



Devotional and Scripture Reading Guide
South Ridge Church
November 2018

This *Devotional and Scripture Reading Guide* has been designed for use during the first half of the
“God is WITH Us” Message Series
South Ridge Church - November 2018

A Note from Pastor Justin:

The older I get, the more I realize just how real and relevant God’s Word is in my life. Admittedly, there have been times when I’m reading the Scriptures and I’m tempted to think things such as, “This person’s life story is so drastically different than my own, what can I possibly learn from them?” But I’m discovering more and more that some of the core issues they struggled with are the same core issues with which I’ve wrestled.

They experienced significant trials in their lives.

They doubted God’s plan and purpose for their lives.

They struggled with self-centeredness.

They sometimes didn’t mention the name of God.

They were confused.

They denied God.

They ran from Him.

They were criticized for their beliefs.

But one significant truth shines through all of these stories. No matter what they were experiencing, God was WITH them. He was WITH them in their trials. He was WITH them in their doubts. He was WITH them in their humility. He was WITH them in the silence. Their confusion. Their denials. Their persecution. He was WITH them through it all.

As you read and reflect through this Devotional and Scripture Reading Guide, it’s my prayer that we will *all* recognize the profound reality that God is WITH Us. No matter what we’re experiencing, He has been, is, and always will be WITH us through it all.

God is WITH Us...

DAILY READING EXAMPLE:

Day 1: God is WITH Us...

The left side of each daily reading will contain a brief devotional and question for reflection.

READING:

The right side of each daily reading will contain a few Scripture verses to read, and additional questions for reflection. You will most benefit from this study by writing out answers to all of the questions in a notebook. This will help you to pause and reflect on the Scriptures and topics for each reading.

F260 READING:

This is an additional Scripture Reading for those who want to read through the foundational passages of Scripture throughout the year. This F260 Reading Plan paired with the H.E.A.R. method for reflection is an excellent way to *Read, Reflect, and Respond* to God's Word, and gain insight into the overall Story God has written to us, for us, and within us.

PRAYER:

The right-side of each daily reading will also contain a brief prayer to read and reflect on.

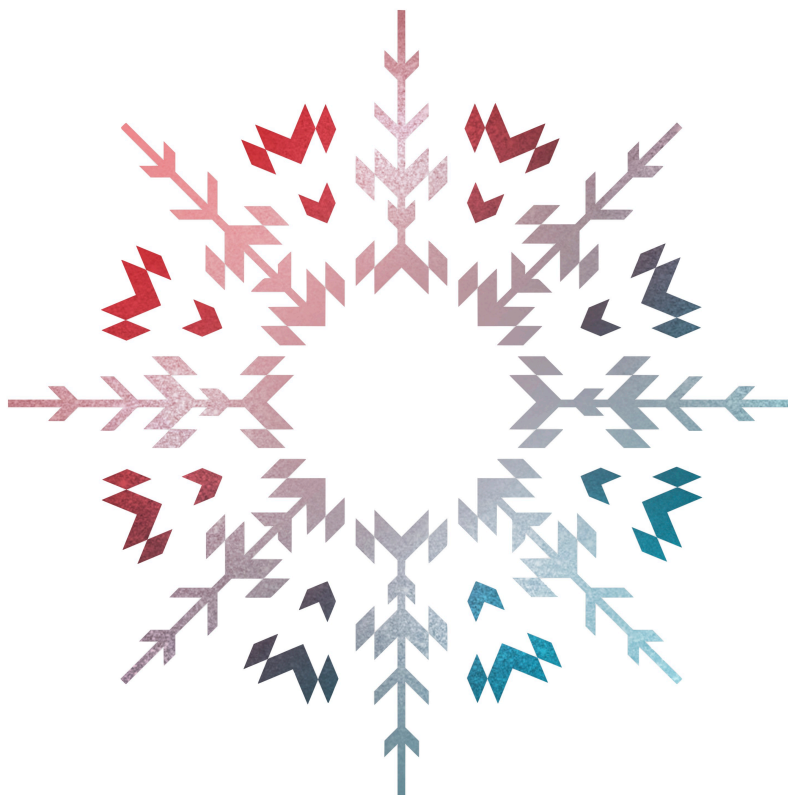
MESSAGE SERIES OUTLINE FOR NOVEMBER 2018:

God is WITH Us...in our Trials (Joseph)

God is WITH Us...in our Doubts (Moses)

God is WITH Us...in our Humility (Nebuchadnezzar)

God is WITH Us...in the Silence (Esther)





Week #1

God is WITH Us...
in our Trials

Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph,
they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was
with him and rescued him from all his troubles.

Acts 7:9-10

Day 1: Sold into Slavery

Did you ever experience any kind of sibling rivalry throughout your childhood? (Unless you were an only child, surely the answer to that question is a resounding yes!)

This is the situation in which Joseph finds himself. He was one of the youngest of 12 brothers in a culture that regularly favored the eldest son. But because Joseph was born to his father at an old age, he was deeply loved by his father. In fact, he was loved more than his brothers.

To make the sibling rivalry worse, Joseph had a dream in which his father, mother, and brothers all bowed down to him. For his brothers who were already jealous of him, this was the final straw. Their jealousy became a fierce anger to the point of wanting to kill their brother. But due to the insistence of one of his siblings, they instead sold him into slavery and told their father he had been killed.

As you begin reading through the story of Joseph today, consider this: What does this passage about Joseph tell you about reality? About humanity?

READING:

GENESIS 37 AND GENESIS 39

What does this passage about Joseph tell you about reality? About humanity?

In what ways does this help you to identify with the story of Joseph?

F260 READING: (A Scripture Reading Plan for Busy Believers)

Read: Exodus 32 & 33

Reflect: What did you H.E.A.R. from God today? (See back page.)

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, as I begin this week I simply pray that the story of Joseph will continue to speak to me in ways I didn't expect. I ask that you help me to see Joseph, his father, brothers, and all of the others in his life story in such a way that I'm able to identify with them. Whether it's their pride. Their fears. Their long-suffering. Their prayers. Or their trials. May I see some similarities between their experiences and my own, and may I respond to You in the same ways Joseph ultimately responds to You. I pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Day 2: Joseph in Prison

Have you ever experienced a high level of jealousy towards somebody else? Chances are, they've had some painful experiences of which you may not be aware. The more you get to know people and hear their stories, the more you learn that nobody rides for free. Everybody has something in their story that which, if you listened closely, would bring you to your knees.

Joseph lived what many would've considered a *privileged* life. Within the local customs and culture of his day, his family was well to-do. His parents showed him a lot of love and affection. At best, he was an overconfident young man without any worries or concerns. At worst, he was a spoiled child who was regularly at odds with his siblings. Still, from an outside perspective, he would've been seen as somebody who came from a family of great influence.

Despite his privileged upbringing, Joseph's story goes on a huge downward spiral. He finds himself not *just* sold into slavery, but also wrongfully imprisoned.

As you read today, consider this: What aspects of Joseph's story resonate with your own life experience?

READING:

GENESIS 40 & 41

What aspects of Joseph's story resonate with your own life experience? (Consider his family upbringing, those he *worked for* or was enslaved to, those he interacted with, etc.)

What kinds of ambitions or hopes could Joseph have had through his life experiences? In what ways does this help you to identify with the story of Joseph?

F260 READING: (A Scripture Reading Plan for Busy Believers)

Read: Exodus 34 - 36:1

Reflect: What did you H.E.A.R. from God today? (See back page.)

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, today I thank You for the many opportunities You provide me to share something about You with those I interact with on a regular basis. Though parts of my story are very different from Joseph, You continually provided Him with others who were ultimately seeking to know and understand You and/or Your plans for their life. May I learn and grow from Joseph's example, and regularly point others toward You in whatever circumstances they may be facing. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Day 3: Joseph's Brothers

Have you ever not seen somebody for a number of years, and when you do see them you're initially unable to recognize them? Perhaps it was somebody you graduated high school with, or a distant relative you haven't seen since childhood. Or maybe it was somebody who used to struggle with anger, addiction, or other behaviors, but today their demeanor is completely different.

How do you respond to such a situation? Do you proceed with caution? Do you respect them for the person they are, forgiving them for the person they were? Do you keep your distance, holding onto the past?

Initially, this is the situation in which Joseph's brothers find themselves. After selling Joseph into slavery and assuming he is long gone, they're unable to recognize their own brother, and even though he's completely overcome with emotion, he decides to keep his true identity hidden. Soon, they will learn of his true identity, and they're left with a big decision: how should we respond?

As you read today, consider this:

How do you think Joseph felt throughout his life experiences?

Day 4: Joseph's Secret

The story of Joseph has a ton of twists and turns. He's deeply loved by his father, beaten by his brothers, sold into slavery, wrongfully imprisoned, then raised to become the second most powerful person in what was, at the time, the most powerful nation in the world.

Joseph could've inflicted severe punishment on his brothers. He could've imprisoned them. He could've let them leave Egypt without any food, which would've led them to starvation. He could've had them beaten and sold into slavery. He could've responded in so many ways...but he responded in grace.

We read in Genesis 45:16, "Then Joseph kissed each of his brothers and wept over them, and after that they began talking freely with him."

As you read today, consider this:

Think back through all of the readings from this week: How did Joseph respond to the challenges he experienced?

Would you have responded any differently a year ago?

5 years ago? 10 years ago?

Would you respond any differently today?

Day 5: **READING: Genesis 47 & 50:15-26**

Who is the hero of the story of Joseph? What passages in this story lead you to this conclusion?

In just one sentence, write out the one thing You learned from the story of Joseph.

Then write out how You will respond to God as a result.

F260 READING: (A Scripture Reading Plan for Busy Believers)

Read: Leviticus 16 & 17

Reflect: What did you H.E.A.R. from God today? (See back page.)

READING:

GENESIS 42 & 43

What problems was Joseph facing?

How do you think Joseph (and Joseph's brothers) felt throughout these experiences?

F260 READING: (A Scripture Reading Plan for Busy Believers)

Read: Exodus 40

Reflect: What did you H.E.A.R. from God today? (See back page.)

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, today's story is an excellent reminder that *everybody* has experienced major challenges in life. Joseph experienced life-changing trials due to his brothers' decision to sell him into slavery. His brothers also experienced life-changing trials (fear, shame, hunger, and more). I ask today that You will lead and guide me in how to respond to others—even others who have personally wounded me—in ways that will lead others to better see and know You, and ultimately bring glory to You. The one person who comes to mind is (_____). Provide me the wisdom to respond to them in new, grace-filled ways. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

READING:

GENESIS 44, 45, & 46

Think back through all of the readings from this week: How did Joseph respond to the challenges he experienced?

Would you have responded any differently a year ago?

5 years ago? 10 years ago?

Would you respond any differently today?

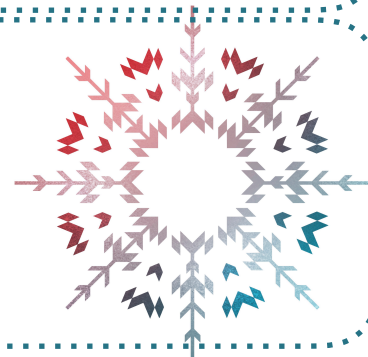
F260 READING: (A Scripture Reading Plan for Busy Believers)

Read: Leviticus 8 & 9

Reflect: What did you H.E.A.R. from God today? (See back page.)

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, I've learned this week that Joseph's story is more than a "Rags to Riches" story. It's a story that ultimately speaks of Your redemption. It's a reminder that I have been enslaved by things that I initially thought were outside my control. It's a reminder that I can grow to love others who have hurt me. It's a reminder that You strongly love me despite the things I have done to hurt You. Finally, it's a reminder that You have been (and will continue to be) with me through it all. Thank You for that! I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.





Week #2
God is WITH Us...
in our Doubts

But Moses protested to God, "Who am I to appear before Pharaoh? Who am I to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt?" God answered, "I will be with you."

Exodus 3:11-12

Day 1: Moses's Doubt

On first glance, Moses's life was very different than our own. He grew up away from his family in a royal household. He was provided the very best opportunities for education and training. But when difficulties came his way, Moses responded in the same way many of us would - he ran!

In his young adulthood, Moses learned that he was a Hebrew, not an Egyptian. Shortly after learning of his true heritage, he kills an Egyptian who was beating a fellow Hebrew. When Pharaoh learns of what happened, he sets out to kill Moses. This is when Moses started running.

While living out the rest of his days away from Egypt, God appears to Moses and tells him that he is being sent back to Egypt to free God's people. How does Moses respond? He doubts God. He doubts he can fulfill God's purpose and plan in his life. He doubts everything. In Exodus 3:11, we read:

"¹¹But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

As you read today, consider this: What does this passage about Moses tell you about reality? About humanity?

READING:

EXODUS 2 & 3

What does this passage about Moses tell you about reality? About humanity?

In what ways does this help you to identify with the story of Moses?

F260 READING: (A Scripture Reading Plan for Busy Believers)

Read: Leviticus 23

Reflect: What did you H.E.A.R. from God today? (See back page.)

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, as I begin this week I want to pray specifically for three people. I pray for (____), (____), and (____). I pray that You will reveal Your grace and love to them in profound ways, and I recognize that You may very well use me to reveal it to them. Which leads me to pray this: I question whether or not I'm the best person to fulfill that role in their lives. I confess that I have doubts about Your purpose and plans for my own life. I confess that sometimes my default response is to run. This week, may the only running I do be towards You and Your Word. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Day 2: Moses's Invitation

Have you ever been invited to a large event or gathering and you weren't sure what to do? Maybe there was an expectation that you would give a speech, or interact with politicians, or some other requirement that was completely out of the ordinary for you?

This is the situation in which Moses finds himself. Except he's not *just* supposed to give a speech, nor is he *just* encouraged to interact with a major political figure. It was so much bigger than that. Moses was invited to meet with the most powerful world leader in his day, and tell him that he needed to permit all of the enslaved people to leave and not come back.

While God may not be inviting you to sit down with world leaders to discuss foreign policy, He is inviting you to be a part of some *big* things. As Henry Blackaby writes, one of the best ways to experience God is to "...find where God is already at work, and join Him in it." In the story of Moses, God was already at work in leading His people to more fully trust Him. Consider the likelihood that God is already at work in significant ways around you, and He's inviting you to join Him in it.

As you read today, consider this: How will you join God in the work He is already doing in your own life? In the lives of others?

READING:

EXODUS 4:1 - 6:12

What aspects of Moses's story resonate with your own life experience? (Consider his family upbringing, those he *worked for*, those he interacted with, etc.)

What kinds of ambitions or hopes could Moses have had through his life experiences? In what ways does this help you to identify with the story of Moses?

F260 READING: (A Scripture Reading Plan for Busy Believers)

Read: Leviticus 26

Reflect: What did you H.E.A.R. from God today? (See back page.)

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, thank You for the reminder that You are already at work within me and all around me. My desire is to be fully committed to You and to join You in the work You've already started. Open my eyes so that I may see and understand the work You're doing within me, and continue to provide me opportunities to reveal the wonders of who You are to others. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Day 3: Moses's Obedience

Take just a moment to think about somebody you know who is regularly looking for ways in which God is already at work so they can join Him in it. Do you think they ever struggle with their own doubts or fears? Do you think they ever wonder if they're actually doing what they're supposed to be doing? Do you think they experience trials? The answer, of course, is a resounding yes. *Everybody* struggles with these thoughts from time to time.

At this time in the story of Moses, he had seen and experienced God doing a lot of miraculous things. Now he was leading an entire nation of people out of Egypt, but there was a huge obstacle in the way - a great sea on one side, and a furious Egyptian army prepared for battle on the other.

As the people began to panic, Moses remembered everything God had accomplished. He turns to the people and shares a truth that helped calm their fears. He said, "The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still." (Exodus 14:14).

As you read today, consider this: What problems was Moses facing? How do you think he felt throughout these experiences?

READING:

EXODUS 13:17 - 14:31

What problems was Moses facing?

How do you think Moses felt throughout these experiences?

F260 READING: (A Scripture Reading Plan for Busy Believers)

Read: Numbers 11 & 12

Reflect: What did you H.E.A.R. from God today? (See back page.)

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, I confess there are times in my life in which I don't feel close or connected with You. There are times when I feel like I need to pray more, or read my Bible more, or *do* more of something else in order to be closer with You. But today I am reminded that the battle is Yours. You have fought for me. You are fighting for me. You will continue to fight for me. My role is simply to be still.

Today, my desire is take intentional time to be silent and to experience Your presence. May You speak to me in the quiet, and may I be refreshed and rejuvenated by meditating on the wonders of who You are. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Day 4: Moses Doubts Again

Have you ever seen God accomplish amazing things? Assuming the answer is yes, consider this: Have you ever doubted God even though you've seen Him accomplish amazing things? If so, then the story of Moses is one that should resonate with you.

At this point in the story of Moses, he has seen God work in profound ways. Moses had first experienced the presence of God on a mountain in the form of a wildfire. Then Moses experienced the power of God by turning his staff into a snake. He then witnessed the strength of God through various plagues that God sent upon Egypt.

After Pharaoh released the people of Israel, Moses crossed through a body of water on dry ground, with the Egyptian Army pummeled by the same waters. He then experienced the presence of God in the form of cloud and fire. If you read through the entire story from start to finish, you'll see that Moses had no reason to doubt God. But despite everything he had seen God accomplish around Him (and within him), Moses still had doubts.

As you read today, consider this: Think back through all of the readings from this week: How did Moses respond to the challenges he experienced?

READING:

NUMBERS 20:1-13

Think back through all of the readings from this week: How did Moses respond to the challenges he experienced?

Would you have responded any differently a year ago? 5 years ago? 10 years ago?

Would you respond any differently today?

F260 READING: (A Scripture Reading Plan for Busy Believers)

Read: Numbers 13 & 14

Reflect: What did you H.E.A.R. from God today? (See back page.)

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, even though the life Moses lived is very different than my own, I'm encouraged to know that I am not alone in my doubts. I'm encouraged to know that somebody who accomplished such great things *still* struggled with doubts.

But even though I do struggle with some doubts, I pray that You will continue to reveal to me the purpose and plans You have for my life, and that I won't run from Your purposes, but will instead continue to embrace them. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Day 5: READING: NUMBERS 34

Who is the hero of the story of Moses? What passages in this story lead you to this conclusion?

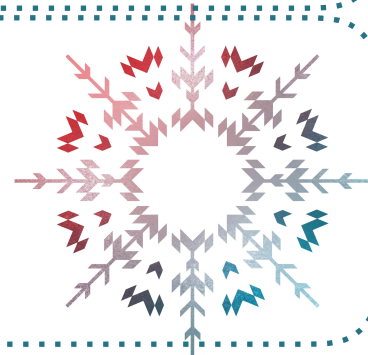
In just one sentence, write out the one thing You learned from the story of Moses.

Then write out how You will respond to God as a result.

F260 READING: (A Scripture Reading Plan for Busy Believers)

Read: Numbers 16 & 17

Reflect: What did you H.E.A.R. from God today? (See back page.)





Week #3
God is WITH Us...
in our Humility

"Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and glorify and honor the King of heaven. All his acts are just and true, and he is able to humble the proud."
Daniel 4:37

Day 1: Nebuchadnezzar's Wisdom

Imagine you're responsible to plan for a massive gathering. Attending the gathering will be people from several different nations, many of whom may speak English, but dozens, perhaps hundreds of others in attendance, may not. The security for the event is your responsibility. Communication during the event is your responsibility. Planning the event is—you guessed it—your responsibility. What do you do?

The above is a simplified case study of a very real situation in which the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar found himself. The Babylonian Empire was huge, and oversaw people from many different nations. King Nebuchadnezzar was responsible for national security, education, communication, and everything else. Would he be up for the task? Would he be a different kind of leader than those who had ruled before him?

The answer to these questions is a resounding *yes*. Nebuchadnezzar employed educated and learned people from other nations the Babylonians had overthrown, not just his own. In time, people from many nations really came to like him as a leader. As you read today, consider this: What does this passage about Nebuchadnezzar tell you about reality? About humanity?

Day 2: Nebuchadnezzar's Dream

Have you ever had somebody place a ridiculously unrealistic expectation on you? Perhaps a coach or music instructor demanded absolute perfection, even though perfection itself is completely unattainable. Or perhaps a teacher or professor tested you on material in which they didn't lecture, nor was it in your required reading. Unrealistic expectations can prove harmful for everybody involved.

As a ruler of a huge empire, Nebuchadnezzar placed an expectation on others that was completely and totally ridiculous. He had a dream and desired an interpretation of the dream, which was very common in his culture. But he took it a step further. He wanted the scholars of his day to not *just* provide an interpretation of his dream; instead, he wanted them to know his dream *and* its interpretation. When they couldn't provide details of what he dreamed, he ordered them all to be killed.

Fortunately, a godly man named Daniel stepped forward and noted that even though he couldn't interpret the dream, his God could reveal all mysteries.

As you read today, consider this: What aspects of Nebuchadnezzar's story resonate with your own life experience?

READING:

DANIEL 1

What does this passage about Nebuchadnezzar tell you about reality? About humanity?

In what ways does this help you to identify with the story of Nebuchadnezzar?

F260 READING: (A Scripture Reading Plan for Busy Believers)

Read: Numbers 20 & 27:12-23

Reflect: What did you H.E.A.R. from God today? (See back page.)

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, as I begin reading and learning about the life of Nebuchadnezzar, I pray that You would open my eyes and heart to see any similarities between his life and my own. If there were times when he resisted You, may I use that as an opportunity to confess the times I have resisted You. If there were times he was overtly proud, may I use that as an opportunity to confess the times I have been overtly proud. If there were times he worshiped You for who You are, may I use that as an opportunity to worship You. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

READING:

DANIEL 2

What aspects of Nebuchadnezzar's story resonate with your own life experience? (Consider the unrealistic expectations he placed on others, those he supervised, those he interacted with, etc.)

What kinds of ambitions or hopes could Nebuchadnezzar have had through his life experiences? In what ways does this help you to identify with the story of Nebuchadnezzar?

F260 READING: (A Scripture Reading Plan for Busy Believers)

Read: Numbers 34 & 35

Reflect: What did you H.E.A.R. from God today? (See back page.)

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, I confess that there are times when I have placed unrealistic expectations on others. Not only that, but I have demeaned or criticized others unfairly for not living up to those expectations. Today I ask for wisdom and clarity as to how I may be able to make amends for these mistakes. Reveal to me steps that may be taken to rebuild trust, reconcile broken relationships, and regain influence in the lives of those I have hurt by my selfish actions. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Day 3: Nebuchadnezzar's Pride

We all see things from various perspectives. Our family of origin, childhood experiences, friends, acquaintances, the entertainment industry, and more, have all educated us to think and observe in certain patterns.

For many who have attended a Christian church for years, the story of Nebuchadnezzar is often taught from the perspective of Daniel, or from Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. When it comes to the latter three, they're often seen as the godly heroes of Daniel Chapter 3. Nebuchadnezzar commands them to worship him over their own God. You likely already know how the story ends: they refuse, are sentenced to death, but miraculously survive.

But try to read through the story from the perspective of Nebuchadnezzar himself. What was it that drove him to such a self-centered pride? Has something similar driven you to prideful thoughts or actions? What experiences led him to praise and worship God? Have you had similar experiences that have led you to praise and worship God?

As you read today, consider this: What situations or problems was Nebuchadnezzar facing? How do you think Nebuchadnezzar felt throughout these experiences?

Day 4: Nebuchadnezzar's Folly

As was mentioned on Day 1, Nebuchadnezzar was a pretty smart king. Even though the Babylonian military had overthrown many different nations and people, as the king, Nebuchadnezzar employed the most learned and educated individuals from these other nations. The diversity of many different nations coming together turned out to be a great strength for his empire.

Additionally, Nebuchadnezzar learned that the people were able to adapt to the changing political climate if they were permitted to continue practicing their own religion. For the most part, this freedom of religion provided a great deal of stability for the Babylonian Empire.

But something occurred that Nebuchadnezzar didn't expect - the God of the people of Israel required exclusive worship. In one sense, Nebuchadnezzar himself had been able to rule over all of the gods people worshiped. But this new God was different. Israel's God declared that He was responsible for Nebuchadnezzar's success, and that He and He alone was worthy of being worshiped. Nebuchadnezzar struggled to accept God's sovereignty, and did so to his own folly. As you read today, consider this: How did Nebuchadnezzar respond to the challenges he experienced?

Day 5: **READING: DANIEL 4:27-37**

Who is the hero of the story of Nebuchadnezzar? What passages in this story lead you to this conclusion?

In just one sentence, write out the one thing you learned from the story of Nebuchadnezzar.

Then write out how You will respond to God as a result.

F260 READING: (A Scripture Reading Plan for Busy Believers)

Read: Deuteronomy 6 & 7

Reflect: What did you H.E.A.R. from God today? (See back page.)

READING:

DANIEL 3

What situations or problems was Nebuchadnezzar facing?

How do you think Nebuchadnezzar felt throughout these experiences?

F260 READING: (A Scripture Reading Plan for Busy Believers)

Read: Deuteronomy 1 & 2

Reflect: What did you H.E.A.R. from God today? (See back page.)

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, as I have read through the story of Nebuchadnezzar I confess that there have been times when I have been much like him. Full of pride. Full of rage. But also, times when I have been full of worship.

Today, one act of worship I desire to offer is to remove all pride, impurity, jealousy, envy, hostility, and instead be Your representative. Reveal to me the opportunities to spread love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control to all I interact with today. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

READING:

DANIEL 4:1-27

Think back through all of the readings from this week: How did Nebuchadnezzar respond to the challenges he experienced?

Would you have responded any differently a year ago?

5 years ago? 10 years ago?

Would you respond any differently today?

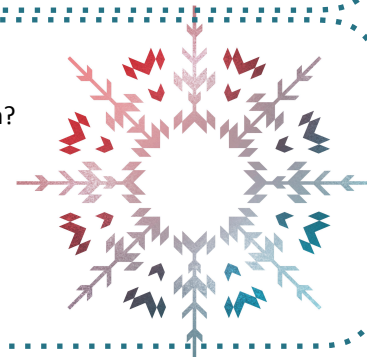
F260 READING: (A Scripture Reading Plan for Busy Believers)

Read: Deuteronomy 3 & 4

Reflect: What did you H.E.A.R. from God today? (See back page.)

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, like Nebuchadnezzar, there have been times in my life when I have wanted to take credit for everything I've accomplished in life. But today I am reminded that You and You alone are responsible for everything I am, everything I have, and everything that is good and pure in this life. Today, I worship You for the many blessings You have provided. Specifically, I thank You for (____), (____), and (____). But mostly, I thank You for the sacrifice Jesus made on my behalf. I worship You today! Amen.





Week #4
God is WITH Us...
in the Silence

The book of Esther teaches how to live in the world with courage and integrity, carrying out responsibilities to the best of one's ability and trusting God in his providence to protect and provide.

ESV Study Bible

Day 1: Esther's Rise

The book of Esther is a challenging book for many historians. In fact, it's likely that the book of Esther has received more historical criticism than any other book in the Bible. For example, the name of Xerxes' wife, Vashti, doesn't align with other historical records. But the Hebrew word translated as "Vashti" is similar to the Old Persian term for "beautiful woman," indicating it may not have been written as a name, but as a description. For some Christian scholars, another challenge with the book of Esther is that the name of God is never mentioned.

Even though the name of God isn't mentioned in the book, it is clear that God is at work in the lives of Esther, her uncle Mordecai, and the Jewish population in this time period.

Four main characters are highlighted throughout the story. King Xerxes (mentioned 29 times), Haman (mentioned 48 times), Mordecai (mentioned 54 times), and Esther (mentioned 48 times).

As you begin reading through this wonderfully written story, pay careful attention to each character, their decisions, and the outcome of their decisions. In what ways may their decisions and the outcome mirror some of your own?

Day 2: Esther's Courage

Think about a time when you knew you needed to have a hard conversation with somebody. Whether it was a college roommate, someone you were dating, your spouse, your children, your boss, or another friend, you probably dreaded the thought of sitting down and sharing something important with them.

This is the situation in which Esther finds herself, only her experience is even worse. Esther knows that the former queen has been harshly punished for not following through on the customs of their culture. And now she's in a position in which, as the queen, she needs to go against the customs of the culture. She's fully aware that by approaching the king, she may very well be put to death. How will she respond?

Initially, Esther responds to the situation by deciding to fast (not eat or drink) for three days, and encourages her uncle to do the same. Until now, her uncle has made many of the decisions in Esther's life. Now, she's taking the initiative to be the spokesperson for her people, even at the cost of her own life.

As you read today, consider this: What aspects of Esther's story resonate with your own life experience? (Consider her family upbringing, those she interacted with, etc.)

READING:

ESTHER 1:1-2:20

What does this passage about Esther tell you about reality? About humanity?

In what ways does this help you to identify with the story of Esther?

F260 READING: (A Scripture Reading Plan for Busy Believers)

Read: Deuteronomy 8 & 9

Reflect: What did you H.E.A.R. from God today? (See back page.)

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, there have been times in my life when I have wondered about Your presence. There have been times in which I felt as if You were completely silent. As I begin reading through the book of Esther, may it be a wonderful reminder that even through the seasons in my life when Your name isn't mentioned, still You are there. May it be a reminder that You have always been with me, are with me right now, and will continue to be with me. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

READING:

ESTHER 2:21-4:17

What aspects of Esther's story resonate with your own life experience? (Consider her family upbringing, those she *worked for* or *served*, those she interacted with, etc.)

What kinds of ambitions or hopes could Esther have had through her life experiences? In what ways does this help you to identify with the story of Esther?

F260 READING: (A Scripture Reading Plan for Busy Believers)

Read: Deuteronomy 30 & 31

Reflect: What did you H.E.A.R. from God today? (See back page.)

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, today I want to thank You for those who have regularly recognized the courage You have placed within me to fulfill the life You have called me to live. Specifically, I thank You for (____), (____), and (____). These individuals have regularly encouraged me to live for You, and I'm so very grateful for them. Today, I simply pray for the wisdom to know Your will, and for the courage to follow through on Your will, even when it's hard. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Day 3: Esther's Honor

Take a brief moment to recall yesterday's reading. Were you able to think about a time when you knew you needed to have a hard conversation with somebody, but you dreaded the thought of actually having it? What happened when you finally sat down with that individual and openly talked about what was troubling you?

If we're all being honest, sometimes conversations like these play out worse than we initially imagined. But oftentimes the opposite is true and we are rewarded for having the courage to follow through. In these moments, the conversation goes much better than expected. In these moments, our concerns are validated. In these moments, the relational bond strengthens. In these moments, God is honored.

In the story of Esther, her courage to approach the king is rewarded and she is given honor by Xerxes and Haman. Similarly, Mordecai's courage to reveal an assassination plot against the king is rewarded and he is given honor by Xerxes as well.

As you read today, consider this: What problems were Esther or Mordecai facing. How do you think they felt throughout these experiences?

Day 4: Esther's Plea

Think about a time when God worked something out in your life in a way that was completely unexpected. Perhaps you had a specific need you hadn't talked about with anybody else, and you suddenly discovered that somebody had fulfilled that need. Or maybe a really difficult situation was unfolding in your personal life, and somebody who didn't know anything about it texted you to say, "I just wanted you to know I've been praying for you throughout the day."

As the story of Esther comes to a remarkable climax, we see God's providence (that is, His care and concern for His people) through the acts of a king that didn't worship Him. Even though the name of God isn't specifically mentioned in the text, we discover in Esther 7 & 8 that God's people are rescued, and many who were not Jewish decide to convert and become followers of God (8:17). So not only were God's people not condemned to death by the Persian Empire, but their numbers grew. At this time in the history of God's people, He showed that He was still with them.

As you read today, consider this: Think back through all of the readings from this week: How did Esther respond to the challenges she experienced?

Day 5: **READING: ESTHER 9 & 10**

Who is the hero of the story of Esther? What passages in this story lead you to this conclusion?

In just one sentence, write out the one thing you learned from the story of Esther. Then write out how you will respond to God as a result.

F260 READING: (A Scripture Reading Plan for Busy Believers)

Read: Joshua 3 & 4

Reflect: What did you H.E.A.R. from God today? (See back page.)

READING:

ESTHER 5 & 6

What problems were Esther and Mordecai facing?

How do you think they felt throughout these experiences?

Who is somebody you personally know who has done something courageous? How may you honor them this week?

F260 READING: (A Scripture Reading Plan for Busy Believers)

Read: Deuteronomy 32:48-52 & 34

Reflect: What did you H.E.A.R. from God today? (See back page.)

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, while the thought of *honoring* others who have done something courageous may still be common today, I confess that I don't regularly share appreciations or honor towards those who have done something courageous. May I begin to see people and situations differently, so that I may honor those who have been courageous, even if their small acts of courage have gone unnoticed by others. Similarly, I pray for opportunities to be more courageous, and I acknowledge that even in these situations, it will be *You* who is ultimately honored as a result. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

READING:

ESTHER 7 & 8

Think back through all of the readings from this week: How did Esther respond to the challenges she experienced?

Would you have responded any differently a year ago? 5 years ago? 10 years ago?

Would you respond any differently today?

F260 READING: (A Scripture Reading Plan for Busy Believers)

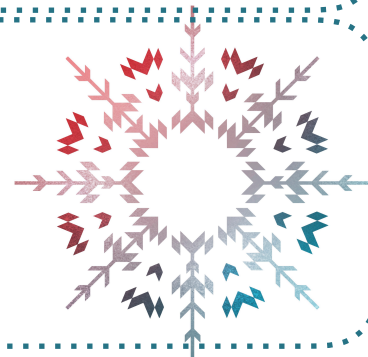
Read: Joshua 1 & 2

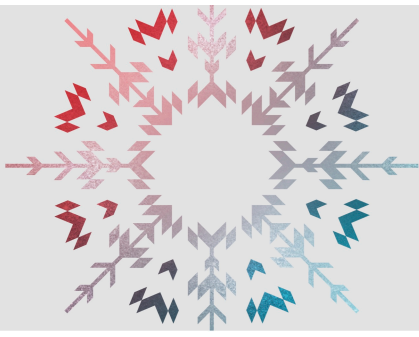
Reflect: What did you H.E.A.R. from God today? (See back page.)

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, today I simply want to thank You for the reminder that even in those moments in which You appear to be silent, still You are with me. You have been with me in my trials. You have been with me in my doubts. You have been with me in my humility. You have been with me in the silence.

This week, as the Christmas season is officially upon us, may I remember that Jesus - Emmanuel - is first and foremost a celebration of You being *with* us. I thank You in Jesus' name.





H.E.A.R.

Bible Study Method

This Bible Study method was designed to be used with the F260 Reading Plan.

READ: 10 Minutes a Day / 5 Days a Week

REFLECT: 5-10 Minutes a Day

RESPOND: All Day / Every Day

HIGHLIGHT:

After reading 1-2 Chapters of Scripture, *Highlight* the verses that speak to you by writing out the following:

- ❖ Write down the name of the book.
- ❖ Write down the Chapter and verses.
- ❖ Write down a 1-3 word title (eg. Why does this passage speak to me?)

EXPLAIN:

Engage with the text and wrestle with its meaning. Some *possible* questions to consider include:

- ❖ Who was the passage written to?
- ❖ Why was it written?
- ❖ How does it fit in with surrounding verses?
- ❖ What may God be communicating through this passage?

APPLY:

Consider how you may be able to apply the text in *Real Life*. Some *possible* questions to consider include:

- ❖ How can this passage help me?
- ❖ How can I apply this passage in my life today?
- ❖ What is God saying to me?

RESPOND:

Finally, *respond* to God. This can be done in any number of ways, but make it sincere.

- ❖ Write out a prayer (eg. Ask God to help you become more loving, or grace-filled, or content, etc.)
- ❖ Sing, write a poem, paint, sketch, take a photo, or find some other creative way to respond to God.
- ❖ Commit to a certain action.
- ❖ Who is God inviting me to be?
- ❖ What's my next step in becoming that person?

