

## S E R M O N N O T E S

The following teaching outlines may be used in both large and small-group settings. They have been designed primarily with busy pastors in mind, but small-group leaders will find them beneficial as well.

Pastors will find the outlines helpful for developing a teaching series based on *The Good Book*. Useful illustrations and large-group examples have also been included in this resource.

Small-group leaders can use the same outlines to facilitate dialogue in a smaller group setting. The small-group-discussion options that appear throughout each session are intended for this purpose.

### In the Beginning

First Message in *The Good Book* Teaching Series

Genesis 1:1, 27; 3:1; 12:1-3

#### **Introduction**

Consider your earliest memory. Some people have positive memories of a parent or a general sense of safety and security. But others who aren't as fortunate may have a negative or traumatic first memory. Whichever is the case, this is the beginning of your story.

*Small-Group Discussion:* What is your earliest memory? How old were you? What happened?

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor may choose to share his first memory, especially if it's humorous and engaging.

Genesis is a book about beginnings, a story of God's creative work that continues with us today. In *The Good Book*, we'll look at four beginnings that define our relationship with God and the world.

#### **I. The Beginning of the Universe—Genesis 1:1**

Many ancient civilizations had their own versions of a creation story. In most of these stories, one primordial being murdered another primordial being, and from this act of violence, the universe unintentionally sprang into existence. In the mind-set of these ancient cultures, the world was a violent place. What a hopeless view!

Modern culture, on the other hand, teaches that the universe is nothing more than an accident. Colliding atoms and randomly occurring chemical compounds somehow produced life. In short, you and I are here by pure chance. This worldview is equally hopeless because if we're an accident, our existence has no meaning.

Genesis offers a third explanation for our universe. Our existence isn't simply a random occurrence or the result of a violent act. A loving God *intentionally* created the entire universe, including us. Genesis 1 contains our first story, and it's a story of love. The Hebrew word for "created" in Genesis 1:1 is used forty-four times in the Older Testament to describe the work of a master craftsman.

*Small-Group Discussion:* What do you enjoy creating? Are you a painter? A writer? A scrapbooker? What do you feel as you create something new?

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor can share what he enjoys creating.

*Illustration:* In 1849, the Richardson brothers promised to forgive the outstanding debt of New York inventor

Walter Hunt if he could create something useful from a single piece of wire. Three hours later, the safety pin was born.<sup>1</sup>

1. Ian Harrison, *Take Me to Your Leader: Weird Facts, Bizarre Stories, and Life's Oddities* (New York: DK Publishing, 2007), 314.

## II. The Beginning of Humanity—Genesis 1:27

Two important words are used in Genesis 1 to describe who God created us to be.

A. *Image*. When you look into a mirror, you see a reflection of your appearance. The Hebrew word for “image” captures this idea. Our lives reflect God. Much as a mother might see some of her mannerisms and expressions in her daughter, so God sees echoes of himself in our identities.

*Small-Group Discussion:* Which of your parents do you take after?

*Large-Group Illustration:* The pastor may choose to talk about which parent he resembles.

B. *Likeness*. The word *likeness* means “to represent.” In the created order, we serve in the place of God. Indeed, we see this idea of representation revealed in God’s command to the first humans to bring order to creation and rule over it.

*Illustration:* The Lincoln penny was introduced in 1909 to commemorate the hundredth birthday of Abraham Lincoln. Victor D. Benner, the designer, placed his initials on the reverse side of the coin. Americans reacted negatively to the artist taking credit for his work. Public outrage was such that Benner’s initials were removed soon afterward. As a result, the pennies with his initials, which were fewer in number than those without his initials, are considerably higher in value. Coin collectors know that the initials VDB increase a coin’s value. In the same way, you bear the initials of God. You are valuable indeed!

## III. The Beginning of Sin—Genesis 3:1

Genesis 3 is the first encounter with Satan in Scripture. Satan is described as “crafty.” The devil can’t be trusted. He calls into question the wisdom and love of God’s clear commands.

A. Evil has a personality. The evil in our world isn’t an impersonal force. Satan is the ultimate opponent to God.

B. Evil is personal. Because Satan opposes God, he opposes all those who belong to God. As you resolve to follow Christ, you’ll face resistance from God’s enemy.

If you’ve ever felt that something is wrong with the world, you’re right! The Bible helps us understand and address the evil that exists on our planet.

## IV. The Beginning of God’s Plan—Genesis 12:1-3

Some two thousand years before Christ, God set in motion a plan for rescuing humanity from the problem of sin and the power of Satan. God told Abraham, “All the peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:2). That was a big promise! From this one man—Abraham—would emerge the nation of Israel. And from this one nation would emerge one man—Jesus Christ—to offer salvation to all of humanity.

*Small-Group Discussion:* What do you know of your ancestry? Has an important family story been handed down from generation to generation?

*Illustration:* Ancestry.com is a heavily used website. Intuitively we believe that by better understanding our origins, we’ll have a clearer grasp of our identity.

Likewise, understanding Jesus’s ancestry enables us to understand him better.

- God’s promise to Abraham, which was ultimately fulfilled in Jesus, tells us that God takes the initiative in

salvation. Before we could even ask for help, God was already answering.

- God is patient. His plan would require two thousand years to complete.
- God's people have always had great difficulty remaining faithful to him. Although salvation history is messy, God didn't give up. His love persevered on our behalf.

## Conclusion

As we begin this eight-week journey through forty essential chapters of the Bible, resolve to do more than read *The Good Book*. We'll explore the Bible's biggest ideas, but the biggest idea of all is the love of God. First John 4:10 says, "Love consists in this: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." From the very beginning, the Bible is a story of love.

## God Is Good When Life Gets Messy

Second Message in *The Good Book* Teaching Series

Judges 3:7

## Introduction

The Hebrew people were on their way. God had worked patiently to bring them into existence. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob became the founding fathers of the Hebrew people and faith. But troubled times were ahead. The Hebrews became slaves to the larger, stronger nation of Egypt.

But God is good even when life gets messy. The Hebrew slaves suffered brutal treatment for several hundred years. But when they cried out to God, he provided a deliverer—Moses. Moses led them out of Egypt and through their wilderness wanderings for forty years. Even though they sinned against God, he didn't abandon his people in the desert. In fact, it was there he gave them his law and provided for their needs.

When they finally settled in the Promised Land, they neglected and forgot God's commands. But God would prove faithful once again.

*Small-Group Discussion:* What has been one of the most difficult times in your life? What good did God accomplish through your messy situation?

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor may choose to share how he experienced God's goodness and grew during a difficult time in his life.

*Illustration:* Stephen Ambrose's book *Nothing Like It in the World* tells about the construction of the first transcontinental railroad in the United States that linked the East and West Coasts. As with every great accomplishment, there was a dark side. As the track moved west, a mobile town moved with it—complete with liquor, prostitution, and gambling. Known for its mobility and debauchery, the town was referred to as Hell on Wheels. Yet even in the messiness of the moment, something great was being built.<sup>2</sup>

2. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nothing Like It in the World* (New York: Touchstone, 2000), 217-18.

Today we'll focus on a dark page in Hebrew history recorded in the book of Judges. Moses and Joshua had led the Hebrew people to accomplish great things. But now, both of these leaders were dead, and no replacement could be found to motivate the people to remain faithful to God.

Judges 3:7 sums up the ethos of the age: "The Israelites did what was evil in the LORD's sight; they forgot the LORD their God." We, too, run the same risk of disobedience when we forget God in three specific areas.

## I. When We Forget God's Commands

One way we forget God is by neglecting his clear commands. How easily we forget the value of obeying him.

*Small-Group Discussion:* When have you forgotten some simple area of obedience to God? In what area of your life do you need to be reminded of simple obedience today?

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor may want to use this opportunity to talk through the Ten Commandments and remind people of the power of simple obedience.

*Illustration:* Gutzon Borglum was the sculptor who designed the Mount Rushmore monument. It took fourteen years for workers to carve the heads of four American presidents into the face of the mountain. Years before Borglum undertook this mammoth project, he was asked to carve the presidents' faces into ivory toothpicks. He turned down the offer because he knew he was made for greater things. Toothpick presidents impress no one. Only a mountain could serve as proper canvas for Borglum's art. Likewise, God has big dreams for us, but we can limit his dreams through our own shortsighted disobedience.

## II. When We Forget God's Blessings

Moses had warned the Hebrew people not to forget the Lord when they had been given land and blessings. Deuteronomy 6:10-12 says,

When the LORD your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that he would give you—a land with large and beautiful cities that you did not build, houses full of every good thing that you did not fill them with, cisterns that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you eat and are satisfied, be careful not to forget the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery.

How easily we forget that all blessings come to us from God! We deceive ourselves when we believe we deserve credit for our own success. When we forget God as the source of all blessings, we degenerate into selfish, arrogant, and ungrateful people.

*Small-Group Discussion:* What is one way God has blessed you? Recognize God as the source of all good things and express gratitude to him.

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor may choose to share a way God has blessed his life.

*Illustration:* In 2003, Dorothy Fletcher was on a flight to Orlando, Florida, when she had a heart attack. Over the PA, the flight attendant asked if there was a doctor on board. Fifteen cardiologists on their way to a convention in Florida raised their hands.<sup>3</sup> The right place at the right time! This kind of blessing can only come from God. He deserves credit for all of life's goodness.

3. "Gran's Heart Attack on Jet with Medics," BBC News, January 2, 2004, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/england/merseyside/3359149.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/merseyside/3359149.stm).

## III. When We Forget God's Promises

As we follow God, we experience two seasons. In the first season, God blesses us through our circumstances. In the second season, God blesses us not through circumstances, but only with himself. Perhaps we experience this second season as a reminder to worship the Giver, not the gifts themselves.

*Small-Group Discussion:* Recount the difficult time you mentioned in the first small-group discussion question in this session. What did God teach you during that time? How did you experience God when it seemed that he had withdrawn his blessings?

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor may want to list some of the biblical promises we have received from God, such as Deuteronomy 31:6, Joshua 1:9, and Isaiah 41:10.

## Conclusion

Though we might forget God, he will never forget us. Every day we have the opportunity to remember and recount God's

commands, blessings, and promises.

*Illustration:* Jeni Stepien's father died a decade ago. He was an organ donor, and his heart went to a man named Arthur Thomas. When Jeni got married, she asked Arthur to walk her down the aisle. Before he gave her away, he offered her the opportunity to put her hand on his chest and feel her father's heart beating.<sup>4</sup>

4. Katie Rogers, "Bride Is Walked Down Aisle by the Man Who Got Her Father's Donated Heart," *New York Times*, August 8, 2016, [www.nytimes.com/2016/08/09/fashion/weddings/bride-is-walked-down-aisle-by-the-man-who-got-her-fathers-donated-heart.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/09/fashion/weddings/bride-is-walked-down-aisle-by-the-man-who-got-her-fathers-donated-heart.html?_r=0).

In Jesus Christ, we experience the heartbeat of God's love for us. Even now, God gives us the opportunity to remember him and return to his love. Feel his heart beating for you today!

## God Is Big

Third Message for *The Good Book* Teaching Series

Psalms 23, 51, 139

### Introduction

Prayer is a challenge for many people. But what a resource we have as followers of Christ! At any time and in any situation, we can speak directly with our creator. Perhaps we make prayer more difficult than it needs to be. The Bible, however, illustrates the simplicity of prayer. In the book of Psalms, great God followers of the past recorded 150 heartfelt prayers, most of which are attributed to David, the great leader of the Older Testament. The book of Psalms motivates us to take advantage of the great gift we have of communicating with our God.

*Illustration:* In her book *Help, Thanks, Wow*, Anne Lamott contends that every prayer we pray can be boiled down to these three words. At times we ask God for help. At other times, we express gratitude. And sometimes, the goodness of God himself overwhelms us.<sup>5</sup>

5. Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* (New York: Penguin Group, 2012).

*Small-Group Discussion:* Which kind of prayer do you need to pray today: help, thanks, or wow?

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor may share which prayer he is currently praying and why.

Today we'll look at an example of each of these three prayers from the Psalms. The Bible gives us permission to talk openly and honestly with God. To do this, we need to eliminate superficiality in our prayers.

Three psalms, in particular, offer examples of the help, thanks, and wow prayers.

### I. Help—Psalm 23

Psalm 23 opens with the words, "The LORD is my shepherd" (v. 1). Sheep are defenseless creatures. They have no sharp teeth or claws to defend themselves against predators. How do they stay safe? The shepherd protects them. By calling God our shepherd, we're asking for his protection and provision.

*Illustration:* It's been said that modern life is defined by the five Ds: depression, debt, divorce, doubt, and death. Life can be overwhelming, but the Lord is still available to be our shepherd today.

*Small-Group Discussion:* Which of the five Ds are you dealing with today?

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor may share which of these issues he has dealt with before.

If appropriate, invite everyone to say in unison, “The Lord is my shepherd” as a simple way of praying “Help.”

## II. Thanks—Psalm 51

King David’s sin of adultery left him a broken man. Psalm 51 is considered the gold standard of asking for God’s undeserved forgiveness. The initial words of this psalm are an open admission of guilt. David offered no excuses; he owned his own failure and pleaded for the forgiveness of God.

It’s worth noting the profound difference between regret and repentance. Regret carries the idea of “I’m sorry for getting caught.” By contrast, repentance says, “I’m sorry for who I have become, and I’m now ready to change.” As you approach God for his forgiveness, be committed to repentance rather than mere regret.

At the conclusion of Psalm 51, David burst into thanksgiving: “Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise” (v. 15).

*Small-Group Discussion:* Have you ever taken an intentional inventory of your life and given deep and deliberate thanks to God? What are you profoundly grateful for today?

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor may share something for which he’s genuinely grateful.

*Illustration:* The expression “Mind your p’s and q’s” likely originated as an abbreviated way of saying “Mind your pleases and thank-yous.” As we thank God, we’re doing more than practicing polite behavior. Gratitude is an act of obedience to God.

## III. Wow—Psalm 139

Psalm 139 calls us to remember that life is an amazing gift. How dare we become bored with ourselves or the life God has given us! The author of Psalm 139 was amazed by the intricacies of his own life and the infinity of God’s creative imagination. In awe he prayed, “God, how precious your thoughts are to me; how vast their sum is!” (v. 17).

*Illustration:* When God populated the ocean, he filled it with a great variety of living creatures. The largest living animal in the ocean (that we know of) is the blue whale, which can grow as long as 110 feet. The smallest fish in the ocean is the dwarf pygmy goby, which is less than nine millimeters in length.

*Small-Group Question:* Take time to look around you and observe with amazement the creative nature of God and the goodness of life.

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor may take time to reflect on something he noticed this week that reflected the majesty and magnitude of God’s creative power.

We miss the wonder of life because we’re too hurried and worried about the circumstances and people around us. Praying “Wow!” requires us to slow down and savor the gift of life God has given each of us.

## Conclusion

The Psalms are a treasury of prayers that can teach us how to express our emotions to God. In his book *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “The richness of the Word of God ought to determine our prayer, not the poverty of our heart.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1974), 15.

Take some time each day this week to pray all three of these simple prayers: Help, Thanks, and Wow.

To enrich your own prayer vocabulary, make a concerted effort to pray through all 150 prayers in the book of Psalms. In the Psalms, we discover ways of expressing our hearts to God, no matter our circumstances. The psalmists teach us how to praise God when others panic. Psalms also encourage us to be resilient during the times in life when we’re most tempted to give up.

## Tough Love, Troubled Times

Fourth Message for *The Good Book* Teaching Series

Hebrews 1:1-2

### Introduction

In the Older Testament, God set apart an interesting and enigmatic group of people known as the prophets. Prophets do more than predict the future; they call people back to a right relationship with God. While many of the Older Testament prophets were out of step with popular opinion, they were in perfect sync with the will of God. They were devoted to God above all other considerations.

Roughly one-third of the Older Testament contains the writings of God's prophets. Why was so much space dedicated to these people? Collectively these servants of the living God tell us that he will not give up seeking a restored relationship with humanity.

*Small-Group Discussion:* Can you remember a time in your life when you sensed God pursuing you with his love even as you were attempting to avoid him?

*Large Group Example:* The pastor may share a time when he was far from God, and God restored him.

*Illustration:* US senator Bill Frist practiced medicine before going into politics. At a National Prayer Breakfast, Frist spoke about performing a heart transplant. In medical terms, he described the intricate procedure of placing a new heart into the body of a recipient. But he admitted that the first beat of a transplanted heart can't be adequately described in medical terms. It can only be described as a mystery.<sup>7</sup>

7. Bill Frist, cited in Mark Batterson, "A Primal Thought: The Tribe of the Transplanted," *Christian Post*, December 20, 2009, [www.christianpost.com/news/a-primal-thought-the-tribe-of-the-transplanted-42364/](http://www.christianpost.com/news/a-primal-thought-the-tribe-of-the-transplanted-42364/).

God's love is mysterious. No matter how much humanity pulls away, runs away, or pushes away from God, his heart still beats for us with forgiveness, patience, and the promise of peace.

The book of Hebrews was written well after the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Through the lens of Jesus, the writer of Hebrews accurately focuses our eyes on the purpose of the Older Testament prophets:

Long ago God spoke to the fathers by the prophets at different times and in different ways. In these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son. God has appointed him heir of all things and made the universe through him. (Heb. 1:1-2)

### I. "Long ago, God Spoke ... by the Prophets"

Communication is a mark of intimacy. No relationship can exist apart from communication. To say that "God spoke" is another way of saying that he chooses to love us, his creation.

The Older Testament prophets consistently invited people to return to a right relationship with God. In his book *Worship: The Missing Jewel of the Evangelical Church*, A. W. Tozer said that God desires to make "worshippers out of rebels."<sup>8</sup>

8. A. W. Tozer, *Worship: The Missing Jewel of the Evangelical Church* [location: publisher, pub date], [p. #].

*Small-Group Discussion:* What is God trying to teach you these days? In what area of obedience is God calling you home?

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor may share a bit of what God is teaching him at this stage in his Christian pilgrimage.

## II. “At Different Times”

The Bible is filled with prophets. The prophet Nathan was sent to confront King David regarding his sin of adultery (2 Sam. 12). The prophet Elijah was commissioned to confront the evil leadership in Israel under King Ahab and his wife, Jezebel (1 Kings 18). Jeremiah the prophet was assigned to serve in the era leading up to the Babylonian invasion and the destruction of Jerusalem (Jer. 1). The prophets, with their extraordinary strength and conviction, spoke for God during troubled times. They embodied the quality of boldness that Jesus followers need today.

*Illustration:* In J. R. R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings series, Tolkien described the experience of Sam Gamgee’s long journey in these words: “But even as hope died in Sam, or seemed to die, it was turned to a new strength ... and he felt through all his limbs a thrill, as if he was turning into some creature of stone and steel that neither despair nor weariness nor endless barren miles could subdue.”<sup>9</sup> Such resilience is seen in the Older Testament prophets, and it’s available to Jesus followers today.

9. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 225.

*Small-Group Discussion:* Can you identify someone in your life who has the gift of boldness and the credibility to boldly speak God’s truth to you? What impact has this person had in your life?

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor may share about a person he trusts enough to always tell him the truth.

## III. “In Different Ways”

The prophets also modeled how we are to listen to God. They learned to listen to him through dreams, visions, events, and other prophets.

While God can certainly communicate to us through any means he chooses, Jesus followers typically experience God’s voice by three primary means: community with other believers, the circumstances of life viewed through the lens of prayer, and Scripture. God has given us a community to offer us wise counsel. He also allows events to instruct our lives. And he will never reveal himself or his will in a way that contradicts the plain meaning of the Bible.

*Small-Group Discussion:* Has there been a time in your life when you believed God was speaking to you? What was the outcome?

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor may share an experience in which he sensed God speaking to him and giving him direction.

## IV. “In These Last Days He Has Spoken to Us by His Son”

God’s ultimate word to us is Jesus Christ. Everything God needed or wanted to say to humanity, he has accurately articulated through his Son. When we listen to Jesus, we are listening to God. When we hear Jesus, we hear God.

## Conclusion

The prophets challenge us to be better listeners in our relationship with God. Before we dare speak on God’s behalf, we must make every effort to intentionally listen to his voice. The good news is that God still speaks clearly through Jesus. To listen to God is to give our rapt attention to Christ.

## Jesus Has Just Entered the Building

Fifth Message for *The Good Book* Teaching Series

Galatians 4:4

### Introduction

The word *gospel* literally means “good news.” Instead of good news, our culture is accustomed to two other types of news. First, we hear bad news nearly every day. The daily tragedies that scream at us from our televisions or media apps remind us that we live in a broken world. Catastrophe and chaos are the stuff of headlines. The second type of news we hear is non-news, more commonly called *entertainment news*. A famous celebrity does something cringe worthy, yet we can't seem to look away. Simply put, what we call news is nothing more than negativity and gossip.

*Small-Group Discussion:* Share a recent example of bad news or non-news from this week's media.

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor may share a recent event that illustrates bad news or non-news.

*Illustration:* Tristan Jacobson, a nine-year-old Missouri boy, was abandoned by his mother in 2012. His guardian, Donnie Davis, wanted to adopt Tristan, but she lacked the required \$10,000 for legal fees. Intent on raising money to fund his own adoption, Tristan opened a lemonade stand. As word spread, generous customers raised more than enough money to fund Tristan's new family. This is genuinely good news!<sup>10</sup>

10. Associated Press, “Third-grader Sells Lemonade to Help Pay for His Adoption,” FoxNews.com, April 25, 2016, [www.foxnews.com/us/2016/04/25/third-grader-sells-lemonade-to-help-pay-for-his-adoption.html](http://www.foxnews.com/us/2016/04/25/third-grader-sells-lemonade-to-help-pay-for-his-adoption.html).

Four gospels—the four accounts of Jesus Christ—begin the New Testament. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are spiritual biographies of Jesus that allow us to experience for ourselves his teaching, his miracles, and the salvation he offers us. These opening books of the New Testament are good news. While we can't cover all four gospels in one session, we do have a single New Testament verse that sums up the importance of Jesus's life and message: “When the time came to completion, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal 4.4).

Paul, the author of Galatians, was a follower of Jesus and a leader of other Christians in the first century. Paul never wrote a gospel account of Jesus's life, but in one sentence he summed up the most important news ever delivered from one person to another: God took the initiative to restore a relationship we had broken long ago.

### I. “When the Time Came to Completion, God Sent His Son”

The King James Version of the Bible translates the beginning of this verse in poetic language: “But when the fulness of the time was come.” God chose the precise moment of history that would maximize the opportunity for the most people to hear and receive his good news. God understands, as we do, that timing is everything.

*Illustration:* Before the world's premier aviators, the Blue Angels, perform a live air show, they gather around a meeting table to conduct an exercise they call “chair flying.” With eyes closed, they visualize every motion they will make in their cockpits and every maneuver they will perform with their airplanes. This exercise enhances focus and fights complacency. Timing and precision matter. They make the spectacular possible.<sup>11</sup>

11. Captain Greg McWherter, interview by Laura Mason, 7x7, October 6, 2010, [www.7x7.com/blue-angels-captain-greg-mcwherter-on-the-most-difficult-stunts-chair--1779515699.html](http://www.7x7.com/blue-angels-captain-greg-mcwherter-on-the-most-difficult-stunts-chair--1779515699.html).

God sent Jesus at the perfect moment in human history as though he had practiced it a hundred times. Jesus was born in the Roman Empire during a period of relative peace and prosperity compared to the chaos of previous ages. The 250 million people who occupied the planet during the Pax Romana (“Roman peace”) enjoyed safer roads and more reliable communication than ever before in human history. Within a generation of Jesus's resurrection, missionaries would be using these roads and the common tongue—the Greek language—to spread the good news of Jesus to the far reaches of the known world.

Just as God chose the perfect moment to step into world history, he also chooses the precise moment to step into our personal histories.

*Small-Group Discussion:* When did God first step into your personal history? When did you first realize your need of a savior?

## II. “Born of a Woman”

Notice that Paul didn’t say “born of a man and woman.” He affirmed something humanly one-sided about Jesus’s parentage. The virgin birth of Jesus isn’t a peripheral doctrine or belief. It is central to a full understanding of the identity of Jesus and the power of God’s salvation.

The virgin birth reminds us that God himself initiated a restored relationship with humanity. Jesus’s origin can’t be traced to an encounter between two human parents. It took place between a willing servant named Mary and the power of God’s Spirit. Through the virgin birth, God sent a signal to us that he is willing to take the first step toward restoring the damaged relationship between humanity and himself. Salvation results from God’s initiative, not our efforts.

*Small-Group Discussion:* Have you ever made the first move to repair a damaged relationship? What kind of emotions come with making things right?

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor may illustrate a time when humility was needed to help mend a damaged relationship in his life. If appropriate, a marriage illustration might connect well with listeners.

God had nothing to apologize for, yet he took the first step of reconciliation upon himself. How humble is our God!

## III. “Born under the Law, to Redeem Those under the Law, so That We Might Receive Adoption as Sons”

Unlike Tristen Jacobson in the earlier illustration, we don’t have to work for our own adoption. God has provided all we need for inclusion into his family through Jesus Christ. Again, this is good news! Generations of Jewish followers attempted to achieve a right relationship with God through an exhaustive and exhausting system of dos and don’ts. In the end, this effort proved fruitless and frustrating. Instead of rules, Jesus offers a relationship that restores our broken relationship with God.

## Conclusion

This week you’ll read five chapters of the New Testament. The first two address Jesus’s entry into the world. The final three contain what Jesus taught once he got here. Take this opportunity to learn about his life and listen to his words. Meet Jesus in the pages of Scripture and encounter the ultimate and unsurpassed good news from God.

# Jesus Won’t Leave Us as We Are

Sixth Message for *The Good Book* Teaching Series

John 17:3

## Introduction

Most of us are fascinated with final words. What people say as they approach death seems to matter more than what they say during their lives. We intuitively understand that since breath is in short supply, the words said using what strength is left must be meaningful.

*Illustration:* Here are some famous last words of four notable people: Elvis Presley—“I’m going to the bathroom to read.” Benjamin Franklin—“A dying man can do nothing easily.” Harriet Tubman—“Swing low, sweet chariot.” Murderer James Rodgers as he stood in front of a firing squad in Utah—“Bring me a bullet-proof vest.”

*Small-Group Discussion:* If you could choose your last words, what would they be?

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor may share the last words of a dying friend or family member at this person's bedside.

John 17 records the final words of Jesus before Judas Iscariot betrayed him, and he was crucified at the hands of the Romans. Jesus cried out to his Father in prayer before embracing the most difficult part of his destiny—the cross. In this intensely intimate conversation, Jesus spoke these words: “This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and the one you have sent—Jesus Christ” (v. 3).

Jesus wasted no breath. Each word in this statement reveals something profound about the relationship between Jesus and God the Father.

## I. “This Is Eternal Life”

As Jesus bore the weight of imminent death, he concerned himself with life—our eternal life! But what exactly is eternal life? Typically, our understanding is too narrow. We restrict our thoughts to the length of life on this earth.

*Illustration:* Jonathan is a giant tortoise that lives on the island of Saint Helena, a British territory in the South Atlantic Ocean. Hatched in 1832, Jonathan is one of the oldest living creatures on the planet at more than 180 years of age. In preparation for a visit from the British royal family, Jonathan was given a bath—his first one in nearly two centuries. Using a soft brush and surgical soap, decades of grime was removed from his shell.<sup>12</sup>

12. Becky Pemberton, “World’s Oldest Tortoise, Jonathan, Enjoys His First Ever Bath at the Ripe Old Age of 184,” *Daily Mail*, March 25, 2016, [www.dailymail.co.uk/travel/travel\\_news/article-3509401/The-world-s-oldest-tortoise-Jonathan-enjoys-bath-ripe-age-184-ahead-royal-visitor-St-Helena-home.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/travel/travel_news/article-3509401/The-world-s-oldest-tortoise-Jonathan-enjoys-bath-ripe-age-184-ahead-royal-visitor-St-Helena-home.html)

We appreciate things that are long lived, but eternal life is more than length of existence. Indeed, the word *eternal* refers to the *quality* of life as much as the *quantity* of life. Jesus defined the ultimate source of an excellent life as a relationship with the one true God of the universe. Eternal life is living a quality life in the presence of God forever.

*Small-Group Discussion:* Describe your idea of a perfect day. If you designed one day that included everything you love, what would it look like? You have only twenty-four hours. What would you include in this day to make it excellent?

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor may wish to describe his perfect day. This personal account will get people thinking about their own perfect day.

## II. “That They May Know You, the Only True God”

Jesus followers accept the reality that there is one God in the universe. Atheists believe there is no God. Agnostics tend to believe that God exists but chooses to remain unknowable. Followers of Jesus hold that the God of the universe is real and knowable—and loving. Because of this, we should address atheists and agnostics with care instead of judgment. The strongest evidence that God exists is our experience with him.

*Illustration:* Ernest Shackleton was an explorer, who attempted to reach the South Pole in 1914. When his ship sunk, he returned to civilization without losing a single crew member. As he and three of his companions made the final thirty-six-hour walk to a whaling station, he sensed that the three of them were not alone. Later he wrote, “When I look back at those days I have no doubt that Providence guided us, not only across the snow fields, but across the storm-white sea.... It seemed to me often that we were four, not three.”<sup>13</sup>

13. Ernest Henry Shackleton, *South: The Illustrated Story of Shackleton's Last Expedition, 1914-1917* (Minneapolis: Quarto, 2016), 225.

*Small-Group Discussion:* When have you experienced the reality of God's presence in your life?

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor may share a time when he experienced the unmistakable presence of God.

### III. “And the One You Have Sent—Jesus Christ”

Jesus said that if we know him, we know God. What a gift we have in the four gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—which give us an accurate picture of Jesus’s personality and character. Together, these spiritual biographies reveal profound truths about his full identity.

A. Jesus was a man of wisdom. His teaching was far and away the finest in the world.

*Illustration:* Offering his professional opinion, psychiatrist J. T. Fisher said, “Here [in the Sermon on the Mount] rests the blueprint for successful human life, with optimum mental health and contentment.”<sup>14</sup>

14. J. T. Fisher and L. S. Hawley, *A Few Buttons Missing* (Philadelphia: Lippencott, 1951), 273.

*Small-Group Discussion:* Think through Jesus’s teaching in Matthew 5–7. What struck you as profound? What do you find difficult to practice in your own life?

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor may wish to pinpoint one teaching from Jesus that he wrestles with in his own life.

B. Jesus was a man of power. His miracles displayed the power of God that can overcome even the worst of life’s difficulties.

C. Jesus was a man of compassion. We live in a celebrity culture in which important people restrict their access to the common crowds. Jesus placed no such barriers around his life. Not only did he allow needy people to approach him, but he often sought them out.

D. Jesus was more than a man. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus reveal something more than merely human about Jesus’s identity. With his death, he showed the love of God for humanity. By his resurrection, he showed that the power of God is now available to his followers.

### Conclusion

Elton Trueblood challenged believers to view the divinity of Christ in a radically different way. The question isn’t whether Jesus was like God but whether God is like Jesus.<sup>15</sup>

15. Paul N. Anderson, foreword to *A Place to Stand*, by Elton Trueblood (New York: HarperCollins, 1969).

*Small-Group Discussion:* What is your reaction to this quote? Have you ever thought of Jesus in these terms?

## Following Jesus

Seventh Message for *The Good Book* Teaching Series

Acts 1:1

### Introduction

The book of Acts is the second installment from a New Testament author named Luke. While Paul wrote more New Testament books than anyone else, Luke contributed more words to the New Testament than even Paul. In sheer volume, Luke tells us more about Jesus and the early church than any other New Testament author.

*Illustration:* The Greek name for the book of Acts is *Praxis*. At the beginning of the movie *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, a small planet named Praxis explodes. This dramatic opening initiates the plot.

Likewise, the book of Acts opens with the church exploding onto the scene of history and initiating a plot that continues even today.

Luke wrote the book of Acts to the same person to whom he wrote his gospel. We know nothing about this person other than his name—Theophilus, which means “lover of God.”

*Small-Group Discussion:* In a way, the book of Acts is addressed to everyone who loves God. What do you love most about God? Perhaps you love one of his character traits or a blessing he has given you. Our love for him is always a combination of who he is and what he does.

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor may share a personal word about his affection for God.

I wrote the first narrative, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up, after he had given instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. (Acts 1:1)

Notice that Luke said that Jesus began his activity during the years of his life on Earth. Implied in this statement is that Jesus continues to act and teach through his followers, also known as the church.

## **I. Jesus Continues to Act**

The church is a group of people who choose to follow Jesus and his teachings in community. If a Christian is a single follower of Jesus, then the church is the collective term for a group of Christians.

Jesus was a man of action, and he expects the same from his church. The church isn't a place to sit and be entertained; it's a group of people who serve.

*Small-Group Discussion:* Where do you see your church serving effectively as the hands of Jesus in the world today? How can the church do a better job in service? Another way of asking this question is, “How can *you* do a better job serving the needs of others in the name of Jesus?”

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor may wish to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of his particular church to offer encouragement and challenge his congregation.

*Illustration:* Charles Conn once found among the restaurant listing an establishment called the Church of God Grill. Curious, he called and inquired about the name. The owner explained that originally the restaurant had been a church, but when it had trouble making ends meet, the church started serving chicken dinners on Sunday evening. The dinners were so popular and the church's attendance was so poor, that eventually the church closed and the restaurant remained.<sup>16</sup>

16. Charles Paul Conn, *Making It Happen: A Christian Looks at Money, Competition, and Success* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1981), 95-96.

What a tragedy! Too often, churches focus on serving their own needs and tastes rather than serving the needs of the people in the name of Jesus. The work Jesus began is to continue through us!

## **II. Jesus Continues to Teach**

Jesus taught consistently about the kingdom of God during his time on earth and again between his resurrection and ascension (Acts 1:3). Now he entrusts this life-changing message to us. The kingdom of God centers on a king named Jesus and his absolute supremacy over our lives. The church is to unashamedly teach that Jesus should have sole rule and authority over our lives.

*Illustration:* Patty Ris, the resident of a retirement center, began choking on a bite of her lunch. A man moved in place behind her to perform the Heimlich maneuver, a technique that saved Patty's life. The name of the person performing the maneuver? Dr. Henry Heimlich, the inventor of this life-saving technique. It was the first time he had ever performed his maneuver on someone who was actually choking.<sup>17</sup> It's one thing to know how to do something; it's another thing to do it.

17. Christine Hauser, “At 96, Dr. Heimlich Uses His Own Maneuver on Choking Victim,” *New York Times*, May 27, 2016, [www.nytimes.com/2016/05/28/us/dr-heimlich-uses-his-own-maneuver-on-choking-victim.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/28/us/dr-heimlich-uses-his-own-maneuver-on-choking-victim.html?_r=0).

The church is to teach what Jesus taught—the kingdom of God. We're to believe in his lordship and then behave accordingly. Doctrine is important, but head knowledge won't change our character. Knowing the stories and characters in the Bible is good, but it won't change our behavior. We need to put that knowledge into practice through obedience.

*Small-Group Discussion:* What is God teaching you in this season of your life? Where is he challenging you to greater obedience?

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor may wish to challenge his church to be obedient to God in a certain ministry or service opportunity.

### **III. The Power of the Holy Spirit Is Essential**

Jesus gave his final instructions as the Holy Spirit directed him. Likewise, we can only obey Jesus's instructions and fulfill his commands through the power of Holy Spirit. In fact, more than one scholar has referred to the book of Acts as the gospel of the Holy Spirit. We aren't expected to continue Jesus's mission and ministry in our own feeble efforts. God has given his church the Holy Spirit to direct our efforts and empower the outcomes. In Acts 2, the church received the Holy Spirit as a sign of God's approval and the source of his strength.

*Illustration:* Historian Christopher Walls notes that Christianity, unlike other world religions, is constantly on the move. Islam is centered where it was founded—in Mecca. Hinduism is focused in India, the place it began. Christianity, however, was launched in Jerusalem. Then within a few hundred years, it shifted to Rome. From there, it moved to Europe and then North America. Today Christianity is shifting to the southern hemisphere, where more than half of global Christians now live. Where might Christianity move next? We don't know, but we do know that the Holy Spirit—God's personal, powerful presence—will go with his church and guide our next steps until the end of the age.

### **Conclusion**

The four gospels contain only the beginning of Jesus's story. Likewise, the book of Acts is only the first chapter in the larger story that records the action and instruction of God's people. The story continues with you and me and the church of today. May the history of heaven record that our generation and the modern church continued what Jesus taught and did.

## God's Message for You

Eighth Message for *The Good Book* Teaching Series

1 John 5:13

### Introduction

Much of the New Testament consists of letters. As the Christian movement grew, the church spread throughout the Roman world and beyond. When churches encountered problems and issues, they reached out to trusted church leaders for counsel. A leader's written response, called an *epistle* (a fancy word meaning "letter") was preserved for later generations. Most striking is the fact that the issues the early church encountered are no different from the issues confronting the church today.

*Illustration:* An antique collector recently discovered a letter dated December 18, 1881. A Christian woman had written this letter to her former pastor, who had moved away to lead a new congregation. The letter included these words: "We miss you so very much." "Charlie is very sick at this time." "Every prayer has been answered, and I have so much to be thankful for." "I often think of the many pleasant hours we have all spent together, and hope we may again in this life. But if not, let us live together in the life to come."

If the letter hadn't contained a date, it would be easy to imagine that it was written just last week. Much in our world changes, but the human condition does not. The New Testament letters, written to people following Jesus, apply as much to those living in the twenty-first century as those who lived in the first century.

*Small-Group Discussion:* What is one of the most important emails, texts, or letters you've ever received? (Think of personal correspondence, an acceptance or rejection letter, a breakup note, or a surprise note.)

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor may share a piece of personal correspondence he has kept over the years because of its special meaning.

One verse from the New Testament beautifully sums up the reason these early church leaders took time to write to local groups of believers: "I have written these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13).

### I. "I Have Written These Things to You"

The men who wrote the New Testament letters had different personalities and writing styles.

- A. *Paul.* Paul wrote more New Testament letters than any other individual. His style was bold and direct. Paul didn't lack for confidence in himself, nor did he lack conviction about the truth of Jesus Christ. His letters include Romans, 1 Corinthians, and Galatians.
- B. *Peter.* Peter was among the earliest of Jesus's followers. He started life as a Jewish fisherman. Following Jesus transformed him into a trusted leader of the early church. His letters include 1 and 2 Peter.
- C. *John.* John was the youngest of the original disciples. He was as gentle as Paul was bold. The dominant theme in his writing was love. His letters include 1, 2, and 3 John. He also wrote the gospel that bears his name.
- D. *James.* James was the half brother of Jesus, related through their mother, Mary. James wrote only one letter in the New Testament: the letter of James.

*Small Group Discussion:* Based on the descriptions of each of these writers, which personality are you drawn to? If you've read any of these New Testament letters, whose writing style appeals to you most, and whose style do you struggle with?

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor can share his favorite New Testament letter and writer, and perhaps his favorite

chapter of Scripture.

It's wonderful to realize that God uses people of all personality types. He still uses the bold, the gentle, and the "nobodies" to accomplish his purposes and plan.

## II. "Who Believe in the Name of the Son Of God"

The New Testament letters make no sense unless we understand that they were written for first-century Jesus followers. Yet they deal with the same issues we face today: following Jesus in a hostile environment, attempting to remain obedient to Jesus while fighting temptation, and refusing to be discouraged when people hurt us or let us down.

*Illustration:* The ancient Greeks told the parable of the fox and the hedgehog. The fox is crafty and thinks of every means to make the hedgehog his prey. He is the Wile E. Coyote of the ancient world. The hedgehog isn't as sleek or crafty as the fox. He knows only one thing. When the fox attacks, he rolls into a ball and exposes his sharp spikes to protect himself. The fox's complex strategy is outsmarted every time by the hedgehog's commitment to simplicity.

We live in a complicated world and face external pressures to compromise every day. We also deal with the inner pull of temptation to sin. Other people—including Christians—hurt us. But in an increasingly complex world, we're invited to embrace the simplicity of following Jesus every single day.

*Small-Group Discussion:* What are you currently struggling with—pressure from others, temptation within yourself, or disappointment with other Jesus followers?

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor may share a time when he was discouraged in ministry, and how Jesus renewed his confidence.

## III. "So That You May Know That You Have Eternal Life"

The letters of the New Testament invite us to see the full picture of life. We're forgiven, and we have the privilege of following Jesus. We have been rescued from a world bent on self-destruction. While life in the short term may be uncomfortable, the future looks bright. Each letter reminds us that while life may be painful, the hope of new life in Christ is certain.

*Illustration:* For those who understand snail mail, do you remember what it was like to go to the mailbox and find a letter from someone you loved? The joy of being surprised was almost as fun as receiving the letter. Even today, when we get an email or text or Snapchat from someone we enjoy, our hearts leap. While many different earthly authors penned the New Testament letters, ultimately they came to us from the heart of our loving God.

*Small-Group Discussion:* If you were to write a letter to the church today, what words of encouragement would you offer? What words would you give to challenge and exhort Jesus followers?

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor may offer a thought or two of what he would write to his own church if he were writing an epistle.

## Conclusion

One of the reasons the New Testament letters survived is that they had a profound influence on those who first read them. Likewise, these letters may have a profound impact on Jesus followers today. They encourage us to live faithful lives and avail ourselves of the age-old wisdom they contain.

## The Good Book

Concluding Message for *The Good Book* Teaching Series

2 Timothy 3:16-17

### Introduction

The Bible is not only a big book; it's a large library of books comprising a collection of sixty-six different writings from men and women spanning fourteen hundred years. The oldest book in the Bible is the book of Job, which plumbs the depths of suffering. The youngest book in the Bible is the Revelation of John, which confuses many Christians. From beginning to end, the Bible reveals the reality of God and his offer of a restored relationship with him through Jesus Christ.

*Illustration:* The Swiss Army knife is a feat of ingenuity. With it a person can tighten a screw, open a bottle, and yes, cut something with the knife. In contrast to the complexity of the Swiss Army knife is the Opinel knife made in France. The Swiss knife does many things; the Opinel knife does only one thing: cut. It's simple in design and function. It's also light, durable, and dependable. The Opinel carbon knife has been recognized as one of the most beautiful knives in the world.

The Bible does one thing: it points us to Jesus. We overcomplicate the Scriptures by reading into it our own agenda and interpretations. But at its heart is the love of God revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

*Small-Group Discussion:* What about Scripture do you find difficult to understand? What confuses you about the Bible?

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor may share what he still finds mysterious or difficult to understand about the Bible. The point is that we all have room to grow.

The Bible itself describes how it helps us know God and relate rightly to him: "All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

### I. "Scripture ... Is Profitable for Teaching"

One advantage of being the youngest child in a family is being able to learn from the mistakes of one's older siblings. By being observant and obedient, the youngest sibling is often spared the mistakes of the older children in the family. Scripture contains life accounts of our older brothers and sisters in the family of God. We have the opportunity to learn from their strengths and weaknesses.

*Small-Group Discussion:* Who in this group is the youngest among your siblings in the faith? What are some of the mistakes you've seen them make that you learned from? Likewise, how might you learn from the mistakes of older siblings in the faith?

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor can share a lesson he had to learn the hard way. He may also tie this into a failure from a Bible character to show how we can learn from the lives of others if we pay attention.

### II. "Scripture Is Profitable ... for Rebuking"

Proverbs 27:6 says, "The wounds of a friend are trustworthy." It's good to have friends who will celebrate with us when life goes well. But it's also important to have friends who love us enough to hurt our feelings if it will help us. God not only uses the Bible to affirm our obedience; he also uses it to confront us when we drift off course.

*Illustration:* The golf swing is one of the most difficult feats in sports. It requires strength, patience, and agility. Anyone who has swung a golf club will tell you that it's easy to develop bad habits. Even the pros have people around them to tell them what they're doing wrong. Golfers can't correct the problems with their swings unless someone points out what they themselves can't see. In the same way we can't master this challenging life on our own. We need people who are willing to speak the truth of Scripture into our lives to help us correct bad habits and behavior. If we listen to them, our lives will be better for it.

*Small-Group Discussion:* Do you have a friend you love and trust enough to tell you the truth even if it's hard to hear? Hold on to such friends!

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor may share an experience of being rebuked that turned out for his good.

### III. “Scripture Is Useful for Correcting”

The Greek word for “correcting” means “to straighten out.” We’re quick to identify where we think others should straighten out. At the same time, we tend to be slow to address the areas of our own lives that need correction.

*Small-Group Discussion:* What area of your life needs some correcting? Share some relevant passages of Scripture that can help correct you in this area.

*Large-Group Example:* The pastor may share an area he is dealing with and how Scripture has played a correcting role.

### IV. “Scripture Is Profitable ... for Training in Righteousness”

A physical trainer’s job is to push us further than we think we can go. So it is with Scripture. God’s Word pushes us to stretch ourselves toward a right relationship with God.

#### Conclusion

*Illustration:* In 1947, a Bedouin boy named Muhammed edh-Dhib was near the Dead Sea tracking a lost goat from his flock. While searching in a cave, he stumbled upon a dozen or so jars containing the lost library from an ancient Jewish community. Unaware of the value of his find, the boy thought some of the leather binding from these papyrus scrolls might make good sandal straps. Eventually the scrolls were sold to an antiquities dealer in Bethlehem for around twenty dollars. In time the true value of these scrolls was recognized, and they became known to the world as the Dead Sea Scrolls. Among the scrolls are some of the oldest known copies of biblical texts.<sup>18</sup>

18. Randall Price, *Secrets of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1996), 35–36.

The destruction of the scrolls would have been tragic. But the boy’s sandal-strap idea lends itself to a useful insight: *the Bible is a secure binding for our feet*. What better way to step into each day than with the guidance God gives us in the pages of the Bible? Life’s path can be slippery, but the Scriptures provide sure traction for the sincere follower of Jesus. When our way grows dark, God uses Scripture to illuminate the trail in front of us as we take our next step. As Psalm 119:105 declares, “Your word is a lamp for my feet, and a light on my path.”

The conclusion of *The Good Book* study isn’t the end of a journey; it’s only the beginning. The road lies ahead of us. The Bible is both timely and timeless. It addresses every circumstance in life during every phase of our lives. The simple purpose of the Good Book never changes. That purpose is to help us fall more in love with the God of the universe by revealing who he truly is in Jesus Christ.