

**Notes & Group Questions for January 16-22 readings (Questions (Q:) for groups are bolded below)**

**GENESIS 32:13 - 45:28**

1/16 - Genesis Chapter 32 closes out with Jacob in a wrestling match! With God? Or an angel? Or God in the form of an angel? Or Jesus preincarnate? Or Michael the archangel? Biblical commentaries offer a few different views on just who Jacob was wrestling with. Clearly, God ordained whomever was wrestling with Jacob and I do think it could have been God himself in an angelic form. It was obviously not God himself in all of his glory - because He would have whooped Jacob in a wrestling match! :) We do see the quick & fierce power of whom Jacob was wrestling in verse 25 when *"he struck Jacob's hip and knocked it out of joint at the socket."* **Q: What is your take on Jacob wrestling with the angel and then being blessed by the angel? Should Jacob have not wrestled / struggled with the angel / God? Should we in our lives today not wrestle / struggle with God? Or should we wrestle with matters of faith sometimes? As long as we know God will win the wrestling match - is it okay for us to enter into a wrestling match with God or no? Is there a faith-journey wrestling match in your past that you'd be willing to share with others?**

1/16 - This is what I love about the chapters of Genesis that we are entering into with our readings now – we read about imperfect humans, not so unlike us, trying to make sense of their lives and their relationships with God. Sound like anyone you know? :) In this early part of the Bible we are shown a God who is willing to wrestle with us, if we need to wrestle. A God who gives us dreams that end up saving a family that will soon become a nation that will save the world. A God who moves us into places and lands and situations to where we need to be to fulfill His perfect will. And in the midst of all of this – we read about imperfect humans that make mistakes. And God still can work through those mistakes and redeem mankind. This is incredible narrative in our readings coming up this next week in Genesis! Chapter 32 verse 28 is an incredibly important verse: *"Your name will no longer be Jacob," the man told him. "It is now Israel, because you have struggled with both God and men and have won."* This is interesting to know! Israel means "God struggles" or "one who struggles with God." It is also interesting I think to see that God gives people new names at times in the Bible, and the names are reflective of their new lives with God. Abram becomes Abraham. Sarai becomes Sarah. Jacob becomes Israel. Simon becomes Peter. **Q: Have you ever "struggled" with God?**

1/16 - Today's Genesis chapter 32 starts off with Jacob preparing presents for Esau. Overall, I thought this was pretty smart. I suppose in some ways you could look at all this as bribery... :) But, I guess I thought Jacob was demonstrating some good business / political principles here. This is something that I do struggle with at times in my own life - a balance of utilizing good business principles versus relying completely on God. I suppose you could argue that Jacob should have simply relied on God to prepare the way for Jacob's meeting with Esau. And this would be a good argument - Esau had become wealthy over the years himself, and seemed to have forgiven Jacob before they met up here again. Though, if you were in Jacob's shoes, think about how you would have had no way of knowing this... and think about the last time you saw your brother 20 years earlier and how that ended... I do think that while clearly our reliance should be on God and His work and providence first and foremost, I believe God also wants us to be actively partnering with him. So, I think after we first pray to God about a situation, we should also do the work that we are called to do by God for the situation as well. This is where I think good business / political principles can come into play - as long as they are clearly aligned with the will of God. Again - a fine line to walk, and a line that can only be blessed by the Holy Spirit. We cannot walk this line on our own power or smarts. **Q: Do you pray to God to show you the work He wants you to do in your life? Do you also ask God to show you the work to be done in various situations that arise in your life? Do you enjoy working with God? How do you integrate faith into your work?**

1/16 - In Genesis chapter 34 Jacob and Esau meet again! I found verses 5 through 7 interesting. Jacob presents his concubines and sons first - then Leah and sons - and then Rachel and Joseph. I read a commentary that he was keeping his favorite wife and son back, as the last presentation to Esau - just in case anything should go wrong with Esau and the introductions of his family... Meaning, if any violence erupted - Rachel and Joseph would hopefully be removed from it. In verse 14 of this chapter we see Jacob likely being deceitful again: *"So go on ahead of us. We will follow at our own pace and meet you at Seir."* He did not follow Esau and meet him at Seir, as we will see in the next chapter. And commentaries suggest Jacob never intended to go to Seir. Genesis chapter 34 is a chapter where we see a lot of violence... It is interesting to note that the name of God ends chapter 33 and begins chapter 35, but is completely absent

from this chapter! The NIV Study Bible has this note about this chapter: "Jacob is now confronted in the promised land with the danger of being absorbed by the native Canaanites (verses 9 & 16), and then with the threat of their hostility after his sons' vengeful act (verse 30). These were dangers Israel constantly faced from the peoples around them - either absorption or hostility, both of which are perpetual threats to God's people."

1/17 - Today is a big day for Jacob in that he finally returns to Bethel - the same place where his pilgrimage began with God in [Genesis 28:10-22](#)! Bethel is where Jacob had his dream of the angels ascending and descending the staircase, when he was leaving the promised land for 20 years in Haran. Bethel was the place where God first gave to Jacob His covenant promise that was also given to Abraham and Isaac - and the covenant promise is reconfirmed in today's readings in chapter 35 verses 11 and 12: *"Then God said, "I am God Almighty. Multiply and fill the earth! Become a great nation, even many nations. Kings will be among your descendants! And I will pass on to you the land I gave to Abraham and Isaac. Yes, I will give it to you and your descendants."* These 2 verses are essentially thought to be the climax of the Isaac-Jacob portion of Genesis. In tomorrow's readings we begin the Jacob-Joseph portion of Genesis. (which is an amazing narrative that begins tomorrow...) The covenant continues! **Q: How do the covenants to Abraham's family stand out to you? Do you believe God is a God of covenants? How do you see God in covenant with you today?**

1/17 - Today we read about the passing of Isaac. What was interesting to me today about the death of Isaac was that he passed away after Jacob and Esau reconciled. However, even with Jacob and Esau being reconciled at this point, going forward in the Old Testament we will see that this reconciliation didn't carry forward to their descendants. The nation of Israel (Jacob) and the kingdom of Edom (Esau) will have much strife in their coming generations toward each other, which we'll read about later this year. **Q: Do you see how the conflicts in the Middle East today tie back to Biblical times? How do you think these conflicts will ultimately be resolved? Or, Who will resolve them?**

1/17 - Today we read about genealogies! :) In chapter 36 we read about Esau's descendants. One interesting note on verse 11 per Zondervan's NIV Study Bible - "Eliphaz: Teman - One of Job's friends was named Eliphaz the Temanite ([Job 2:11](#)), and Job himself was from the land of Uz ([Job 1:1](#)). Thus Job probably lived in Edom (see verses 28 & 34 in Genesis readings today)." **Q: How does reading the genealogies stand out to you? How do genealogies or family tree's play a role in your family? Do you have any family historians? Why is this important?**

1/18 - Today in Genesis chapter 37 we begin the incredible last portion of the book of Genesis where we read about Joseph! This portion of the story that starts in today's readings will carry us through the rest of the book of Genesis and will set the stage for the exodus from Egypt. In chapter 37 today we read about Joseph's dreams and how these dreams make his brothers jealous. A couple of things came to mind to me today as reading through this. First is that it is clear that God does some communicating through dreams in the Old Testament. We've already seen this in our previous readings - via a dream Abimelech had or a dream Laban had. And here we see some powerful prophetic dreams that Joseph has. Actually, while I am on this topic of dreams, let me share this. I did used to have nightmares periodically. However, when I started reading the One Year Bible each night before going to bed a few years ago the nightmares basically went away. Seriously. I honestly believe because of the Light & life-giving power of the Word of God that the nightmares went away. Just a little testimony here for you on the power of reading the Bible each day. It is spiritual food and nourishment and protection for you in ways that you may not consciously realize. For me, there has been maybe a time or two in recent years where a nightmare has still come to fruition - and I don't remember the details of the nightmares, but somehow I know that in the midst of my dream I called out the name of Jesus and the nightmare stopped immediately! I am not kidding. I don't know how I got myself to call out Jesus' name in the nightmare, but I am so thankful that I did! Maybe this is something that prayer brings - or maybe this is something that happens when we really understand and believe in the all-powerful name of Jesus? If you suffer from nightmares, my two prescriptions are to 1. read the Bible before going to bed, 2. somehow somehow say the name of Jesus in your nightmare. Pray about this before you go to bed. Maybe this will help you do this in your dream. I hope so! **Q: My first question I had was whether Joseph should have shared these dreams with his family? And I asked this question because I wonder if sometimes we also maybe get an insight or what we believe to be a word from God - and if we should share these things with others? Or keep them between God and ourselves? The other thing that came to mind for me here is what role do dreams play for us today? Does God still communicate to people via dreams today?**

1/18 - Genesis chapter 38 brings us the story of Judah and Tamar. Keep in mind that Judah, Tamar, and Perez from this chapter are all part of the genealogy of King David and Jesus as we recently read in Matthew chapter 1 verse 3: *"Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar, Perez the father of Hezron."* Verse 24 stood out to me in this chapter as sad irony: *"About three months later, word reached Judah that Tamar, his daughter-in-law, was pregnant as a*

result of prostitution. "Bring her out and burn her!" Judah shouted." This verse reminded me quite a bit of a recent teaching we read about from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 7 verse 3: ""Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" **Q: How in our lives are we too are sometimes like Judah? Do we sometimes condemn others for sins that we ourselves commit too? Even if we don't commit the same sin as someone else, should we instead leave the judging and condemning to God?**

1/18 - Today in Genesis chapter 37 we read about Joseph in Potiphar's house! Verse 5 stood out to me in this chapter: "From the day Joseph was put in charge, the LORD began to bless Potiphar for Joseph's sake. All his household affairs began to run smoothly, and his crops and livestock flourished." I found it fascinating that God was blessing Potiphar for Joseph's sake. It reminded me of God blessing Laban for Jacob's sake earlier in Genesis. **Q: Today, how does God today continue to bless others around those who love God? Do you think God intervenes and blesses our work lives? Do you pray about your work life regularly? Do you think God blesses your work life? And like Joseph, does God maybe bless those around you, even if they aren't necessarily in relationship with God? And maybe does He do this for your sake?**

1/18 - Verses 8 & 9 also stood out to me in today's readings, demonstrating Joseph's strong moral integrity when being approached by Potiphar's wife: "But Joseph refused. "Look," he told her, "my master trusts me with everything in his entire household. No one here has more authority than I do! He has held back nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How could I ever do such a wicked thing? It would be a great sin against God."" I admire this so much. Joseph was gaining more and more favor with Potiphar and more and more "power" so to speak. And here we see a situation where Joseph could have abused his favor and power. But he did not. He stood strong with his moral convictions. And I wonder about this in our lives. **Q: As we maybe gain more and more favor in our work or personal or ministry lives, do we also gain more and more "power" so to speak? And when this happens, do the temptations maybe even somehow seem to get bigger and bigger and our opportunity to abuse our favor or power get easier and easier? And in light of all this, will we stand strong by our moral convictions? Will we realize, like Joseph, that our favor or power only comes from God - and it can be taken away in an instant if we sin against God?**

1/19 - In Genesis chapter 41 we read about Pharaoh's dreams and Joseph is called from prison to interpret them. The cup-bearer finally remembered Joseph 2 years later! :) Verse 16 is powerful for us to consider as Pharaoh calls for Joseph to interpret his dreams: ""It is beyond my power to do this," Joseph replied. "But God will tell you what it means and will set you at ease."" What I like about this reply from Joseph is that he is giving credit to God for his "gift" of being able to interpret dreams! And really, it is God interpreting the dreams, and letting Joseph know what to say. I wonder about this in our lives today. **Q: Do you have some unique gifts in your life? Things that you are really good at? How do you give credit to God for these gifts in your life? Have you ever claimed them as gifts we developed on your own? Do you believe that God is truly the Gift-Giver of all your skills and talents and wisdom in your life?**

1/20 - Today in Genesis chapter 41 we read about Joseph interpreting Pharaoh's dreams - and not just interpreting them, but offering a solution! Joseph suggests finding a wise man to administer a program to collect crops during the 7 years of plenty to save up for the 7 years of lean. Verses 39 & 40 in this chapter tell us: "Turning to Joseph, Pharaoh said, "Since God has revealed the meaning of the dreams to you, you are the wisest man in the land! I hereby appoint you to direct this project. You will manage my household and organize all my people. Only I will have a rank higher than yours."" Notice that Joseph did not ask for this position. He probably could have, in light of interpreting the dream and offering a solution. But he didn't. The position was simply thrust upon him. **Q: And I wonder in our lives - are we like Joseph - humbly offering our gifts and skills with no need of a payback? Or, do we expect something in return? Do we want to be put in charge? I do wonder this about myself - if I was put in charge of all of Egypt, would I still remember God? Or would the power go to my head and would I think it is all about me? And then I wonder if there are similar, smaller temptations like this in my life - in my work or ministries or in my social circles. Are there times where I offer my skills & gifts, and expect to be put in charge of something, forget about God, and think it's all about me? How about you? Do you give freely and humbly from your God-given gifts with no need of a payback?**

1/20 - In Genesis chapter 42 Jacob sends Joseph's brothers to Egypt for grain. Verse 4 stood out: "Jacob wouldn't let Joseph's younger brother, Benjamin, go with them, however, for fear some harm might come to him." As you'll recall both Benjamin and Joseph were Rachel's only sons. And Jacob loved Rachel dearly. It seems that in light of Jacob already losing one of Rachel's sons, he didn't want to lose the other. **Or - I wonder - did Jacob maybe have some sort of mistrust in the back of his mind of the other 10 brothers?** (as obviously Joseph disappeared when going to find the

10 brothers many years back) This is outside of the text I realize. Just a thought.

1/20 - Genesis 42:6 stood out: *"Since Joseph was governor of all Egypt and in charge of the sale of the grain, it was to him that his brothers came. They bowed low before him, with their faces to the ground."* This fulfilled the dreams Joseph had in Genesis chapter 37 verse 6 & 7! *"He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it."* And verse 6 was 21 years after Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers at the age of 17 - Joseph has spent 11 years as a slave, 2 years in prison, and 7 to 8 years in charge of Egypt (through the 7 fat years of the harvest, and now they are likely in the first year of the famine). And even after 21 years Joseph recognized his brothers immediately. I read a commentary that his brothers probably didn't recognize Joseph because he was decked out in Egyptian robes & garb, he may have been speaking through an interpreter, and he was likely clean shaven - Egyptians shaved, whereas Hebrews typically wore beards. **Q: How did it impact you, reading about Joseph and his brother reuniting and seeing Joseph's earlier dream fulfilled?**

1/22 - In Genesis chapter 44 we read about Joseph instructing his servant to place his silver cup in Benjamin's sack. I guess what struck me about all this is that it seemed to me like Joseph was possibly playing mind games with his brothers. Not to say that they didn't deserve it... but, I wonder if in all of this Joseph had a master game-plan - or if it was simply games he was playing? The weeping we see from him kind of makes me think that he was not 100% sure of what he was doing, game-plan wise. The weeping seemed to indicate that he wanted to reconnect with his brothers and his family. It seems in all of this he has kept at least 1 family member around - or has not let them get very far away. **Q: This makes me wonder – how do we play mind games with others around us? Should we? Would it have been better if Joseph was honest with his brothers from the beginning on who he was? How would it be better for us if we are simply honest with others from the beginning? And don't play mind games?**

1/22 - Verses 18 through 34 in this chapter is Judah's amazing speech to Joseph! I don't know what it is about this speech. But I love it! It seems like Judah is finally owning up to being who he was born to be - the forefather of the line of King David and Jesus Christ. Verse 33 is the verse that really stood out to me: *"Please, my lord, let me stay here as a slave instead of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers."* What struck me about this is that now Judah is willing to be the slave, in the place of his brother Benjamin - whereas 22 years prior he offered up the idea of selling his brother Joseph into slavery as we read in Genesis 37 verses 26 & 27: *"Judah said to the others, "What can we gain by killing our brother? That would just give us a guilty conscience. Let's sell Joseph to those Ishmaelite traders."* It seems like Judah in chapter 44 has finally grown up and is acting like a morally responsible adult. Judah with this speech today is finally beginning to look like he might indeed deserve to be referred to as the father of the tribe of the "Lion" of Judah! **Q: Have there been big moments like this in your faith walk, where it's clear you've moved forward in your faith?**

1/22 - Genesis chapter 45 begins with Joseph weeping again - and I think that it makes perfect sense that he does so, in light of Judah's impassioned speech! **Q: Do you think that Joseph in part weeps because Judah is offering to be the slave in the place of Benjamin? Either Joseph is weeping because his brothers did not show him this same mercy 22 years prior - or he is weeping because he is happy that Judah and his brothers seem to be very different people from 22 years prior - or he's weeping for other reasons. What are your thoughts on the reasons for these tears? When have you ever cried tears in your faith walk?**

1/22 - Verse 5 in this chapter is a powerfully mature statement from Joseph to his brothers: *"But don't be angry with yourselves that you did this to me, for God did it. He sent me here ahead of you to preserve your lives."* I find this very powerful that Joseph discerned this. He had been sold into slavery for 11 years! He was in a prison for 2 years! And then, yes, things got better for him thereafter - but he was still apart from his family. And yet - Joseph saw God's hand and God's plan in all of this. There was a greater good happening - the preservation of Abraham & Isaac's descendents. The preservation of God's covenant people. I then wonder about this in our lives. **Q: Are there times where we go through some hard times - maybe for many years - and in the midst of that, could God be working? Could God's hand and God's plan be moving in the midst of challenging times in our lives?** I think it's possible that if I was Joseph that maybe I would have become a bitter man toward my brothers - and maybe done worse than just mind games. But, Joseph was compassionate - he wept - he gave grain in abundance to his family - he forgave his brothers. And more than anything, he saw that God was in control. **Q: How do you believe that God is in control of your life? Right now? All the time? No matter how good or how bad circumstances seem? Is God in control?**

**MATTHEW 11:7 - 14:36**

1/16 - Matthew chapter 11 opens up with Jesus teaching about the importance of John the Baptist's ministry and the transitioning from the old covenant to the new covenant, which can be seen in verse 13: *"For before John came, all the teachings of the Scriptures looked forward to this present time."* Basically, this could be rephrased that all of the Old Testament was prophesying about the coming of Jesus and the Kingdom of Heaven. **Q: Do you believe this to be true about the Old Testament?**

1/16 - Verse 20 is a convicting one! *"Then Jesus began to denounce the cities where he had done most of his miracles, because they hadn't turned from their sins and turned to God."* This is something for each of us to really examine ourselves on. **Q: Have we heard Jesus' teachings? Do we believe in his miracles? And in light of these things - have we turned from our sins? And have we turned to God?**

1/16 - Today we read Matthew chapter 11 verses 28 through 30, which are amazing verses for each of us to consider, particularly if we are struggling with the burden of sin or the burden of worry or the burden of regrets (and the list could go on - you can fill in the blank for your life): *"Then Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke fits perfectly, and the burden I give you is light."* **Q: Have you ever experienced the power of these verses? Have you ever come to Jesus weary and carrying heavy burdens and found rest? Is there anything in your life today that is heavy that you can give to Jesus?**

1/17 - Today in Matthew chapter 12 we read about Jesus' teachings surrounding his healing on the Sabbath. Note that in verse 14 the plots to kill Jesus begin: *"Then the Pharisees called a meeting and discussed plans for killing Jesus."* **Q: Why do you suppose these plots started at this point?** I don't know that it was this one incident per se that began the plots in and of itself - but it was probably a culmination of Jesus' teaching, preaching, and healing ministries up to this point that started murmurs and discussions and finally led to plots. I think Jesus' wisdom and power and popularity with the people were seen as a threat. **Q: Do you think that Jesus' wisdom and power and popularity with the people are seen as a threat by some in our world today? What are some examples of people threatened by Jesus in our world today?**

1/17 - I read an interesting commentary on verses 11 & 12 today: *"And he (Jesus) answered, "If you had one sheep, and it fell into a well on the Sabbath, wouldn't you get to work and pull it out? Of course you would. And how much more valuable is a person than a sheep!"* The commentary said that in this verse Jesus contrasts the worth of an animal with that of a human being. I think for most of us, we would agree that a human life is more valuable than an animal life. However - interestingly, not everyone in our world today feels that way. I recently heard a radio talk show host ask a woman if she saw both her beloved dog and a stranger drowning in a lake and she could only save one of the two, who would she save. And the woman basically said her dog - she hemmed and hawed about saying that straightforwardly, but basically she said her dog was her family... And so the stranger - the human - would lose out in that situation. **Q: If you could only save your beloved pet or a stranger (human) from drowning, who would you save? Who would God save? Do you think God places a higher value on human life than animal life? Do you think some people in our world place higher value on animals than human life? What are some examples of this?**

1/17 - I love the Isaiah prophecy in today's readings, summarizing the quiet aspects of the ministry of Jesus! Verse 21 makes me tear up to really meditate upon: *"And his name will be the hope of all the world."* **Q: How does this verse strike you? Do you believe that Jesus' name is the hope of the world? Is Jesus' church a part of the hope of the world?**

1/18 - Jesus' teaching in Matthew Chapter 12 verse 30 stood out to me in today's readings: *"Anyone who isn't helping me opposes me, and anyone who isn't working with me is actually working against me."* This is a really really powerful verse if you think about it. **Q: And I think we then need to ask ourselves - are we really helping Jesus? How are we really working with Jesus? How are we really being obedient to Jesus' teachings for our life? Are there times in our lives when we are actually working against Him?**

1/18 - Jesus' teaching on the sign of Jonah in this chapter is awesome! In verse 40 Jesus prophesies His death, burial and resurrection: *"For as Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days and three nights, so I, the Son of Man, will be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights."* And then the following verse is just so powerful and convicting: *"The people of Nineveh will rise up against this generation on judgment day and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah. And now someone greater than Jonah is here--and you refuse to repent."* **Q: In what**

**ways is Jesus is greater than Jonah? And greater than Solomon? (as we read in verse 42) How has understanding Jesus' teachings led you to repent in your life?**

1/19 - Matthew 12 verses 48 through 50 are powerful: *"Jesus asked, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" Then he pointed to his disciples and said, "These are my mother and brothers. Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother!"*" I read an interesting commentary that said that these words from Jesus were stating that spiritual bonds are as strong as physical bonds. And that in this teaching Jesus was paving the way for a new community of believers - the church! Very cool... **Q: How are you a brother and sister and mother of Jesus?**

1/19 – Matthew 13 verse 22 in this chapter is convicting for me, as I have experienced this in my life in the past.... *"The thorny ground represents those who hear and accept the Good News, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the cares of this life and the lure of wealth, so no crop is produced."* .... and I still struggle with the "cares of this life" crowding out the Good News in my life today! I think in some ways this might be a life long struggle. **Q: How are you doing on this verse? Where is God's seed of the Good News being sown in your life? In the good soil of your heart?**

1/20 - In today's Matthew readings we go through 5 parables that begin "The Kingdom of Heaven is like..." Great way to start these parables! They do indeed give us a glimpse of what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. Do these parables speak to you as you read through them? I know they do for me. Sometimes in encouraging ways. Sometimes in convicting ways. I love verses 31 & 32: *"The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed planted in a field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but it becomes the largest of garden plants and grows into a tree where birds can come and find shelter in its branches."* I think if we cultivate the seed that Jesus plants in our hearts - the Gospel - we will see an amazing plant grow that will ultimately bless others. From the tiniest beginnings, with patience and faith, can come the largest of plants. **Q: How have you let Jesus plant a mustard seed in your heart? How have you been patient and allowed the seed time & space to grow? How have you watered and cared for the seed of the Gospel planted in your heart so that one day it will be a beautiful tree of life for yourself and others you come in contact with? In 2010, how will you allow Jesus to grow a new mustard seed tree with your life?**

1/20 - I love the last 2 parables in today's readings! The treasure buried in a field and the pearl of great price. And the thought of being willing to give up absolutely everything to be a part of the Kingdom of Heaven. How about for you? Are you willing to give up absolutely everything to be a part of the Kingdom of Heaven? Is there a price too high that you would not be willing to pay? I will share with you this somewhat related tangent. I had this really interesting jog several years ago. And it was before I was a Christian, so I didn't equate my thinking with the "Kingdom of Heaven" at this time. But, here were my thoughts that night on the jog. As I was jogging I thought to myself - I am a "billionaire"! Why? Because I am blessed with this opportunity to jog, and to check out the beautiful night air around me, and more than anything because of this wonderfully complex thing in my skull called the brain. :) The brain that allows me to do all these things and to simply think and enjoy life. And I thought to myself - at what price would I give up the ability to use my brain? Would I sell my brain for 1 billion dollars? And the answer is obviously no - because there would then be no point to living in this life without the brain. So - I reasoned with myself, well - "Then I am a billionaire!" I have a billion dollar asset in my skull! :) I hope this isn't too random of a tangent. Maybe you'll realize that you are a billionaire today too though? :) To tie this back to the Kingdom of Heaven. Would I sell of my rights to the Kingdom of Heaven for 1 billion dollars. No. So - I guess then technically, I am a multi-billionaire now! 1 billion asset value for the brain + 1 billion asset value for the Kingdom of Heaven! The point being... or maybe the question to you. **Q: Which would you prefer - 1 billion in cash, or the Kingdom of Heaven? Is there any price you would place on giving up the Kingdom of Heaven? If not – how will you pursue the Kingdom of Heaven with all of your worth? And how will you then share this amazing "pearl of great price" with others around you?**

1/21 - Today in Matthew chapter 13 verse 54 we read about Jesus going to his hometown of Nazareth where he was raised as a child. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, as we know, but raised in Nazareth, where Mary & Joseph met and married and returned after their flight to Egypt after Jesus' birth. In verse 57 we read this when Jesus was in Nazareth: *"Jesus said to them, "Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor.""* This verse remind me that sometimes when we really move forward in our faith, our friends ("hometown" from the verse above) and our relatives can sometimes not understand what is going on with us. I think there are phases of our walk with God where really it becomes very personal – between us and God – and through that process God will transform us. And our friends and relatives sometimes may not appreciate our change for various reasons – just as Jesus' friends and relatives did not appreciate his ministry in this verse. I hope that this verse can be of comfort to you if by chance you are having challenges reconciling

your faith and your changed heart with your friends & relatives expectations of who you were in the past. Know that you are on the right path. As long as you are staying focused on God and his will for your life, you may have to accept some loss of "honor" (per the verse above) in your status with your friends and relatives. You may not seem to be as "cool" or "fun" or whatever as you once were in your friends' eyes. But – if in God's eyes you are loving Him with all of your heart and you are loving your neighbors as yourself, then you are eternally cool and fun in the Kingdom of Heaven. And that's where it really counts. **Q: Where are you seeking "honor" in your life today? In the eyes of your friends and relatives – or in God's eyes? How do you seek honor with God? How does the world tempt you with its honor? Have you ever lost some "honor" with your friends or family as you've moved forward in your faith? If you did lose honor with your friends did you gain honor with God? Do you think you sometimes base your decisions more on what other people will think? Or do you base your decisions on what God will think? At times in your faith walk have you had to distance yourself from some old friends so that you can move forward in your faith walk? How has this been hard? How has it been worth it?**

1/22 - In Matthew chapter 14 today we read about two miracles - Jesus feeding the 5,000 (or really 10,000 to 15,000 counting men, women & children - Matthew just counted men, as his Gospel was written to a Jewish audience, which had men eat separately from women and children at that time/place) and Jesus walking on water. While these 2 miracles are amazing and again confirming that Jesus is God - a couple of other things stood out to me. First was verse 23: *"Afterward he went up into the hills by himself to pray."* **Q: If Jesus did this - do you think we should do the same? How often do we get away from the "crowds" or even the "disciples" or loved ones in our life to be by ourselves and pray? Do you do this at least for a few minutes each day? Do you do this for longer periods of time too? How do you model this behavior of Jesus' in your life and slip away from the crowds to pray by yourself? How often? Where and How? Also, do you take spiritual retreats? Do you take the retreats alone or with others? Is prayer a central part of the retreats?**

1/22 - Verses 29 & 30 also stood out to me today: *"All right, come," Jesus said. So Peter went over the side of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. But when he looked around at the high waves, he was terrified and began to sink. "Save me, Lord!" he shouted.* These verses made me wonder in our own lives – **Q: Are there times or areas in your life where Jesus has said, "Come", and you've moved forward in faith? But then - the waves came... the challenges came... the doubts came... the insults came.... and you started to waver in your faith? Maybe you got scared - and started to sink? Well - I do admire that Peter did cry out to Jesus to save him in this situation - and we then get the reassuring verse 31: *"Instantly Jesus reached out his hand and grabbed him."* If you feel like there are some areas in your life where you are sinking - will you cry out to Jesus to save you? Do you believe he will instantly reach out his hand and grab you?**

#### **PSALM 14:1 - 18:15**

1/16 - Psalm 14 could be seen at first glance as a discouraging Psalm...Particularly as we look at verse 3: *"But no, all have turned away from God; all have become corrupt. No one does good, not even one!"* I think it is important to keep in mind that there is truth in this verse (particularly if we ever start thinking we're "good" and others around us are not...). But also I think it's good to keep in mind that this verse was written before Jesus came to the earth. Jesus was perfect. And through His resurrection we are called toward greater holiness and ultimately perfect goodness once we meet Jesus face to face in heaven. Jesus gives us the hope spoken of in the closing of this Psalm in verse 7: *"Oh, that salvation would come from Mount Zion to rescue Israel! For when the LORD restores his people, Jacob will shout with joy, and Israel will rejoice."* **Q: Do you recognize the salvation that has come to us? Are you shouting for joy for this salvation? Are you rejoicing!?**

1/17 - Psalm 15 verses 1 & 2 today are awesome: *"Who may worship in your sanctuary, LORD? Who may enter your presence on your holy hill? Those who lead blameless lives and do what is right, speaking the truth from sincere hearts."* Psalm 15 was written for those that wished to have access to God in his Temple in Jerusalem. However, I do believe that today, through Jesus, anyone can worship God anywhere - in a church or in our homes or wherever we find ourselves. However, I do think there is truth in these Psalm verses in that we can worship God beautifully by living a blameless life (not perfect life - only Jesus was perfect this side of heaven - we will need to confess sins & repent), doing what is right, and speaking the truth from sincere hearts. I do believe these are acts of worship that demonstrate our friendship with God and our growth in becoming more like his son Jesus in our lifetimes. **Q: How do you seek to lead a blameless life? How do you seek to do what is right? How do you speak the truth from a sincere heart? How do you seek to worship God in some way each and every day?**

1/18 - Today we read Psalm 16, which I absolutely love! I could probably share with you some thoughts on just about every verse in this Psalm. Verse 1 tells us: *"Keep me safe, O God, for I have come to you for refuge."* **Q: When has God kept you safe when you've come to Him for refuge?** And verse 2 is so true: *"I said to the LORD, 'You are my Master! All the good things I have are from you.'"* Everything good thing in our life - absolutely everything good thing in our life - comes from God. **Q: How have you experienced this?** Verse 3 reminds me to rejoice for and pray for our pastors and spiritual mentors: *"The godly people in the land are my true heroes! I take pleasure in them!"* **Q: How do you appreciate your pastors / ministers / priests and spiritual mentors? How do you appreciate other godly people you know too? Are they true heroes? Do you pray for these folks regularly?**

1/19 - In Psalm 17 David appeals to God as Judge when he is being attacked by foes. Verse 7 is a great prayer and comfort! *"Show me your unfailing love in wonderful ways. You save with your strength those who seek refuge from their enemies."* **Q: How do you seek refuge with God from whatever might attacking you? How do you believe that God will show you his unfailing love in wonderful ways? How have you been saved by God's strength? How have you sought refuge with God from your "enemies"?**

1/20 - Psalm 18 is an amazing one! We'll get it for the next 3 days of readings, which is great. And then comes Psalm 19 which is off the charts awesome! Verse 1 today is so beautiful: *"I love you, LORD; you are my strength."* **Q: How often do you tell God that you love him?** One thing that one of my former pastors does when he prays publicly, which absolutely moves me, is that he closes out just about every prayer with "God we love you. And we pray all of this in the name of your son Jesus." The last line of course is the powerful line! But, that second to last line... is just beautiful. Just telling God that we love him. I'm not sure I tell God that I love him often enough. God may not "need" to hear it. But I think that I need to say it more often. **I love you God! Q: Why do you think it might be important for us to say "I love you God?"**

1/21 - There are so many great verses today for us to meditate upon in Psalm 18! I love verses 25 through 27: *"To the faithful you show yourself faithful; to those with integrity you show integrity. To the pure you show yourself pure, but to the wicked you show yourself hostile. You rescue those who are humble, but you humiliate the proud."* **Q: How are you showing yourself to be faithful to God? How are you living with integrity? How you showing yourself to be pure? How is God showing you these things as well?**

1/21 - I really love verse 28: *"LORD, you have brought light to my life; my God, you light up my darkness."* **Q: How has Jesus brought light into your life? How does God light up your darkness?**

1/22 - Today we finish up Psalm 18. (Psalm 19 tomorrow! So excited! :) The closing verse 50 of Psalm 18 today is powerful - and I believe can apply to both David and Jesus: *"You give great victories to your king; you show unfailing love to your anointed, to David and all his descendants forever."* **Q: How are you a spiritual descendent of David? How do you believe that God shows you unfailing love? How do you think that God's Word, the Bible, shows His unfailing love for you?**

#### **PROVERBS 3:19 - 4:6**

1/16 - Proverbs chapter 3 verses 19 & 20 are so truthful. If you look at the amazing way in which nature works, I don't see how you cannot believe in God. **Q: Could all of this majesty around us be just random chance? Do you believe as verse 19 teaches us: "By wisdom the LORD founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens"? Do you believe in intelligent design?**

1/17 - I love Proverbs 3 verses 21-23 today: *"My child, don't lose sight of good planning and insight. Hang on to them, for they fill you with life and bring you honor and respect. They keep you safe on your way and keep your feet from stumbling."* These verses remind me of a couple of things. First is the old adage of "Trust in God. And tie up your camels." Meaning, tying up your camels to a pole so they don't wander away is good planning and good insight. It's common sense. Obviously you don't want to live your life on solely your own smarts and your own planning and your own insight. We need God to be our foundation. But, at the same time I think God wants us to be smart about how we live our lives. Yes, trust in God, but wear your seatbelt. Trust in God, but save some money for a rainy day. See where I am going with this? The other thing that these Proverbs verses remind me of is one of my favorite three word quotes: "Habits determine success." I've spoken about this in some of my weekly emails in regards to reading the One Year Bible each day. It takes some planning and insight for us to figure out when we will realistically read the Bible for 15 minutes every day. After this planning and insight and after a week or two we've suddenly built up a great habit! A habit that will

determine our success in reading the Bible in a year. **Q: How do you go about planning things in your life? In what ways do you invite God into the process of planning your life? And in what ways, or at what times, do you simply make decisions based on your own knowledge or common sense? What is the foundation of your own knowledge or common sense? Is it the Bible? Is it God? Do you suppose with the foundation of God and the Bible in our lives, that we may not need to take every single decision throughout our day to God in prayer because we are operating (generally speaking) from a biblical godly worldview? How do you balance taking things to God for guidance and making decisions on your own?**

1/18 - Today we read Proverbs chapter 3 verses 27 and 28: *"Do not withhold good from those who deserve it when it's in your power to help them. If you can help your neighbor now, don't say, "Come back tomorrow, and then I'll help you."*  
**Q: How often do we say to ourselves when we think about serving the poor – "oh, I'll maybe do that in the future." Is this similar to saying "come back tomorrow, and then I'll help you" as this Proverb tells us? Can you help your neighbor now? Do you regularly volunteer with ministries or nonprofits that serve the poor? Do you consistently give offerings of your finances to ministries and/or nonprofits that serve the poor? Are the poor your neighbor? Should you be helping them today? Is it in your power to do so?**

1/19 - I love Proverbs 4:7 today! *"The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding."* How simple and yet profound is that first sentence? The beginning of wisdom = get wisdom. Can't argue with that! :) The question then becomes how do we get wisdom? Or, where do we get wisdom. I will say simply, The Bible is the best fount of Wisdom I know of. So, reading and studying the Bible on a daily basis = wisdom. Then the second sentence in the verse above is great too - though it cost all you have, get understanding. Where does understanding come from? Again, I'd say the Bible. But I'll also say that I think understanding comes from investing in a community of people and being invested in by other people. We can't really get understanding on our own, being a "lone ranger." We need others in our life so that iron sharpens iron. **Q: Where do you "get wisdom" in your life? Are there places outside of the Bible and the church that you get wisdom from?**

1/21 - I love Proverbs 4:7 today! *"The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding."* How simple and yet profound is that first sentence? The beginning of wisdom = get wisdom. Can't argue with that! :) The question then becomes how do we get wisdom? Or, where do we get wisdom. I will say simply, The Bible is the best fount of Wisdom I know of. So, reading and studying the Bible on a daily basis = wisdom. Then the second sentence in the verse above is great too - though it cost all you have, get understanding. Where does understanding come from? Again, I'd say the Bible. But I'll also say that I think understanding comes from investing in a community of people and being invested in by other people. We can't really get understanding on our own, being a "lone ranger." We need others in our life so that iron sharpens iron. **Q: I hope and pray you are in a local church community? And I hope and pray you are in a small group of some sort? We need others to do life with and to gain understanding. Will you find a church or a small group in this next month if you're not part of a church or small group yet?**

1/22 - Proverbs chapter 4 verse 13 was impactful for me today: *"Carry out my instructions; don't forsake them. Guard them, for they will lead you to a fulfilled life."* I like that last thought - guard God's instructions. Don't forsake them. For they will lead you to a fulfilled life. I think sometimes people think that loving God and following his ways will be BORING. :) This is so not true! It is absolutely the best adventure we could ever imagine. And truly, following God and his instructions is the only way I personally believe that any of us can have a fulfilled life. I do not think there is another way to lead a fulfilled life. **Q: Can you imagine a life apart from God being fulfilling? Is this remotely possible?? Today, let us leap into the adventurous life of faith that God is truly calling us to live! How have you found your faith journey to be fulfilling recently?**

#### **Group discussions:**

- Introductions.
- What were some of your favorite verses or passages from the past week's readings?
- What are some questions that were generated for you based on the past week's readings?
- What is something new you learned about God or the Bible from the past week's readings?
- How did God speak to you through the past week's readings?
- What is something you want to change or grow in your life based on the past week's readings?
- **Discuss the bold Questions in the Study Notes**

- Any prayer requests for the group for the coming week?

**Each group is encouraged to close in prayer.**

**Daily questions for this next week's readings you may want to journal or pray through and discuss with your group next Sunday:**

- My favorite verses or passages:
- What I learned from the readings:
- My questions for further study:
- How God spoke to me through the Word:
- Something I want to change or grow in my life based on the Word:
- My prayer points based on the Word:

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