OUR STORY

GOD'S WORK. OUR HOPE.

Chronological Readings

February

NORTH FORT WORTH
BAPTIST CHURCH

PRACTICAL APPROACH TO OUR DAILY READINGS

Commit to a consistent time and place (allow 15-20 minutes).

Read each day's passage prayerfully. Don't ask the question, "What does today's reading mean to me?" Read each day, asking, "What truth is God revealing?" Focus especially upon:

> What does the reading reveal about God?
>
> What does the reading reveal about humanity (about me)?
>
> What does the reading reveal about what is "relationally" appropriate or inappropriate toward God? God isn't supplying us with a list of rules to follow.
> He's inviting us to relate to Him as God so we might walk with Him by faith.
>
> What does the reading reveal about God's unfolding work of salvation?

Underline what stands out. We want to remember key ideas or verses.

Prayerfully identify one promise, insight, or action to carry with you into the day, and then commit it to the Lord in prayer.

Read each day's devotion for further perspective.

Keep in mind—the goal is NOT to read the Bible thru. The DAILY COMMITMENT is to draw near to God by faith and to experience the life-changing power of Jesus Christ.

ENLIST A PERSON OR GROUP TO JOIN YOUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Agree to hold one another accountable.

Touch base consistently about your readings.

> Exchange daily texts, emails, or social media posts to highlight the promise, insight, or action you seek to carry into the day.
>
> Talk weekly or every other week by phone or in person. Discuss specific lessons or questions that especially stand out.
>
> Adopt an approach that works best for you—consistency is the key.

Pray for one another by name for spiritual understanding and growth.

Encourage one another to press through the ups and downs of the journey.

February 1
Exodus 1-2; 1 Chronicles 6:1-3a; Exodus 3:1-4:17

In time, Joseph and all of his brothers died, ending that entire generation. But their descendants, the Israelites, had many children and grandchildren. In fact, they multiplied so greatly that they became extremely powerful and filled the land. (Exodus 1:6–7)

The story of Abraham's descendants continues, and God remains faithful to His covenant. That doesn't mean, however, that difficulties will not be ahead. God's people will suffer horribly at the hands of the Egyptians for an extended length of time. They are forced into slavery, devalued, and abused. The destructive influence of sin and pride manifests itself again in the ugliest ways.

God is not blind to the Israelites' plight. He is not unmoved. At the right time and in the right way, God acts to provide His solution to the deteriorating situation. Indeed, God already promised their deliverance centuries earlier to Abraham (Genesis 15:13-15). God sees what we do not see. He knows what we are incapable of understanding. Of course, that does not prevent us from complaining along the way.

Dramatically, God reveals Himself to a man who had fled Egypt in fear. God explains to Moses, *"I have certainly seen the oppression of My people in Egypt. I have heard their cries of distress because of their harsh slave drivers. Yes, I am aware of their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and lead them out of Egypt into their own fertile and spacious land." (Exodus 3:7–8)*

And the lesson? God is faithful to His promises. Though we may not understand our current circumstances, God is not indifferent or unmoved. We must learn to trust His timing and act when He calls us forward. We will learn a great deal from Moses and the unfolding story ahead. I already see myself in Moses' initial hesitation. I, too, can be negatively influenced by the "what if" scenarios I create. I suspect I am not alone.

Even so, let's follow Moses' story. Let's learn about God's ability to make the necessary difference as we follow His lead. Will you join us for the journey? It's the continuation of "Our Story." May God speak to our hearts as we do.

February 2
Exodus 4:18-7:13

So Moses took his wife and sons, put them on a donkey, and headed back to the land of Egypt. In his hand he carried the staff of God. (Exodus 4:20)

Moses is on his way to Egypt, but God's servant will sometimes prove tentative and erratic. If we expect everything to fall naturally into place, that will not be the case. Moses has not even circumcised his sons as a sign of the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 17:9-12). What does that suggest concerning the one God calls to lead His covenant people?

No, Moses' early steps are not without fault. He's a work in progress—as is true of each of us. However, let's give Moses credit for returning to Egypt. He's facing his fears in ways that would cause anyone to hesitate. He moves forward with the LORD, learning as he goes. And there will be much to learn. For example, Moses' initial success in rallying the Israelites was followed by confusion and disappointment as their circumstances worsened.

Have we experienced the same? We step forward with the LORD only to discover a new set of problems. Do we find ourselves second-guessing? Moses certainly did. He cries to God, "*Why have You brought all this trouble on Your own people, Lord? Why did You send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh as Your spokesman, he has been even more brutal to Your people. And You have done nothing to rescue them!" (Exodus 5:22–23)*

Of course, Moses is misreading the situation, as we also do. Let's not be too hasty in diagnosing the problem. If we learned anything from Job's experience, we should admit that more is often going on than meets the eye. It may be appropriate to step back and remind ourselves WHO we are following. He is the great "I AM." He is EL-SHADDAI, God Almighty.

God reminds Moses of that very thing (Exodus 6:2-5), even as He would remind us. Let's not allow our early disappointments to cause us to doubt God's future provision. Let's focus instead on God's promise (His larger plan) and keep moving according to His Word. We will experience God's grace and power as we do.

February 3
Exodus 7:14-9:35

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Pharaoh's heart is stubborn, and he still refuses to let the people go." (Exodus 7:14)

What does it take for God to get our attention? Do we knowingly ignore or reject what God is saying—to our demise? At what point do we pass the point of no return? If we are not careful, our misguided choices can become a moral and spiritual avalanche that tragically sweeps us away.

Pharoah's stubbornness serves as a sobering example. How many ways does God attempt to get his attention? God turns water into blood. Pharoah is unmoved. How about an invasion of frogs? Nope, still resistant. Pesty gnats? Not enough. A swarm of irritating flies will make the point. As the text describes, *"Pharoah again became stubborn and refused to let the people go." (Exodus 8:32)* What will it take? Diseased livestock? No. Festering sores? No again. Surely a devastating hail storm will open the ruler's eyes? As the storm clouds depart, Pharoah's stubbornness reappears.

Why so resistant? Why reject God's warning? Why travel further down a path of judgment and destruction? The issue with Pharoah may be the same with us. The problem is one of pride. Despite God's proof and repeated warnings, the Egyptian ruler refuses to acknowledge the LORD. His stubbornness of heart (Exodus 7:13, 22; 8:15, 19, 32) perpetuates a rebellion that multiplies the consequences.

To make matters worse, his pride reaches a point of no return. His continuing rejection results in a hardening of the heart that God precipitates (Exodus 9:12; 10:20, 27; 11:10). And the lesson? We are foolish to presume that we have unlimited opportunities. Like Pharoah, we can move beyond God's warning and step perilously toward judgment and loss. Thankfully, this does not occur quickly or easily. But tragically, it does happen. In Pharoah's case, it was predictable—as God Himself announces.

So, what does it take to get our attention? Let's not ignore God's appeals. May we recognize our pride for what it is. It blinds us to who God is and hinders our response to His Word. The added tragedy of Pharoah's decisions is the negative impact on the lives of others. That is often the case. May we learn then to humble our hearts and respond appropriately. One last time—what does it take for God to get our attention?

February 4
Exodus 10-12

These are your instructions for eating this meal: Be fully dressed, wear your sandals, and carry your walking stick in your hand. Eat the meal with urgency, for this is the LORD's Passover. On that night I will pass through the land of Egypt and strike down every firstborn son and firstborn male animal in the land of Egypt. I will execute judgment against all the gods of Egypt, for I am the LORD! But the blood on your doorposts will serve as a sign, marking the houses where you are staying. When I see the blood, I will pass over you. This plague of death will not touch you when I strike the land of Egypt. (Exodus 12:11–13)

God's judgment is about to descend upon Egypt. God informed Abraham centuries earlier that a time of reckoning would come (Genesis 15:14). The nation will soon cry out in horror as the LORD strikes down the firstborn male in every household. Death will be no respecter of persons. The firstborn in the richest and poorest families will suffer the same judgment.

God, however, provides a way of escape for the descendants of Abraham and those who act upon His instructions. God's judgment will pass over the families where the blood of the prescribed lamb is appropriately applied. Death will be averted, and their release from captivity will follow. In the truest sense, it will be a night of salvation for the people of God. The blood of the lamb would make the difference.

The children of Israel will commemorate this unforgettable night with each passing year. They will remind themselves of God's ability to save and deliver as they reenact the Passover meal and ceremonially apply the sacrificial blood. This observance, however, would ultimately point to a greater demonstration of God's power and love. Jesus, the Son of God, opens our eyes to God's greater work as He shares the Passover with His disciples. As Mark records, *"Jesus took some bread and blessed it. Then He broke it in pieces and gave it to the disciples, saying, 'Take it, for this is My body.' And He took a cup of wine and gave thanks to God for it. He gave it to them, and they all drank from it. And He said to them, 'This is My blood, which confirms the covenant between God and His people. It is poured out as a sacrifice for many.'" (Mark 14:22–24)*

May the truth of this scene settle within our hearts. Jesus is our Passover Lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7). He delivers us from the horror of God's judgment. Though we deserve death, Jesus rescues us as we respond to Him in faith. He died in our place so we might receive the gift of new life. Yes, from the children of Israel, let's remember that the night of deliverance is only the beginning. God leads His people to discover a new life together with Him. God desires the same for us as we relate to Him through Jesus, His Son. May we do so today!

February 5
Exodus 13-15

With Your unfailing love You lead the people You have redeemed. In Your might, You guide them to Your sacred home. (Exodus 15:13)

God's people lift these words of praise to the LORD as they witness the dramatic defeat of Pharoah's army. Of course, their jubilation was preceded by fear and doubt. Remember the scene? God deliberately leads His people to a place of vulnerability so He might demonstrate His faithfulness. They find themselves trapped—with a body of water before them and Pharoah's army behind them. And they envision the worst. They cry out, *"Why did you bring us out here to die in the wilderness?" (Exodus 14:11)* They fixate on the problem and fail to open their eyes to the sufficiency of the One leading the way.

Moses reassures the people, *"Don't be afraid. Just stand still and watch the LORD rescue you today. The Egyptians you see today will never be seen again. The LORD himself will fight for you. Just stay calm." (Exodus 14:13-14)* The truth is: Moses required a little encouragement himself. God, however, is not surprised by the situation and is more than capable of providing what is needed. He opens a way where there is no way. He parts the Red Sea so His people can walk to the other side on dry ground. At the same time, God lays a trap for their pursuers. The path of deliverance would also become the instrument of God's judgment. Behold the power of the LORD. God's people erupt in celebration and praise. Consider the earlier refrain,

"With Your unfailing love You lead the people You have redeemed. In Your might, You guide them to Your sacred home." (Exodus 15:13)

Think about their testimony with Jesus in mind. Can we trust Jesus to lead on our behalf—even if we find ourselves in a difficult place? Has He not redeemed us so that He might guide us to His sacred home? I anticipate further parallels as we continue our readings. May God prepare our hearts as we open His Word.

February 6
Exodus 16-19

Then the whole community of Israel set out from Elim and journeyed into the wilderness of Sin, between Elim and Mount Sinai. They arrived there on the fifteenth day of the second month, one month after leaving the land of Egypt. (Exodus 16:1)

The life of faith is a journey. We learn to relate to God for who He is day by day. We learn to trust Him, follow His lead, and submit to His commands. Today's reading illustrates that sometimes the learning process can be slow. Consider the steps and missteps of the children of Israel. A month into their journey, the Israelites are still inclined to complain. Do they seek God's counsel when they lack the necessary food? No. They find it easier to blame Moses and Aaron for the shortage. They are slow to look at the situation through the eyes of faith.

Interestingly, God's solution to the problem will require active faith on their part. He instructs the people to gather a daily portion of manna each morning to sustain them. They are to harvest just enough for the day at hand—not too much, nor too little. The exception would be on Friday. God directs His people to gather enough for two days on the sixth day. Why the difference? God demonstrates His sufficiency to sustain them. He also provides the gift of a Sabbath day. The term "Sabbath" means "to cease." God teaches the formerly enslaved people (whose work was never done) the value of setting a day apart to rest and refocus. It would become a day for physical and spiritual renewal.

What is the people's response? Despite God's explicit instruction, some still take more than is needed, only to discover that the excess spoils. And others went out to gather the manna on the Sabbath as if God's instructions were not trustworthy. And God's response? He is far more patient than I would have been.

The lesson in all of this is one of faith. Day by day, we learn to follow God's lead and trust His provision. Faith is not a feeling. It is an action. We act upon what He says and move toward the future, confident in His ability to make the difference. Take heart. God will also be patient with us as we learn the necessary lessons. Just remind yourself—the life of faith is a journey. Let's keep learning, keep trusting, and keep following. He is worthy of our confidence and faith.

February 7
Exodus 20:1-22:15

When the people heard the thunder and the loud blast of the ram's horn, and when they saw the flashes of lightning and the smoke billowing from the mountain, they stood at a distance, trembling with fear. And they said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen. But don't let God speak directly to us, or we will die!" (Exodus 20:18–19)

God addresses His redeemed people dramatically at Mount Sinai, the appointed meeting place. He calls His people to relate to Him as God and relate to one another appropriately. Jesus later summarizes God's covenant expectations to involve loving God with all we are and loving our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:34-40). The often-cited Ten Commandments highlight both (Exodus 20:1-17).

Yet, God's people draw back in fear, and a great tragedy occurs. God redeemed the descendants of Abraham so they might experience His presence and interaction in personal ways. God intends for them to become a "kingdom of priests" (Exodus 19:6), but (because of fear) they stop short of what could be. Instead of God addressing them directly, they plead with Moses to become their intermediary. *"You speak to us,"* they cry. *"And we will listen. But don't let God speak directly to us, or we will die!" (Exodus 20:19)*

Every time I read this, I wonder what might have been. The people stand at a distance (Exodus 20:18) instead of drawing near. Is it possible that we choose the same? In the Israelites' case, they feared their potential death. Moses appeals, *"Don't be afraid."* He then adds, *"for God has come in this way to test you, and so that your fear of Him will keep you from sinning!" (Exodus 20:20)* Ironically, their future struggles will relate directly to the absence of reverence and fear.

The people chose to stand at a distance. It is not coincidental that Jesus establishes us as a kingdom of priests. As the Apostle Peter describes, *"You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for He called you out of the darkness into His wonderful light. Once you had no identity as a people; now you are God's people. Once you received no mercy; now you have received God's mercy." (1 Peter 2:9-10)*

The relevant question is: Will we stand at a distance or draw near? May we not be content to allow someone else to approach God on our behalf. By faith, acknowledging our inadequacies and fear, let's draw near to the LORD so we might experience even more of His glory and power. Will you join me in this pursuit or stop short of what should be?

February 8
Exodus 22:16-24:18

Then Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel climbed up the mountain. There they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there seemed to be a surface of brilliant blue lapis lazuli, as clear as the sky itself. And though these nobles of Israel gazed upon God, He did not destroy them. In fact, they ate a covenant meal, eating and drinking in His presence! (Exodus 24:9–11)

Can you imagine experiencing the above scene? God redeems His people so they might draw near to Him. The LORD expressed that desire when He initially called Moses up the mountain (Exodus 19:4-6). *"You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,"* the LORD announces. Sadly, as we noted yesterday, the people stand at a distance instead of drawing near (Exodus 20:18-19). Even so, God's desire for fellowship remains. Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy elders, share a covenant meal with the LORD upon the mountain. They are described as eating and drinking in His presence. Again, can you imagine?

Keep this scene in mind as you consider the LORD's instructions and commands. We make a mistake when we view God's wisdom and guidance as an impersonal set of rules. They are far more. They reflect His character and knowledge so we might be protected from harmful actions and enjoy His presence at the table. Understand me. A person doesn't earn one's right at the table. The LORD is the One who redeems. Our obedience, however, increases our awareness of what can and should be. It places us in close spiritual proximity with the LORD so we might experience more of His presence.

Then, let's do the right thing, not simply because it is "right." Let's do the right thing because we enjoy fellowship with the One who is righteous. Do you see the difference? One approach leads to legalism and pride. The other moves us humbly toward God's presence and the table of fellowship.

Do you doubt God's desire for fellowship? Get ready for tomorrow's reading as God provides a layout for the Tabernacle of God—the Tent of Meeting. The LORD will continue to step toward His people. And their response? And our response? May God help us to draw near.

February 9
Exodus 25-28

Have the people of Israel build me a holy sanctuary so I can live among them. You must build this Tabernacle and its furnishings exactly according to the pattern I will show you. (Exodus 25:8–9)

Our reading today provides the blueprint for God's Tabernacle. Referred to as "the Tent of Meeting" (Exodus 29:42), "the Tent of Testimony" (Numbers 17:7), or simply as "the Tabernacle" (Exodus 25:9), which means "dwelling" — God continues to move toward His people. He actively seeks to restore the fellowship that Adam and Eve's rebellion disrupted. The construction of the Tabernacle, establishing the Priesthood, and introducing the appropriate sacrifices will be significant steps forward.

What are we to make of the elaborate detail? God not only provides building instructions to Moses, but the language of Exodus suggests that Moses is permitted to see an actual representation of the Tabernacle itself (Exodus 25:9). Think about it. It's easier to construct something that you have physically observed. That said. Where does Moses see it? Is it a vision or a dream? Is the earthly Tabernacle a faint reflection of a heavenly one?

There's something deliberately mysterious and beautiful about Israel's "Tent of Meeting." Though we may not find answers to all our questions, we are informed by the writer of Hebrews that the Tabernacle, the Priesthood, and the sacrificial lamb serve as copies or shadows of heavenly things (Hebrews 8:5). They point us to Jesus and the difference He makes. So, with all that we've read in view, let's consider the greater testimony,

"So Christ has now become the High Priest over all the good things that have come. He has entered that greater, more perfect Tabernacle in heaven, which was not made by human hands and is not part of this created world. With His own blood—not the blood of goats and calves—He entered the Most Holy Place once for all time and secured our redemption forever. Under the old system, the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer could cleanse people's bodies from ceremonial impurity. Just think how much more the blood of Christ will purify our consciences from sinful deeds so that we can worship the living God. For by the power of the eternal Spirit, Christ offered Himself to God as a perfect sacrifice for our sins." (Hebrews 9:11–14)

Let's keep this testimony in mind as we continue our readings tomorrow. The Tabernacle, the Priesthood, and the sacrifices all point to something more significant—the coming of Jesus. The glory and mystery of the Tabernacle will pale in comparison to what God ultimately reveals through the incarnation of His Son. May God help us keep this in mind.

February 10
Exodus 29-31

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Look, I have specifically chosen Bezalel son of Uri, grandson of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. I have filled him with the Spirit of God, giving him great wisdom, ability, and expertise in all kinds of crafts. He is a master craftsman, expert in working with gold, silver, and bronze. He is skilled in engraving and mounting gemstones and in carving wood. He is a master at every craft! And I have personally appointed Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, to be his assistant. Moreover, I have given special skill to all the gifted craftsmen so they can make all the things I have commanded you to make." (Exodus 31:1–6)

God enables what He commands. Do you believe this? It's a biblical principle that we should take to heart. God enables His people to do whatever He commands. He doesn't simply offer suggestions or point the way. God actively empowers His people to accomplish whatever He asks.

A helpful example of this is observed in the craftsman Bezalel and his assistant Ohiliab. They may not be familiar names, but they illustrate today's lesson or principle. God empowers both of these men and the other artisans to construct the prescribed Tabernacle of God. The details of the Tabernacle were spelled out in yesterday's reading. God is precise in defining what should be done. Construction will require both skill and artistic flair.

God identifies Bezalel and Ohiliab for the job. He recognizes their natural abilities. However, God does something more. The LORD fills them with His Spirit so they may accomplish what He commands. In other words, "God enables what He commands." This doesn't diminish their giftedness or experience. Instead, it highlights what is intended to be a spiritual pattern. The LORD takes us as we are, with our strengths and weaknesses, and then empowers us by His Spirit to accomplish whatever He commands.

Think about this concerning our lives and situations. As believers in Jesus, we have received God's Spirit within (Romans 8:9-16). The Spirit bears witness that we are God's children. Yet, the Holy Spirit also empowers us to make the necessary difference. God is more than a spectator. He equips and enables us to achieve what would be impossible otherwise. Of course, we can attempt things independently of Him with various degrees of success. Or, we can acknowledge God's presence, seek His active influence, and discover that we can do far more with God than we ever imagined.

So, what has God been asking you to do? Take heart! God enables what He commands. Let's acknowledge our dependence on Him. Let's seek the activity of God's Spirit within and step toward the task before us. It may not be as elaborate as constructing the Tabernacle. Even so, God has something He desires to do through us. Let's give Him the opportunity.

February 11
Exodus 32-34

The LORD told Moses, "Quick! Go down the mountain! Your people whom you brought from the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves. How quickly they have turned away from the way I commanded them to live! They have melted down gold and made a calf, and they have bowed down and sacrificed to it. They are saying, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.'" (Exodus 32:7–8)

Sad, confused, angry—so many emotions rise to the surface as one considers the spiritual infidelity of God's people. Forty days earlier, they pledge, *"We will do everything the LORD has commanded." (Exodus 24:3)* Their words ring empty as they abruptly turn away from their Deliverer and bow before a god of their making. It's baffling. How does this happen?

Let's keep the facts in view. God dramatically delivers the descendants of Abraham from their Egyptian captivity. The LORD miraculously sustains His people as He leads them across the wilderness. God reveals His power and glory to His people as He explains the nature of their relationship. God could not be more clear: *"I am the LORD your God, who rescued you from the land of Egypt, the place of your slavery. You must not have any other god but Me. You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens or on the earth or in the sea. You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods." (Exodus 20:2-5)*

Knowing this, why do the Israelites turn away? How does Aaron permit this to happen? Where are the seventy elders who confirmed the covenant six weeks earlier (Exodus 24:9-11)? Is there no one who will speak out on the LORD's behalf? I raise these questions without answers. I'm grateful that Moses intercedes on the people's behalf (Exodus 32:11-13). I'm thankful that God's wrath is averted (Exodus 32:14). I'm also encouraged to see steps taken toward reconciliation (Exodus 33-34). Yet, I'm stunned that God's people would abandon the LORD so quickly.

Join me in wrestling with the emotions that this scene provokes. May we search our hearts. Are we also susceptible to betraying the LORD? Will we cry out if we see others stepping away? I pray we display a fidelity that honors the One we follow. May it be so. Please, LORD, may it be so!

February 12
Exodus 35-36

Then Moses said to the whole community of Israel, "This is what the LORD has commanded: Take a sacred offering for the LORD. Let those with generous hearts present the following gifts to the LORD: gold, silver, and bronze; blue, purple, and scarlet thread; fine linen and goat hair for cloth; tanned ram skins and fine goatskin leather; acacia wood; olive oil for the lamps; spices for the anointing oil and the fragrant incense; onyx stones, and other gemstones to be set in the ephod and the priest's chestpiece ..." So the people of Israel—every man and woman who was eager to help in the work the LORD had given them through Moses—brought their gifts and gave them freely to the LORD. (Exodus 35: 4–9, 29)

What a difference a day makes. Yesterday's reading was characterized by idolatry, judgment, repentance, and restoration. Today's reading highlights a response of devotion and service. I don't know about you, but I prefer today's reading over yesterday's. Let's think about the people's response. Moses appeals to the twelve tribes of Israel to give an offering to the LORD. God had previously provided detailed instructions for their place of worship. However, constructing the "Tent of Meeting" will require considerable resources. The gifts of a few individuals will not be enough, so Moses extends a call to all of the people. Bring an offering to LORD. Freely honor Him as one's heart is stirred.

The outpouring is remarkable. People give generously toward the construction. Day after day, they share the resources God has placed in their hands. I'm not sure we grasp just how liberally they give. Tomorrow's reading will inform us that 2193 pounds of gold are contributed (Exodus 38:24), and an additional 7545 pounds of silver are presented (Exodus 38:25). Measured in today's dollars, that represents a combined value of $50,613,028. That doesn't include the costly gems, fabrics, spices, and other items. Indeed, the people are so generous that Moses finally announces, *"Men and women, don't prepare any more gifts for the sanctuary. We have enough!" (Exodus 36:6)*

As we were appropriately critical of the people's failure yesterday, let's celebrate their response today. They generously honor the Lord and make the Tabernacle's construction possible. Even better, let's learn from their example and respond generously to the LORD in ways we can. Pray about it. Let's tangibly honor the LORD into the week ahead.

February 13
Exodus 37:1-39:31

Bezalel made the ephod of finely woven linen and embroidered it with gold and with blue, purple, and scarlet thread … The ephod consisted of two pieces, front and back, joined at the shoulders with two shoulder-pieces … They mounted the two onyx stones in settings of gold filigree. The stones were engraved with the names of the tribes of Israel, just as a seal is engraved … Bezalel made the chestpiece with great skill and care. He made it to match the ephod, using finely woven linen embroidered with gold and with blue, purple, and scarlet thread … They mounted four rows of gemstones on it … Each stone represented one of the twelve sons of Israel, and the name of that tribe was engraved on it like a seal. (Exodus 39: 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 14)

Work on the Tabernacle is now underway. Filled with God's Spirit, Bezalel (and the other artisans) serve the LORD as they bring God's detailed plans into being. It's exciting as God's plans are finally completed—the Ark of the Covenant and associated items, the Tabernacle's curtains and protective coverings, and of course, the priestly garments and specified accessories. God's people will soon have a place to draw near the LORD's presence.

Today's reading pulls our attention in many directions—the beauty and placement of the golden items within the Tent, the size and design of the altar placed strategically outside the Tent, and the curiosity surrounding the colorful embroidery incorporated into the curtains and veils. There's much to attract our attention. My attention is drawn to the details involving the High Priest's ephod and chestpiece. It stands out to me that the twelve names of the tribes of Israel are engraved three times onto ornate stones that adorn the High Priest's garments. All twelve names are inscribed upon two onyx stones that decorate the shoulder pieces of the ephod. Each name is also engraved upon a series of twelve precious gems mounted on the chestpiece. Consider the implications. The High Priest bears their names upon His shoulders as he lifts the necessary sacrifices to the LORD. Their names are also positioned near His heart as he makes intercession on the nation's behalf.

Project the same close association upon Jesus, our High Priest. Is it too much to imagine that Jesus bears our names upon His shoulders? Even more, envision our names near Jesus' heart as He makes intercession. Consider also the reassuring words of Hebrews, *"So then, since we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe. This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for He faced all of the same testings we do, yet He did not sin. So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive His mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most." (Hebrews 4:14–16)* Let's think about this description and be encouraged!

February 14
Exodus 39:32-40:38; Numbers 9:15-23

Whether the cloud stayed above the Tabernacle for two days, a month, or a year, the people of Israel stayed in camp and did not move on. But as soon as it lifted, they broke camp and moved on. So they camped or traveled at the LORD's command, and they did whatever the LORD told them through Moses. (Numbers 9:22–23)

Construction on the Tabernacle is now completed. Everything is carefully erected on the first day of the first month. The people follow the LORD's command at every point as they consecrate the Tabernacle, the furnishings, the altar of burnt offerings, and all the associated articles. The "Tent of Meeting" is also ceremonially set apart along with the Priesthood, who will intercede on the people's behalf.

God displays His approval as a cloud descends upon the Tabernacle. The glory of God's presence is manifest. His presence is so intense that even Moses is forced to withdraw. The "Tent of Meeting" will now fulfill its intended purpose. God's people will draw near to the LORD's presence in personal ways. On the first day of the first month, it is a new beginning for the children of Israel. However, this is only the beginning. The children of Israel will also learn to follow God's leadership. The people will break camp whenever the glory of God's presence lifts from the Tabernacle. They either set up their camp or travel at the LORD's command. They are committed to following His lead. Can we express the same?

Allow the people's example to instruct our hearts. As followers of Jesus, may we prove to be as devoted. Indeed, may we commit ourselves to following Jesus' lead. May we seek His influence and refuse to move contrary to His leadership. By faith, let's draw near to the LORD so His glory might also be seen in us. Yes, may His glory be seen!

February 15
Numbers 7:1-89

Whenever Moses went into the Tabernacle to speak with the LORD, he heard the voice speaking to him from between the two cherubim above the ark's cover—the place of atonement—that rests on the Ark of the Covenant. The LORD spoke to him from there. (Numbers 7:89)

Two observations stand out from today's reading. First, I am struck by the practicality of the leaders' offering. They collectively present six carts and twelve oxen to the LORD in front of the Tabernacle. It is a gesture of faith and devotion but will also serve a functional purpose. The carts and oxen will transport the Tabernacle's different components whenever the people break up camp to follow the LORD's presence. It is both generous and functional.

We should appreciate that our gifts to the LORD fulfill the same. Though our contributions are often financial, they enable the local church to achieve what is needed. They facilitate the congregation's ministry efforts as we, too, seek to follow the LORD's lead. We present to the LORD what is in our hands so that He might make a difference through us. May God bless our generosity and faith.

My second observation involves Moses' interaction with the LORD. Moses enters the Tabernacle and hears the LORD speaking between the two cherubim above the ark's cover. Think about that. The ark is a symbol of God's covenant with the children of Israel. It is a physical reminder of God's covenant relationship with His people. It is also referred to as the "mercy seat" (Exodus 25:17). For it's there that the sacrificial blood would be applied to secure the people's necessary atonement. It is not coincidental that Moses hears God's voice from the place where mercy rises. There's something beautiful in that. God doesn't speak to His people because they deserve it. He appeals to His people, both then and now, as an act of love and mercy. Perhaps we should keep that in mind. Maybe it would influence how and why we draw near.

Of course, we don't physically approach the Ark of the Covenant or hear God audibly speak. Instead, we draw near to the LORD by faith as we open His Word. We recognize that God's presence dwells within us through the Holy Spirit. In some ways, we are afforded a greater mystery and privilege. Let's keep that in mind as we read daily from God's Word. May we also remember that God appeals to us, like Moses, from a place where mercy rises. Be encouraged by the thought.

February 16
Numbers 8:1-9:14; Leviticus 1:1-3:17

When you present the Levites before the LORD, the people of Israel must lay their hands on them. Raising his hands, Aaron must then present the Levites to the LORD as a special offering from the people of Israel, thus dedicating them to the LORD's service. Next the Levites will lay their hands on the heads of the young bulls. Present one as a sin offering and the other as a burnt offering to the LORD, to purify the Levites and make them right with the LORD. Then have the Levites stand in front of Aaron and his sons, and raise your hands and present them as a special offering to the LORD. In this way, you will set the Levites apart from the rest of the people of Israel, and the Levites will belong to me. (Numbers 8:10–14)

God requires a group to serve on the people's behalf. He chooses the tribe of Levi to be the representative tribe. They would be set apart to the LORD for a holy work within the Tabernacle. Our reading today highlights the steps taken to consecrate God's chosen servants. Interestingly, the people of Israel would physically lay their hands on those who would serve. The "laying on of hands" would become a symbolic act of transference or identification. With future sacrifices, the worshipper would place his hands upon the animal to publicly identify with the sacrifice. A similar action is taken toward the Levites. In this case, the Levites do not become sin-bearers but become living sacrifices that would serve on the nation's behalf. The consecrated Levites represent the "kingdom of priests" that God promised (Exodus 19:5-6).

Of course, serving in this capacity would require the appropriate sacrifices and cleansings. They would be incapable of ministering within the Tabernacle unless they first address their sin and guilt. Failing to do so would dishonor and provoke the very One they seek to serve. Thankfully, the LORD provides a way of forgiveness and cleansing so that their service would be possible. How does any of this relate to us? Consider Paul's testimony concerning all who have responded to Jesus in faith. He writes, *"Dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all He has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind He will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship Him." (Romans 12:1)*

The Levites became representatives of God's kingdom of priests in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, God creates a new nation of priests. Every believer in Jesus is set apart unto the LORD as a living sacrifice. Even more, His cleansing on our behalf is thorough and complete. Jesus has made each of us holy and acceptable. Please appreciate that this is not something that we achieve for ourselves. Instead, we freely receive God's work of grace through the gift of Jesus, His Son. Reflect upon this today as we consider the Levites and their role. May the LORD open our spiritual eyes to the incredible privilege that is ours.

February 17
Leviticus 4-6

If any of the common people sin by violating one of the LORD's commands, but they don't realize it, they are still guilty. When they become aware of their sin, they must bring as an offering for their sin a female goat with no defects. They must lay a hand on the head of the sin offering and slaughter it at the place where burnt offerings are slaughtered. (Leviticus 4:27–29)

Let's begin today's devotion with a prayer, "Lord Jesus, I seek Your forgiveness. You died on my behalf so I might experience forgiveness and life. Restore me now. I acknowledge my wrong for what it is and turn freely from it. Cleanse me. Renew me. Grant me the privilege and joy of experiencing Your presence and activity into the day ahead. Lord Jesus, I trust in You."

Do we understand how blessed we are because of Jesus? Our readings in Leviticus should drive the lesson home. Can you imagine offering the prescribed sacrifices for sin? Two considerations are worth noting. First, ignorance does not excuse one's sin. Did you notice the number of times people are described as guilty, even if they are unaware of their offense? One's ignorance or unintended negligence does not nullify the sinfulness of the action. "I didn't know" will be an ineffective defense. When we violate God's standards, we are guilty before Him. A sin sacrifice is required.

Second, did you notice the recurring emphasis on the sacrificial animals being without defect? The sacrifices are intended to be a symbolic substitute for the sinner. Sin stains a person before God. A spotless sacrifice is offered in exchange. The judgment for sin is death. Transferring one's guilt to the animal results in the possibility of life. Admittedly, the whole process is ugly and unsettling. Yet, it is intended to underscore the seriousness of one's sins.

Again I ask. Do we understand how blessed we are because of Jesus? Speaking of Jesus, the Apostle Paul writes, *"For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ." (2 Corinthians 5:21)* Let's think about this today as we reflect upon our reading together. May we recognize the opportunity to experience God's forgiveness is always there—as we turn to the One who died on our behalf. His cleansing is only a prayer away. Tell me. Why would we hesitate?

February 18
Leviticus 7-8

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Bring Aaron and his sons, along with their sacred garments, the anointing oil, the bull for the sin offering, the two rams, and the basket of bread made without yeast, and call the entire community of Israel together at the entrance of the Tabernacle." So Moses followed the LORD's instructions, and the whole community assembled at the Tabernacle entrance. (Leviticus 8:1–4)

Let's focus today on Moses' response to the LORD's commands. Great attention is given to God's instruction on Moses' part. It is especially true as Aaron and his sons are ordained as priests. Moses is diligent in adhering to everything that God prescribes. The testimony is repeatedly the same: Moses did *"just as the LORD had commanded him." (Leviticus 8:9, 13, 17, 21, 29)*

Can the same be said of us? I admit the occasion of Moses' actions is unique. Even so, this is a recognizable pattern on Moses' part. He consistently takes God's instruction to heart and proceeds to do whatever the LORD requires. Moses, of course, will not prove perfect any more than we are perfect. Nevertheless, His commitment to follow God's commands should instruct us all.

Let's then take a quick inventory. To what degree are we following God's command? Can it be said, "We did just as the LORD commanded us"? Or do we justify half-hearted or selective obedience? Do we obey the LORD's command just enough to feel good about ourselves but don't want to appear overzealous? If that rationale is anywhere in our thinking, maybe we should think again.

Consider Jesus' final appeal to His disciples, *"I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18–20)*

How do you think Moses would respond to Jesus' words? And our response?

February 19
Leviticus 9-11

Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu put coals of fire in their incense burners and sprinkled incense over them. In this way, they disobeyed the LORD by burning before him the wrong kind of fire, different than he had commanded. So fire blazed forth from the LORD's presence and burned them up, and they died there before the LORD. Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the LORD meant when He said, 'I will display my holiness through those who come near me. I will display my glory before all the people.' "And Aaron was silent. (Leviticus 10:1–3)

The death of Nadab and Abihu is tragic and disheartening. The day had been filled with so much good. Sacrifices had been presented to the LORD. In response, God dramatically makes His presence known. His glory is evident for all to see. God is visibly dwelling among His people. And then? Aaron's sons behave foolishly. They disregard God's instructions, and their disobedience will prove costly. God judges the brothers' sin promptly and severely.

Some might consider God's response as unfair. However, Moses instructed Nadab and Abihu concerning their activity. Even more, he modeled the appropriate approach. Moses was committed to doing *"just as the LORD had commanded him."* **(Leviticus 8:9, 13, 17, 21, 29)** We noted this yesterday. In contrast, Aaron's sons considered God's holiness as something that could be denigrated or ignored. They brought shame and sorrow to a situation that should have been characterized by amazement and joy.

What do we learn from this? Where much is given—much is required. Nadab and Abihu were placed in a position of privilege and honor. They were set apart before God to reflect His glory among the people. They sullied their role by defying God's command, and the price they paid underscores the seriousness of their actions. We may empathize with Aaron's loss, but let's humbly acknowledge the holiness of our God. If Nadab and Abihu had only honored the LORD with their actions, the memory of this day would be entirely different.

We may still find our hearts unsettled by what occurred. Perhaps, like Aaron, the best way to conclude today's lesson is to stand or sit in silence. May God grant us a perspective that allows us to experience His presence and glory without fear or dread. May we draw near to the LORD humbly, grateful for our privilege.

February 20
Leviticus 12:1-14:32

The LORD said to Moses, "Give the following instructions to the people of Israel. If a woman becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son, she will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during her menstrual period. On the eighth day the boy's foreskin must be circumcised." (Leviticus 12:1–3)

God's instructions to His people are thorough—from their diet to addressing blemishes on their skin to even responding to mold within their homes. There's so much detail provided. It's easy to get lost amid it all. That said. There are moments along the way when my mind naturally shifts to Jesus. Today's command concerning circumcision is one of those occasions (Leviticus 12:3). It reminds me of Luke's account when he says of Jesus,

"Eight days later, when the baby was circumcised, He was named Jesus, the name given Him by the angel even before He was conceived. Then it was time for their purification offering, as required by the law of Moses after the birth of a child; so His parents took Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord. The law of the Lord says, 'If a woman's first child is a boy, he must be dedicated to the LORD.' So they offered the sacrifice required in the law of the Lord—' either a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.'" (Luke 2:21–24)

The New Testament informs us that Jesus conformed to God's requirements completely. Even when it was beyond His control, Joseph and Mary acted on Jesus' behalf so that He would fulfill the totality of God's Law. That includes His circumcision on the eighth day. Of course, this is necessary if Jesus is to become our sin sacrifice. He cannot be exposed as lacking at any point. Think about that with today's readings in view. And we're not even halfway through Leviticus.

Jesus is the fulfillment of the whole of God's Law for our sake (Matthew 5:17). Reflect on that today and give thanks. Jesus certainly deserves our trust and devotion. Let's renew both for the day ahead!

February 21
Leviticus 14:33-16:34

When Aaron has finished purifying the Most Holy Place and the Tabernacle and the altar, he must present the live goat. He will lay both of his hands on the goat's head and confess over it all the wickedness, rebellion, and sins of the people of Israel. In this way, he will transfer the people's sins to the head of the goat. Then a man specially chosen for the task will drive the goat into the wilderness. As the goat goes into the wilderness, it will carry all the people's sins upon itself into a desolate land. (Leviticus 16:20–22)

The Day of Atonement is the most elaborate and complex ritual recorded in the book of Leviticus. Its significance cannot be overstated. If Passover is the most important festal day, the Day of Atonement represents the children of Israel's most solemn day. In Hebrew, it is known as Yom Kippur and is intended to be a day for introspection, repentance, and fasting. Its purpose is to provide the necessary cleansing: for the High Priest and his family (16:6, 17), for the people of Israel as a whole (16:17), and also for the Tabernacle itself (16:16, 20, 33).

For our benefit, let's focus on the ceremonial sending away of the "scapegoat." Two goats are presented before the LORD at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. Following a casting of lots, one is offered as a sin sacrifice upon the altar. The other is driven into the wilderness—but not before the High Priest lays his hands upon the goat. He symbolically transfers the people's sins to the animal. The sending away of the "scapegoat" illustrates the sufficiency of the forgiveness secured. The people are not to be chained to their past guilt or sin. They have been freed and delivered. The scapegoat serves as a physical reminder of a spiritual truth. God's forgiveness is real and should affect their lives.

Do we need to be reminded of the same? I fear that sometimes we carry the guilt and shame of our sin with us instead of allowing the power of Jesus' forgiveness to free us from our past. We carry guilt and regret like a ball and chain. We become prisoners of our own making. Allow the imagery of the scapegoat to help. Accept the sufficiency of God's forgiveness. Visualize Jesus, our High Priest, placing His hands upon the scapegoat and then sending it away—never to be seen again. Be encouraged by the thought and celebrate the power of God's forgiveness.

As a further encouragement, consider John's reassuring words, *"If we confess our sins to Him, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness." (1 John 1:9)* Let's take John's words to heart and accept God's forgiveness. Jesus has sent your guilt away. Choose to do the same.

February 22
Leviticus 17-19

If any native Israelite sacrifices a bull or a lamb or a goat anywhere inside or outside the camp instead of bringing it to the entrance of the Tabernacle to present it as an offering to the LORD, that person will be as guilty as a murderer. Such a person has shed blood and will be cut off from the community... Give them this command as well. If any native Israelite or foreigner living among you offers a burnt offering or a sacrifice but does not bring it to the entrance of the Tabernacle to offer it to the LORD, that person will be cut off from the community. (Leviticus 17:3–4, 8–9)

God provides a way of forgiveness for His people. He establishes a place of meeting. The manner of sacrifice has also been commanded and explained. Renewal and restoration are available as the people draw near to the LORD according to His Word. God's prescribed path, however, is the only way. The children of Israel will be unsuccessful in all other attempts. Indeed, if they make sacrifices to the LORD outside of His instructed way at His appointed place, they will alienate themselves from God and be cut off from the community of faith.

Let's think about this further. From the beginning, God teaches that multiple paths to the LORD and His forgiveness are unavailable. Though some in our day suggest that all religious attempts lead to God, the LORD would state otherwise. We are not afforded the luxury of adopting an approach of our choosing or making. Instead, God is the One who makes such a way possible. He has provided the way of salvation and life. He and He alone. Do we understand this? Do we accept this?

Of course, God's prescribed way with the children of Israel points to the ultimate expression of God's salvation through Jesus, His Son. Jesus is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). He is our atoning sacrifice (1 John 2:2). Acknowledging this, we must likewise understand—Jesus is the only way. Multiple options or paths do not exist. Jesus explicitly states, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through Me." (John 14:6)*

Don't interpret this to mean that God is trying to make it more difficult for people to be saved. The issue is the problem of one's sin. Our disobedience and rebellion alienate us from God, and there's only one way that our guilt can be adequately addressed. It is through the sacrifice of God's sinless Son. Maybe we should stop criticizing the exclusivity of God's plan and be grateful that God provided a way of salvation at all. Let's reflect upon this today and respond appropriately.

February 23
Leviticus 20-22

Do not live according to the customs of the people I am driving out before you. It is because they do these shameful things that I detest them. But I have promised you, "You will possess their land because I will give it to you as your possession—a land flowing with milk and honey." I am the LORD your God, who has set you apart from all other people. (Leviticus 20:23–24)

God saved and delivered the children of Israel to live distinctively from the world around them. They are not to emulate the Egyptians (Leviticus 18:3), nor are they to adopt the defiling customs of the Canaanites (Leviticus 20:23). They are instead to reflect the character of the God who redeemed them. His influence is to be observed in what they eat, how they dress, and most importantly, how they conduct their lives. They have been set apart by God and must choose to live accordingly.

It should be noted that a warning accompanies God's call to holiness. If they reject God's wisdom, the land itself will vomit them forth. Instead of enjoying God's blessing in the land flowing with milk and honey, their sinfulness would result in expulsion. The language that God uses is deliberately provocative. Their response to God, or the lack thereof, will either establish them in the land or cast them out. The decision would be theirs to make. Of course, God appeals for the appropriate response,

> *"You must be holy because I, the LORD, am holy. I have set you apart from all other people to be My very own." (Leviticus 20:26)*

And the people's response? As we continue our chronological readings, we'll observe a mixture of both. There will be periods of blessing, but painfully, God's people will also be driven from the land because of their disobedience and sin.

What do we learn? God sets His people apart to reflect His glory and influence. The same is true of us. His goodness and character are to be displayed in who we are and what we do. When we lose sight of this, we lose sight of our spiritual identity in Jesus. I pray we refocus our hearts today and appreciate our distinctive role and purpose. May we allow Peter's appeal to move us into the day ahead, *"So you must live as God's obedient children. Don't slip back into your old ways of living to satisfy your own desires. You didn't know any better then. But now you must be holy in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy. For the Scriptures say, 'You must be holy because I am holy.'" (1 Peter 1:14–16)*

February 24
Leviticus 23:1-25:23

The LORD said to Moses, "Give the following instructions to the people of Israel. These are the LORD's appointed festivals, which you are to proclaim as official days for holy assembly. (Leviticus 23:1–2)

Our reading today highlights the special days and festivals that were to be observed by the children of Israel. God's people needed to remember His actions and His provision on their behalf. If they lose sight of God's mercy and grace, they will be weakened spiritually as a nation. God then calls for His people to renew their faith and consistently celebrate His goodness through these notable days and observances.

I highlight a further emphasis on God's part. Again and again, God calls for His people to come together for a holy day or holy assembly. In Leviticus 23 alone, eleven times, God extends this appeal (Leviticus 23: 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 21, 24, 27, 35, 36, 37). The word "assembly" is the Hebrew term miqrā. The idea behind the term is to gather with a religious purpose in mind. It's more than a general meeting. God intends for the people of God to assemble so they might renew their faith and corporately respond to Him.

Think about that. Some in our day suggest that believers can respond to God in isolation. They believe the whole idea of gathering with others is optional at best. God's instructions to Israel suggest otherwise. Indeed, God makes gathering with others a priority. Even more, the first emphasis on assembling as a people is assigned to the Sabbath Day (Leviticus 23:3). That's right. God is the One who prioritizes the weekly gathering for the benefit of His covenant people.

As followers of Jesus, should we think differently? Of course, the Sabbath gathering has shifted to Sunday (the first day of the week) because of Jesus' resurrection (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2). It is the Lord's Day for Jesus' disciples (Revelation 1:10). The spiritual priority of gathering should be no less important. As people of faith, we should look for such opportunities. The question is, "Do we?" I pray that God grants us a renewed commitment to assembling with others in faith.

In closing, consider the writer of Hebrews appeal, *"Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near." (Hebrews 10:24–25)*

February 25
Leviticus 25:24-26:46

Do not make idols or set up carved images, or sacred pillars, or sculptured stones in your land so you may worship them. I am the LORD your God . . . I will walk among you; I will be your God, and you will be My people. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt so you would no longer be their slaves. I broke the yoke of slavery from your neck so you can walk with your heads held high. (Leviticus 26:1, 12–13)

God redeemed the children of Israel from captivity so they might relate to Him as God. God desires fellowship with His people so they might experience His blessing and activity on their behalf. He commits to dwell among them as their God to improve their lives. His heart is for them to walk with their heads held high.

The people, however, had a choice to make. Would they relate to God for who He is? Or would they bow to other gods, seeking blessing from another? The decision would be theirs, but consequences would accompany whatever they decided. They would experience either prosperity or loss. They would enjoy God's presence at work among them, or they would discover the foolishness of turning away. Given such clearly defined outcomes, it's hard to understand why God's people would ever turn away.

What about us? It should be noted that Jesus never promises His disciples financial prosperity. Nor does He guarantee a life free from calamity or loss. Jesus is clear. His kingdom is not of this world (Matthew 6:19-34). That does not mean that our lives should not be characterized by fullness of heart and joy. Jesus says of His disciples, *"I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." (John 10:10, ESV)* Indeed, Jesus came to impart life. However, the fullness of life He extends is directly related to our decisions. We either walk in fellowship with Him or not. We either experience His activity or not. Like the children of Israel, the decision is ours to make. Consider then John's call to fellowship.

"This is the message we heard from Jesus and now declare to you: God is light, and there is no darkness in Him at all. So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness; we are not practicing the truth. But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:5–7)

The decision is ours to make. I choose fellowship. I want to walk with my head held high. And you?

February 26
Leviticus 27:1-34; Numbers 1:1-54

The LORD said to Moses, "Give the following instructions to the people of Israel. If anyone makes a special vow ..." ***(Leviticus 27:1–2)***

It may be surprising that the book of Leviticus concludes with a chapter devoted to vows. Or perhaps we should not be surprised since, throughout the book, God consistently makes promises on His people's behalf. And, of course, God will prove faithful to His promise. The question is, "Will the people display the same fidelity?" Keep in mind: the highlighted vows in today's reading are not commanded by the LORD. They are voluntary expressions of faith, gratitude, or devotion.

What did the potential vows include? They reveal pledges of one's life for service, the servitude of a family member, a person's property or home, or the dedication of an animal or field. It seems that the individual could freely promise anything of worth or value. It would be a gesture of faith and affection on the person's part. Interestingly, the chapter also explains how the potential vows could be purchased back. This should be noted since the ongoing ministry of the Tabernacle required continuing financial support, and the "buy back" option would benefit that effort. So, whether one fulfilled the vow or redeemed the vow, both were considered significant before the LORD.

How does any of this relate to us? Has the day of "vow making" passed? From my perspective, it certainly has not. Think about it. We benefit from a greater expression of God's salvation and grace. Consider how Jesus' actions have freed us from the far-reaching demands of the Law. How many times in your Leviticus readings did you think, "I'm so thankful that Jesus fulfilled the Law on my behalf"? Should we then be more grateful or less?

Vows are intended to be spontaneous expressions of faith and devotion. They allow the heart of a believer to celebrate God's goodness in personal ways. They are not to be expressed impulsively or frivolously because God expects His people to keep their promises (Ecclesiastes 5:4-5). That's important to remember. Even so, shouldn't there be occasions when (with grateful hearts) we present a vow to the LORD? May today's reading give us something to consider in prayer.

February 27
Numbers 2-3

When the Israelites set up camp, each tribe will be assigned its own area. The tribal divisions will camp beneath their family banners on all four sides of the Tabernacle, but at some distance from it. (Numbers 2:1–2)

How does one effectively organize and mobilize over a million people? God did not leave it to chance. The LORD provides clear instructions to Moses concerning the careful placement of each of the twelve tribes. He specifies where each tribal group would be located and supplies their travel order as the children of Israel pick up their camp and move. For example, the tribes of Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun pitched their tents on the east side of the Tabernacle. Each gathering around their family banners. These three tribes would be the first to follow the procession behind the Levites as the LORD leads His people. Next in order and camping to the south side of the Tabernacle would be the tribes of Reuben, Simeon, and Gad. To the west would be the tribes of Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin. And last but not least, the tribes of Dan, Asher, and Naphtali would camp to the Tabernacle's north.

The specified order had a practical purpose. Can you imagine mobilizing a group this size without a plan? The placement of the tribes is also instructional. God would be central to their mutual relationship as a nation. As symbolized by the Ark of the Covenant, God would lead the way in the center of things. It's worth mentioning that the tribe of Levi would camp within the center area surrounding the Tabernacle itself—with Moses, Aaron, and his sons positioned at the Tabernacle's entrance.

What might we learn from today's reading? We are wise to recognize the orderliness of God's plan. It shouldn't surprise us. The Creator who introduced the laws of nature and their precise coordination would prove no less wise as He leads His chosen people. The Eternal God is a source of wisdom and order, and we should remember as much. Do note: There is a place for spontaneity, but not when you're mobilizing a million people.

Yet, the more significant lesson involves the layout of the encampment itself. As highlighted, God is central. God is at the center of their lives. Every time they set up or tore down their camp, they would assess their situation based on their specific proximity to God. That's a lesson that we should take to heart. We, too, should evaluate our coming and going based on our proximity to the LORD. He should be no less central to our plans and actions. May the LORD then encourage our hearts as we align ourselves with Him.

February 28
Numbers 4-5

The duties of the Kohathites at the Tabernacle will relate to the most sacred objects. When the camp moves, Aaron and his sons must enter the Tabernacle first to take down the inner curtain and cover the Ark of the Covenant with it. Then they must cover the inner curtain with fine goatskin leather and spread over that a single piece of blue cloth. Finally, they must put the carrying poles of the Ark in place. fine goatskin leather on top of the scarlet cloth. Then they must insert the carrying poles into the table. (Numbers 4:4–6, NLT)

As was emphasized in yesterday's reading, God provides clear instructions concerning the positioning and mobilization of the twelve tribes. God's attention to detail is again on display as He instructs Moses concerning the transportation of the Tabernacle and its sacred objects. Three Levite clans are assigned specific tasks. The Merarite clan would carry the Tabernacle frame, the crossbars, the posts, and related items. The Gershonite clan would be responsible for the many curtains and coverings that make up the Tabernacle. And the Kohathite clan would be granted the privilege of carefully wrapping and transporting the holy objects within the Tent of Meeting. God assigns each group specific responsibilities.

And what might we learn? We should again acknowledge God's attention to detail. He is a God of order and design. Yet, today's reading also illustrates how God works through various people in distinct ways. We are not all called to the same tasks. God seeks to work through our lives in different ways. That's true in the Old Testament. It is also true in the New Testament.

Of course, as Jesus' followers, we are not assigned to set up and tear down the Tabernacle. Instead, God calls each of us to build up and strengthen His Church, the body of Christ. Even at that, we don't all do the same thing. God equips us with distinct roles and tasks like members of a body. Paul explains, *"Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other." (Romans 12:4–5)*

Let's think about that today. Even better, let's pray about it. We all have something that God would have us do. It may not be spelled out as clearly as the three clans of Levites. Nevertheless, God desires to make a difference in ways that each of us can. Let's ask the LORD to guide our hearts and move us to build up those around us. We may not all do it the same way, but I think that's the point. Let's discover what God has for us to do and do it!

Devotions written and prepared by Stephen Lowrie

All references unless noted: New Living Translation