

ECCLESIASTES, SONG OF SONGS, 1 & 2 PETER, LUKE 1 & JOHN 1 Bible Reading Schedule

4 Weeks

NOTE: The reading schedule for the beginning of 1 Peter can be found at the end of the Minor Prophets Reading Schedule or at the end of this document as an addendum.

WEEK 1

Ecclesiastes challenges us to think deeply about very basic questions. Life, and all it contains, appears to be a meaningless vapor, here today and gone tomorrow. Even so, life need not be without purpose. Ecclesiastes recommends wisdom, righteous living, finding purpose in remembering our Creator, and keeping God's commands. Then we can experience joy in the life God has given us. This is sure to challenge our thinking and expand our hearts for what matters most.

The conclusion of 1 Peter will lead us to readings in 2 Peter, of course. The themes that Peter addresses still speak to us today. He is concerned about false teaching, the perseverance of believers, and living godly lives. Those topics seem just as important now as then.

DAY 1 – Ecclesiastes 1 and 1 Peter 4:12-19

Solomon's introduction is an overview of how he experienced life and why he describes it as a "vapor" (the Hebrew word 'hebel'). It might be helpful to compare "hebel" to glory. Glory is meaningful, substantial, and eternal. On the other hand, hebel is futile, insubstantial, and fleeting. Solomon's argument in this chapter focuses on how repetitive life is as he says in verse 9, "History merely repeats itself. It has all been done before." He begins this book of wisdom with a view of life that is earthbound rather than emphasizing God's perspective. It seems to me that he wants to paint a picture of earthly pursuits that are essentially empty without a real and personal faith in God. He will bring this up more forthrightly later in the book. How can pursuing earthly happiness lead to disappointment, something he defines as meaningless?

There's no doubt that verse 16 reflects the major theme of this letter: "But it is no shame to suffer for being a Christian. Praise God for the privilege of being called by his name!" The suffering and trials of life that believers face connect us with the suffering of Jesus. Peter thinks of these challenges as a way to identify with the Lord. We can expect to face hostility in a sinful world. But if we face difficulties because we have sinned through causing trouble or meddling in such a way as gossiping, or prying into someone else's private life, don't be surprised when you face judgment and opposition. The Lord cares about your life and witness too much to let you stray. You can expect that he will get your attention. Romans 8:17 tells us that "Together with Christ we are heirs of God's glory. But if we are to share in his glory, we must also share his suffering." Jesus did triumph, but not without suffering. So too, our journey will have trials and opposition until we see him face to face one day. How do you deal with the inevitable suffering in this life? How might the right perspective help you as you face setbacks and disappointments in life?

DAY 2 – Ecclesiastes 2 & 1 Peter 5:1-7

It is difficult to find the silver lining in Solomon's presentation so far. He talks about the futility of pleasure, the way of the foolish, and the uselessness of hard work. All of these leave us empty unless they include the hand of God. His first positive statement is verse 24, which took 42 verses to surface with a hopeful word from the wise man Solomon. "So I decided there is nothing better than to enjoy food and drink and to find satisfaction in work. (This contradicts what he has already said.) Then I realized that these pleasures are from the hand of God." The inclusion of the Lord redefines everything in verses 24 to 26. I had been waiting for this emphasis. His message up to this point was rather depressing. But focusing on God, who gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy, turns the tables for the better. He will revisit the emptiness of life again and again, but I am confident he will point us back to the hand of God. Amen! How do you respond to this chapter and especially his conclusion?

Jesus told Peter to "Tend my sheep" in John 21:16. Each one of us has sheep in our lives that God asks us to care for and support, and speak the truth in love on their behalf. When we read the words "Care for the flock that God has entrusted to you," we think too narrowly. Who might be the sheep in your life? Peter's words of instruction on how to do that and what it means for you flow out of verses 2-4. The other topic that is strong and repeated by Peter is humility. You would not think of Peter as particularly humble. But then you would be wrong because God's refining work in Peter was deep and real. God really shaped his heart into a humble and compassionate man. There are times when I realized I had some pride, but I wasn't that alarmed. However, the statement "God opposes the proud" is something that should cause us to tremble. How might God be speaking to you through these words?

DAY 3 – Ecclesiastes 3 & 1 Peter 5:8-14

Simon and Garfunkel have made this chapter famous with their song, “To Everything (turn, turn, turn).” This song, which originated from verses 1 to 8, was actually recorded by The Byrds first, along with Pete Seeger. But my favorite verse is probably yours too: “Yet God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God’s work from beginning to end.” (V11) This is an amazing statement because it means that God has given human beings an awareness of the infinite. That is, God draws people to the infinite and the hope for life after death, which is clearly revealed in the New Testament through Jesus. But we all know so many people who close their minds and hearts to the infinite and ignore their conscience that points them to their need for God. Also, the unpredictability of life and the reality of injustice in this world are meant to stir up our desire for help and our inability to control any of it. This is an exceptional chapter with so many ideas to contemplate and apply to your life. How is God speaking to you through it?

Peter gives us such descriptive words for the devil and the need for us to stand firm. How does Peter’s warning about the spiritual battle we are in strike you? These last words of instruction and encouragement show us how much Peter cared for these followers. The theme is repeated again in verse 10, “So after you have suffered a little while, he will restore, support, and strengthen you, and he will place you on a firm foundation.” How does Peter know this? Because that is precisely what the Lord had done for him. The statement that the church here in Babylon greets you is confusing at face value. But Babylon is most likely symbolic of Rome. Babylon was a great city and considered a powerful center of a world hostile to God’s people. There’s no doubt that it was becoming more and more difficult to be a Christian in Rome in the 1st century. How have you appreciated Peter’s message about standing strong in suffering?

DAY 4 – Ecclesiastes 4 & 2 Peter 1:1-7

Solomon’s wisdom surfaces in chapter 4 with the value of relationships and doing life together. The person alone in his toil of life (V8) might accumulate wealth, but someone else could take it when he is gone; this is deemed meaningless and depressing by the end of verse 8. But Solomon’s message in verses 9 to 12 is very clear. There are numerous benefits to walking through life with a friend or two. You share the load; you help each other in need; you comfort each other and protect each other. Plus, three people working together can even be stronger (V12). Verse 12 has been interpreted as the help of God in the connection of friendship or even marriage. A relationship that shares faith in the Lord has a third cord that is especially strong, of

course. One minute Solomon's words seem hopeless and empty, and the next minute he shares helpful, uplifting truth. I have found that having time alone is necessary for replenishing my soul. But the meaning of life is so much fuller and enjoyable when I walk the road with others. How about you? What do you appreciate about this chapter?

2 Peter is written even later, of course, than his first letter. That means that the persecution is increasing, and suffering is inevitable. But Peter doesn't focus on the challenges surrounding believers in Rome, but on the possibilities available for the believer. His recognition of the "divine nature" means that we have been merged with the Lord by the Holy Spirit, even though he does not mention the Spirit, but just that God has "given" us everything we need. The gift of the Spirit is the One who produces the progress of growth and character described by Peter in verses 5 to 7. This progression is understandable and challenging. He says we have a part to play in our growth. Actually, I think we can get in the way of what God wants to do in us through selfish desires and a wandering of faith. Peter is most likely not rigid about the precise steps outlined in these verses, but more about the possibilities of growth and what we often call "sanctification." The word used in verse 5 is "effort." The teaching of the New Testament never eliminates effort in cooperating with God. The word "earn" in order to secure your position with God is eliminated, however. We don't earn God's favor; we receive it. The growth in our lives happens progressively as we walk in the Spirit, according to the Apostle Paul. How do you understand these verses? How would you assess your growth and progress in Christ?

DAY 5 – Ecclesiastes 5 & 2 Peter 1:8-15

You might have noticed Solomon's description of worship and prayer, "Let your words be few." You might recognize them from a modern worship song by Phillips, Craig, and Dean in 2001. This seems to be his theme in the first seven verses. In the NLT, it warns us about making too many promises to God, which is literally the word for "vow." It also warns us about too many words, which is translated as "talk is cheap." Another relevant warning is about money and wealth: "Those who love money will never have enough." (V10) The topic of money is well-documented, as some of the most anxious and unhappy people in the world have tons of money. Solomon knew firsthand the dilemma of money and wealth. But the words of verses 18-20 are the most inspiring words because they talk about the wisdom to understand the gifts of life, which are really God's gifts to us. He is the source, and he wants us to enjoy these gifts that we know full well are from him. Why does it matter to know that food, work, possessions, and good health are gifts from him? Solomon has made it clear that unless we acknowledge the Lord's hand in all of these, we will feel empty and lack joy. This is a crucial principle in this book; how do you embrace it?

The theme of this reading from 2 Peter 1 has to do with reminding us of something we probably already know. Sometimes I think that I always have to come up with a new topic for teaching and leading as a pastor. Peter had no problem reminding them, "as long as I live," he says. Peter's words could be misunderstood: "work hard to prove." (V10) Peter did not mean that we are chosen by God for salvation according to what we do. Our desire to grow stems from the wonder of being saved. The Lord adopted us as his children, and he is eager to help us become what he intends us to be in this world. This posture of a father is easy to understand. Fathers want their children to reach their full potential. Peter is admitting that he thinks this is his last letter and that the Lord has shown him he will die soon. Peter is probably in his 60s and has the full assurance of faith to enjoy heaven forever. He is not anxious and accepts God's plan, as we notice in verses 14 & 15. In John 21:18-19, Jesus tells Peter he will be handed over to others who will take his life, but this will definitely bring glory to God. There's no question that Peter's life and his death glorified God. He is an inspiration to us, right!?

WEEK 2

The reason I like reading Ecclesiastes stems from Solomon's experience in life. He had all life could offer from an earthly perspective. His conclusions about life reveal the emptiness of pursuing temporary things compared to things that pertain to God and what life means in relation to God. The pursuit of happiness is a common endeavor for many people. We are a pleasure-seeking society. So, Solomon's words touch on how life is but a "vapor" apart from God. May this give you a sense of anticipation as we begin our second week in the book.

Our New Testament reading will focus on the rest of 2 Peter with the theme of Christ's return and false teaching that is sure to dovetail with present-day philosophies we have in our world. The emphasis is on how to live now in light of the hope of Christ's return, which could take place in our lifetime. These words from Peter are especially relevant for us today.

DAY 6 – Ecclesiastes 6 & 2 Peter 1:16-21

Recently, I watched a "Police Show" on TV, and the bad guy got away with murder, literally! It is hard to believe, but that is how the show ended, giving the viewer the impression that sometimes the bad guys aren't caught. I am sure that is true, and sometimes the wealthy never get to enjoy their "stuff." Solomon is focusing on the inconsistencies of life in this chapter. Being wealthy or poor is secondary to enjoying life and knowing how to live well, no matter what the circumstances might be. Do you agree with that? Did you notice that the only time God is mentioned in this chapter has to do with his oversight of everything? You can argue with God, but ultimately, he has the last say. How can life have meaning when we either ignore God or argue with him? So, how do you respond to this phrase in verse 12, "Our lives are like a shadow?"

Peter affirms the return of Christ from his own personal experience and from the credibility of God's Word. The transfiguration in Matthew (17), Mark (9), and Luke (9) is well documented as the Father spoke from heaven about the identity of his Son. Peter was an eyewitness to this miraculous event. Do you remember it? This event portrayed Christ as eternal and the glorious Son of God. The Lord's face was transformed, and his clothes became dazzling white (according to Luke). Jesus' pre-existent glory shone through his human body. Plus, the prophets told us that the One coming to be among us is the very One who will return in glory. Peter wants these believers to be assured of Christ's return. That is one of his main concerns in this letter. Peter also had a high view of God's Word. What do verses 20 & 21 tell us about the Word? I think our devotion to His Word is such a primary topic for us. We are so privileged to have the revelation of God's Word complete for us. God's message directs us deeply and sufficiently so that we may

know the truth. How precious is God's Word to you? What role should God's Word play for your daily life?

DAY 7 – Ecclesiastes 7 & 2 Peter 2:1-11

The first fourteen verses sound very much like the Book of Proverbs. Which proverb are you drawn to in these verses? Why? How can the day you die be better than the day you were born? Solomon teaches that life is difficult and suffering cannot be avoided. But when you die as a believer, eternity is everything you have ever hoped for. We sometimes refer to death with these words, "rest in peace." Solomon is describing death in a similar way. As verse 14 concludes, Solomon says, "Remember that nothing is certain in this life." Another way of saying this in a positive light is "Life is full of surprises." As I read through the rest of this chapter, it reminds me of Proverbs again. There is a path that seems right to people, but, in the end, it leads to death. I am sure that is in the Book of Proverbs and is obviously similar to verse 29, "But I did find this: God created people to be virtuous, but they have each turned to follow their own downward path." Solomon possessed a lot of wisdom, but in these verses, he is saying that there are definite limits to human wisdom. Why is this an important principle in life?

The false philosophies in Peter's day are probably different than ours, but the point is that when we allow falsehood to capture our minds, we are susceptible to fall. The false teachers were sure to be judged. They would not escape just like the angels who rebelled, or the people in Noah's day who were wicked, or Sodom and Gomorrah. The Lord knows how to rescue the godly and he knows that justice means judging the wicked. In our day, there is a philosophy that says everyone will be okay in the end if they believe sincerely in what they believe. In other words, all religions are essentially the same, and people of goodwill can be sure of rescue and eternity. This is the great modern-day deception, in my opinion. There is plenty of false teaching in our world. We have 24/7 access to the ideas and teachings of man. These have the potential of leading us astray. A sure sign of human wisdom is pride. How might you be susceptible to the falsehood of our modern world?

DAY 8 – Ecclesiastes 8 & 2 Peter 2:12-22

If I said to you, The Pastor is always right, you would probably cringe. The reason is that I'm a pastor. It seems unwise for the King to speak about obeying the King. But Solomon warns people to obey the King because he has great power, and it would be futile to disobey him. The need to honor authority is well-founded. Plus, trying to get the upper hand by violating the laws of the land or ignoring those in authority will seldom work well. Solomon reminds us that we cannot control the uncertainties of life, so the best advice is to fear God and follow his

commands (V12). Solomon will repeat these ideas 2 or 3 more times before we close the book on the understanding of life from Ecclesiastes, which refers to the “preacher” who instructs us on the principles of life and how we should live in light of those. Does any instruction from this chapter catch your eye? Why?

My journey in ministering to AICs (adults in custody) has proven this unfortunate tendency that, without genuine conversion and deep connection to Christ, people are prone to return to their “vomit.” (V22). I have also learned that when people respond to Christ with selfish motives, the seed of God’s Word seldom gets rooted in the heart. The story of Balaam is a fascinating story of trying to obey God with the desire to benefit for his own good. If you are curious about the manipulation of a selfish prophet named Balaam, read Numbers 22 to 24. The false teachers represent how often people use dishonesty and deception to benefit selfishly. Peter’s warning to be on your guard is still a valuable posture in a deceptive world with many deceptive people.

DAY 9 – Ecclesiastes 9 & 2 Peter 3:1-10

At face value, Solomon suggests that death also appears to be meaningless. Some die young, and others live a long life. This makes life on Earth unpredictable. Solomon is building his argument again, that when we make success, pleasure, or accomplishments our goal, we will often be disappointed. This reminds me of the unrealistic expectations for life or meaning, which are temporary at best. Also, the wise man in the small village helps everyone by saving the town (V15). But in the end, no one recognizes it or expresses appreciation. Oftentimes people disappoint us with a lack of support or even worse, ignore us altogether. Solomon has an interesting way of challenging our preoccupation with this life. Before you know it, you will be dead. My interpretation of Solomon’s instruction has to do with Jesus’ wise words, “If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it.” (Mark 8:35) How are you responding to another chapter of intriguing wisdom from Solomon?

Peter shifts gears from his warning concerning false teachers to his exhortation to be ready for Christ’s return. We are fascinated by the teaching in the Bible concerning the Second Coming. I enjoy it too. But Peter’s words call for patience because our God is patient with people, so that as many as possible will be saved. (V9) It has been 2000 years since Christ walked the earth and fulfilled his mission to die and rise again. That can seem like a long time, right? But verse 8 reminds us that God does not think of time as we do. In fact, you know that God is timeless. To drive home his point, Peter gives us a very insightful statement: “A day is like a thousand years to the Lord, and a thousand years is like a day.” This is his message to us from the 1st Century, which has power for us 2000 years later. Peter affirms Christ’s return, but he reminds us that our

timing and God's timing are far different. When Jesus returns, there will be judgment. Are you in a hurry for God to bring his final judgment on the world, or might you have a bit more compassion, not wanting anyone to perish? What does Peter tell you about the Day of the Lord and its coming? How do you respond?

DAY 10 – Ecclesiastes 10 & 2 Peter 3:11-18

What do you think of this chapter? Solomon's "go to" instruction is often in the form of proverbs, right!? Is there a particular proverb that got your attention? Verse 10 is a principle that I read in Covey's book, "Seven Habits of Highly Effective People." It was called "sharpen the saw." Sharpening the saw is likened to gaining wisdom. Overall, I think wisdom is very important. But our definition of wisdom is equally important. If we understand wisdom from a worldly point of view, we might think of it as knowledge or intellect. James 3:17 is my favorite definition of wisdom: "But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere." How does that sound? Solomon always connects wisdom to character rather than being smart. "A wise person chooses the right road; a fool takes the wrong one." (V2) What aspect of wisdom would you like to have more of in your life?

Peter's motivation to write these believers who are facing suffering and persecution is summarized in verse 18, "You must grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." Plus, how do we wait on Christ's return? "While you are waiting for these things to happen, make every effort to be found living peaceful lives that are pure and blameless in his sight." Also, Peter reminds us of the promise that one day we will live in a world filled with God's righteousness." (V13) I also notice Peter's affirmation of Paul with a small gap about how some of his teachings are somewhat difficult to understand. (V16) But his point is that Paul's main message is very understandable and life-changing. How do you respond to Peter's closing words? How has reading through Peter's letters blessed you?

WEEK 3

Ecclesiastes will conclude on a high note, which will lead us into another book written by Solomon on the beauty of love. Many have interpreted the Song of Songs as an allegory of the relationship between God and the church, but it is now accepted as celebrating the profound love between a man and a woman, providing a refreshingly realistic and wholesome treatment of human sexuality. Of course, both a love relationship with God and a love relationship between a man and a woman could be intended by the author.

The coming of the Messiah through Jesus presents his birth in both the Gospel of Luke and Matthew. Rereading these Scriptures at this time is an especially meaningful addition to our Old Testament focus.

DAY 11 – Ecclesiastes 11 & Luke 1:1-25

Solomon was such a wise guy. These statements are truly worth contemplating since they so easily apply to us still today. What do we say today about investing and diversifying? Isn't that what verse 2 tells us? If the farmer waits for perfect conditions (V4), he will miss the opportunity to plant in a timely manner for the best harvest. These are things we deal with in the 21st century. From verses 7 to 10, young people should make the most of life and the vitality they enjoy, since no one stays young forever. How do you connect with these random wise sayings? My connection is one of affirmation for the activity of God, as mentioned in verse 5, as being beyond human understanding, but to me, knowing God is the greatest delight in life. Solomon tells us in a repetitive way that life apart from God is no more than a vapor, but life connected to God brings meaning to this brief life on earth. We are winding down with one chapter left. Tomorrow, Solomon brings a concluding message that is often thought of as the last word from Solomon.

I was thinking of Advent when I chose for us to read Luke 1 this week. I think it is the ideal chapter to prepare our minds and hearts on the birth of Christ as the Word became flesh (John 1:14). The story of Zechariah is well known, but still so interesting to read and reflect upon. Of course, Zechariah's lack of faith is the most recognized part of the story, but the announcement from Gabriel is incredible to me as the forerunner to the Messiah is on his way, and he will show the way. The anticipation of a forerunner to the Messiah is announced already by Malachi (3:1, 4:5-6) 400 years previously. Gabriel makes the connection to Elijah just like Malachi did. My thoughts about Zechariah being befuddled and saying, "How can this happen," are not difficult for me to perceive. He has encountered the mighty angel, Gabriel. Give him some grace. He would learn his lesson, but God would keep his promise as Gabriel announced. How do you

respond to this familiar story this time? I look forward to meeting Zechariah in heaven. The Lord honored him and did not give up on him. I appreciate that.

Day 12 – Ecclesiastes 12 & Luke 1:26-38

The theme of chapter 12 could be “Remember Him!” Reverence for God, the Creator, can give wisdom and guidance as to what will be best in this life and pleasing to God, knowing we must give an account to Him, as it says in the final verse (14). Why should we pay attention to God when we are young? How many important decisions did you make when you were/are younger? It seems to me that the direction of life is more uncertain when we are young, and following the right path will make an incredible difference. How do you respond to Solomon’s precise conclusion, “Fear God and obey his commands?” Without God, life is meaningless... that is, the rapid evaporation of life, and when it is over, each one of us will stand before God in heaven. Because this is true, knowing God, worshiping God, and serving God are the supreme focus of wisdom and meaning in this life. Solomon has given us the stark contrast of living life apart from God compared to finding purpose in living for God. His writings were meant to stir up the inclination of human beings who are prone to live for themselves, which is empty and contrary to God’s design. He ultimately points to the need for faith and connection to the living God. We already know that, but we have people in our lives who don’t. Let’s pray for them!

Reading about the young teenager, Mary, is always a special part of the Christmas story. Her response to the angel, Gabriel, has inspired the faith of others time and again. Her response might seem similar to Zechariah’s from yesterday’s reading. She also says How can this be since I am a virgin. Gabriel is completely gracious to her and realizes that she is a young teenager, and helps her understand what God has planned. When Gabriel explains the plan, Mary simply says, “May your word to me be fulfilled.” (V38) What Gabriel told her is beyond human understanding. The Holy Spirit will cause this birth? Wow. But Mary’s simple faith and obvious humility reveal why the Lord chose her. I have always appreciated Mary, who will become even stronger after reading her song to the Lord tomorrow. God chose an unlikely person to be the mother of Jesus. But the Lord does not choose people for his purposes based on earthly status or a popularity vote. I find that especially encouraging as I think of how graciously God has chosen me and affirmed me for his purposes. I hope you sense the same for you from God.

DAY 13 – Song of Songs 1 & Luke 1:39-56

I don’t know how long it has been since you read this Old Testament book, but it is very unique, to say the least. I want to begin with a quote from G. Lloyd Carr, a retired Old Testament professor from Gordon College – “God’s action of creating us as sexual beings was no accident

of compromise... It should not be considered obscene that at least one book of the Bible be dedicated to the celebration of one of the central realities of our creaturehood." The first chapter jumps right into the topic with "Kiss me and kiss me again, for your love is sweeter than wine." Obviously, there is a strong attraction between the man and the woman. "How beautiful you are my darling, how beautiful! Your eyes are like doves." (V15) We sometimes refer to this as romance, which is important in a love relationship between a man and a woman. The backdrop seems to indicate that the King is about to take her into his palace, but her true passions lie with her shepherd lover. The hope that her lover will rescue her from the King's presence, who is most likely enlisting her as one of his concubines, is a new theme for me as I read Solomon's words this time around. There's no doubt that the topic is very intimate and passionate. This must be thought of as encouragement from the Lord to be captivated by human love in the preparation for and closeness of marriage. But possibly you are single and inclined to skip reading this book. But many have interpreted this book as the passion of knowing God as his bride. I think that also has merit.

John the Baptist and Jesus meet each other for the first time in verse 41. As John in his mother's womb, he jumps for joy, seemingly out of excitement for the Messiah who is developing as a human being in Mary's womb. Elizabeth must have been a breath of fresh air for Mary. Her being pregnant before the wedding would be very awkward, to say the least. Elizabeth blesses her instead. Mary's song is traditionally called the Magnificat. This is because she magnifies the Lord who has been mindful of her low estate. Mary realizes that being chosen for this role would elevate her forever. She gives the Lord humble gratitude for his mercy and this special privilege. As you read her song, what do you notice? Do you focus on a particular verse or even a particular word? The principle of exalting the humble is affirmed again, reminding us that this is how our God operates. The Lord brought down princes but lifted a lowly servant girl. So many aspects of God's approach are upside-down to our natural inclination. You would think believers would finally realize this clear perspective, but people rarely operate this way. But there is no question that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. How does this principle touch your heart today?

DAY 14 – Song of Songs 2 & Luke 1:57-66

I wonder if you were eager to read the next chapter in the Song of Songs today? To me, it is so interesting that the Lord wanted to include teaching that served as an example of the importance of romantic love in marriage. It is actually very rare for intimacy in marriage to fade in today's couples. Along with the beauty of intimate love is the caution to not awaken it until the time is right (V7, 3:5, & 8:4). Virginity is affirmed and should be honored in Christian relationships prior to marriage. This is also unfortunately rare. Verse 15 may be a literal warning

or a metaphor for something that can ruin a relationship. Literally, the woman's responsibilities as a vinedresser would be in danger because foxes digging holes could ruin the plant. But most interpreters see it as a metaphor representing threats to the love relationship. It could be the stress of life, rival suitors, the cooling of love, or anything that keeps them apart. This longing for human love between a man and a woman is the way God intended it to be. Investing in your marriage and honoring the marriage bed is pleasing to God. What do you think about that?

We are reading about the birth of John in Luke today. The details of the story are especially inspiring to me. Zechariah can't speak, and since they had to use hand gestures, he was also deaf. Elizabeth is especially old and probably was on bedrest since the birth seemed to be a bit of a surprise to those around her. But the people were happy for her and yet surprised again when she wanted to name the boy John. This leads to Zechariah and his response of obedience, which frees the Lord to heal him. It might seem obvious to us that John will be special, but the birth of a baby doesn't usually point to something extraordinary. However, the family and local community sensed the hand of God on this boy's life, and they were right. How do you respond to the birth of John? What stands out to you?

DAY 15 – Song of Songs 3 & Luke 1:67-80

I am learning about an interpretation of this book that is new for me. The young woman is not pursuing King Solomon, even though there is a sense that he would want her among the women of his life. The young woman is trying to find her lover, and at the same time, Solomon shows up with sixty soldiers by his side. The King would not roam around at night by himself. The woman wants the handsome but common young man instead of Solomon. It makes a lot of sense to me and affirms the purity of love that is not based on wealth or position or power. Love is meant to be shared with simple devotion and beauty without the human trappings of expectation, worldly values, and external desires. Love is a heart connection that wants the best for another. The idea is that Solomon admires this beautiful woman, and he is attending her wedding. But the certainty of this conclusion is not foolproof.

Zechariah expresses overflowing praise and gratitude to God in this reading. The Lord has brought him through some deep waters as a mute and deaf man for close to a year. Plus, the unimaginable takes place as his wife becomes pregnant as an old(er) lady. But Zechariah doesn't even focus on the gift of his son until verse 76, but rather on the salvation coming to mankind through the royal line of David (V69). The prophetic words announced by Zechariah for his son match the words of Gabriel given to him over a year ago. Previously, he questioned Gabriel, but now he affirms the message and speaks of his son's special purpose "to prepare the way for the Lord." (V76) Also, after giving a sermon on peace, I appreciate the connection that Zechariah

makes with the coming of the Messiah, guiding us to the path of peace (V79). This is a powerful, prophetic song that should easily inspire us. What phrase or idea given by Zechariah catches your eye? Isn't it marvelous how God never let go of Zechariah, and we see how much stronger and full of faith he is because of what he went through?! How does Zechariah's journey in this first chapter speak to you?

WEEK 4

We are reading the rest of the Song of Songs this week. It will continue to highlight the romantic love between a man and a woman. But this is not a fluffy type of love, but rather very strong with a deep commitment. In chapter 8, the author tells us about a love that is enduring. Verses 6 to 8 give us a good definition of a love that lasts. As a married man, I appreciate the reminder to affirm my wife's beauty and my attraction to her. There's no doubt that God encourages intimate love in marriage.

The first chapter of the Gospel of John is especially powerful and yet rather unique. There is much to glean from these 51 verses. We will meditate on about 10 of them each day. This is sure to enhance your Advent season of preparation as well as deepen your own faith.

DAY 16 – Song of Songs 4 & John 1:1-9

As I understand it, a woman loves to be captivated by a man who genuinely loves her. This is definitely the case from verses 1-7, "You are altogether beautiful, my darling, beautiful in every way." This sensuous poem obviously leads to sexual intimacy as the man describes her physical beauty from the head downward. Then, the young woman invites the young man into her garden. Since the wedding took place in chapter 3, we could expect the emphasis of chapter 4 to be on the wedding night. Verse 12 affirms the woman's chastity as the woman is the lover's private garden as his bride, his treasure alone. It is hard to read these words without blushing. They are surprisingly descriptive. But again, the Lord created the pleasure of love and intimacy as a gift for marriage.

This Scripture is good all year round. But it is especially significant during Advent. No other author announces Christ's arrival quite like John. The use of the "Word" points to God's revelation as the guiding principle for mankind. It is an elevated way of affirming the identity of Jesus as God. The most repeated idea besides the Word is the "light" coming into the world. Light will become a key theme in John's Gospel. Light makes sense in so many ways. When the light shines, we can see and understand the meaning of life. The darkness is meant to veil our eyes and cause us to stumble along the path. However, darkness cannot extinguish the light. Jesus is the true light, which means he is greater than any obstacle the devil tries to throw at him. What does it mean to you that Jesus is the true light? (V9)

DAY 17 – Song of Songs 5 & John 1:10-18

The main interpretation of these verses suggests that the woman is having a dream. Previously, in chapters 1 & 3, she had been upset because she couldn't find her lover. "I slept, but my heart was awake..." Again, the theme pertains to sexual intimacy as the idea of knocking and asking for her to open the door means the man is requesting entry. This insinuates the desire for sexual union and the importance of honoring the woman's desires, not just the man's. Also, the dream includes a disruption; something gets in the way of the two lovers uniting. The poetic picture pertains to the possible struggles that a husband and a wife might experience concerning their sexual intimacy. Her dream turns into a nightmare with watchmen who are devilish and abusive. (V7) However, the dream returns to a focus on affection and how much the young woman is thrilled by her lover. The portrayal of these thoughts fits the unpredictability of a dream, but they also affirm how much the lover was on the mind of this young woman.

There is no question in my mind that the message of verse 14 is monumental. It is the clear description of what we refer to as the "incarnation;" God coming in human flesh. You could camp on this verse for the remainder of your quiet time and find treasure after treasure in these words. But verse 12 is especially important as well. The invitation is to believe and receive. This is the essence of faith and salvation. Believing in the Lord Jesus Christ and receiving him into your heart is the definition of being saved. It reminds me of Romans 10:9, "If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord (the Son of God) and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." I actually spent a whole week meditating on these verses alone, guided by the prayer ministry of Lectio 365. The revelation of God is fully embodied in His Son. "No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father's heart. He has revealed God to us." (V18) How has the Lord spoken to you through these amazing verses in John's prologue?

DAY 18 – Song of Songs 6 & John 1:19-28

The young man is wise as he affirms the beauty of his bride, even repeating himself from chapter 4. One of the unique statements from the lover is in verse 8. If he had to compare her with sixty queens and eighty concubines, "I will still choose my dove..." (V9). This is a marvelous way to affirm his wife as the one he would choose even if offered all other maidens. I am sure that the exchange of such love and beauty is rare in most marriages. But where else should a husband or a wife be affirmed for their beauty? If a spouse never shares how he or she is attracted to their mate, the married person might be tempted to look for it from someone else. This does not make it right, but the issue could be addressed by sharing romantic love more freely within the marriage. These are important reminders to enhance God's design in marriage for intimate love.

The Gospel of John turns to the life of John the Baptist who plays a very significant role in God's plan as John announces the arrival of the One who is worthy and as 1:15 already highlighted, "This is the one I was talking about when I said, 'Someone is coming after me who is greater than I am, for he existed long before me,'" The Gospel of John actually says less about John than the other accounts. But still, this Gospel helps us see the humility of John. Everything can be summarized with his statement in John 3:30, "He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less." John simply wanted to be known as the 'voice preparing the way for the Messiah.' The baptism of John was a baptism of repentance and preparation, which is different than how we understand baptism as a symbol of faith and cleansing from sin that recognizes the person as a follower of Jesus Christ. Why do you think John said he wasn't Elijah? Malachi 4:5 tells us that Elijah would be the forerunner of the Messiah. So, in my thinking, John represents Elijah as he prepares the way for Jesus. John definitely wanted to keep a low profile and respond with humility.

DAY 19 – Song of Songs 7 & John 1:29-34

The exclusive nature of the sexual relationship between the man and the woman makes their lovemaking indeed special and an important aspect of their bond together. As the last line in this chapter affirms, "new delights as well as old, which I have saved for you, my lover." This is obviously another chapter describing the beauty of love in marriage. It might seem unusual for the Bible to include such an open presentation about sexual expression in marriage. However, there's a purity in these words that honors the original intent of marriage from Genesis 2:23-25, "'At last!' the man exclaimed. 'This one is bone of my bone, and flesh from my flesh! She will be called woman because she was taken from man.' This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one. Now the man and his wife were both naked, but they felt no shame." How does this reminder about marriage speak to you?

Everything that John says points to what happened when Jesus was baptized, as the other Gospel writers confirm. The Holy Spirit descended on him, which was the sign that 'he is the Chosen One of God.' (V34) But the statement that has as much meaning as anything else John the Baptist said is the declaration that Jesus is "the Lamb God who takes away the sin of the world." (V29) That's as big of a statement about his identity and his purpose that John could make. Jesus also said, "I did not come to be served, but to serve and give my life as a ransom for many." (Mt 20:28) John is actually saying that Jesus will be the eternal Passover Lamb, who will die in our place. His shed blood will be the sign of the new covenant for the forgiveness of sins. This is absolutely foundational to the Christian faith. John declares a timeless truth the first time

he meets Jesus face-to-face. Thus, this short reading does have some depth and inspiration to it for you and me. How are you responding to John the Baptist's words in these verses?

DAY 20 – Song of Songs 8 & John 1:35-51

Don't you appreciate the strong definition of love in verses 6 & 7!? It says that the bond of love is resolute, unshakable, and broken only in death. The mention of the seal over your heart affirms exclusivity and the permanency of marriage. A seal was for identification and ownership. This coincides with one's wedding vows, only to be broken by death. No doubt the love presented here is best described as a lifelong commitment. Also, in this chapter, we read about the emphasis on virginity before marriage. Verses 8 to 10, in the midst of passionate love and sexual expression, the author calls for the brothers of the family to guide and protect their sisters from premature sexuality before marriage. A hidden message challenges even the king from buying love. She can now pay Solomon the lease fee for the vineyard. The exclusion of Solomon from getting what he wants is such an interesting addition to what I previously thought. But it now makes sense to me, knowing Solomon's issue with women and the purity of love between these two lovers. May you hear the message of this book as an encouragement to love your spouse with a deep and intimate love.

Jesus is enlisting fishermen who also said he would make them "fishers of men." These men have no idea what is about to happen in their lives from this point on. They all would one day die for the name of Jesus as martyrs. I like how the NLT closes this section, "the one who is the stairway between heaven and earth." Jesus is the bridge to God and the pathway to heaven. We all believe that, but the disciples were just beginning. It says in verse 44 that Bethsaida was Peter and Andrew's hometown. Maybe so, but they moved to Capernaum shortly after this. (Mark 1:21, 29) I also notice Nathanael's statement about Nazareth. That was how many Jews felt, and yet Nazareth was Jesus' hometown. Jesus reflects the kind of person he gives special attention to. Our Lord was way more interested in the simple, the poor, the broken than he was concerned about the religious, the wealthy, the celebrity, right!! I am very inspired by the fact that the Lord took ordinary guys and changed the world through their testimony. Acts 4:13 says, "The members of the council were amazed when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, for they could see that they were ordinary men with no special training in the Scriptures. They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus." That's what you and I need more of... TIME WITH JESUS!

ADDENDUM: 1 Peter 1-3 (10 days)

DAY 1 – 1 Peter 1:1-7

Some have suggested that 1 Peter could be titled, “Be Hopeful.” The kind of hope mentioned is described as a living hope that will sustain God’s people in difficult times. These first seven verses are ones that I often read to people in the hospital because they are usually facing a trial (Verses 6-7). What ideas does Peter share with us in this first reading? Chosen, born again, living hope, kept in heaven, refined by fire, to the glory of Jesus... are ones that stand out to me. A secure salvation will sustain us with hope no matter what. How do you respond to that statement? What blesses you most about this first reading in 1 Peter?

DAY 2 – 1 Peter 1:8-12

Salvation is such an important topic for Peter; he gives us more teaching on the importance of salvation. He tells us that salvation overflows with love, trust, and joy in verses 8 & 9. The impact of salvation changes everything. What a privilege to be alive after the revelation of the incarnation as God comes to earth through his Son. Jesus imparts the way to eternal life. The two mountain peaks of spiritual truth and anticipation would be Mount Calvary and the Mount of Olives. Calvary has already taken place, and we know without a doubt that Jesus walked this earth and died in our place. Also, his resurrection was verified by hundreds of people. But the picture of the Mount of Olives is the return of Christ to reign forever. We are sure of his first coming; we can be sure of his second coming as well. How does this short reading inspire your faith?

DAY 3 – 1 Peter 1:13-21

I titled these verses in 1 Peter 1 as “ready for action.” Holiness literally means to be set apart for a godly purpose. Because of Christ and through Christ, we are called to live in a way that is distinct from the world as well as attractive, so that people will ask, “How can I have what they have?” We are privileged to receive salvation, but now God gives us a sense of responsibility. Our lives matter; God meant for us to be a reflection of Himself in this world. “Be holy, as I am holy.” There was so much at stake with the Early Church. Everything was crucial to the integrity and expansion of God’s Kingdom in the 1st century. What stands out to you in these verses about obedience, holiness, and living for Christ?

DAY 4 – 1 Peter 1:22-2:3

These short readings in 1 Peter are packed with ideas worth contemplating. The behavior that is especially necessary in the Body of Christ is what? You guessed it. There are actually two kinds of love mentioned. The friendship love as brothers and sisters; the agape love that is deeper and necessary to weather the challenges facing this new church and the people in it. A sacrificial love will be used by God to sustain the fellowship of believers. How will you develop a deep love for others? Peter tells us it is nourished through the living and enduring word of God. In verse 2, the idea of spiritual milk must be connected to the truth of God's Word. The vitality of the church can be drained by envy, hypocrisy, deceit, and harsh words that destroy others. This verse, in 1 Peter 2:1, points to the need for sanctification, to grow in Christ. Put off the old nature of selfishness and sin; put on the truth of God's Word, which will cause you to grow. I encourage you to slow down and reflect on what God might be saying to you in these 6 verses!

DAY 5 – 1 Peter 2:4-10

1 Peter 2:4f are especially inspiring words about the New Community the Lord has formed through his Son, Jesus. The word "church" is not mentioned in these verses, but everything points to it, in my opinion. The spiritual house, the cornerstone, the elevated descriptions of God's people as chosen, holy, and priests... give us a picture of God's plan to birth the church as the gathering of God's people, a witness to the world. Verse 9 is the culmination of these lofty words and descriptions about God's plan for the church. "As a result, you will show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." The church is meant to be a gift for God's people but also a light to the world. What aspects of this short reading point to the church, affirm the church, or reveal the purpose of the church? Peter had learned so much from Jesus as well as through his own failure, so that we can glean much from his wisdom expressed in this letter! How is 1 Peter speaking to you?

DAY 6 – 1 Peter 2:11-25

1 Peter emphasizes the challenge facing believers in the 1st Century. The governing authorities were not always trustworthy, and neither were the masters of so many slaves. This section brings us to Peter's main theme of suffering and facing opposition. Verse 17 has a simple but profound summary of how to live as a believer when the believers are a minority. Verses 17 & 21 are verses that get my attention. I have already told you why verse 17 is important, but verse 21 gives me an overarching principle: "walk in his steps." A famous Christian book was written in 1897, entitled "In His Steps" by Charles Sheldon. Have you ever read that book? It is exceptional and puts in story form the message Peter shares in these verses. What does it mean to walk in

his steps? There are many statements in these 15 verses worth noting. Which one(s) jump out at you? Why?

DAY 7 – 1 Peter 3:1-7

Peter addresses the subject of marriage that coincides with Paul's instruction about marriage in Ephesians 5:22f. The idea presented by Peter is that marriage can be difficult, but don't give up. When a Christian wife comes to faith, she has an even more significant purpose in marriage. The possibility of an unbelieving husband coming to faith is very hopeful since that man will see the change in his wife's life. Women were drawn to the uplifting and honoring truth of the Gospel more readily than the men were (at least that is how it seems). Like the Apostle Paul, marriage was an essential relationship that tested one's faith and challenged believers to put into practice the life of faith in the closeness of marriage. What do you learn about marriage from Peter in these seven verses? Let me remind you that Paul summarized the call of marriage with husbands loving their wives and wives respecting their husbands. (Ephesians 5:33) Why is that so important?

DAY 8 – 1 Peter 3:8-17

Peter gets to his main concern in 3:8-17. He wants to help them stand strong in suffering. If we stay connected to each other and faithful to the Lord by overcoming evil with good, I think we might "love life" as verse 10 suggests. But there are ample opportunities to face opposition, insults, and evil in this world. So, the strongest statement is found in verse 15 with the importance of "set apart Christ as Lord" in your hearts. With that deep and real commitment to Christ, a believer can withstand the persecution and slanderous words that come their way. If we remain strong, Peter says, "You are blessed." (V14) Peter tells us that good behavior can lead to sharing about the hope we have in Christ. (V15) But remember that how you share it is as important as what you share. Respond to unbelievers with gentleness and respect. There are a number of ways to apply these verses to your life. What caught your eye? How might the Lord want you to apply his truth to your life?

DAY 9 – 1 Peter 3:18-22

1 Peter 3:18-22 has long been considered a difficult passage. It begins with "spirits in prison." The passage connects this phrase to the people of Noah's day. During the days of Noah, God waited patiently for the people to hear the proclaimed message and repent. But I want you to know that there is no certain interpretation of these verses, but the one I am drawn to is the preaching of Noah long ago, inspired by Christ. They had the opportunity to respond, but now

are imprisoned, separated from God. But eight people believed tying this to baptism, which represents the salvation of our Lord. Peter might have meant that, as the water floated the boat in which Noah and his family were saved, so baptism saves believers. Not the mere mechanical act of baptism... “not by removing dirt from our bodies,” as if the water itself cleanses our souls. Baptism is thought of as a reflection of salvation because it is based on inward faith and grounded in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as Peter writes in Verse 21b. Sometimes Bible scholars look for deeper meaning and interpretation, but I am drawn to an understanding that is simpler so that readers like you and me can apply it to our lives. Noah’s story is a story of warning. As the Gospel is preached, people are confronted with a message that they can believe or they may choose to reject. The result is a seat on the boat or the drowning waters of separation from God forever.

DAY 10 – 1 Peter 4:1-11

Again, the focal point of this reading can easily gravitate to verse 6 about preaching to the dead. But the meaning is more literally translated, “preached even to the dead.” Peter refers to people now dead who were exposed to the Good News while alive; he does not envision a chance to repent after death. All people will die, but the ones who responded in faith will “live forever with God in the Spirit.” (V6) This fits the context the best. Verses 7 to 11 are very practical and pertain to everyday concerns as a follower of Christ. Verses 10 & 11 are of special interest to me as they affirm God’s gifting in our lives and how they help us serve one another well. Speaking gifts and serving gifts are a helpful summary of how the Spirit gifts us as believers. I am sure you found something practical in these verses to contemplate and apply to your life.