

# Daily Bible Study

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### Olive Orchard Garden of Gethsemane

The garden called Gethsemane lies at the foot of the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. *Gethsemane* means “oil press” in Aramaic. The Gospels of Matthew (26:36) and Mark (14:32) identify it as the place Jesus and his disciples went to pray just before Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion. Luke’s Gospel does not mention Gethsemane by name but does record Jesus going to the Mount of Olives to pray (Luke 22:39).

While the area in Jesus’ time was likely covered by plants and crops, today it is a relatively small grove. It remains a frequently visited site for Christian pilgrims who visit Jerusalem.

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DAILY BIBLE STUDY is designed to help adults better understand the biblical message for their lives.

DAILY BIBLE STUDY (ISSN 0742-065X) is published quarterly by The United Methodist Publishing House, 2222 Rosa L. Parks Blvd., Nashville, TN 37228. Periodicals Postage Paid at Nashville, TN. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to DAILY BIBLE STUDY, PO Box 280988, Nashville, TN 37228.

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Printed in the United States of America.

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# A Word From the Editor

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Like millions of other people in its path, last August 21, I gathered with coworkers outside our building to observe the first total solar eclipse to sweep across the entire United States in 99 years. Nashville was billed as a prime viewing location, and people from all over the nation and around the world traveled to our city to watch day become night as the moon completely covered the sun for a couple of minutes.

Preparations had been underway for weeks, including pre-eclipse events, demonstrations, and simulations. Viewing parties popped up everywhere. Everyone sported a pair of special solar-filter protective glasses, and many people donned special eclipse t-shirts and other festive commemorative gear. The atmosphere was electric.

While a couple of locations around the city experienced disappointing cloud cover at eclipse time, conditions at our location were perfect. Yells, cheers, and whistles echoed up and down the boulevard as the moon covered the sun. It was awe-inspiring, leaving many of us speechless. Those who could verbally react used words such as *amazing*, *epic*, *thrilling*, *breathhtaking*, and *incredible* to describe it.

While meteorologists and other scientists waxed eloquent in explaining the science of the event, people of faith praised the God of science and of all creation. Only God could have done this. It was indeed a time to acknowledge God's creative power.

When the sun was once again visible, my coworkers and I dispersed. We had work to do, after all. Yet for days, we continued to talk about what we had seen and felt.

What inspires a sense of awe in you and literally takes your breath away? What causes you to acknowledge God's unparalleled greatness?

From its opening pages, Scripture introduces us to a creative, creating God whose astonishing acts of guidance and provision resulted in people's praise, thanksgiving, and trust. Their commitment to follow and worship God alone acknowledged divine supremacy in their lives and bore witness to the peoples living around them.

Nothing before or since, however, has brought more affirmations of God's greatness than Jesus' resurrection. And nothing, it seems, came as more of a surprise to Jesus' disciples. Even though Jesus had told them to expect it, they were at first frightened, doubtful, puzzled, and astonished. They couldn't believe what they were seeing. But once they believed, they could not stop praising God.

Shortly after Jesus' post-resurrection appearances and some final instructions, Jesus "left them and was taken up to heaven. They worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem overwhelmed with joy. And they were continuously in the temple praising God" (Luke 24:51-53).

Encountering the greatness and majesty and power of God has that effect on us. Our only response can be to say, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power" (Revelation 4:11).



Jan Turrentine  
Editor

# Our Writers for This Quarter

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## **Abby Thornton Hailey**

**Abby Thornton Hailey** is a native of Richmond, Virginia. She holds an undergraduate degree in religious studies from the University of Virginia and a master's of divinity from Duke Divinity School. After serving several churches in North Carolina and Virginia, she now lives in Annapolis, Maryland, where she serves as pastor of Broadneck Baptist Church.

Abby enjoys writing and editing curriculum for Baptist, United Church of Christ, Mennonite/Church of the Brethren, and United Methodist publishers. She also likes playing guitar, kayaking, traveling, spending time at the beach, and eagerly anticipating the start of a new Duke basketball season.



## **Clara K. Welch**

**Clara K. Welch** is an ordained deacon in the North Georgia conference. She holds a BS in music education from Lebanon Valley College in Pennsylvania, a master's degree in Christian education and church music from Scarritt College in Nashville, Tennessee, and a Master of Theological Studies degree from Candler School of Theology, Emory University. She has served as a music teacher in two elementary schools related to the Red Bird Mission in Kentucky and has served United Methodist churches in Maryland, South Carolina, and Georgia.

Currently, Clara serves her local church in the areas of pastoral care and Christian education. She and her husband, Brian, have one daughter, Rebecca Jo, who recently graduated from veterinary school. As they adjust to life as empty-nesters, Clara and Brian enjoy gardening, trying new recipes, hiking, and listening to their daughter's stories about the life of a veterinarian.



## **Christopher P. Momany**

**Christopher P. Momany** is the chaplain and director of church relations at Adrian College and a member of the Department of Philosophy/Religion. He is an ordained United Methodist minister and has been the pastor of several churches. He is a graduate of Adrian College, Princeton Theological Seminary, and Drew University.

Chris writes for *Ministry Matters*, an online ministry resource. His book on the Wesleyan ethic of love and justice bears the title, *Doing Good: A Grace-Filled Approach to Holiness*.

For several years, Chris has combined his writing and teaching with an emphasis on the tragedy of human trafficking. Today it is estimated that 27 million people are held as slaves throughout the world. Chris has been a national leader among college and church professionals in confronting this issue.

## Don't Forget the Lord's Provisions

### **Do you rely on God more when things are going well or when they are going badly?**

The Israelites had lived in the wilderness for 40 years. In harsh circumstances, vulnerable to the elements, they were utterly dependent on God. A nomadic people, they had no land to farm for food. Instead, they relied on God to send bread from heaven every morning. God's direct provision was the only hope these formerly enslaved people marching toward freedom had for survival.

Now, the people stood on the edge of the Promised Land, "a land of wheat and barley, vines, fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of olive oil and honey; a land where [they would] eat food without any shortage—[they wouldn't] lack a thing there," as the writer of Deuteronomy said (Deuteronomy 8:8-9). Finally, their precarious existence would be at its end!

Perhaps in this moment, though, the people faced their greatest danger thus far: "But watch yourself!" today's reading begins. When they were no longer dependent on God to rain down daily bread from heaven, the people might forget their dependence on God that had been so obvious in the wilderness.

When the earth produced abundant crops, the people might think this was because they were excellent farmers who could care for themselves rather than realizing that all they had was a gift from God. They might forget God, a danger reiterated and preached against four different times in this single passage (verses

11, 14, 18, 19). Becoming comfortable might dull their sense of need for God, their awareness of God's presence and importance, or their sense of urgency to seek out God.

We still see this today. A 2010 Gallup poll found that in the world's poorest countries (those with average per-capita incomes of less than \$2,000 a year), 95 percent of people name religion as central to their daily lives. On the other hand, in the richest countries (those with average per-capita incomes over \$25,000), less than 50 percent of people name religion as central.<sup>1</sup>

In places such as Niger, Malawi, and Burundi, survival—as it was for the Israelites in the wilderness—is tenuous. In wealthier places such as Sweden, Japan, and Great Britain, daily dependence on God for survival is a more distant reality.

Is this true for you? Do you feel more drawn to God when things are going well and you feel safe and secure, or do you feel more drawn to God when you are vulnerable and in need? Why are we so tempted to be self-reliant and applaud ourselves when we are successful, then cry to God when we are desperate?

<sup>1</sup>From [gallup.com/poll/142727/religiosity-highest-world-poorest-nations.aspx](http://gallup.com/poll/142727/religiosity-highest-world-poorest-nations.aspx).

**God, help me remember that you alone are the giver of all good things, whether I'm in a time of need or of plenty. In all circumstances, it is your faithfulness that sustains me. Amen.**

# Jesus Tested in the Wilderness

## When have you been tempted to take a shortcut?

It would have been so easy. As God's Son, God's Messiah, all the stories of history told Jesus he had every right to claim his throne, to claim his triumph and safety, to claim his glory. This is the point being made by the tempter in the wilderness:

“Since you are God's Son, these things should be yours—feed yourself, or, better yet, change all these desert stones to bread, and feed the world! Throw yourself off the Temple in the presence of all these crowds milling below, and make them believe forever, as they rightfully should! Just drop to a knee for a second, and all these corrupt kingdoms of the world, you can have control over them. You can avoid having to conquer them yourself and take the fast track to setting this world straight, which is what you're supposed to be doing anyway!”

It would have been so easy for Jesus to take a divine shortcut. Any one of these could have been justified. But, instead, in this moment of choice at the outset of his ministry, Jesus chose not to quickly grasp after God's power but rather to take the longer, slower route of being what he came to earth to be: human.

Jesus' responses to the tempter show he would not seek any shortcuts; he would not play the “God card,” no matter how convenient and rightfully his it may be. Rather, he was going to live a fully human life:

“Humans, myself included, should not live by bread alone but by every word

from the mouth of God. The Son of God may count on the angels to save him, but humans, myself included, should not put the Lord their God to the test. And every human has been told to worship God alone, and so shall I do. I choose not to exercise the fantastic powers of my divinity but to live fully into my humanity. So get away from me, Satan. This is the road I choose to travel. No shortcuts. No advantages.”

There would, of course, be moments in his coming ministry when Jesus would feed the masses, do miraculous things, and speak about a coming kingdom. He would do all these things, on occasion, for the sake of others. But here Jesus set up what kind of person he was going to be, what kind of person he wants us to be: one who accepts and embraces the limits of humanity, having enough trust to let God be God, even when it's a slower, more painful way.

We all love shortcuts. We want to get where we're going as quickly and efficiently as we can. But sometimes, we must avoid the temptation to take the easier route, traveling instead the rockier road of staying faithful to God. Fortunately, we can know it's a road Jesus has walked before us.

**God, when I am faced with the decision between what is easy and what is right, grant me the strength to choose your slow way of faithfulness. Amen.**

# Angel Confirms Direction for Jesus

## **How has God responded to, or seemed not to respond to, your most desperate prayers?**

In the Gospel of Luke, prayer is depicted as particularly central to Jesus' life. We find Jesus praying at basically every major moment in his life and ministry, for example, at his baptism (3:21), before choosing his disciples (6:12), and at the time of his transfiguration (9:28-29).

It was Jesus' personal commitment to prayer that led the disciples to ask him to teach them to pray, which in turn gave us what today we call the Lord's Prayer (11:1-4). Jesus died with prayers on his lips (23:34, 46), and after his resurrection, he was not recognized by his companions on the road to Emmaus until he prayed over the bread at a meal they shared (24:30-31).

In many of these circumstances, we don't know the content of Jesus' prayers. The text simply says things such as, "He was praying." However, on the evening of his crucifixion, as Jesus prayed in a place he apparently visited often to pray, the Mount of Olives (Luke is unique among the Gospels in not naming a garden or Gethsemane as Jesus' location as he prayed), we get to hear what Jesus was praying for.

Jesus' prayer was twofold: that his disciples would not fall into temptation (22:40) and that he would not have to face the gruesome fate that lay ahead of him if there was any other way (verse 42). Here we see Jesus' deep humanity: Just like us, he did not desire suffering and prayed it might pass.

When someone like Jesus prays, you'd think God would be quick to grant his requests. After all, who could have better motives and intentions than Jesus? But in this circumstance, God does not seem to have granted any of Jesus' petitions except for one, one that resonates with how Jesus taught his disciples to pray: "Not my will but your will must be done" (verse 42).

But because God did not say yes to Jesus' other petitions does not mean that those petitions weren't heard or that they didn't receive a response. God sent an angel to strengthen Jesus, the help and comfort Jesus would need to face the harrowing hours ahead. The verb used here for "to strengthen" is used only one other place in Scripture (Acts 9:19) to describe the strength drawn from food. The angel's presence gave Jesus strength to keep praying, the resolve he needed for what was to come.

The angel's help may not have been the response Jesus was looking for with his prayer, but it gave him strength to indeed see that God's will was done even when it was not his own. When has God responded to your prayers in surprising ways?

When has God seemed to say no but provided you with strength to face whatever lay ahead?

**God, come to me with strength, so that my first prayer may always be for your will to be done and my actions directed toward that will. Amen.**

# Prayer for Help in Time of Crisis

## In whom, or in what, do you place your trust?

Psalms 20 is common as a psalm and unique. It is common in that it is clearly a royal psalm (like Psalms 2, 18, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132, and 144), and it addresses issues related to the Israelite or Judean monarchy. Some of these psalms are prayers for royal weddings or coronations.

Psalms 20 appears to have first been offered as a king went off to war. Most scholars believe it was offered when a king came to pray before going into battle. The people blessed him, proclaimed faith in God, and prayed for him and themselves. Here, however, is where the psalm is unique: Only the last line, verse 9, can be clearly categorized as a prayer addressed directly to God.

Yet throughout the psalm, God is clearly the actor and the one being called upon to act. Though the words were initially spoken over the king, they are not words about how the king was to act but about God's actions on behalf of the king.

God is the subject of almost every verb: *God* must answer. *God* must protect. *God* must send help. *God* must recall. *God* must fulfill. The people offering this psalm clearly saw that any good could come from the horror of war only if God was active. It was important to pray for their leader, yes; but no matter how good of a person or a warrior their king might have been, he could not be the one in whom they placed their ultimate faith and trust. Only God could sustain their lives.

One could read this psalm as the con-ceited words of a people who believed God was going to give them the vic-tory because they were in the right and their opponent was in the wrong. Actu-ally, however, it was a prayer of humility, recognition that all the weapons of war, including chariots and horses, would not ultimately protect them.

It was only God in whom they could place their trust; it was only as they remem-bered God's name that they had any hope for the future. Their own wisdom, wiles, or strength would never be enough. It's the sort of way we see Jesus living on his way to the cross, not by the power of sword or violence but trusting that God would ultimately vindicate him if he lived faithfully and called upon God to the last. And, in the Resurrection, God ultimately did.

In what or whom do you place your trust? What do you believe will save or deliver you?

We place our trust in many things. We still place much faith in military might. We place trust in human leaders, believ-ing they will make or break us. We trust in our bank accounts, in our own intelli-gence or wit, or in our ability to pull our-selves up by our bootstraps. But in the end, only one is trustworthy: the Lord our God.

**God, my faith, trust, and hope are in you. Help me live this belief knowing you alone can provide what I need. Amen.**

## Family Lineage of Abraham Preserved

### What do you believe God is able to do?

Throughout Jewish and Christian history, the willingness of Abraham to offer up his son Isaac's life when God asked him to has been one of the most central stories, a story that models faithful obedience to God. It's a story that has captured the imagination in its horror and courage, leading many other biblical and extracanonical writers to expound upon the story.

Based on the Genesis text that will be the focal passage on Sunday, we have no idea how Isaac responded to his father's plan to sacrifice him. The only time we're told that he spoke was to ask where the animal was for the sacrifice (Genesis 22:7). The writer of 4 Maccabees, however, added to the story that "when Isaac saw his father's hand wielding a knife and descending upon him, he did not cower" (4 Maccabees 16:20).

The writer of Hebrews adds an element to the story as well, taking us inside Abraham's mind to imagine what might have enabled him to respond to God with such obedience. In the Genesis story, we never hear Abraham argue with God or think through what he was about to do. He simply said "I'm here" and then acted.

But the writer of Hebrews conjectures what Abraham was thinking: "He figured that God could even raise [Isaac] from the dead" (Hebrews 11:19). If Abraham did believe this, Fred Craddock writes, it means "Abraham believed that God is not only faithful but also powerful. Even the death of Isaac would not finally impede

God's keeping a promise, because God is able to give life to the dead."<sup>1</sup> God had power to overcome anything—even death.

It seems like delusional thinking, doesn't it? And, certainly, the belief that God can raise people from the dead should not lead us to see lives as expendable or to take lives knowing God could bring them back. But it is something to consider what it would mean if we deeply believed God was that powerful, if we believed that God could bring life out of death, not just physically but metaphorically.

Abraham's trust in this (not just on the mountain with Isaac but throughout his life) meant that from his family line, which seemed dead when he and Sarah were childless in old age, came descendant after descendant. Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph all became part of God's promise because Abraham trusted that promise so deeply he was willing to stake absolutely everything upon it.

How often do we act as if we believe God has the power to do anything?

<sup>1</sup>From *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume 12 (Abingdon Press, 1998); page 138.

**God, even as I struggle with what you called Abraham to do, help me be moved by his faith to trust that you can do anything, things beyond our imaginations. Amen.**

# God Blesses Abraham for Obedience

## Who might God want to bless through you?

Throughout the Genesis narrative, God makes promises to bless and work through Abraham (or Abram, as he was initially called) on several occasions. The first instance is in Genesis 12:2, when God said, “I will make of you a great nation and will bless you. I will make your name respected, and you will be a blessing.”

God reiterated this promise in Genesis 13:14-17, adding the promise of land to that of offspring: “All the land that you see I give you and your descendants forever” (verse 15). Later, in Chapter 15, God made a formal covenant with Abraham, saying, “Look up at the sky and count the stars if you think you can count them. . . . This is how many children you will have” (15:5).

God made yet another covenant with Abraham, promising children and land in Chapter 17, and then visited Abraham and Sarah personally in Chapter 18 to announce that they would soon be expecting Isaac. Much of the Abraham-God story is dialogue between the two, with God making promises and calling Abraham to live in covenant relationship so that the promised blessings may be poured out on all people.

Now that Abraham had proved his faithfulness, withholding nothing, God spoke to him one final time. And for the first time, God swore an oath, an action that meant God was accountable if the promises were not fulfilled. Now the promises emerged not out of the blue, as they did

before, but because of Abraham’s own demonstration of faith. Now people would be blessed directly because of what Abraham had done. His decision to remain faithful in relationship with God would lead to goodness for many.

What would have happened if Abraham had not remained faithful to God in this test? Would God have given him another chance? Would God have moved on to build a covenant relationship with someone else? Would the people of the earth have missed out on God’s blessing?

We don’t know. But we do know what happened because of one person’s faithfulness. God’s desires and dreams for humanity could proceed and draw a little closer to fruition, a big act of faithfulness on Abraham’s part that made this possible.

When have you seen a small act of faithfulness lead to good or blessing for others? How might you be one who is faithful in choices big and small?

**God, it’s hard to believe you want to bless the world through me. Yet as you worked through Abraham in his faithfulness, you long to work through my life. Help me bear this responsibility with joy and wisdom. Amen.**

## God Provides the Sacrificial Ram

### What might it mean to say that God takes risks?

This story is a risky story. It tells an edge-of-your-seat tale of toying with tragedy. A trembling old man comes within a downswing of his arm of killing his beloved son, and God comes within a slightly delayed angel of allowing his chosen one to commit murder. Yet beyond this, it's a risky story to have within our canon of Scripture.

Here, just a few pages into the Bible, it looks like God has decided to kill off the promise of restoration once again. It looks like this God who has pledged faithfulness has suddenly turned capricious. What kind of God asks someone to use his child as a chess piece sacrificed for some unknown greater good? To consider such a question means risking something of the belief we hold in who our God is and what that God could call us to do.

This is probably why risk-averse people have tried to write this story off or soften its blow in a lot of different ways. Some say Abraham must have known that this was an act all along. Some say that God just intended to teach Abraham a lesson about attachment and sacrifice, that it was all a charade. Some say it's just a parable, a moral tale to show Israel that child sacrifice was not to be part of their worship as it was for most ancient religions.

But what if the point of this risky story is to teach us that risk is a central part of God's nature? Consider God's words in Genesis 22:12: "I now know." Those words indicate that God did not know what

Abraham was going to do. God did not know how this whole scene was going to turn out.

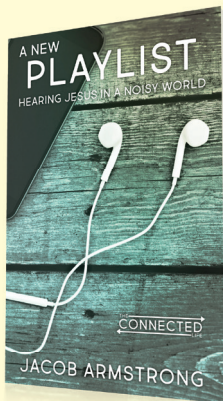
In asking this unseemly act of Abraham, with apparently no control over how Abraham would respond in his divinely given human freedom, God put at risk the very covenant made with Abraham years earlier and took the risk that Abraham could reject the unseen Giver in favor of the gift he could hold in his hands, the bigger future in favor of the local present. God loved Abraham and was startlingly vulnerable to the choice that would be made.

God's actions show that it was not only Abraham who would risk everything for the sake of love. God laid it all on the line as well when Abraham was given a full chance to walk away from everything he and God had built together. It's a scene that would repeat itself centuries later. Once again, when Jesus chose not to walk away but to give his very life, it showed that there is no length to which God will not go for the sake of love.

**God, thank you that there is nowhere you ask us to go that you have not yourself been. Thank you for taking the immense risk of loving us completely and without condition. Amen.**



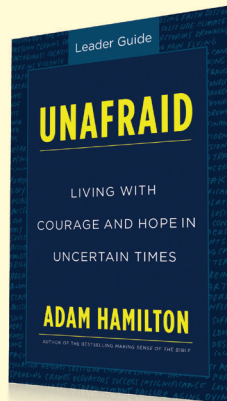
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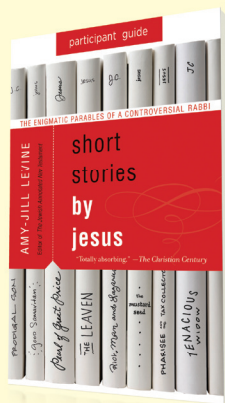
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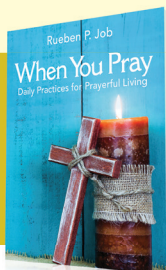
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