

# BETTER

BETTER BEFORE BIGGER



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# BETTER

I am convinced there is a huge lie that holds us back from an amazing relationship with God, with ourselves, with others, and even with the stuff around us! Not surprisingly, it's the first ever lie told all the way back in the garden. It's the lie the serpent told Eve...God is holding out on you. Basically, he was saying "If you had more than what He has given you...then you would be happy".

Think about that - it's the first lie ever told in the history of the universe and since then, our world has revolved around making sure we have more and more of what we don't have - but are convinced we need. Our dreams, our desires, our wants continue to get bigger and as we achieve them - we have even bigger desires.

And bigger is **ALWAYS** better, right?

Most people would want a bigger paycheck or a bigger house. Or maybe those don't interest you but a bigger car for your growing and ever increasing family does. For some, it is a bigger influence online...more and more followers means a bigger audience to consume those amazing videos and posts you are making. For me, I spent years wanting a bigger TV.

But what if bigger isn't **BETTER**? What if the opposite is true? What if God doesn't want you to have a bigger life but a **BETTER** life? What if the thing holding you back from the life you want isn't bigger...but **BETTER**?

I mean, after all, who doesn't want ...

- A **BETTER** relationship with **GOD**?
- A **BETTER** relationship with **THEMSELVES**?
- A **BETTER** relationship with **OTHERS**?
- A **BETTER** relationship with **STUFF**?

Throughout scripture God constantly asks questions of those who are following Him. Tough questions - questions meant to challenge and call us into a **BETTER** understanding of **WHO** He is and **HOW** we interact with Him. Taken seriously, these questions have the power to reshape our relationship with everything around us. In fact, in this devotional we've divided up each week into four distinct relationships I believe God wants you to grow in.

If you are willing to allow God to ask you some tough questions and then reflect on your answer, I believe you'll walk out of the next four weeks completely different. God's questions are **BETTER** than our questions and so, let's pause from asking our own questions about how we get bigger and allow God to ask us what He wants and let Him reshape us into a more healthy version of ourselves.

Let's spend these next four weeks answering key questions from God with the commitment to get

**BETTER** before bigger!

*Pastor Nic*

Pastor Nic Smith  
River Lake Church  
Relevant | Simple | Real

**IF ANY OF YOU LACKS WISDOM,  
YOU SHOULD ASK GOD, WHO GIVES  
GENEROUSLY TO ALL WITHOUT FINDING  
FAULT, AND IT WILL BE  
GIVEN TO YOU.**

**JAMES 1:5**

# HOW TO USE THIS DEVOTIONAL

Talking with God may be outside your comfort zone, so we've designed this to be as Relevant, Simple, and Real as possible. It is our goal that through the use of this devotional, your relationship with God, yourself, others and even the stuff in your life will become **BETTER** and **BETTER**.

Here is a step by step overview of how we designed it:

## STEP 1 - Turn to the **CURRENT DAY** you are on

If you miss a day (or two or three), that's fine. Don't skip those days but simply continue as if you didn't miss anything. The goal of this is not to finish it on a certain day but to allow it to speak to you over the course of several weeks.

## STEP 2 - **PRAY**

Spend a few moments asking God to speak to you during this time. Ask Him to honor your request to hear from Him and to remove any distractions that might hinder hearing His voice above all others. Then turn to page 63, date your entry, and make a note of what you are asking God for today. It may be small and seem insignificant when you see it on paper but if it's important enough for you to ask God, it's important enough to keep a record of it. It can be a list or a paragraph - that's up to you. But learn to keep a record of your prayers so you can pray through those that have not been answered and thank God for those that have been.

## STEP 3 - Read the **TOPIC** and **TEXT** of the day

The **TOPIC** will always be the question at the top of the page. The **TEXT** is a reference to a section of scripture in the Bible. It doesn't matter whether you read it from a physical Bible or an app on your device, just make sure you take your time and focus on what you are reading.

## STEP 4 - Read the **CONTEXT**

This will help guide your thinking and give some background as to why we chose this particular question to reflect on.

## STEP 5 - **REFLECT**

This is the last but most important step. There will be a section every day for you to record your thoughts and reflections to the question of the day. Avoid simple "yes or no" answers and spend a little time going deeper. Spend some time thinking through your answer and maybe even write out why you answered the way you did. This section is designed to help you get to know yourself more than you currently do.

Remember, the goal is not to be "religious" and just check off that you did it. The goal is for you to experience God and hear from Him. This is your opportunity to create space in your schedule to allow Him to ask you some questions to help you see Him and yourself more clearly and be open to what He is saying to you.



WEEK 1

# MY RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

## HAVE YOU SETTLED?

There is no more important relationship we can have than with the One who created us, the One who loves us, the One who seeks us.

But sometimes what we settle for is far less than a relationship with God. Many Christians I know have settled for “religion” that guides them morally instead of a relationship that guides them spiritually. Now, let me be clear - there is nothing wrong with being religious. But there is so much more to God than just following rules and making sure to attend a weekly service. The Lord wants to love us, help us learn about Him, and ultimately lead us into a life filled with purpose and meaning.

And since this whole book is about questions, let me ask you a few:

- Do you have a relationship with God where He speaks to and leads you?
- Do you feel loved and valued by God?
- Do you feel conviction in your heart and mind when you walk away from Him?
- Do you desire to know God more and follow Him more closely or have you settled for attending church and being good?
- Are you open to exploring where God may be leading you and courageous enough to follow Him?

This week my prayer for you is that God would call you into a deeper (and **BETTER**) relationship with Him and you would not just settle for a religion that falls far short of God’s design and will for your life.

So turn the page and start to read and reflect on your relationship with **GOD**.



## WHO ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?



JOHN 20:11-18

Everyone is looking for someone or something. That's because we are made to worship. It doesn't matter whether you believe in God or not, you are worshiping and seeking something or someone. The question is **WHAT** or **WHO** are you looking for? Said differently, what has your heart? What do you sacrifice for regularly?

There are many Christians who believe in God but behave as if He doesn't exist. They will attend church, maybe serve, or even give a little when it's convenient. But, if they are honest, they are searching for something else outside of a relationship with Jesus. They're searching for the perfect golf score, the right house or car, or maybe they're still searching for a spouse that will make them feel whole.

This person isn't seeking Him or a relationship with Him. This is the person who has settled for a religious experience outside of a relationship with Jesus.

Have you settled for something less than what Jesus is offering? Are you looking for Him or for something else to fill up your life, your time or maybe even your purpose?



## WHERE ARE YOU?



GENESIS 3:1-21

We're going to start a three day journey into the original story of where it all went wrong. There are three questions found in the story of the fall. Each is an important question for us to wrestle with as it relates to our relationship with God. Skip one and you may find yourself struggling and not know why.

Today we're going to look at the very first question God asked Adam and Eve, "Where are you?" They have sinned and really messed things up. And in that moment, they realized they were naked and immediately created crude coverings before hiding from God. But the problem is deeper than what we see in this story. They don't just cover up physically; they cover up spiritually and blame each other for the sins they've committed. They are making excuses instead of trying to make it right. The problem with sin is it separates us from God and those around us. As we focus on our relationship with God this week, we have to deal with the impact of sin in our lives before we can move forward.

So where are you? Are you close to God? Do you feel connected and in step with Him and His calling? Do you feel His presence and Word guiding you day to day? If so, that is incredible! Enjoy this season of your life and communion with God. But that doesn't describe everyone. Maybe you feel disconnected?



## WHO TOLD YOU THAT?



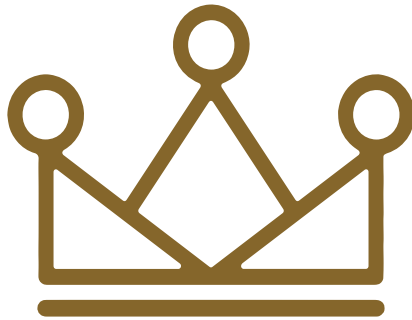
GENESIS 3:1-13

Yesterday I asked if you really want a relationship with God. I have found most people do but there is something that often gets in the way...their own brokenness. Today's question is about asking who you are listening to. Both Adam and Eve had heard the voice of God. It wasn't an information issue. It was a volume issue. God's voice was there in the story; in fact, Eve quotes God. The problem was the serpent's voice was louder in her mind and, as a result, she and Adam compromised who they were called to be - all because the voice they were listening to wasn't the right one.

Do you know what God's voice sounds like? If so, is it the loudest in your life? Are you open to what God may be saying to you? For many, like Adam and Eve, our struggle is not that we don't know something is wrong. It's that we trust the wrong voice. It could be a loved one or a boyfriend or a girlfriend pressuring us. Maybe it is culture, as a whole, tempting us to compromise who we are to be cool or successful or relevant today.

For many, it is the voice inside our own head telling us things like we are not good enough as we are, lying to us by telling us we have to be someone we're not, or that we need to be **BETTER** than we are right now.





**HAVE YOU SETTLED FOR “RELIGION” THAT  
GUIDES YOU MORALLY OR ARE YOU SEEKING  
A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD THAT GUIDES YOU  
SPIRITUALLY?**

**... THROW OFF YOUR OLD SINFUL  
NATURE AND YOUR FORMER WAY OF  
LIFE, WHICH IS CORRUPTED BY LUST  
AND DECEPTION.  
INSTEAD, LET THE SPIRIT RENEW YOUR  
THOUGHTS AND ATTITUDES.  
PUT ON YOUR NEW NATURE, CREATED  
TO BE LIKE GOD — TRULY RIGHTEOUS  
AND HOLY.**

**EPHESIANS 4:22-24**

## WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?



GENESIS 3:1-13

Again we look at the same passage today but there is a different question I want you to notice. It is the last one, and maybe, the most important one. What have you done? Obviously God knows what they have done. So why does He ask it; in fact why does He ask any of these questions? It's because many times we don't take long enough to really think through what we are doing and how it is affecting us. Just like yesterday's question about who told you that, today's question is about what might be a temptation for you.

When the enemy is allowed to speak to us directly and we engage in a conversation with him, it leads to something subtle and insidious. Think about it: before the serpent speaks, Adam and Eve were great. They had been given so much. In fact, God told them they could have everything except one thing. That is ridiculously generous. But the serpent speaks, and because his voice was louder than God's at the time, he convinces them to quit focusing on everything they had and focus on the one thing they didn't.

All of a sudden, God went from being generous to being greedy in their minds. God was holding out on them with something that would be **BETTER** for them - something they now wanted.



## WHY DID YOU LAUGH?



GENESIS 18:1-15

There are two questions God asks in our text today. I want to focus on the first one this time. God tells Abram that his wife will get pregnant and she doesn't believe Him. She laughs at the idea that someone as old as her could ever have a baby. Every time I read that passage, I get it from her perspective. She has prayed and prayed, and trusted and trusted, and at some point, she just gave up. At some point it went from probably, to possibly, to probably not, to impossible. So later, when it seems like all hope is lost for them to have a biological child, it makes sense that she scoffs at the idea that she could get pregnant. I don't think her struggle was whether God "could" but more about whether God "would".

The same thing happens in our own lives. We pray about things and maybe in the beginning there is hope. It is more probable than not but you're still going to pray about it. Then time goes on and it is still possible but it doesn't look good. Then, at some point, you give up. You start to believe that either God doesn't hear, doesn't care, or doesn't want that for you. Either way, it's not going to happen. So we quit praying, quit believing, quit hoping for what could be.





WEEK 2

## MY RELATIONSHIP WITH MYSELF

## HOW DO YOU SEE YOURSELF?

I believe one of the worst relationships people have is with themselves. We live in a culture that is built on comparison, combined with social media that consistently shows us how great everyone else's life is. And top that off with our own sinful patterns that create stress, anxiety, and separation from God and others...it's no wonder we struggle to see ourselves as God sees us. It can feel like everything around us is working against us.

But the second most important step a person can make after developing a healthy relationship with God is to develop a relationship with who they are and how God wired them. Scripture reminds us

*13 For you created my inmost being;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
your works are wonderful, I know that full well.*

Psalm 139

Let those words sink in. God made you intentionally. At River Lake we believe everyone was made **ON** purpose, **WITH** a purpose, **FOR** a purpose. You are not an accident! Your unique abilities and struggles weren't random. The quirky things you may not like about yourself are not a surprise to God. Essentially...

He **MADE** you.  
He **KNOWS** you.  
He **LOVES** you.  
He has a **PLAN** for you.

All that's left is to believe it and live it out. But—and this is huge—if you don't have a healthy relationship with yourself, you'll struggle to step into that calling. So this week we're focusing on how you view yourself and how to become even **BETTER** as you allow God to speak into your life with His questions.



## WHAT IS YOUR NAME?



GENESIS 32: 22-32

Today we're going to look at your identity—more specifically, your name. A name is a powerful thing when it is owned. I remember telling my oldest son, also named Nicolas, that his name meant victory. He quickly responded with "That must be why I always win". For my son, at that time, he owned his name. He saw himself as a victor in life...it was who he was. Names are important to us all. Sometimes we are proud of our name but other times we are ashamed of it. This can be really true when it comes to last names. Some people are proud to be a (whatever their last name is) and others are ashamed of their heritage. Either way, names are important.

Today we read a story of Jacob who, for most of his life, pretended to be someone he wasn't. He lied and schemed and fooled everyone around him. But he couldn't fool God. So when God asks Jacob what his name is, He is asking him if he is finally good with who he really is, as opposed to who he was pretending to be. I think many times in life we pretend to be people we really are not. Social media is a great place to make sure our pictures are just perfect. We exaggerate the truth about past situations so others think of us as better than we really are. We lie to hide the things we don't want others to know about us. It is easy to pretend, but the problem is - it can be exhausting.



## DO YOU WANT TO GET WELL?

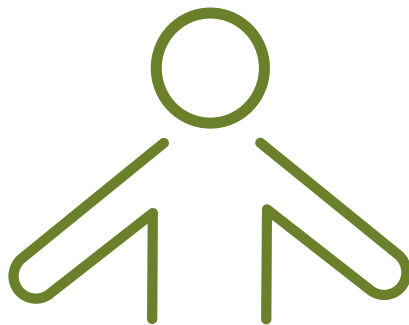


JOHN 5:1-9

Today's question is always an interesting one for me. Every time I read that story I think to myself, "Who wouldn't want to be healed?" Who wants to stay broken or hurt or crippled or lame? But as I watch our current culture, I see people all over who don't want to be healed. They say they do, but their actions say something else. These are people who are stuck in addictions, past trauma, current anxieties - only to name a few. For many, their pain or their hurt has become how they see themselves. It is their identity. To overcome whatever is holding them back would mean to lose part of who they are, not just how they feel.

They are a victim and can't (or don't) want others to see themselves as anything else. It has become a crutch to excuse their own bad behavior. They blame it on how they were raised or what happened to them. They point out the hardship they have experienced or why no one can understand what they're going through. As long as they are a victim, they are not held accountable to grow or move forward. Victimhood in our culture has become a "get out of jail free" card people use daily to excuse why they do what they do.





**ARE YOU LIVING YOUR LIFE AS THOUGH YOU  
WERE MADE ON PURPOSE, WITH A PURPOSE,  
FOR A PURPOSE?**

**FOR YOU CREATED MY INMOST BEING;  
YOU KNIT ME TOGETHER IN MY  
MOTHER'S WOMB.  
I PRAISE YOU BECAUSE I AM FEARFULLY AND  
WONDERFULLY MADE;  
YOUR WORKS ARE WONDERFUL, I KNOW  
THAT FULL WELL.**

**PSALM 139:13-14**

## WHAT IS IN YOUR HAND?



EXODUS 4:1-9

Today we're going to talk about how you see yourself as it relates to your competencies? Do you feel like you can do all God has called you to do or do you feel like you are lacking in some area? Maybe you don't feel smart enough, or rich enough, or spiritual enough to take that step God is asking you to take. I know everyone at some point feels like they can't do it; they aren't enough. That is where today's story comes in.

We pick up today with Moses in the middle of a conversation with God. Moses is struggling, like so many of us, to answer the call to do what God is asking him to do. Essentially, Moses doesn't see himself the way God sees him. So what does God do? He asks a question. God could have spoken all kinds of words of affirmation and told him how great he was and that he had everything. Instead, God chose the power of a question to prove His point.

In our reading today, we see that what Moses already had was enough; I think the same is true for us when we trust in God. God took an ordinary staff (stick!) and turned it into something extraordinary. This is what God does in our lives. When we trust Him and take steps of faith, He shows up in ways we never thought possible. To Moses, he had a staff, but to God, he had a weapon to use against the enemy.



## WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?



1 KINGS 19:9-18

Today's passage deals with purpose and how you see yourself in light of your success. It's easy to base how we feel about who we are on how successful we think we are in the eyes of others. When we have enough money, or we found the right person to marry, or we had the right amount of kids, or some other criteria that we may have in our mind - then we can see ourselves as "successful" and therefore good. But what happens when life doesn't work out like you thought? You didn't get into the college you wanted, or you can't seem to find the right friends, or maybe even you can't find a job and you feel worthless in life. It's easy to end up in a place you never thought you would be.

This is where Elijah found himself. He had lived a good life, followed the Lord the best he could, and yet we find him having a pity party for himself in a cave miles away from where he is supposed to be. So God asks a question - What are you doing here? God is wanting Elijah to reflect on his life a little more than normal. God is asking him to go a little deeper than the surface answer of "My boss is trying to kill me" (that is what was going on in his world at this time - and you thought you had it rough!).



## DO YOU STILL NOT UNDERSTAND?



MATTHEW 16:5-12

I have five kids, and if you have children you've had a moment like this. You've told your kids over and over what to do and maybe even why to do it and they look at you with blank stares as if to say... what? It can be frustrating for sure. What makes it worse is when they talk to their friends or siblings instead of coming to ask you what they should know or be doing. If you're like me, your frustration is doubled. Why didn't they get it and then even more frustrating is why didn't they come to me directly for help?

In today's passage Jesus is trying to teach his disciples something important but, while they are struggling to grasp it, they talk to each other instead of Him directly. I don't know why they did this. Maybe they were embarrassed because they didn't understand or maybe they thought Jesus had more important things to do. Either way, they didn't go to Jesus and Jesus was frustrated with them.

I think sometimes we do this with God. We have questions which make sense, but instead of going directly to God, we ask each other, our friends, or even our pastor.





WEEK 3

## MY RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHERS

## DO YOU REFLECT GOD TO OTHERS?

I believe how you treat others is a direct reflection of how close you are to God. You can't treat other people poorly and say you love God. And I think most people would agree with that. It just makes sense, right? But there is this fascinating passage of scripture where Jesus tells His disciples that if they have an offering for God but remember someone has something against them, they are to leave the offering and go get right with the person first.

Why would Jesus say that? Why not finish with the offering and then go to the person afterward?

It's because what Jesus is saying is this - You **CAN'T** be right with God unless you're right with **OTHERS**. Too many people treat others poorly or are dismissive and then believe that they are good with God. But they aren't.

There is even this passage in the New Testament where the prayers of husbands aren't being heard by God because of how they are treating their wives. Think about that. You could be pouring your heart out to God about something insanely important but because you are harsh or cold with your wife, God isn't listening.

That is a **HIGH** standard. But that is how important it is that we get this next category right. God is just as much interested in your relationship with **OTHERS** as He is your relationship with **HIM**. Why? Because you are called to reflect Him. And you may be the only version of Him **OTHERS** ever see!

So let's jump into this week's questions to get a **BETTER** understanding of our relationships with **OTHERS**.





## WHY DO YOU HONOR YOUR SONS MORE THAN ME?

1 SAMUEL 2:12-32

Have you ever met someone who lived vicariously through their children? Or maybe it wasn't their kids, but their spouse? They worshiped the ground they walked on. Now they would just tell you they loved that person. And there is nothing wrong with loving those around us. As we look deeper and ask some hard questions about our relationship to others though, it's important we have them in the right place. If we're not careful, that child we prayed and prayed for can go from a good thing we appreciate to a god thing we worship. This is when we get into trouble. Anything that replaces the Lord as God is out of the order He has called us to have.

Today we read about Eli and his unwillingness to deal with his sons' bad behavior. He spoke to them about it, but he didn't deal with it. He confronted it, but didn't cleanse it from his family. Believe it or not, God took this as Eli putting his sons before Him. And so God removed Eli and his wicked sons from their roles of priests. It is a hard story to read because people lost their lives as a result of this decision. While I don't think you'll die if you don't have people in the right place in your life, things will die.



## DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT I HAVE DONE?



JOHN 13:1-17

We are called as Christians to serve others. It is part of our identity and calling. It is an overflow out of our relationship with God. It is not an option for those who seriously want to follow Jesus and the way He leads. In today's passage, we see Jesus modeling exactly how we should treat others. We are called to serve people and not use them. Jesus humbly washes the feet of those who were following Him. From a worldly standpoint, it would have made more sense if Jesus asked His disciples to wash His feet, but that is not what we see. By serving His disciples, there was no benefit to Him nor was He fulfilling a responsibility - He wanted to do it because that is who He was - a servant.

When Jesus is done, He asks them the question "do you understand what I've done". Obviously they would have understood the act of what Jesus did. Jesus is asking them to look deeper at the act and think through the "why". Our culture doesn't understand what I call 'radical service'. What Jesus did was radical. He stripped down, got on His knees, pulled out a towel and cleaned the feet of those who would in a few hours both betray Him and deny Him. Washing someone's feet is gross, even when you like - or even love - the person. Washing the feet of Judas, the man who would betray Him and send Him to the worst pain possible, is an entirely different level of service.



## WHO SHALL I SEND?



ISAIAH 6:1-13

I was in the mall one day and felt this overwhelming urge to tell the person helping me that God loved them. It was so out of left field for me. Evangelism is not my strength and I feel incredibly inadequate at it. There I was though with what I felt like was a message from God and I really didn't want to deliver it. To make it worse, I was picking out an outfit I was going to wear that Sunday so I could tell people about Jesus. Talk about a disconnect in my life! Eventually I worked up enough courage to share that with them. They looked at me weird and I'm sure I looked at them weird. Instead of sharing some great spiritual moment, we shared a weird moment and then I walked away. I am not sure why God wanted me to do that. I have no clue if it was because they needed to hear that or I needed to be challenged. Either way, I was honestly glad it was over as I left wondering what just happened. To this day I don't have an answer - but I haven't forgotten it, either. I hope they still remember this weird guy that walked up to them out of the blue and told them God loved them; maybe it even encouraged them at some point in their life. We have no idea what can come out of our obedience!

Today we read about God asking who will go speak for Him. The prophet, Isaiah, says "send me" and we read about the message God wanted to send. It isn't super inspiring if I'm honest. But he was willing. He was open to speak what God put in his mouth. I believe God is still asking this question today: Who is available to spread My message?





**WHEN YOU CONSIDER YOU ARE CALLED TO REFLECT GOD AND COULD BE THE ONLY VERSION OF HIM SOMEONE EVER SEES, ARE YOU MORE WILLING TO STEP OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE AND SHARE YOUR FAITH WITH OTHERS?**

**THEN I HEARD THE VOICE OF THE LORD  
SAYING, “WHOM SHALL I SEND? AND WHO  
WILL GO FOR US?” AND I SAID, “HERE AM I.  
SEND ME!”**

**ISAIAH 6:8**

## WHAT ARE YOU DOING DOWN ON YOUR FACE?



JOSHUA 7:1-13

Today we look at a passage that deals with how we should deal with the sin in our lives and the lives of those around us. When we sin, not only does it mess with our relationship with God, but also our relationships with those around us. There are many who have messed up marriages, finances, jobs, and other relationships because they believe the lie that it was just hurting them and no one else. Maybe there is someone in your life that has caused you great pain, or maybe you see what is happening but feel helpless to do anything about it.

In our scripture today, we see Joshua's army being defeated and he didn't know why or what to do next. He could tell something was wrong but was frozen with his face to the ground asking God for help and seeking clarity. What I love is God's response to Joshua. He asks him why his face is on the ground when there is sin in the camp. God tells him to deal with the sin and the army will be fine. But it would require Joshua to get up, have some hard conversations with some people, and then deal with the sinfulness of those responsible. This would not have been easy or popular to do. But it is what needed to happen.



## WHO ARE THESE MEN WITH YOU?



NUMBERS 22:1-20

One of the hardest things I've had to do in life is cut someone out who wasn't good for me. Sometimes it was because the person changed and I couldn't go where they were going. Other times it was because I changed and what was once acceptable no longer was. As I've gotten older, I've become much more careful about who I allow into my inner circle of friends. It's too hard to allow people in only to have to remove them later.

Today we read about a man who represented God but allowed ungodly people to have influence over his life. It is a story that plays out over and over in the lives of Christians to this day. God asks Balaam to evaluate who he is allowing to be around him. Balaam was about to make a huge mistake with his newfound friends but in God's grace, He asked him this important question - Who are these men with you?

Do you know who is around you? Have you thought about the impact they have on your walk with God, yourself, and those around you? Often, we tend to make excuses for people we allow to stay with us. We say things like -

- We've been friends for years.
- They don't influence me; I influence them.
- I know what they really mean.
- They are not that bad.





WEEK 4

## MY RELATIONSHIP WITH STUFF

## DO YOU HAVE STUFF OR DOES STUFF HAVE YOU?

Jesus made a powerful statement one day while preaching to a crowd. In the middle of his sermon he tells the crowd they can't serve two masters. Now, if you're like me and you like to show how much you know, it would be tempting to want to 'predict' who the two masters we are tempted to serve are. I would have guessed God or Satan. Maybe you would have guessed God or yourself. Maybe you have a specific struggle or addiction and so you would have said you pick either God or your current struggle.

What would have been low on my list, and probably yours, would have been money. I don't think of myself as worshiping money. Scrooge McDuck worships money as he swims through it in the cartoon I grew up watching. But I don't worship money. At least I didn't think I did...until one day I was getting a check from an accident and I couldn't wait to spend it. I thought about all the different ways I could use it. Trips, TV's, eating out, etc...I was on cloud nine! In the middle of my dreaming about all of this the Lord showed me what I was worshiping - and it wasn't Him. I wasn't necessarily worshiping money but what money could do for me.

It's subtle, but it's easy for us to confuse having **STUFF**, with **STUFF** having us. And before you blow me off as not struggling with it like I would have years ago...let me define what I mean by **STUFF**.

### **STUFF**

Your Schedule  
Your Toys  
Your Uniqueness  
Your Future  
Your Finances

There is nothing wrong with any of those things on that list. But just like a person, **STUFF** can quickly go from a good thing to a god thing in your life. And the problem is this one is so deceptive because we don't want to admit what most likely has our heart. Before you reject this week, remember this is the one thing Jesus said would come for your heart more than anything else. So, if you're willing, let's take a deeper look at the **STUFF** in your life and your relationship to it. Maybe you're great, or maybe - just maybe - **STUFF** has you after all!



## IS IT TIME TO LIVE IN PANELED HOUSES?



### HAGGAI 1

There's nothing wrong with **STUFF**, as long as **STUFF** doesn't have you. Today's passage further illustrates how deceptive money and things like houses can be. What we see is God calling out His people for living in nice, extravagant houses while the temple was in ruins. God had called the people to build His temple and to sacrifice and give to help build His kingdom, but they kept focusing on their own little kingdoms. This happens all the time in our day and age.

Do you want to know a secret? The most generous people in the church are normally not the richest! I know - it doesn't make sense. You would think the people with the most money would be the most generous toward God, but every study I've seen shows it's just the opposite. It's a lot easier to give 10% of \$40,000 than it is to give 10% of \$400,000. Why? Money is deceptive in ways that are hard for us to imagine. It lies to us and wants us to put our faith in it instead of God.

But if you read the passage you notice the depths of the deceptiveness. They don't out-and-out tell God no. They say it is not the time. They'll give next week, next month, next year. I've run into so many people who are going to start giving . . . next month or when they get out of debt or when they get to a certain place financially. But if God can't trust you with a little, what makes you think He will trust you with a lot? When it comes to our relationship with money specifically, it is easy to not see how much we worship it.



## WHY ARE YOU ANGRY?



GENESIS 4:1-9

Nothing makes people angry in a church like talking about money. I've been sent emails and text messages and been told-off to my face because I dared talk about their money. When someone has a reaction like that it's obvious they don't have a healthy relationship with money. They don't have **STUFF** — but **STUFF** has them. Maybe you're even reading with some strong skepticism because I asked you to at least read today's devotion. And on some level I get it. There are a lot of manipulative preachers out there who have said and done a lot of terrible things just to get money. I've seen it first hand. If you can just put whatever feelings you have aside for a moment and look at what God is asking us today and throughout the week, God may show you something new and impactful...if you let Him.

The story today is a simple one. While we don't know exactly what God required for Cain and Abel to give to God, we do see there was a requirement and it wasn't just whatever they wanted. The text seems to make clear that what Abel brought was valuable to him and, therefore, a real sacrifice. What Cain was offering was potentially some leftovers and, in turn, not really a sacrifice.

I want you to see God's response to this. God doesn't yell at Cain and tell him he'd better bring more **STUFF** the next time or he'll get zapped by God's finger. God connects Cain's generosity with his ability to show grace towards others.



## IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU TO BE ANGRY?



### JONAH 4

Yesterday, we looked at a passage where God asked **WHY** Cain was angry. Today we go a little deeper with this. Jonah wasn't angry God was asking him to sacrifice his finances or **STUFF**. Jonah wasn't consumed by money, but convenience. It's **STUFF** by another name.

Jonah is a story of God wanting to save a whole nation from sin and death and Jonah was the prophet who was called to help them. But he didn't want to. He didn't like those people and didn't think they deserved grace and salvation. So Jonah ran away, was swallowed by a big fish, and then spit out on a beach. Funny how he was willing to go to Nineveh after all that. God can be pretty persuasive sometimes.

But something happens in Chapter 4 that causes God to ask a question. Jonah was upset but about the wrong thing. Jonah wasn't upset that possibly thousands of people were going to die by God's judgment; he was upset that the plant God had given him for shade died.

He was more worried about a plant than he was people. In fact, worried isn't the right word. Jonah was furious enough to ask God to kill him. A bit of an overreaction, but that is sort of who he was. Jonah didn't have **STUFF**, but **STUFF** clearly had him. And when he couldn't have what he wanted, he wanted to die.



## WILL A MAN ROB GOD?



MALACHI 3:6-12

I need to tell you the story of the man we'll call J. Moon. J. Moon changed how I saw leadership in a profound way. J. Moon was a part of a larger church I was visiting one weekend. I found myself in the parking lot, sick to my stomach, while everyone else was inside enjoying the service. Then this guy, who was actually the volunteer Parking Lot Leader, walked up to me. He makes sure I'm okay and then sits down next to me. I started to quiz him about the church. I wanted the real info, the insider's look at why everything worked so well for such a large church and how everyone seemed bought in. What he said blew me away.

He told me the reason everyone seemed to be bought in is because they were. To be any sort of leader at all, Parking Lot Leader included, you had to be what they called 4G. Everyone that led a team HAD to be 4G! Here is what that stood for:

- Gifts — Using how God gifted you to serve His kingdom
- Growth — Inviting people to Sunday morning church
- Giving — Giving at least 10% to the local church
- Groups — Being a part of a small group

Did you catch the third one? It's that one I was hung up on. I pressed him a little more and made sure I understood. He validated it...you couldn't lead any team of any size unless you were doing all four...you were 4G.

I kept pressing and it felt like a very high standard to put on all people. Then he looked me straight in the eyes and said a sentence I will never forget - "How can I, as a leader, lead my people to be 'all in' if I'm not 'all in'?" It made perfect sense then. Everything made sense from a leader's standpoint . . . because you can't lead people to a place you're not.

Today's passage is about just that. The priests (local leaders) were not honoring God with their finances. They publicly praised God but privately stole what He wanted from them - thus stealing from God. God called them out. See, the problem was they thought they were getting away with something. But they weren't. God was cursing the 100% they kept. They were essentially hypocrites and God can't stand when His people mock His name.

I remember a pastor asking the church one time if they would rather have 100% of their money cursed or 90% blessed. For me the answer is obvious. But I understand if you're not there yet. It takes trust. You first have to get over any anger (Days 1 and 2) before you're even open to being generous toward God.

And just so we're clear, I don't believe this passage is a promise for us today. I don't believe anyone can just 'test' God by giving. This is what is called a "One time promise with an all-time principle". What that means is it was promised to a specific people at a specific place for a specific time. And while we don't get to claim that promise, I do think there is a spiritual principle there. When you honor God with your money by giving Him your first and best, God will bless your life. Maybe not financially (this isn't the Prosperity Gospel), but in some way - even if that blessing is storing up treasure in Heaven.

## REFLECTION:

— Are you all in with God and His kingdom? Are you 4G? What is holding you back and are you willing to make the change needed to be "all in"?

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**WHERE IS YOUR STUFF HOLDING YOU BACK  
FROM BEING “ALL-IN” WITH GOD?**

**BRING THE WHOLE TITHE INTO THE  
STOREHOUSE, THAT THERE MAY BE FOOD  
IN MY HOUSE. TEST ME IN THIS,” SAYS THE  
LORD ALMIGHTY, “AND SEE IF I WILL NOT  
THROW OPEN THE FLOODGATES OF HEAVEN  
AND POUR OUT SO MUCH BLESSING THAT  
THERE WILL NOT BE ROOM ENOUGH  
TO STORE IT.**

**MALACHI 3:10**



## WHAT GOOD IS THE WORLD IF IT COSTS YOU YOUR SOUL?

MARK 8:34-38

Our last day together is a hard one. In fact if you've made it this far without being offended - then maybe today is the day!

It is one of Jesus' most powerful little sermons he preached and He just puts it out there. Basically He tells the crowd that if you are a disciple (aka Christian) then you must be willing to sacrifice in this life to experience the next one. We don't like the word sacrifice much. It's almost a four letter word in some circles. We talk about giving generously or wanting to help out. Those are great and should be a part of our walk with God. But if your walk with Jesus never calls you to die to yourself and sacrifice something significant, then you aren't really following Jesus.

Jesus says we must be willing to put everything on the table, pick up our cross (an instrument of death) and do whatever He says. It's a hard saying for sure. I told you today was going to be hard. But Jesus isn't playing around at this moment. He's as real as He can be. Often I think most people settle for a small, anemic version of Christianity that isn't really Christianity at all.

So, over the past 28 days, what has God called you to sacrifice? What is it that maybe you've been holding back from Him? A relationship, a hobby or habit, an amount you feel led to give to the church, or maybe something never mentioned but you know what it is? It's stuck in your head and, as much as you try to mentally change the subject, that channel keeps popping back up.

While I don't know what God is calling you to die to, I do know it is WORTH it. Following Jesus is the most exciting, dramatic and wonderful journey you can take. Over the years I've had a lot of ups and downs. But God has never let me down! He has always been there for me and honestly, I can't wait to see how He continues to challenge and call me into deeper waters. I hope you join me.

Accept the challenge to be all-in with God. Walk away from the **STUFF** that is holding you back and make sure you are truly following Jesus.

REFLECTION:

— What do you need to die to? What do you need to let go of and never look back? Why is it so hard for you to sacrifice that part of your life? Be open! Go deeper! Sit with it for a while! Write it out so you won't forget this moment! It could be the moment where everything changed!

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**TRUST IN THE LORD WITH ALL YOUR  
HEART AND LEAN NOT ON YOUR OWN  
UNDERSTANDING; IN ALL YOUR WAYS SUBMIT  
TO HIM AND HE WILL MAKE YOUR  
PATHS STRAIGHT.**

**PROVERBS 3:5-6**









# BETTER

You made it! All four weeks! Hopefully you didn't skip anything to get here. But more importantly, I hope you experienced God in a Relevant and Simple and Real way. I hope you have felt His Spirit lead you to some big decisions and you had the courage to take the next step.

**BUT** if I can...if you'll let me...can I ask you one more question?

I know this whole book has been about God asking the questions and obviously His are far **BETTER** than mine. But, if you'll allow me, I want to ask you a question...ready? Here it is...

What's **NEXT**? What's next for you? You made it to the finish line but, in reality, this devotional's finish line is really a new starting line for a totally different, deeper, and hopefully **BETTER** relationship with God.

It would be so easy to read a devotional like this, allow God to speak to you, watch Him show up in big ways, only to go back to what you used to do beforehand - to put God back on the back burner until next year's challenge.

But you were made for **SO** much more than that!!! You were made to get up every single day with a God-sized purpose. A purpose that is scary big - so big it forces you into trusting God. A purpose so awesome you can't wait to tell others about it. You were made **ON** purpose, **WITH** a purpose, **FOR** a purpose. I hope and pray more than anything you are open to take the call to follow Jesus more seriously than you ever have. This next season is not just **BETTER** - it's the **BEST** ever!!!

The **GOSPEL** changes everything,

*Pastor Nic*

Pastor Nic Smith

