ENCOUNTERING GOD THROUGH BIBLICAL CHARACTERS
SOME SAY, “I’M NOT LIKE THE PEOPLE IN THE BIBLE…” BUT THAT CAN’T BE TRUE.
Some say, “I’m not like the people in the Bible, they are spiritually well beyond me. My faith is not as strong as their faith.” But that can’t be true. One of the most freeing aspects of the Scriptures is the raw and transparent insight we get about the men and women in the Bible. We can learn from their encounters with God, we can be inspired by their encounters with God, and we can relate to their encounters with God.

Over the next few weeks, we are going to study a variety of encounters that men and women in the Bible had with God. From successful entrepreneurs to blue-collar workers, from expectant mothers to arrogant leaders, from broken prophets to wayward prophets, each of these encounter God in unique ways: some through a thunderous word from God and others through His gentle whisper. God meets them where they are and loves them too much to allow them to remain in their pride, doubts, and brokenness.

If a biblical character study is a new endeavor for you, then you are in for a treat! Don’t hold back, don’t play it safe, and don’t study these lives on the surface level. There will be uncomfortable times which will simultaneously be met with reassurance. Through the study of these men and women, we pray that you will see yourself in each of their stories and encounter God in a life-changing way.
GETTING THE MOST FROM THIS BIBLE STUDY

DAY 1: CAPTION / CONTENT
Read the entire chapter for this week’s passage. Give the chapter a short descriptive title. Describe, summarize, paraphrase, outline or make a list of the major points in the chapter.

DAY 2: PEOPLE, PLACES, THINGS
List the most important people, places, or things in the chapter. Are you similar to any of the people in this passage? How?

DAY 3: CHALLENGES / CROSS-REFERENCES
List any difficulties you have with the chapter. Use the cross-reference in a study Bible and look up other verses listed to get a better understanding of what the chapter is talking about.

DAY 4: CHRIST SEEN / LESSONS LEARNED
What does this chapter tell you about Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, or God the Father? Write it down. What major principles, insights, and lessons are found in this chapter? What does it say about God? Humanity?

DAY 5: APPLICATION
How do the truths apply to your life and what steps can you take to apply them?
STUDY THE WORD 5 DAYS A WEEK
If you were a conservative investor, you would have been extremely uncomfortable with the high risk and high intensity of 1st century church planting. It wasn’t for the faint of heart or for the one who didn’t like to ruffle feathers. The task required bold leadership, inspired vision, and complete confidence in the Lord’s sovereign plan to make disciples of all nations.

The apostle Paul fit the church planter role perfectly. At the beginning of Acts 16, we see Paul and fellow church planter Silas taking Timothy along with them to the city of Philippi. Timothy was already exhibiting gifts and passion for being a strong disciple maker. When the three of them arrived in Philippi, they went to the place outside the city where people gathered to pray; there, they met a group of women.

One woman was Lydia. She was a merchant who sold fine fabrics, who had interest in God but had not encountered the life-giving message of forgiveness through Jesus Christ.
When Paul began to speak, her spiritual curiosity was peaked. Verse 14 says, “The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.”

God was at work in Lydia and through Paul! What if Paul had not spoken? What if Paul had remained silent, because he was intimidated by Lydia, for she was a wealthy woman who lived in prestige (a seller of purple goods)? Just imagine how Lydia’s life was changed, because of her encounter with Jesus, and that change was due to God using an available servant like Paul.

We, in many ways, are all church planters - God has called us to be ambassadors for the Gospel, planting seeds for the eternal harvest. He wants to use us as His mouthpiece. We are to be speaking on His behalf as if He is making His appeal through us, even if it makes us uncomfortable. However, we must never forget that it is not our speaking, but His power and the message that change the hearts of people.

As you spend time in this passage and consider its implications, think about this: Who in your life needs Jesus? Once you have identified someone, will you pray that God gives you the chance to speak into their lives and that He would cause them to open their hearts and pay attention to the message of forgiveness found in Christ? You may not be the boldest person when it comes to speaking about Jesus to others, but boldness and confidence don’t come from within us – they come from God.

- Doug Clark

- DAY 1: Caption / Content
- DAY 2: People, Places, Things
- DAY 3: Challenges / Cross-References
- DAY 4: Christ Seen / Lessons Learned
- DAY 5: Application
Listening is one of the greatest skills that we can develop. Listening helps relationships and plans move forward. The problem is that interruptions are frequent in life, making listening difficult. Truthfully, many of the interruptions are self-imposed, and, as a result, conflicts arise in relationships and plans are stymied.

In the passage this week, we know that the prophet Elijah had just experienced an amazing feat of faith in an encounter with the prophets of Baal. Soon after his faith gets put on display, he reaches an all-time low after his life is threatened by Jezebel, Ahab’s wife. Elijah finds himself in a cave on Mt. Horeb, and, while there, God calls him out of the cave where He passes by in a powerful wind that breaks rocks into pieces from the mountain. Following the wind came an earthquake and then fire. The Lord was not in the wind, the fire, or the earthquake. After these powerful
displays, Elijah hears a gentle whisper asking him, “What are you doing here?” Elijah admits his discouragement, and God speaks directly to it, letting Elijah know that he is not alone. This is exactly what he needed to hear, but he had to listen.

Elijah needed to escape the distractions, particularly the threat on his life and his discouragement. Even though he was exposed to what could have been extremely frightening in the wind, fire, or through earthquake, he was able to listen because he knew God’s voice and he was in an environment to hear it.

We experience interruptions in a variety of ways - sometimes through good things - that keep us from listening to God’s voice. God speaks through His Word, but are you able to listen? What distractions are keeping you from listening? Busy-ness?

Habits? Relationships? Discouragement? Entertainment? Take this week and ask God to show you what interruptions are keeping you from listening. Then, begin your time with Him by confessing and repenting of those distractions.

- Lewis Pollard

- DAY 1: Caption / Content
- DAY 2: People, Places, Things
- DAY 3: Challenges / Cross-References
- DAY 4: Christ Seen / Lessons Learned
- DAY 5: Application
Fear is the reaction to a clear or perceived impending danger. Fear can be staring us straight in the face, like Saul looking out at the massive Philistine army, or it can be perceived with thoughts such as, “What if I lose my job and cannot support my family?” The problem, of course, is not that fear occurs - because it always will; it is what we do with it.

My fear about what could possibly occur in my life always led me down a familiar path. I wanted to control my life because I was afraid that I would not get what I wanted. Therefore, I worked hard towards a college degree, towards a certain job, living in the “right” neighborhood, having the “right” friends, and so on. The problem for me is that I came to believe that it was my hard work, my skills, and my actions that had gotten me all these things. I began to think more highly of myself and
soon found that I had two new friends: Mr. Pride and Sir Arrogance (they are brothers, I think).

My pride kept me from turning to God while my arrogance kept me believing I could do life without Him. This led me down a miserable path until I reached a point where I could finally hear His calling.

Saul saw the Philistine army, he became fearful, he took control, and then his arrogance led him to believe he had the same ability to perform the burnt offering as Samuel. It did not turn out well, and I know that when I push things, have no patience, and believe I can do it better than the other guy, life does not go very well for me either. Whenever I start feeling the way Saul did, I try to ask myself, “Am I in Christ?” “Do I have the fruit of the Spirit as it is spelled out in Galatians chapter 5?” Peace, patience, faithfulness, and self-control especially apply when my pride and arrogance show their faces, and I get to learn all over again how to turn things over to God.

Are you trying hard to do it yourself? Or are you relying on God to do His work in and through you? Take a moment to identify places in your life which you’ve yet to let God completely control. Confess it to God and ask Him to intervene.

- Bryan Chesley
NEHEMIAH 8-9
Nehemiah 8-9 are incredible chapters in the story of God’s people as He brings them back into the land He promised them. After continual faithfulness from the Lord displayed by the re-building of the city walls, the people gather for a dedication of their new city and to remember the faithfulness of God. Ezra, the priest, stands up and reads the Law…for 6 hours non-stop. Our American timeliness may cringe at the thought, but this isn’t a boring endeavor! No one is standing in the crowd rolling their eyes as he reads the Law. Instead, the people respond, incredibly, in an entirely different way. Ezra finishes the reading of the Law of God, and the people shout back to the reader,
“‘Amen! Amen!’ as they lifted their hands. They bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground” (Neh. 8:6). The people encounter God through their deliverance back into the land and from the remembrance of His steadfast faithfulness, and they reply with joy and worship.

This is not their only response to the reading of God’s Word. The people begin to say aloud to one another all of the ways God has delivered them since the time of Abraham until that point in time. They speak the word of God’s deliverance out loud, including the years of exile and suffering. Yet, the people proclaim, “‘You are righteous with regard to all that has happened to us, for you have acted faithfully’” (Neh. 9:33). As you encounter God through His Word, think about his continual faithfulness to you in and through Christ, and as you respond with joy and repentance, be confident that He has and will continually be faithful to you!

- Dakota Zook
Desires of the heart can bring great joy, but sometimes, they bring great pain. As I get older, I am often asked when I might “settle down” with someone. Though their intentions are not malicious, what people often fail to realize when they ask is that it is a great desire of mine to be married and have a family. Therefore, sometimes I find that answering that question brings shame and pain because I do not know the answer to it.

In 1 Samuel 1:1-18, Hannah wrestles with a strong desire of her heart. She feels the shame and pain of not having a baby - something she desperately desires. Her womb was closed, and a baby was impossible. Do you ever feel, as did Hannah, that what you want seems an impossibility? It can be discouraging, cause great pain, and make you feel empty inside. In Hannah’s case, she did not give up. Rather she went to the Lord’s house and prayed. She completely surrendered her desire for a child to
the Lord and vowed before Him that if He gave her a son, she would give him to the Lord for all the days of his life.

Is that you? Are you willing to surrender your desires to the Lord? In Hannah’s pain and shame, she went before the Lord and offered the one thing that her heart desired: a baby.

In the end, she got something so much larger & more astonishing than what she asked for: a deeper relationship with God and a chance to see His provision, goodness, and care for her.

What are the desires of your heart? A husband? A wife? A baby? Are you willing to surrender those certain desires to the Lord? When we surrender to the Lord, we free ourselves from the burden of shame and pain. We commit ourselves to trust God and His plan for our life. Then we allow God to take our desire in His hands and use it for His will and glory.

In what ways is God showing you His provision, goodness, and care for you this week?

- Lindsey Fortner

- DAY 1: Caption / Content
- DAY 2: People, Places, Things
- DAY 3: Challenges / Cross-References
- DAY 4: Christ Seen / Lessons Learned
- DAY 5: Application
“Mine!” A close second only to “Mama” or “Dada,” “mine” became a very popular word to our second born. With a white-knuckled grip and clenched teeth, our daughter was very quick to name anything within grabbing distance, “mine!”

I have a few years on my two-year-old, but I find myself acting with equal zeal - guarding my talents, treasures, and time.

The beginning chapters of Acts give us a glimpse of the new church exploding throughout Jerusalem following Jesus’ resurrection. As the disciples spoke boldly and confidently about Jesus, we are told that these new believers were so unified that they were of “one heart and soul.” They were so connected that their personal property no longer was seen as something to serve themselves but, rather, this new growing community. What caused these new believers to be so unified, so generous that “there was not a needy person among them?”
Through Barnabas’ selflessness we are given an example of a follower of Christ who came to a crossroads. I can imagine Barnabas worked hard to maintain his land and, perhaps, had well-laid plans for his future. However, he decided to exchange his temporary wealth for something eternal. Barnabas continued on in Acts as a church leader, spreading the Gospel to the Gentiles, reinforcing his nickname as the “Son of Encouragement.” What compelled Barnabas in this act of humble generosity to lay this money down, no strings attached? Barnabas’ generosity was a result of his encounters with Jesus.

When we encounter God and experience the abundant grace freely given to us by Christ’s death and resurrection, you and I are made new. We are changed from the inside out. We begin to see what we formally claimed as “mine!” was really His all along. What are we holding on to that God is asking us to exchange for something greater? Reflect this week and ask God to reveal areas in your life where you could exchange the temporary for the eternal.

- Matt Rovanesi

- DAY 1: *Caption / Content*
- DAY 2: *People, Places, Things*
- DAY 3: *Challenges / Cross-References*
- DAY 4: *Christ Seen / Lessons Learned*
- DAY 5: *Application*
I SAMUEL 20:18

Friendship has come a long way for me. In the 80s, it was, “Are you my friend? Check Yes or No.” In the 90s, friends were friends forever (thank you Michael W. Smith). More recently, along came BFFs and besties. We all desire friendship, and 1 Samuel 20 is an amazing account of two friends: Jonathan and David.

I don’t know that I ever truly realized the selfless friendship that Jonathan offered to David. Jonathan may, in fact, be one of my new favorite characters in the Bible. Verse 17 says, “And Jonathan had David reaffirm his oath out of love for him, because he loved him as he loved himself.” Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown describe the interview between Jonathan and David as, “unrivaled in the records of human friendship.” Wow! God truly intertwined these two lives in an intricate and amazing way.
As we read this narrative, let’s consider two principles of friendship. First, love people as God loves people. Jonathan, caught between his best friend and his father, chose to follow God over everything else. Jonathan had every reason to despise David, yet he knew David was God’s next chosen king. He chose to love what God loved.

Second, having friends requires us to extend ourselves. Verse 18 has an interesting phrase: Jonathan tells David, “You will be missed, because your seat will be empty.” David was an integral part of Saul’s court, and Jonathan knew his absence would be noticed. We like to be noticed when we are gone, but how much do we notice others? Dale Carnegie says, “You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you.” Are we looking for people to notice us, or are we looking for people to notice?

Friendship is a beautiful gift of relationship from God. May we all strive to love and serve our friends as Jonathan served David.

- Julie Connor

DAY 1: Caption / Content
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DAY 5: Application
It’s bound to happen at some point: I’m going to interrupt a serious conversation with another adult to enthusiastically point out a dump truck. I’ve got a habit of looking for trucks and heavy machinery because of the excitement it brings my kids. I never want to miss an opportunity to see the joy on their faces when we pass a construction vehicle. Their minds are filled with wonder, and it is beautiful. When does this wonder fade? At what age? Are we less prone towards wonder after we’ve experienced disappointment or feel like we’ve got things figured out? Does there come a time when we’ve seen it all and can predict the outcome of most situations?

In Genesis 18, God invites us to wonder. The impossible becomes possible, and the limit of our faith is increased. God visits Sarah and Abraham and promises Sarah a baby though they were both in the age neighborhood of the century mark. She had longed for a child back
when it seemed likely, but that was a distant memory. Time and aging had overtaken her youth, and the idea of pregnancy had become laughable. Thankfully, God doesn’t operate according to our timelines or understanding. When situations seem hopeless and our human efforts have proven fruitless, God intervenes with the miraculous.

God left Sarah with a question we should ask ourselves: “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” What looks impossible in your life? Where has hope been drained? Is there an addiction that has sapped your joy? A relationship that seems beyond repair? Inescapable anxiety or sadness? Through Sarah’s story, God invites us to wonder at what He can do. Pray and invite God into your situation, remembering that He keeps promises and nothing is too hard for Him.

- Kyle Smith

○ DAY 1: _Caption / Content_
○ DAY 2: _People, Places, Things_
○ DAY 3: _Challenges / Cross-References_
○ DAY 4: _Christ Seen / Lessons Learned_
○ DAY 5: _Application_

The wealthy man in this story makes a common mistake. He defines the state of the heart by the work of the hands. Unfortunately, he isn’t ready for the truth Jesus offers because he has not considered the identity of the one he is asking. This is not simply a good teacher offering “how-to tips.” This is God in the flesh. So Jesus peels back the skin to reveal his heart. “Why do you call me good?” He asks. In other words, what does the ability to do good things have to do with the relationship between God and you? Unfortunately for those who place their trust in abilities, resources, or the securities the world has to offer, the nature of a relationship with God is difficult. Why? Because it is meant to be a profound exchange of spiritual community based on reciprocated love between creator and creation. It can exist only in the context of submission and acceptance. The submission of the created to the creator is the kind of unconditional trust an infant places in a parent. The acceptance God offers His creation is the kind a parent gives the baby in spite of the child’s lack of ability to contribute.
anything to the daily task of sustaining life for the family.

This man made the mistake of thinking he could do something good and therefore transcend his own humanity. When Jesus says it is difficult for a wealthy person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, it isn’t because being rich is bad. The Kingdom of Heaven isn’t about being good or bad. It’s about being honest with who you are in light of who God is. Wealth gives us the illusion that we have control over our circumstances. It makes us think we have power and security. If we worked hard to get it, then we sometimes begin to believe that hard “doing” can fulfill all needs in our life. If we didn’t work hard for it, we are still tempted to think that having it allows us to “do” whatever we need to find any life to which we aspire.

However, in God’s economy, doing is only doing. It won’t quiet a troubled soul. It will not bring us a lasting peace. And it surely will not bring us into an eternal relationship with Him. Whether we are the starving poor or the rich young ruler, doing will only lead us to more doing. So, how do we free ourselves from the trap of trying to “do our way” through life? We take the medicine Jesus gave this young ruler. Give it away. If it is our treasure, we use it less on us and more on others. That means less financial security and more trust. If it is our talents, we use them less to build personal kingdoms and more to draw others to Christ. If it is our time, we make the most significant exchange of all. We use it more to “be” and less to “do.” We reorient our lives in a way that puts us in submission to God through time in His word, in prayer, and in community with God and His people. Take this week to pray over the hours and exchanges you have scheduled. Look for ways to “do” less and “be” surrendered to Him more in both your heart and in the work of your hands.

- Chris Witt

- DAY 1: Caption / Content
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JUDGES 7
Have you ever felt overwhelmed and completely inadequate for the task? That was Gideon. An Israelite hiding in a winepress doesn’t exactly seem a likely candidate to take on the whole Midianite army and restore the nation of Israel. Even he didn’t think so. When the angel of the Lord approached him about saving Israel out of Midian’s hand, he replied, “My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.” In other words, “You’ve got the wrong guy.” Like many of us, Gideon looked at the numbers and they didn’t seem to add up.

In Judges 7, Gideon continued crunching numbers as he formed an army of 32,000 to face off against the 135,000-strong Midianite army. The odds were already not in Israel’s favor; however, God told Gideon, “You have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into their hands, or Israel would boast against me, ‘My own strength has saved me.’” Eventually, the army of Israel was whittled down to a mere 300 men. At this point,
Israel appeared to be outnumbered 450 to 1: overwhelming odds.

Why does God allow times of overwhelming odds in our lives? Why did He allow them in Gideon’s life? When we come to the end of ourselves, we realize that our strength is not enough. It becomes an opportunity to encounter God and grow in trusting Him as our more than enough.

Gideon’s trust in God was not perfect. Neither is ours. The Lord told Gideon, “Go, for I have given them into your hand. Yet, if you still don’t believe, go on into their camp and I will show you what I am able to do” (Judges 7:9-11). God graciously met Gideon at the point of his trust, providing the extra assurance he needed. Are you facing an overwhelming situation and finding it hard to trust God for the outcome? What steps of trust can you take? Remember that God is willing to meet you where you are and show you what He is able to do both for you and through you.

- Betty O’Maker

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- **DAY 1:** Caption / Content
- **DAY 2:** People, Places, Things
- **DAY 3:** Challenges / Cross-References
- **DAY 4:** Christ Seen / Lessons Learned
- **DAY 5:** Application
I am Jonah! Even after following Christ for over 50 years, on most days I still think when life hassles me that God should make things better - that God should cooperate with my understanding of life rather than me cooperate with His plans. That was Jonah!

God first called Jonah to predict prosperity for God’s people even while a wicked king ruled (2 Kings 14:23-27). When God’s call matched his desires, Jonah was happy to be God’s prophet. In desperate need, Jonah longed for God to protect his people from Assyria, the evil empire of that day. But God was not only silent to Jonah’s need, He actively worked against it by commanding Jonah to give Nineveh, Assyria’s capital city, a chance to prosper and remain strong.

When God called Jonah to a mission that was countercultural, an offense to his people, and an embarrassment to his reputation, Jonah ran away. Like me, Jonah had the ability to rationalize stubborn disobedience. Not even
imminent death in a watery grave or seventy-two hours in the stomach of a fish brought Jonah to his senses. Even when Jonah obeyed God, he did so grudgingly. He still was convinced that God should be the kind of God who looked after him and his people as Jonah thought best. It has been said that no prophet was more successful in his ministry nor more offended by his success than Jonah. The Ninevites repented. God forgave them. And Jonah got mad. Israel’s enemy was not destroyed.

God even relieved Jonah’s misery by providing shade from the hot desert sun, and Jonah actually felt happy in the shade while still wishing that people God cared for would die.

Jonah reduced God to a God who was supposed to submit to his understanding of what matters most, not being able to discern the lethal self-interest behind his desire for God’s approval. I am Jonah!

When your life hits a bump that God could smooth but doesn’t, will you continue to think that God should surrender His wisdom to yours and do what you think best?

- Shane Barnes

DAY 1: Caption / Content
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