

Images of God

God is mystery. We cannot begin to fathom who or what God is really like. All we have are the human words and human images of Scripture (even though divinely inspired) with which we try to describe what God is like. These images give us a glimpse of certain aspects of God, but they cannot begin to contain the whole truth.

There are a few inherent problems with images:

1. Images are very personal – so a word or thought that might convey a very positive message to me, might be negative or upsetting to you, depending upon your experience. One image may convey many mixed messages.
2. Images are one dimensional – they make an effort to convey one or two aspects of God, but may leave out another balancing quality or characteristic. They may not include ‘both sides of the coin’.
3. Images come from our human understandings and are tainted with human sin. When we compare God to a human image, we must be careful we are not limiting God to that human’s character or assume all aspects of the image also pertain to God.

The goal of this study is to look at the images or descriptions of God that we have in Scripture and what they teach us about God. We also want to understand how these images might possibly communicate a distortion of who God really is, because of our human experiences and understandings.

The outlines for most of these lessons are taken from the Lord’s Prayer. There are many images contained in that familiar prayer given us by Jesus and each week we will explore the ideas contained there.

OUTLINES

1. “*Our Father* “: The opening line of the Lord’s Prayer conveys three images of God. The first image is that of **Father**. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he encouraged them to approach God as a Father figure and he, himself called God, “Daddy”. **Week 1 we will study the image of God as Father.**

2. “*Who Art in Heaven*”: The second image is that of a **God who dwells in heaven** – in a place above and beyond us. How is God both transcendent and immanent in our lives? Does this image create distance in our understanding of God’s work in our lives? This will be week 2 of our study.

3. “*Hallowed Be Thy Name*”: The third image is that of holiness. **God is holy.** What does that mean to us? What is holiness and how do we relate to this word. Is there anything else in our human experience that is holy – that we can compare it to?

4. “*Thy Will be done*”: Week 4 will study **God as All-powerful.** Is God in control of everything? How will His Will be done, in light of the gift of free will given to His creation?

5. “*Give us this day our daily bread*”: Week 5 will look at **God as our Provider.** What should we ask for and what shouldn't we expect in our prayers? What are our true needs? How do we partner with God in providing for the hungry, the sick, and the lost?

6. “*Forgive us our trespasses*”: **God as our judge.** Is the human image of the judge and the Canadian Justice System the best understanding of this concept of God as judge – God as righteous? What is God's view of justice in our world? Is God vindictive? Vengeful? To whom does his mercy extend?

7, “*Deliver us from evil*”: **God, as our deliverer** is the focus of Week 7. Again, what are our expectations of God when we find ourselves facing difficult times and struggles? Do we believe God acts the same on everyone's behalf, considering the rampant evil in our world today and the horrors taking place in countries around the world? Is this only an eternal promise, or does it have meaning in our daily lives?

8. “*For Thine is the Kingdom*”: **God, as our King.** In a democratic country, we are not familiar with the idea of an appointed monarch not of our choosing. We always need to counter the possibility of corruption in our government. God is the perfect ruler who rules for the best for His people. What is this Kingdom of God like?

9. “*The Kingdom and the power*”: **God, as the Creator – NOT as creation.** As we think of God as the author and life breathing power behind all of creation, how might we be drawn to worship the creation rather than the Creator? What are the subtle lines between seeing God in everything He has made, and believing that God IS everything made. God is over all, in all, through all. What does that mean?

10. “*Forever and Ever*” - **God as Eternal.** We are a people born into time. Life has a beginning and an end. Every day we are faced with change, with aging, with death, with birth. There is comfort in believing that God does not change – that there is something ‘everlasting’ in this life. But how do we really get our mind around this mystery. What is time?

Week 1: God as Father

Most of us develop our concepts and feelings about our heavenly Father from our earthly mothers and fathers, and these feelings become intertwined and confused. Good models breed positive images of God, bad models breed something else. But even our good models can be misleading and need to be looked at carefully.

Thought Starters:

1. What words come to mind as you think of your earthly father?
2. How would you describe your relationship to your earthly father?
3. In what ways, if any, do you relate similarly to your heavenly Father?
Examples: Did you know the unconditional love of your father, or did you feel the need to prove yourself. If your father was demanding and a perfectionist, do you view God as demanding perfection from you? Was your father someone who encouraged you, or was he hard to please? How does this translate to your understanding of God desires for your life?

Quote: From *Memories of God* by Roberta Bondi, Abingdon Press

“Unfortunately, we do not live in an unfallen world. The primary and earliest place we do learn about fatherhood, human and divine is from our own fathers, but the fatherhood we learn about is not unfallen fatherhood. In the world of experience, because our own fathers were wounded, even when they long to, they never do perfectly image God’s fatherhood. Without even meaning to, and sometimes even trying very hard not to, they have wounded us, their children, by the way they were fathers, just as we wound our own children, and so without intending to, our fathers pass on a wounded image of God’s fatherhood as well.”

“My earthly father, whom I worshipped and resented in equal measure, was a remarkable man. He was brilliant, funny and full of life. He was a loving man, but in those years of his youth, he also tolerated no imperfections or weakness in other people, no laziness, no disobedience from his children, or his wife, no sullenness, no arguing with him or asking “why.” As for his attitudes toward women and men, he held to an exaggerated version of the cultural stereotypes of the forties and fifties. He only respected men who were highly intelligent and would stand up to him and argue with him. , These same qualities in a woman, however, he found contemptible. The woman who won my father’s approval could not win his respect. A good woman was sweet and pliant, quiet and obedient.”

1. Because Roberta saw God as a bigger version of her father, she had many distorted views of God. What would these distortions be?
2. How might this affect her personal sense of worth, value and promise?
3. What are some other case scenarios that you know of where a woman might not be able to relate to the image of God as father because of her upbringing. For example, I know a woman who has never been forgiven by her father for dating a man who eventually became her husband. They continue to be estranged today. How might this make it hard for her to believe in the forgiveness of God?

Author's note: *The image of God as father was not meant to portray God as male because human fathers are male. The image is not to define gender, but rather the role that a father can play in the lives of children.*

Study Matthew 6: 5 - 14

1. What characteristics can we learn about God as a Father in these verses?
2. Do these images hold true for you as you have experienced God? Has your own earthly father clouded any of these images, or enhanced them by his own life example.
3. Read Matt. 5: 48. What does this verse mean to you in light of the struggle Roberta Bondi had with her perfectionist father? How do you understand these words and what God requires of us? How is 'perfect' defined in the preceding verses in Matt. 5: 43 – 47?

Roberta eventually found healing, not by dismissing the image of God as father, but rather by reclaiming it with new understanding.

Read Psalm 103: 1 – 14 to gain greater understanding of Fatherly Love

1. List the images and characteristics of God found in this Psalm:
 - Identify image e.g. vs. 3 God as Physician who heals all diseases:
2. Think about these questions:
 - Out of your personal experience, how have you found that image to be true?
 - Are there ways this image of God may not be fulfilled completely in this lifetime but gives promise for our future?
3. What would be the characteristics of a human father if he were more like the God described in this Psalm?
4. What is the most comforting thought when you think of God as Father?

Continue to read Psalm 103 throughout the week so that it sinks deep into the heart!

WEEK 2: Our Father, who art in Heaven.

The God who abides in heaven - that in itself is a tough picture to get a handle on. Does this mean that God is distant from us, above us, watching us run around like busy ants? When someone outside of the church hears us refer to a God in heaven, what image might come to their mind?

Thought Starter

1. How do you define heaven? Where is it or what is it? If you place God within your definition, where then do you visualize Him being?
2. Is God physically distant from you in your mind's eye? Is God emotionally distant or is he intimately involved in your life? How do you understand God to be immediate to all 6 or 8 Billion of His children at the same time?
3. Have you ever experience a feeling of absence from God? How did you resolve it?

Quote: Carolyn Arends writes in *Living the Questions* about a such a time when she lost a sense of God's presence. She writes:

Everything sane and solid and good in my life, everything I have believed effortlessly (instinctually and spontaneously, so that my believing was as natural as breathing), seemed all at once to disintegrate into absolutely nothing. Physically I felt sick to my stomach, heart racing, fists clenched. Emotionally, maybe even spiritually, I was in cardiac arrest. The life giving oxygen of faith and hope that had always sustained me was suddenly, inexplicably cut off.

I could not feel the presence of God.

This "dark night of the soul" lasted over an entire summer and as quickly as the feeling had crashed down upon her, God reveal himself through the splendor of the red Utah Canyons. Her loss had been the immediate experience of intimacy with God but her joy was restored by a glimpse of the Creator in the splendor of His Creation – his transcendent majesty.

To know God is to understand both the God of the Heavens and the God of our heart. The Scriptures give both images – one of incredible majesty and wonder, and another of an intimate friend.

Scriptural Snapshots:

Look up each of the following Scriptures and talk about what image comes to mind of God through the verses. Does God seem immanent (close and intimate) or does God appear transcendent (far above and beyond the likes of us!) or both?

Gen. 1:1,2

Gen. 2:7

Gen. 3:8

Exodus 19: 16 – 20

Job 1: 6 – 8

Revelation 7: 9 - 12

Isaiah 6: 1 – 3

John 14: 1 - 14

1. Are there any images that you relate to more easily than others?
2. What might happen if we emphasize one aspect of God over another? For example, if we only see God as dwelling in heaven, how does that affect our understanding of his presence with us? Or, if we see God only as a friend and companion, do we lose the sense of awe and majesty?
3. How do these images affect your prayer life? Do you have an image of God when you pray? Do you change the picture or image according to the kind of prayer you need?
4. How does the image of the Trinity help you to understand God both with us and beyond us?

Author's Note: *Different denominational traditions emphasize different aspects of the Trinity. Mainline denominations such as Anglican, Lutheran, and Presbyterian tend to emphasize God as transcendent and so their worship style is filled with more reverence, silence and respect. Evangelical churches focus on our "elder brother", Jesus and so worship is filled with intimate love songs. Pentecostal traditions celebrate the power and indwelling of the Spirit and their worship tends to be lively and emotional.*

5. What style of worship do you prefer and does this give you an insight into whether you tend to emphasize the transcendence or imminence of God in your perception of Him?
6. Do you find more comfort in believing God is above and "in charge" of it all or that God is close to you or within you to comfort and strengthen you?

Read Psalm 139 throughout the week and let this vision of God sink deep into your heart and prayer life.

Week Three – “Hallowed (holy) be thy Name”

“Holy, holy, holy” – this triune praise is repeated throughout the Old and New Testament in praise of our God. God is Holy – there is none who would debate that. And unlike other images, this image is not a human image, for whom or what else could be defined as holy on earth?

Since we have no human image to relate this to, what does it mean to be holy? My favorite definition of holiness is “something wholly other”. *Isaiah 40:25: “To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?” says the Holy One.*” God is “something other” than we have known or experienced before. God is ‘something other’ than scientists can discover, or mankind can create. God is “something other” than we have ever experienced. **From this, we know better what God is not, rather than what He is.**

Thought Starter

1. When you read in Scripture that you are to fear the Lord, how do you define fear?
2. When you read in the Scripture, “Fear not, for I am with you”, how do you define fear?
3. In human terms, when we fear something, it is because we feel threatened by it, or intimidated or out of control. Does any of this relate to how you might feel toward God?

Quote: from *Preparing for Jesus* by Walter Wangerin Jr. – Zondervan Publishing

When he saw the seraphim flying and heard their cries, the prophet Isaiah wailed, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips! Even the reflected glory of the Lord, flaming in the face of a living man, caused such mortal dread that the people of Israel “were afraid to come near” Moses after he had talked with the Lord.

Nevertheless, fear has been forgotten – both by the world and by Christians in general. We rush toward angels unafraid. We approach the blazing furnaces of the seraphim with no more apprehension than children who reach laughingly for fire.

Author’s Note; *It is Holiness that is a dreadful thing. It is in the face of Holiness that people fall down as if dead – their heart stopped in fearful awareness. It is angels that have to say ‘Fear Not’ when they come to Mary or the shepherds or to Abraham or Daniel. That is what really and truly causes dread.*

1. For what reasons does the presence of holiness evoke this heart-stopping fear?
2. What evidence do you see that the world has lost its fear of holiness? Why do you think that is?
3. How have Christians even lost this sense of fearing God's presence in our worship or prayer life?

And this is the truth that we fear the most – the truth that we are not white like snow. What we consider purity, is really as dirty and gray and grimy as an old rag. When we are face to face with Holiness in all its glorious brilliance, the truth of our own impurity is as painful as death itself.

Wangerin goes on to say that we must fear the Lord, before we can ever hear the words, "Fear not" and understand the grace and mercy that are contained in them.

Scripture Reading : Luke 12:1 – 10, Revelation 15:3,4

1. In Luke, what does Jesus tell us we should not fear, and what does he say we should fear? What do you fear about your own body? Is there anything you fear about death?
2. When you fear something, you give it power over your life. What are some of the fears in your own life that at times can take over control of you? Why does God ask us to fear Him only? How can your faith help you battle your fears?
3. What is the sin of the Pharisees that Jesus is addressing and what would be the warning to us?

Jesus tells us that we should not fear that which can only hurt the body – instead we need to fear the One that has eternity in His hands. We are not to fear darkness. We are not to fear death. We are not to fear evil – God is much stronger than all of these. But what we need to fear is the Holy one – the One who truly has the power to determine our destiny. That is who should command our fear. The passage then goes on to say, "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God, "Indeed the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."

*Jesus tells us to fear God because he has the power to throw us into hell and then in the next breath says, **BUT FEAR NOT!!! – He has no intention of doing that.** Because you are loved and cherished – every hair on your head numbered. Don't ever doubt what God has the power to do, but with that knowledge and respect comes the confidence that out of love, God will do everything in His power to bring you to life eternal.*

End with Psalm 99 and continue to read this Psalm throughout the week to that it sinks deep into the heart!

Week 4: “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done”

We believe in an all-powerful, almighty God – the ruler of the universe who will one day draw all creation unto Himself. What do these words, “all mighty” convey in our world? How does God use power as opposed to how the world uses power? How does Christ crucified seem to convey a different image of power and control than we are used to? How do we understand the promises of Psalm 91 if we lived in the Sudan or in Indonesia or China?

This study will try to grasp what God is willing and not willing to do in our world, and what the promises truly mean for us.

Thought Starter

1. What are some of the areas in your life that you feel you have power over – a sense of control and believe that your will is being done in those areas?
2. What are the areas that you feel are not yours to control at all and you gladly relinquish them in prayer?
3. What areas do you believe God has control and power over in our world?
4. Do you think there are any areas in which God is powerless – or does not control?
5. How does God’s will and his power relate to our free will and personal choices?

Quote: from “What is the Father Like?” By Phillip Keller

Almighty. The sound is so ominous. Does it frighten you to think I am all mighty and all powerful?

I am not distant or detached. Never haughty, rude or disdainful. Quite the opposite! My strength enables me to care for you tenderly. In my mighty keeping you are safe. You need not be alarmed. Always when I have come to my own I come in peace and goodwill – whispering, “Fear not. It is I, be not dismayed!” . . .

I am mighty . . . mighty in compassion to those who are contrite in spirit. Let me remind you it is the gentle who are strong. The mightiest are those who can lift up the fallen. The most powerful are those who can produce peace.

Scripture Reading: I Corinthians 1: 18 - 31

1. What are some of the things that give man/woman power here in society? (i.e. money, position, intimidating personality)
2. Are these the same things that God would grant us by His power? Then what kind of power does the Spirit give us?
3. How was God’s power revealed in the crucifixion (not the resurrection)? How does the crucifixion reveal how God uses his power among us?

4. What is the foolishness of human power in comparison to Godly power?
5. Do you believe that God 'controls' through power? In what way does love operate that is different from control by force?
6. Have you ever confused love with control, and tried to control another's behavior or responses? How ?

Quote: Song by Carolyn Arends: "It's Out of My Hands"

And so I stand here
 Looking at all that I have made
 Fallen in ruins and it would seem that

It's out of my hands – there's nothing I can do
 The best laid plans again have fallen through
 I thought my world was under my control
 Now I can't believe
 Just how glad I am – It's out of my hands.

My favorite delusion
 I must control the universe
 Failure brings freedom
 You are God, and I'm not so

And so I stand here
 Looking at all that You have made
 Learning to place my
 Life in your keeping

Its' out of my hands
 I know this much is true
 The best laid plans All belong to you
 When I know my world is under you command
 I can't believe just how glad I am
 It's out of my hands.

Psalm 91

- 1) Do you take these promises literally in daily living? What do they mean to you? How would you understand these promises if you lived in Sudan and some family members had been murdered for being Christian?

Author's Note: *It seems to me that God promises to protect what is most important in life. We might think our job is important, but if we lost it, we would carry on in a new way. We may think our home is important, but if we lost it, we would survive. We might lose loved ones and grieve their loss, but we would know of their eternal reward. We might lose our own life, but we would be safe in the arms of Jesus.*

Continue to read Psalm 91 throughout the week to that it sinks deep into the heart!

Week 5: God, the Provider: “Give us this day our daily bread”

Carrying on from last week’s study we look at how God uses his power on our behalf. What can we expect God to give to us? Does God “help those who help themselves” – or does God help those who depend upon Him for all things?

Thought Starter:

1. In your personal experience, what has God been faithful to provide you with? Share any distinctive memories where you believe God provided for you at just the right time.
2. Have you had times when you lacked what you needed - not just wanted, but truly needed at a particular time in your life? Was this a challenge to your faith and did God come through in the end?
3. Have you ever felt ‘let down’ by God?

Quote: *Meditations of a Hermit:* By Charles de Foucauld

Don’t economize in almsgiving. Cut off nothing in charities, rather increase them if anything. “Give and it shall be given to you. In the measure that you do to others, so it shall be done to you. What you give to the poor you give to me”. **The best way of always having enough is to share generously with the poor, seeing in them the representation of Jesus himself.** And then be full of confidence. “He who gives life will also give the nourishment. He who gave the body will give the clothing. Seek the Kingdom of God and his Justice (that is to say, perfection) and the rest shall be given unto you.” This is said for all Christians and not only for monks. Be full of confidence. Keep yourself from all anxiety.

1. In what ways does your faith in God help you to be a more generous person? Are there times that you wrestle with giving to charities? What principle might help us decide when it is good to give and when it is okay to say no?

Scripture Reading: Matt. 6: 25 – 34

1. What are the areas of our lives that the Scripture specifically says not to worry about?
2. What does this passage reveal about priorities? Where does God desire that our energies be placed?
3. The North American work ethic is considered part of our Christian heritage as well. Do you see any conflict between this passage of Scripture and the concept of working hard to provide?
4. What is the balance between participating in the filling of God’s promises and trusting God to meet your needs?

5. Think about countries where a child's basic needs are not being met. How does sin interfere with the provisions of God? Are North American Christians doing enough?

Author's Note: *North America is a wealthy nation by worldly standards. When we give to charity, too often we give out of our excess. This is not sacrificial giving. But very few of us feel that we have too much. It seems each month is a challenge to meet our bills and to participate in the activities that we want to. It is hard to find that balance of using what God has given us to help others and to honestly know what is 'enough' in our own lives.*

A question each Christian must also ask is, are we a wealthy nation because God has blessed us for being a "Christian Nation" or are we wealthy because we have taken advantage of poorer nations. Are we wealthy because of our work ethic, our capitalistic policies, our natural resources and good soil, or by the hand of God?

*It is also important to remember that material wealth rarely brings people closer to God, but rather the opposite. The more that we have, the more independent we become for we do not need to lean on God or others as much. The more secure we are in our own abilities, the less we depend on God to provide and the less we count on the promises of Scripture. **Be careful when you equate material goods with blessings from God, unless you are prepared to use them in service to God!***

Quote: from Oswald Chambers, "My Utmost for His Highest"

Do we expect God to come to us with His blessings and save us? He says – *Turn to me and be saved.* The great difficulty spiritually is to concentrate on God, and it is His blessings that make it difficult. Troubles nearly always make us look to God; His blessings are apt to make us look elsewhere. The teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is, in effect – *Narrow all your interests until the attitude of mind and heart and body is concentrated on Jesus Christ. "Turn to me".*

Read Psalm 104: 24 – 35

1. Do you believe that you are honestly depending on God for your daily needs, or do you trust in your abilities to provide?
2. How do we break down the idols of material wealth in our lives and truly seek after the Kingdom of God and his righteousness?

Throughout the week Read Psalm 104: 24 – 35 and let it sink deeply into your heart.

Week 6: God as Judge, “Forgive Us our Trespasses”

In a day when we would much rather talk about a God of love than a God of Judgment, this is an important study to consider. How does God judge and whom does he judge and how often? Is this something that happens daily or only in the last days at the return of Christ?

Thought Starters:

1. What is your image of a human judge? Does this fit with your image of God?
2. Is the idea that God is a judge a comforting idea to you, or is it uncomfortable and why?
3. Do you believe Christians will face any kind of judgment or is it reserved for non-believers? Is there more than one judgment?
4. Have you ever felt that every move you make is being watched and evaluated by ‘the big guy upstairs’? Did you ever feel like that as a child? In your Christian maturity, what new image has replaced the old?

Scripture Reading: Matthew 25: 31 – 46 / Eph. 2: 8 – 10 / James 2: 14 – 26

1. Does not Matthew sound like we are to be saved through our works, not our faith? Is there any mention of faith in this passage? How does Jesus separate the sheep from the goats? Is it according to faith or works? Is this passage referring only to those outside the Christian faith or to everyone?
2. Look at Ephesians and Paul’s recipe for salvation: Note that we are saved **BY grace** (this is God’s initiative) **through faith** (this is our response) **for good works** (this is our calling). Whether a person does good works or not, it is always God’s grace that redeems us, for no one could ever be good enough. How do you reconcile these verses with the ones just read in Matthew?
3. Read James and discuss how he connects both faith and works into salvation. Matt. 7: 16 says that you shall know a tree by its fruit. Is James explaining how God looks upon us and judges us, or rather how we might discern the will and actions of those around us? Matthew seems to be giving us a method of evaluating the actions of others – not that we are judge, but rather that we are not swayed by false teachings.

Author’s Note: *Thank God that none of us will ever be called upon to judge the soul of another human being. God knows the heart, but we cannot. We can see the fruit and understand some of the truth of a person, but only God will make the final call at judgment time. And we know that the Lord, the compassionate and gracious Lord (is) slow to anger, abounding in love. (Ex. 34:6). **God knows the heart** – God knows the intent and motivation behind all of our actions. If God*

looks on the heart, then we need not fear judgment if our heart is set upon doing the will of God. And since none of us is ever pure of motive, clean of heart, we also rest on the grace of God to forgive. James 2: 13 declares, "Mercy triumphs over judgment".

Quote: Buechner, "Wishful Thinking" – pg.48

We are all of us judged every day. We are judged by the face that looks back at us from the bathroom mirror. We are judged by the faces of the people we love and by the faces and lives of our children and by our dreams. Each day finds us at the junction of many roads, and we are judged as much by the roads we have not taken as by the roads we have.

The New Testament proclaims that at some unforeseeable time in the future God will ring down the final curtain on history, and there will come a Day on which all our days and all the judgments upon us and all our judgments upon each other will themselves be judged. The judge will be Christ. ***In other words, the one who judges us most finally will be the one who loves us most fully.***

Romantic love is blind to everything except what is lovable and lovely, but Christ's love sees us with terrible clarity and sees us whole. Christ's love so wishes our joy that it is ruthless against everything in us that diminishes our joy. The worst sentence Love can pass is that we behold the suffering which Love has endured for our sake, and that is also our acquittal. The justice and mercy of the judge are ultimately one.

Though we are safe in the loving heart of Jesus as individuals who walk by faith, I wonder if we will be judged as a nation quite differently. Perhaps the wealth and bounty of North America will some day see a reckoning, because of our societal treatment of the poor, because of the injustice we have ignored or even promoted in other countries, for taking the wealth and resources from other nations with little given in return. We are not a Christian nation, nor are our Southern neighbors, contrary to what they may believe about themselves. God is judge. As a nation, are we sheep or are we goats? Are we the oppressed or the oppressors? The Scriptures make it clear what is required of us – to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God.

Read Psalm 9 then continue to read this Psalm through the week so that its message might sink deeply into your heart!

Week 7: God as Deliverer: “Deliver us from evil”

God, as our deliverer is the focus of Week 7. Again, what are our expectations of God when we find ourselves facing difficult times and struggles? Do we believe God acts the same on everyone’s behalf, considering the rampant evil in our world today and the horrors taking place in countries around the world? Is this only an eternal promise, or does it have meaning in our daily lives?

Thought Starters:

1. Deliverance: What comes to mind when you think of deliverance? What do we, as believers, need deliverance from?
2. What Scripture verses come to mind as you think of God’s protection over you – Is deliverance and protection the same thing?
3. In what areas are you confident that God will protect you? In what things do you feel less confident?
4. What is your understanding of evil and the request that we be delivered from that evil?
5. What is your answer to “why do bad things happen to God’s people?”

Quote: This is an excerpt taken from Regine King’s story of her life in Rwanda as a Tutsis. (See the full story in the Link and Visitor, Jan/Feb. 2003.)

After Easter, Regine prepared to go to Kigali to spend the rest of the holidays with her godmother, whose husband was a leader of an opposing political party. A seemingly insignificant incident stopped Regine from going.

She had purchased a Thermos flask, but left it at the shop. When she went back to pick it up, the shop was closed and she had to wait. By this time it was getting late, and it was dangerous to travel to Kigali after dark. She decided to wait until the next day. That night the president’s plane was shot down.

Although responsibility for the assassination has never been established, the killers did not wait long to start killing Tutsis. They had already prepared guns, machetes, and lists of people to kill. Within hours, Regine’s godmother and all who lived in her household were murdered.

“I knew from that moment that I would not die,” Regine says. “If God could use a little thing like a Thermos flask to keep me from being in that home where I would surely have been killed, I knew I was not going to die. I trusted him.”

1. Have you ever felt that you were protected for a special reason, as Regine did? Have you ever had a near death experience – or been saved from a terrible car accident? Did you ever think you might have been saved for a purpose? Did it affect your life and how you live it?
2. Why might God have chosen and protected Regine, but not others in her family? Do you struggle with the seeming inconsistency of who is protected and delivered from harm and who isn't?

Scripture Reading : 2 Corinthians 1: 3 – 11

1. Comfort: Where does the ability to truly be a comforter to others come from? What incident in your own life has helped you minister to others? Do you feel you can give thanks for that event in your life?
2. How do the sufferings of Christ flow over into your life? Do these sufferings come from within in your personal struggles or from without as in persecution? Is there a difference in how you face or deal with the pain?
3. Why was Paul so confident that God would deliver them (vs.10), yet they were suffering much persecution? What is the power of prayer that is revealed in this passage and Paul's experience?
4. Who are the enemies you need protection from? Who threatens your life – if not physically then emotionally or spiritually?

Author's Note: *When you read the Psalms, what do you think about as you read the call to defeat your enemies? It is always important to visualize who or what might defeat us in our journey. Perhaps pride is your enemy, or low self esteem, or an addiction that keeps you from experiencing full maturity in Christ. In prayer, we must have the confidence of David that God will deliver us from the enemies that keep us from the abundant life. He truly is our deliverer. As for physical harm, as believers we must remember that death is not defeat. Sometimes our lives will be required of us and we pray it will be for a higher purpose than we might ever know or understand.*

*When all is said and done, if God does deliver us, it is so that we can deliver others. If God comforts us, it is so we can comfort others. In the end, it is not about me – it is not about you, it is about me serving you and you serving others. **Read Luke 4: 18 – 19.** This is really the great commission – what Jesus was called to do and what he has called us to do.*

Read Psalm 70 and continue to read it through the week so that it might sink deeply in to your heart.

Week 8: God as King: “For Thine is the Kingdom

What image comes to mind when you think of a king? Is there any human king that is a worthy model of our Lord and God? Not even King Arthur can measure up to the kind of kingdom that God reigns over. Where is this kingdom and how do we experience it? Is it only in eternity or can we know this kingdom now?

Thought Starter:

1. How would you define the Kingdom of God?
2. What are the characteristics of a human king that correctly define the characteristics of God?
3. What are the human weaknesses of a king that do not affect God?
4. Consider that during the life of Jesus, the Romans were the ruling power and the wicked King Herod and his sons were in power. What would the promise of a new kingdom with God at the reins especially mean to them?
5. What benefits are bestowed upon the subjects of a benevolent king?
6. What benefits are bestowed upon the family members of that king?

Quote: from Robert Capon’s “Parables of the Kingdom” – page 20

If Scripture has a single subject at all . . . it is the mystery of the kingdom of God. It is about the mystery by which the power of God works to form this world into the Holy City, the New Jerusalem that comes down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. It means that it is not about someplace else called heaven, nor about somebody at a distance called God. Rather, it is about *this place here*, in all its *thisness* and placiness, and about the intimate and immediate Holy One who, *at no distance from us at all*, moves mysteriously to make creation true both to itself and to him. . . the Bible is concerned with the perfecting of what God made, not with the trashing of it.

Author’s Note: Jesus spoke in parables and his primary message was on the kingdom of God. Capon goes on to explain that Jesus spoke in riddles because the mystery was not only so great, but so contrary to the way we understand kingdoms and authority and power. He calls the working of God, “The Left-handed Power of God” which is paradoxical power for it looks to all the world looks like weakness. Right-handed power is straight, direct, concise and forceful. But left-handed power is guided by the more intuitive, open, and imaginative right side of the brain. Just try doing a few tasks around the house with the opposite hand that you are used to. You suddenly become very creative!!!

Scripture Readings: Luke 17: 20, 21 and Ephesians 2: 11 – 22

Ephesians 2: 11 – 22

1. These verses contain a whole new meaning to the phrase, “And the two shall become one.” In the Jewish world, there were two kinds of people, Jews and non-Jews or circumcised and uncircumcised. God widened his family of chosen people to include both groups – meaning all people. What benefits do the chosen now receive through Jesus?
2. Do we as Christians feel one with non-Christians? Why or why not might this verse parallel our Christian relationship to the world? How far does the kingdom of God extend? (consider vs. 17,18) Who can inherit the Kingdom of God?
3. Relate vs. 22 to Luke 17. One refers to the Kingdom of God being within us and one talks of becoming a holy temple – a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. How might you define the Kingdom of God in this context? Do all of these references only refer to believers?

Look at Matthew 13: 44 – 46

1. The Greek word for “hidden” contains the idea of mystery. Most interpreters of the parables see the ‘field’ as representative of the world. So if you read, “The kingdom of heaven is like a *mystery* hidden in the *world*”, what understandings might you gain from this parable?
2. The first parable seems to infer that a person stumbled upon this amazing mystery and recognized its value. The second parable of the Pearl of Great Price talks of a person who knows what he/she is looking for and when they find the real thing give up all else for it. Do either of these describe your journey to knowing God?
3. As believers, how might we ‘buy the whole field’ – or claim the whole world as containing the mystery of God? What are some of the attitudes that could be adjusted if we truly saw God’s presence all around us?
4. What do you need to release or sell off in order to claim the pearl of great price?

*The Kingdom of Heaven is not so much a place, as it is a **presence**. God’s kingdom is living in the presence of the King. There is no barred access by armed guards – we can enjoy the blessings of our King at all times. God is not exclusive in his kingdom – he desires all to enjoy its benefits and all of his creation to truly know they are the children of the King. Many people do not enjoy life with the King because they do not recognize the wonder and mystery of the Presence of God within each of us. Our calling is to point it out – to say to our neighbors, “I see God in YOU!” The Kingdom is here if you’d only open your eyes and your heart to the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords!*

Read Psalm 145 this week and let its truths sink deep into your heart.

Week 9: God as Creator: “And the power and the glory”

As we think of God as the source and life breathing power behind all of creation, how might we be drawn to worship the creation rather than the Creator? What are the subtle lines between seeing God IN everything He has made, and believing that God IS everything made. God is over all, in all, through all. (Eph.4:6) What does that mean?

Thought Starter:

1. Share times when an experience in nature has led you to worship. What inspired your response?
2. What does nature reveal to you about the character of God?
3. How is nature different than God?

Quote: from Madeline L’Engle, “Glimpses of Grace” - pg. 2, 3

It must have been an unusually clear and beautiful night for someone to have said, “Let’s wake the baby and show her the stars.” The night sky, the constant rolling breakers against the shore, the stupendous light of the stars, all made an indelible impression on me. I was intuitively aware not only of a beauty I had never seen before, but also that the world was far greater than the protected limits of the small child’s world which was all that I had known thus far. I had a total, if not very conscious, moment of revelation; I saw creation bursting the bounds of daily restriction, and stretching out from dimension to dimension, beyond any human comprehension.

I had been taught to say my prayers at night: Our Father and a long string of God-blesses, and it was that first showing of the galaxies which gave me an awareness that the God I spoke to at bedtime was extraordinary and not just a bigger and better combination of the grownup powers of my mother and father.

This early experience was freeing, rather than daunting, and since it was the first, it has been the foundation for all other such glimpses of glory. And it is probably why the sound of the ocean and the sight of the stars give me more healing, more whole-ing, than anything else.

Scripture Reading: Romans 1: 18 – 25

1. God says that he is revealed through his creation, yet many cannot see him. How does sin block our ability to recognize the Creator behind the creation?

2. If creation were the only witness or evidence to the existence of God, would you be a believer? What evidence would convince you and what would God be like?
3. Vs. 20 states that God's eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen. How do you experience God's eternal power in nature? And what is God's 'divine nature' that might be known through creation? (Try to think of what you might know without the Scriptures or any teaching you have received).
4. Vs. 25 warns of the danger of worshipping created things instead of the Creator. What are some of the spiritual paths that people you know are on that seem to fall short of finding God because they equate nature with God?
5. How do you reconcile the God of wrath described in these verses and the God of grace and love?

Author's Note: Ephesians 4:6 reminds us that God is not apart from His creation. He is not the absentee landlord that winds up the world and then steps away and lets it run its course. He is over all, and through all and in all. In our own lives, we know that we are never far from God. He is not 'up there, somewhere', but as close as our own beating heart. It is an intricate balance to know the "God within" and the Holy God who is far beyond what we can begin to imagine.

Quote: from Madeline L'Engle, *Glimpes of Glory*, pg. 244

During my journey through life I have moved in and out of agnosticism and even atheism, as I become bewildered by what mankind has done to God; and so, too often, I see God in man's image, rather than the other way around. But I cannot live for long in this dead-end world, but return to the more open places of my child's intuitive love of God, where I know that all creatures are the concern of God who created the galaxies, and who nevertheless notes the fall of each sparrow. And from the darkness I cry out: God!
And it is enough.

Read Psalm 8 together and then take it with you through the week

Week 10: God as Eternal: “Forever and ever, amen”

How do you get your mind around eternity? Is the world 6000 years old or 6 billion years old? How can we understand such lengths of time or distances – such as how far the stars are away from us? **God has always been and will always be.** There is comfort in that statement. Our own existence is a totally different story. We are here and gone like the fading grass or a breath of wind. What is our place in God’s magnificent story?

Thought Starters:

1. Are you afraid of dying? What is your vision of the afterlife? What do you think you might lose in dying and what do you believe you will gain?
2. Describe a situation when time seemed to last forever and another scenario when time seemed to fly by. Is time a constant measure?
3. How do you understand the place or importance of humanity in life, when from God’s time perspective, our existence seems to be a blink of an eye?

Quote: by Marva Dawn, “To Walk and not Faint”, page 36, 37

“All flesh is grass, and its constancy like the flower of the field.” Nothing in this world will ever satisfy our deepest longings, because everything in this world is merely temporary. We look around at all the things on which we stake our happiness and discover that they all provide only fleeting satisfaction. . .

To realize fully that our flesh is grass will not lead us to despair *unless we are dependent upon our own flesh for fulfillment*, unless we don’t have our priorities straight. The good news of our faith in Christ is that we are not in the slightest dependent upon ephemeral things.

The fact that our flesh is fleeting should do this one thing: It should drive us to total dependence upon the one who does not pass away. If the things of the world do not ultimately satisfy, if they do not push under our deepest longings, we can come to the realization that we are indeed made for another world – and that that world has already entered our own and changed it eternally.

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 40: 6 – 8, 2 Corinthians 4: 16 – 5: 10

1. How does the world try to hide the fact that it is temporary?
2. How do we hide that fact from ourselves?
3. What are some goals you have set for yourself, thinking that if you achieved them, you would be satisfied?
4. How can you experience the satisfaction of realizing that you are really made for another world? In what ways is it a comfort to know that Paul also recognized that we groan in our earthly tents, longing for more?

5. How might the Church better cry out to the world this message that it is ephemeral? Merely fading grass?
6. How would you describe this “other world” that you are made for? What is eternity?
7. Consider the message of the Book of Ecclesiastes. How does Solomon deal with this question of the meaning of life and its vanity?

Author’s Note: *Personally, I struggle with understanding what life is for, when it seems so brief as compared to God’s eternity. Why do we bother with this four-score and some odd years on earth, when it is such a struggle between good and evil, joy and sorrow, gift and loss? Why did God need this ‘stage’ when we could simply be born into eternity right from the beginning? I don’t have an answer to my question, except to realize that though I do long for more, there is much in this life that I wouldn’t trade for one minute. Life is a gift from God – a good gift that he affirmed through the Incarnation. It was good enough for God’s own Son to come and dwell on earth – it must have some extreme value in his eyes. If he cares enough to clothe the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, then this life matters. Yes, it is temporal and only a shadow of things to come, but it is important enough that we should live it to its fullest!*

Quote: by Madeline L’Engle, “Glimpses of Glory”, page 19.

On a small ship the ability to be aware of our tiny, yet significant part in the interdependence of all of God’s creation returns, and one’s mind naturally turns to cosmic questions, rather than answers. Seeing the glory of the unpolluted horizon, the brilliance of the Southern Cross against the black velvet sky, opened up questions about creation and the Creator.

And laughter, too, for though we cannot take ourselves seriously enough, we can also take ourselves far too seriously.

One of the sailors remarked casually as he was swabbing down the deck, “It’s a short walk from the womb to the tomb,” and jolted us back from cosmic time to mortal time.

But mortal time is part of cosmic time, and during that short walk we are given glimpses of eternity, eternity which was before time began, and will be after time ends. The Word, who moved into time for us and lived with us, lives, as Christ, in eternity: so, when we live in Christ, when Christ live in us we, too, are free from time and alive in eternity.

Consider Psalm 90 as you read it throughout the week.