. She lied to her husband and said that Joseph had tried to rape her. He was angry with Joseph and put him in prison. Joseph was persecuted for doing the right thing. Jesus said that this would happen to those who follow him. Are we willing to face that possibility? Or would we take the easy way out by giving in to the temptation?

God blessed Joseph even in prison. He became a trustee there and was entrusted with caring for those servants of the royal house with whom Pharaoh was upset. Are we the sort of people who are faithful even when things do not go the way we think they should? One night the royal cupbearer and royal baker had dreams. Joseph interpreted their dreams and his interpretation proved true. But for two years the royal cupbearer forgot about Joseph until Pharaoh had dreams that needed interpretation. Joseph interpreted those dreams and was given a position of authority right under Pharaoh himself. Do we trust God that he can make good come out of the bad things that happen to us in life?

January 17

After Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream, he was given a position of responsibility as governor in Egypt in charge of collecting grain during the years of abundant crops. He worked diligently at this task, storing grain in every city beyond the ability to measure how much grain was being stored. He had previously worked diligently as chief servant in Potiphar's house and then as trustee in the jail. He was trustworthy in small jobs and that prepared him for more responsibility. Are we people who work diligently at our jobs, or is it merely "eye-service," being diligent when the boss is looking? Paul writes that we should work as if serving Christ. God blessed Joseph with a wife and two sons during this period. He named his sons with God in mind. Do we see our children as blessings from God?

When the years of famine came, Joseph sold grain, not only to Egyptians, but to people of the world around Egypt. Jacob sent his ten oldest sons to Egypt to buy grain. When they came to Joseph to buy grain, he recognized them, but they did not recognize him. He looked Egyptian and spoke Egyptian, and they thought he was dead by this time. We don't know if Joseph had previously thought about what he might do to his brothers if he got a chance. But in the moment, he accused them of being spies and put them in jail for three days. He then sent nine of them home with instructions to bring his full brother Benjamin with them next time they came. This is the beginning of the struggle Joseph went through to forgive his brothers. Are we people who are willing to forgive, or do we harbor grudges for years? Jesus says we must forgive those who wrong us if we want God to forgive us.

Joseph could still speak Hebrew and he overheard his brothers saying that this bad thing of being accused was a spiritual penalty for having sold their brother to Egypt. Now they felt guilt over what they had done. Joseph overheard them and turned away to weep. Perhaps hearing their remorse was the beginning of his forgiveness. Does guilt nag us because of our sins? God gives forgiveness, but he also expects us to change.

January 18

Jacob had been born into a family of deceivers and cheaters. When he was younger, he cheated his brother out of his birthright and deceived his father to get his blessing. But in turn his uncle Laban had deceived him about his wife and his work. As he grew older, he learned honesty. When his sons returned from Egypt with their money found in their grain bags, he told them to take it back on their second trip. Perhaps it was a mistake. Have we learned honesty in our lives? If a clerk gives us too much change back when we purchase something, do we call it to the clerk's attention and return the extra money?

Guilt for sin has a way of making one fearful even when there is no need to be. When Joseph's brothers returned to Egypt, Joseph had them come to his house to eat. They did not know he was Joseph and wondered why they were asked to eat with him. They were afraid and worried that he wanted to enslave them and steal their donkeys. Do we let our sins create all kinds of imagined problems in our minds because of our guilt?

The Egyptians in Joseph's house ate at a different table from Joseph's brothers and even from Joseph, their lord. This was because they thought it was an abomination to eat with Hebrews. This is an early example of racism in Bible times. What about us? Are we willing to associate with people of a different race? We all come from one man.

Joseph had devised a plan to get his full brother Benjamin away from the brothers who had sold him into slavery in Egypt. He had his silver cup hidden in Benjamin's grain sack. His servant said the one with the silver cup would become a slave. But all the brothers returned when the cup was found in Benjamin's sack. Judah pleaded with Joseph to let him take Benjamin's place as a slave. Likewise Jesus has taken our place. Joseph realized that his father thought a wild animal had killed him. He saw that his brothers had changed. He finally was able to forgive his brothers and reveal who he was. Are we able to forgive those who hurt us? It may take a process, but God has forgiven us, so we should forgive.

January 19

Joseph forgave his brothers for selling him into slavery. More than that, he showed his forgiveness when he revealed himself to them. He spoke to them and kissed them and wept over them. Actions speak louder than words. How about us? Do we say we forgive people who sin against us but then our actions seem to say that we don't forgive them? Do we hold a grudge against them? Joseph encouraged them when they went home to their father, "Don't argue on the way." It would be easy to play the blame game when they were found out. Joseph sees that this episode is over since he has forgiven them and believes there is no more room for blaming each other. Do we try to encourage those whom we have forgiven?

Joseph lived in such a way that those around him wanted to help. When Pharaoh heard that his brothers had come, he encouraged them to move to Egypt and even sent wagons home with them to bring their family. Do we live in this same way so that people appreciate what we have done and want to help us?

The Bible is a book full of miracles and prophets. Sometimes we read it like there is a miracle a day. There is a saying, "A miracle a day keeps the devil away." That is a misunderstanding of the life spent following God. Decades of life are unrecorded in the Bible. For example, God spoke to Jacob when he left Canaan for his uncle's house. Twenty years later, God told him to return to Canaan. He wrestled with a "man" whom he understood to be God. God spoke to him twice before Benjamin was born. And when he was ready to go to Egypt, God spoke to him again. He told him to go down to Egypt and Joseph would close his eyes when he died. By this time he was 130 years old. For 22 years he thought Joseph was dead. Why didn't God mention Joseph in all this time? The fact is that Jacob lived a life of faith. Most of the time he had no word from God. This is the way we also live. We may have a time of spiritual experience or growth. But day by day we only have our faith that comes from hearing God's word. We live by faith, not by sight.

January 20

When Jacob was 147 years old, he called his sons together to bless them. His son Reuben was the firstborn and by rights should have inherited the birthright, the double portion above his brothers. But that honor went to Joseph instead because of Reuben's sin. After Rachel had died, Reuben had sex with her maid, who was a concubine wife of Jacob and mother of two of his sons. Reuben was not disinherited, but he did lose the birthright over this incident. Actions have consequences. Because of God's grace, we may not lose our salvation over our sins, but our sins may still negatively affect our lives in a number of ways.

When Jacob blessed Judah, he prophetically said that a ruler would come from Judah. While this was initially fulfilled when David became king of Israel, it was ultimately fulfilled in Jesus. Wearing the title, son of David, he is the messianic King over not just Israel, but all the people who will accept him. In the judgment, everyone's knee will bow to him.

Jacob told his sons that he was to be buried in the cave with his grandparents Abraham and Sarah, his parents Isaac and Rebekah, and his first wife Leah. It is interesting that he chose to bury the "hated" wife, the one he didn't want to marry, in the family tomb next to where he would be buried. Over the years she became the special wife. Today it seems that many couples give up on marriage before it has time to reach that long-lasting love. The story of Jacob and Leah's marriage should give us hope that marriages can last if we give them time and chance.

Jesus tells the parable of a man who hired workers for a vineyard. He hired workers at 6am, 9am, noon, 3pm, and 5pm, whenever he could find them. At the end of the day, he paid them all the same, the wage for a full day's work. It was due to his generosity. When some who were hired in the morning complained, he said, "Are you stingy because I am generous?" So also with us. We are saved because of the generous grace of our God, not because we have served him for a certain period of time. When we come to Jesus, we work for him for the rest of our lives.

January 21

Hindsight is better than foresight. We often cannot see clearly how God is working in our lives while his work is going on. Joseph could not see that the children of Israel needed to be in the northwest Egyptian delta called Goshen when the famine was scheduled to come some 27 years later. All he could see was that his brothers were selling him as a slave who was being taken to Egypt. Later he could not see that he needed to be in prison to meet the royal cupbearer and interpret his dream. All he could see was that he was being unjustly accused by his master's wife. And he at first could not see God's hand at work when his brothers appeared to buy grain and bowed before him. He only saw a way to rescue his full brother Benjamin from their hand. It took a while for him to realize the working of God and what his role in it was. When his brothers came to him asking for forgiveness after their father died, he said that even though they meant to harm him, God meant it for good in order to save many people from the famine. Do we have the hindsight to see the hand of God at work in our lives? Are we even looking for God's working in our lives?

When a later Pharaoh issued an edict that Hebrew baby boys should be thrown in the Nile River, the mother of Moses hid her baby for three months rather than obeying such an evil command. The writer of the book of Hebrews says that it was his parents' faith that led to this action. When the world is going crazy around us, do we have the faith to act differently than expected and follow God's will instead of the world's?

Moses was well off, having been raised in Pharaoh's house as the son of his daughter. It was, however, his sense of justice that caused him to visit his people and kill the Egyptian man who was beating a Hebrew. That same sense of justice caused him to attack the shepherds who were driving away the young daughters caring for Reuel's flock. The writer of the book of Hebrews says that it was his faith that led to these actions. Do we have the sort of faith that sees injustice in the world and drives us to try to correct it? Or are we just happy being well off?

January 22

God appeared to Moses as a fire in a bush that kept burning and the bush was not burned up. He did this to get Moses' attention. What does God have to do to get our attention?

When God spoke to Moses from a burning bush, Moses asked God what his name was. God responded with two answers, one a verb and one a noun. First, he said "I AM who I AM. Tell them I AM has sent you." The Greek Old Testament translates this as "I am the being" or "I am the one who is." He simply exists. He IS! Then he says that his name is YaHWeH (these are probably the right vowels, but vowels aren't written in the old Hebrew text; English speakers tend not to pronounce the H at a syllable end). This name comes into English as JeHoVaH (an alternate of YeHoWaH). It is usually translated as LORD or GOD (in all caps) in our Bibles except in the word "hallaluYaH," using the short form of the name. It probably means something like "Being." God is the Being who always exists. Do we who are in this world only temporarily give the honor due to the Being who always exists and has created us? God describes himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is a personal God. Do we believe that the Being is our personal God?

When God told Moses he was sending him back to Egypt to deliver his people from slavery, Moses began to make excuses: People will ask your name; they won't believe me; I can't speak well; just send someone else. When we read in the Bible what God wants us to do, do we make excuses? God didn't accept Moses' excuses. Do we think that he will accept ours?

God told Moses that he would force Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go with a mighty hand. In the same way Jesus has redeemed us from Satan with a mighty hand. He did not pay Satan anything for us, but it did cost him his life, his blood shed on the cross. But it was by the power of his resurrection that he was declared to be the Son of God, and that death and resurrection are what saves us today.

January 23

Our English translations follow the New Testament wording of "hardening the heart" in rendering the Old Testament passages on the subject. Interestingly, there are three Hebrew terms used for the concept, all of which refer to being stubborn. That is our problem sometimes. Just like Pharaoh, we don't want to change our minds. The book of Exodus uses the language of strengthening the heart (60% of the time), making weighty the heart (30% of the time), and hardening the heart (10% of the time). God told Moses that he was going to make Pharaoh's heart strong and hard and he would multiply the number of miracles in Egypt because of this. When Moses met with Pharaoh and told him that God wanted his people to go into the wilderness to worship him, Pharaoh made his heart strong and weighty and refused to let the people go. As the most powerful person in Egypt, Pharaoh had always gotten his own way. He was not going to let a strange God tell him what to do. Are we like that sometimes? We don't like what God is telling us to do, and so we resolve not to do it. We can think of all kinds of reasons why God is wrong.

God did not make Pharaoh's heart strong and weighty until Pharaoh had repeatedly done so himself. At first God had Moses present signs that resembled tricks that Pharaoh's magicians knew how to do. No doubt their tricks help convince Pharaoh that this God had no special power. This reinforced his natural stubbornness. By the time the magicians couldn't do the same miracles and told him, "This is the finger of God," he couldn't change his mind and admit he was wrong. Is this ever us? Do we have to always be right? Will our stubborn wills yield to God?

Moses and Aaron were not young when they confronted Pharaoh. They were 80 and 83, respectively. Sometimes we make excuses like "I am too old" or "I am too young" or "I don't know enough." The real power however is with God. Moses had tried to make excuses, but God said that He would be with Moses. God will be with us and give us the ability we need to serve him.



January 24

As the plagues increased in Egypt and it became apparent that these were not just magic tricks that the magicians knew, Pharaoh decided to negotiate with God. To get rid of the flies, he agreed that the Israelites could worship God but they should stay in the land of Egypt. When Moses pointed out that the sacrifices of the Israelites would be abhorrent to the Egyptians, Pharaoh agreed they could leave but not go far away. However, when the flies were gone, he reneged on his agreement and refused to let the people go worship. Three plagues later, during a massive hail storm, he called for Moses and agreed to let the people go. But when the hail stopped, he reneged on his agreement again. He was only saying this to get temporary relief. How about us? Do we turn to God when life is tough but forget him when things are running smoothly once again? When Moses predicted a plague of locusts, Pharaoh under pressure from his officials began to negotiate with God once again. Only the men could go. But Moses held to God's original demand that everyone would go worship, women and children too. God wants men to worship, but not just men. When Moses threatened darkness (thus attacking a primary false god of the Egyptians, the sun), Pharaoh again tried to bargain with God: everyone can go, but leave the animals needed for sacrifice behind, thus undercutting the worship. Do we sometimes want to negotiate with God as if his will is not sovereign? Do we want to strike a bargain with him, letting us do a little of our own will instead of wholly his will?

Beginning with Exodus chapter 10, the narrative switches from Pharaoh hardening his own heart to God hardening (strengthening) Pharaoh's heart. Did he do that directly, or did he use the officials surrounding Pharaoh? God had hardened their hearts too. What were they advising Pharaoh to do? Were they encouraging Pharaoh not to back down but remain strong? People often want to appear pleasing to those around them. This is called peer pressure. Do we bow to peer pressure? Are we more concerned with what people around us think than with what God thinks? Do we listen to others rather than read the Bible?

January 25

When the locust plague came, Pharaoh confessed to Moses, "I have sinned." He asked that the plague be taken away, but when it was, he still stubbornly refused to let the people of Israel go. Confession of sin is important. The apostle John in his first letter says that if we confess our sins, God will forgive them. However, sometimes people mistake confession of sins for repentance. Pharaoh had not repented. When the Jewish leaders came to hear the preaching of John the Baptizer, he told them to bring forth fruit worthy of repentance. It is not enough to hear the preaching of the gospel; it must change our lives. Sorrow for sin is good if it is God's kind of sorrow, which leads to repentance, but there is also the world's kind of sorrow that leads to death. Peter had the former after denying Christ while Judas had the latter after betraying him.

After the plague of darkness Pharaoh told Moses that if he should show his face again, Pharaoh would have him killed. So Moses in hot anger said that Pharaoh would never see his face again; rather, God would send one more plague, the death of all the firstborn people and livestock of Egypt, and then Pharaoh's officials would come to Moses and tell him to take the people of Israel and leave the country. Now the anger of men does not work the righteousness of God. But Moses was angry because Pharaoh refused to obey God. Jesus showed anger when the Jewish leaders had turned the temple into a profit-making marketplace. There is a righteous kind of anger about people disrespecting and disobeying God. But most of our anger comes when we feel personal hurt. The apostle Paul says that we should not let the sun set before we get over that kind of anger.

God told Moses that the people of Israel should kill a lamb and put the blood on the lintels and doorposts of their houses so that the destroyer would pass over them. He wanted them to keep the Passover feast annually to remember this event and teach their children about it. Jesus is our Passover Lamb whose blood saves us. He asks us to keep the Lord's Supper often to remember his sacrifice to save us from our sins.

January 26

When God struck down the firstborn of people and livestock in Egypt, he had Moses to tell the people that their firstborn belonged to him. They were to sacrifice clean firstborn livestock and redeem unclean firstborn livestock. Firstborn sons were to be redeemed. When God saves us, he expects something in return. Are we willing to give back to God when he blesses us? There is no way we could ever pay him back, but he expects something in return. Or do we try to take advantage of God and his gracious mercy?

Some people never learn from experience. When Pharaoh realized that his decision to send the Israelite people away meant that Egypt was losing their service, he gathered up his chariots and army and set out to bring them back. This did not turn out well for him and his army. Do we, like Pharaoh, stubbornly refuse to change? Do we reject God's will for us over and over again?

When the Israelite people heard that the Egyptian army was coming after them, they were afraid. They thought they were going to be killed by the army. They complained to Moses, saying that it would have been better to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness. They had forgotten that God had redeemed them from that slavery by his mighty power. They had let their fear overcome their faith. They had the faith to follow the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, but not the faith to realize that God would protect them from the army. Do we have faith to overcome our fears? When Jesus says that he will be with us to the end of days, do we believe him?

The Egyptian army should have had a clue that God was protecting the Israelites when the pillars of cloud and fire held them back while the Israelites crossed the Red Sea. But they recklessly followed the people into the crossing between the walls of water. When God began to clog their chariot wheels, they realized he was fighting for the Israelites. By that time it was too late to turn back. Unbelievers wait until it is too late.

January 27

After the Israelites had safely crossed the Red Sea, they saw the dead bodies of the Egyptian army on the seashore. From this they learned to fear God and believe in him. They had been afraid of the Egyptians and lacked the faith that God would save them. God had saved them anyway, and this led to their faith. Do we look at how God has worked in our lives and have our faith grow as a result? Moses led them in a song praising God for his deliverance. James says that if anyone is happy, that person should sing songs of praise.

As God led the people in the wilderness, he provided for them. When they came to Marah, the water was bitter. But God showed Moses how to make the water drinkable by putting a certain kind of a piece of wood in the water. All of this was a test of whether the people would learn to trust God for what they needed day by day. He promised them that if they would obey him, they would not suffer from the diseases that the Egyptians had. God gives good laws that are for our benefit. What the Israelites learned, however, was how to complain: It would have been better to have died in Egypt where we had meat and bread than to be killed by hunger in this desert. God heard their complaints, and being the gracious God, he told Moses that he would give them food. Moses told the people that they were not really complaining against him but against God. Do we look at the provisions that God has given us and complain because we want more? How thankful are we for what we have? God gave them manna (meaning "what is it") in the mornings six days a week (with double on Fridays) that they could make into bread. But they had to gather it. Just because we have to work to get our food does not mean that it doesn't come from God.

When the Amalekites attacked Israel, Moses sent Joshua to lead the Israelite army against them. Moses went to an overlook with Aaron and Hur. When he raised his staff, the Israelites would win, but his arms got tired and he let them down. Aaron and Hur held up his arms so that Israel would win. Do we hold up the arms of someone who is tired?

January 28

There is a saying: If you want something done, you should do it yourself. Moses was trying to lead the people of Israel all by himself. He would stand before them every day teaching and judge any disagreements that came up. His father-in-law visited him and said, What are you doing? You will wear yourself and these people out. He advised Moses to appoint judges over groups of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens of people and let them judge the easy matters. They could bring the hard cases to Moses. This is how Moses learned to delegate the responsibility of leadership. Do we try to do everything all ourselves? Are we afraid that it won't be done right unless we do it? Do we wear ourselves out by refusing to share the work? Paul told Timothy to teach what he was taught to men who would teach others also.

Moses gathered the people of Israel in front of Mt. Sinai and God spoke to them from the top of the mountain. There in a great voice he gave the Ten Commandments. He began by telling the people who he was and what he had done for them. Sometimes we omit that first statement in listing the commandments. It is important. Do we realize who God is and what he has done for us? That is why we obey him. It is not to earn our salvation. It is because he is our Savior. The first commandment is the primary one of the ten. He alone is to be worshiped. No one or thing else should take his place. Idolatry is the great sin. It puts something else in God's place. And we should not disrespect God by flippantly using his name. It seems common these days to hear the word 'God' used as an exclamation. We learn to honor God by honoring our parents. God also wanted the Israelites to take Saturday as a day of rest. It is easy to overdo and wear ourselves out. He also gave commandments about how we treat others. Do not murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, covet (that is, have greedy desire). Jesus said that these sins start from the inside with things like anger and lust. The people were afraid when they heard God speak. God told Moses that this was a good thing. If they feared him, they would obey him. Do we show our fear of God by obeying him? If not, we need to be scared.

January 29

God not only gave the Israelite people the Ten Commandment but also many other laws. A good number of them have to do with justice, what is the right thing to do. A person who is entrusted with keeping an item safe incurs a liability if the item is destroyed or goes missing. From this we learn that we must be people who can be trusted. To not take care of someone else's property is a kind of stealing from them. If someone causes damage to someone else's property (such as by fire), they are liable to pay for that damage. While we are no longer under the Law of Moses, these laws set principles for us as to what God considers the just thing to do.

God sees sex as tied to marriage. One of the laws regarded a man who seduced a virgin. Under the law that man had to pay the bride wealth fee to her father, and if her father would let him marry the woman, he had to take her as his wife. Our society has tried to divorce sex from marriage. The result has been children born out of wedlock with no father to bring them up, children killed before they were born, the spread of sexual disease, heartache and personal problems, and on occasion, murder.

The law forbade cursing a leader of the people. Somehow in the society in which we live, people who claim to be Christians have horrible things to say about the leaders of our people. Paul told Timothy that we should pray for our leaders. This was in a society where Nero was Caesar and was soon to persecute Christians. It is true that our leaders often do not act in the way that God would have them do. But our calling is to pray, not to criticize. Do we pray for our leaders or say bad things about them?

The Israelites were forbidden to oppress people of another race who lived among them because they themselves used to be foreigners in the land of Egypt. Are we prejudiced against foreigners who come to our country or do we follow the Golden Rule that Jesus taught?

January 30

God told the Israelites that when he brought them into the land of Canaan, they were not to bow down to the gods of the inhabitants. Instead, they were to tear down their idols and pillars. He would help them by driving out the inhabitants with hornets and they should drive out those who remain. They should not make a covenant with those people or their gods. They should not let them continue to live in the land because they would cause the Israelites to sin. Is that because evil seems to spread faster than good? Do we learn a lesson of association from this? With whom do we associate? With what kind of people do we let our children associate? Do we influence them for God, or does their influence lead us away from him?

Moses told the Israelites all the laws that God commanded them, and they said that they would keep all his commandments. So Moses sacrificed animals and collected the blood. He wrote down the commandments and read them to the people. Then he sprinkled the collected blood on the people and said, "Here is the blood of the covenant." At the Last Supper, Jesus said the same thing when he blessed the cup and gave it to his disciples to drink. It pictured the blood shed on his cross that not only takes away sin, but also establishes a new covenant with us. It is interesting that at the Lord's Supper we often hear people mention the forgiveness of sins found in Matthew's account, but rarely hear the word covenant found in all four of the accounts of that sacred meal. When we take the Lord Supper, do we resolve to keep all of God's commandments in his new covenant? If not, why not?

God told Moses to come up the mountain and bring Aaron, his sons Nadab and Abihu, and seventy elders of the people to see God. They saw a beautiful vision of God on a transparent blue pavement. Nadab and Abihu were later killed by God when they made up their own way of worshiping him. Their spiritual experience did not change their hearts to follow God's way. Do we rely on experiences that we have had rather than on what God tells us in his word that he wants?

January 31

God told Moses to take an offering from every one of the Israelites whose heart prompted them to give. The gifts included all kinds of items used to build the tabernacle and worship God in it: gold, silver, bronze, blue, purple, and crimson yard, leather, wood, oil, and incense among other items. It was to be a sanctuary where God could dwell in the midst of his people. Expensive items were given for the glory of God. Do our hearts prompt us to give for God's glory? Does he get the expensive gifts or the leftover money?

God gave Moses instructions on how to build the tabernacle and the items in it. He said that these should be built according to the pattern shown to him on the mountain. God gave specific instructions regarding the materials that were to be used and the dimensions of the tabernacle, its court, and the furniture inside and outside of it: the ark of the covenant, the table for the bread of the Presence, the lampstand, the inner and outer curtains, the altars of burnt offerings and incense, and the bronze basin. He also specified what the priests' clothing would look like and how to make the incense and anointing oil. However, there were some things that he left up to the builders. He did not specify the thickness of the gold plating on the ark of the covenant, the shade of blue on the curtains, or the height of the cherubim embroidered on the curtains. When God tells us what he wants in his word, we should do exactly what he says. But there are some details about how to do it that he leaves up to us. The danger is that sometimes we get mixed up about what are the commands of God and what are our time-honored ways of carrying out those commands. Do we sometimes demand that others carry out God's commands in exactly the same way that we carry them out? When we do so, are we putting ourselves in the place of God?

The names of the sons of Israel were to be inscribed on stones sewn on the high priest's garment to bring them to God's memory. While we do not wear clothes listing the names of our brothers and sisters in Christ, we can bring them to God's memory in our prayers. Do we do so?