

CARING



# GOD WITH US

A SCRIPTURE STUDY FROM *CARING*

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# A COVENANT-KEEPING GOD



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Life is not always predictable, but then recent events surrounding COVID-19 have demonstrated that reality in very tangible, sometimes tragic, sometimes comedic ways.

The weekend before my husband and I left on vacation, we were shopping at Costco. We came to the toilet paper aisle, did a rough estimate of how many rolls we had at home and decided that we could wait until our next shopping trip to buy more—same with laundry detergent. Little did we know then that within the two weeks of our vacation and the unexpected quarantine that followed, that the world would go just a little bit crazy—and toilet paper would become a high-value commodity.

In recent days, as I have watched the news and scrolled Facebook, one thought comes back to me over and over again: The overarching response to the coronavirus pandemic is fear.

Fear is a funny thing. In dangerous circumstances, it ignites our instinctual “fight or flight” response, adrenaline flushes through our system, heightens our senses and makes us ready to protect ourselves from harm. But, fear can also become an enemy in itself.

In Franklin D. Roosevelt’s first inaugural address he said, “This great nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”

Roosevelt came to office in the depths of the Great Depression, and he continued to lead the nation through World War II. He understood that there is healthy fear that alerts us and arms us for safety and preservation and there is unhealthy fear that sucks the life out of us and paralyzes us.

Fear can lead us to make unwise decisions, with consequences that we have not considered.

Fear can cause us to forget or doubt the promises of God and leave us vulnerable to the lies of the enemy.

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### BEHIND THE SCENES

Read what Scripture says in Genesis 12:1-3. God made a covenant with Abram when he called him out of Ur.

- What did God ask of Abram?
- What did God promise Abram?

Abram responds in obedience and takes his wife and servants and flocks and possessions on the road. When we get to Genesis 15, Abram is growing concerned that God is not keeping God's end of the deal.

Read what Scripture says in Genesis 15:1-6.

- What is Abram's charge against God (15:2-3)?
- What is God's response (15:4-5)?
- What is Abram's response (15:6)?

The remainder of Chapter 15 points us to a covenant-keeping God. God commands Abram to prepare a heifer, a goat, a ram, a turtledove and a pigeon for sacrifice, with instruction to lay each half of the animals side by side. In the culture of the day, when two men entered into a covenant with one another they would prepare such a sacrifice, and both would walk through the offerings together. In this instance, it is God alone who passes through the offering (15:17). God made a covenant with Abram, a one-sided covenant.

Enter fear.

Read what Scripture says in Genesis 16:1-6.

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This is about 10 years after God made his promise to Abram that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars (16:3). Sarai has an idea, rooted in fear and her own logic.

- What is Sarai's plan?
- What is the outcome?
- What is the unexpected consequence? (16:4)

Sarai's fear that she had grown too old and that God wouldn't keep his promise led her to make a decision that introduced chaos and dissension into her household. And, in truth, it is a decision that has brought chaos and dissension into our world ever since.

- Looking at your own life, when have you allowed fear to rule you and your decision making?
- What were the consequences, positive or negative, that resulted?

God is a covenant-keeping God. Despite Abram and Sarai acting in fear and taking matters into their own hands, trying to fulfill God's promise of abundant descendants themselves, using their own dysfunctional thinking, God still has a plan. God gives Abram and Sarai new names. Abram becomes Abraham, meaning ancestor of a multitude, and Sarai becomes Sarah, meaning noblewoman. At 100 and 90 respectively, Sarah gives birth to the child of promise, Isaac.

Our fear does not change the character and nature of God, though it does make it difficult for us to see how and where God is at work.

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Our fear does not negate God's promises, though it may keep us from experiencing the full blessing God intends.

### BEYOND THE SURFACE

We live in an age when we are saturated with information, some of it reliable from accurate sources, some of it not so reliable from sources that may have an ulterior motive. A brilliant meme that makes the rounds captures the reality: "The problem with quotes found on the internet is that they are often not true (Abraham Lincoln)." Misinformation and wrong focus can easily drive us to be fearful.

So, how do we, as Christ followers, maintain the right focus in uncertain days?

First, remember who we follow. We follow Jesus, the exemplar of hope. We are quickly approaching Resurrection Sunday. Christ who was crucified, dead and buried, lives! And those who are his possess that same resurrection life and power.

Second, think of others. Matthew 22:37-39 says, "He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (NRSV).

If we become self-obsessed, we become self-protective and we allow a place for fear to set up camp in our heads. If we look outward and find ways to share the love of God with others, in practical and encouraging ways, it helps us to keep our eyes fixed on kingdom values.

This week, consider: What is one thing you can do to share the love of God with another?

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Third, we pray and allow God to take away the anxiety and fear. Read what Scripture says in Philipians 4:4-6

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- There are several words that indicate actions that we can take.

List them here:

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- And, what will God do in response?

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### **BETWEEN THE LINES**

Take time to memorize Philippians 4:4-6 this week. In the process, put the words into action in your own life and share their truth with others around you who may not know the God of peace. We live in uncertain days, but we serve a God on whom we can rely absolutely.

# KEEPING FOCUSED



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We live in an age when we are bombarded with noise and information and constant, instantaneous communication. We have things pulling at us from every direction, demanding our time and our attention, pressing us with a sense of urgency.

My husband and I were provided a mandatory period to be quiet. We were placed under a quarantine order because of potential exposure to COVID-19. The first isolation period was on a ship—seven days...just the two of us. Then we were transferred to a military base—five more days. Then our state brought us home to quarantine at home—14 days. If you were counting, that's 26 days! We were home, still, quiet, no unexpected guests, even if anyone had come, they would have had to stay on the front porch, talking to us through a door.

If I am honest, I will tell you that there were a few days in those 26 when I didn't do a single thing that was truly productive...occupied with games on my phone, binge watching TV, time on Facebook. That was the exception, but my point is that if we are not careful, we can easily take on a façade of productivity and focus while really being lazy and distracted.

So, in these days of distraction and pandemic, when we are being asked to stay home to help stop the spread of COVID-19, how do we maintain a right focus?

I propose that the Apostle Paul gave us some good tools in Philipians 4:4-9.

### BEHIND THE SCENES

There is a temptation to worry and become anxious when life becomes uncertain.

In Jesus's Sermon on the Mount he spoke about worry, asking his listeners to consider how God cares for creation and how pointless worry is (Matthew 6:25-34). There are two verses to which I draw your attention:

*"Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" (Matthew 6:27 NIV).*

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*"Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own"* (Matthew 6:34 NIV).

Stop and consider those thoughts for a moment.

Are there things in this time that are consuming you with worry? Yes, there are things that are concerning, there is a good deal of uncertainty... but are you allowing it to consume you? Name those worries. Write them down.

And now, Paul's remedy.

Read what Scripture says in Philippians 4:4-7.

Step one: Rejoice! It's important enough that Paul says it again for emphasis. What difference does that make? What does it do for your heart and soul? (If you need a little bit of help, play your favorite praise and worship music, crank it up and let it wash over you.) Worry weighs us down; the simple act of choosing to rejoice adjusts our perspective and makes things lighter.

Step two: Pray! Life is going to come at us, things will not always go as planned, we will face challenges and difficulties. *However*, that reality does not have to consume us (as a side note take a look at 2 Corinthians 4:7-9).

In verse 6, Paul uses some fairly emphatic language. What are we to be anxious about?

What are we to present to God with prayer and petition? And how are we to present those prayers and petitions?

Why is it important for us to present our requests to God with thanksgiving?

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As I have considered these words over time, I have reached one important conclusion about the importance of thanksgiving as we talk to God about things that are weighing us down. In the act of thanksgiving, we remember. We remember how and when God has taken care of us and provided for us in the past. It becomes a statement of faith and testimony—what God has done before, God will do again. When we remember God’s faithfulness, those things that cause us concern come down to size and are brought into the right perspective, from mountain down to mole hill.

When we surrender these worries and concerns and anxieties, God’s Word promises that anxiety will be replaced with peace; see Philippians 4:7. Be good to yourself...you may have to give it back to God several times...when you do, give yourself a moment to allow God’s peace to wash over you.

There is nothing that is beyond God’s ability to handle in our lives. There is nothing in our lives that is too small for God’s attention.

### BEYOND THE SURFACE

On the heels of right praying, comes the need for us to think rightly.

Back to the noise of this age and the abundance of information. It distracts us. Our minds and ears are filled. Paul encourages us to be discerning and to focus our attention on things that matter and will build us up.

What are the eight things Paul encourages us to think on? List them out:

1. Whatever is \_\_\_\_\_
2. Whatever is \_\_\_\_\_
3. Whatever is \_\_\_\_\_
4. Whatever is \_\_\_\_\_
5. Whatever is \_\_\_\_\_
6. Whatever is \_\_\_\_\_
7. If anything is \_\_\_\_\_
8. Or \_\_\_\_\_

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Ideally, the things that we spend our time and energy on will fit through this filter. It's amazing what happens when we filter out the things in our life that have become toxic, sucking the joy out of us. There may be things that are taking up your time and energy that are not necessarily bad, but that do not necessarily feed your spirit or help you remain focused on the right things.

If there is something that the Holy Spirit is already showing you that needs to go, jot it down here, memorialize it so that you don't forget it.

When we fill our minds with things that are positive and pleasing to God, again, those things that have caused us fear or anxiety are brought into perspective.

### **BETWEEN THE LINES**

*"Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you"* (Philippians 4:9).

It took me a while to come to grips with Paul's words here; it used to seem to me that perhaps Paul was a bit prideful. However, my friend David summed it up this way: "Follow me, as I follow Jesus." Now, that works!

It's not enough for us to know what steps to take to keep focused, we've got to put them into practice. And, as Paul suggests, we need others to help us on the way and to set a good example. It's a truth inherent to growing in faith (and one that is fundamental in 12-Step recovery groups). Partner with someone who can help you along the way, someone who will call you out when your focus drifts and when you become overwhelmed by the uncertainties of this life.

Know that I am praying for anyone who goes through this study, that God's presence will be real, and that in focusing on God and God's presence with you, that you will know God's peace in tumultuous times.

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# LOVE GOD, LOVE OTHERS



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If asked to sum up what it means to be a Christ-follower in one sentence, it would be this: Love God and love others. Five words, easy to understand and easy to remember.

Life is a bit upside down right now. Our world has changed seemingly overnight. In the United States, we are accustomed to our freedoms and the privileges that come with living in a democratic nation. We are used to coming and going as we please, crossing state boundaries without a thought. The Constitution guarantees the right of peaceful assembly and we've been asked not to meet in groups, but rather stay home. Life is different.

So, if we are not gathering for worship on Sunday morning, if we are not doing our "usual" church thing, how do we impact the world with the love of Jesus? (Perhaps, it's time for us to rethink what it means to be the church... but that's another study altogether.) How, in a world being defined by social distancing and seclusion, do we demonstrate love for God and love for others? How do we keep ourselves focused on the things that matter most?

### BEHIND THE SCENES

When Jesus walked on the earth, the religious leaders of the day were always trying to trip him up, to catch him speaking blasphemy or dismissing the law of Moses. Jesus was dismissing what the law had become, heavy and burdensome, and reminding people what God's heart was as the law had been delivered. I've recently spent time reading the book of Deuteronomy and was amazed by the number of times Moses reminded the Israelites that the first order of business was to love the Lord their God.

Read what Scripture says in Luke 10:25-37 as it begins with that same scenario—someone trying to show Jesus up or justify himself.

Jesus often taught in parables, earthly stories that help us to understand what the Kingdom of Heaven is all about. The key players in this parable are four men. The man who was beaten and left for dead. A priest returning from Jerusalem after performing his service in the Temple. A Levite, a temple worker returning from Jerusalem after performing his service. And, a Samaritan, from some of the pieces described, probably a businessman of some sort on his regular route.

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The priest and the Levite both walk around the man, neither bothering to see whether he is dead or alive. Neither bothers to find out if he is a fellow Jew. The excuse is likely that they did not want to become ceremonially unclean by touching what might have been a dead body. Here's the problem... they were traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, not from Jericho to Jerusalem. Why does it matter? They had completed their temple duties, the need for them to remain ceremonially clean had passed. They used their temple responsibilities as a pretext for disregarding the obvious needs of another.

Enter the Samaritan. Jews hated Samaritans and would go out of their way to avoid them. They considered them half-breeds and unfaithful to Yahweh. And yet it is the Samaritan who stops, who inconveniences himself, gives out of his own resources, provides for this stranger's care and demonstrates kindness and compassion.

### BEYOND THE SURFACE

Luke 10:27 tells us that we are to: *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind."* Jesus affirmed that what the expert in the law said was correct.

I took a logic class in college. I couldn't tell you the specifics of most of what we studied, but one definition stuck in my mind. All means all, not some, not most. Therefore, it is not, love the Lord your God with *most* of your heart and with *some* of your soul. It is a call to be *all* in—heart, soul, mind and strength, body, soul and spirit. We are called to love God with our whole person.

Loving God completely involves loving what God loves—justice, mercy, sinners, saints, the disenfranchised, the entitled, the rich, the poor, widows, orphans, drug addicts, alcoholics, all ethnicities, all people groups, etc., etc., etc. Loving God completely involves being brokenhearted by the things that break God's heart—pornography, racism, abandoned children, divorce, hatred, sexism, sickness, disease, poverty, human trafficking, violence...

And then, we live in a manner that demonstrates our love for God.

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### BETWEEN THE LINES

One of the best ways we can demonstrate our love for God is to behave in loving ways toward others.

Jesus gave us one new commandment when he walked among us, as one of us, *“A new command I give you; Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this, all men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another”* (John 13:34-35).

So, first, Christ-followers need to love each other. If we can't act in love toward those with whom we share an intimate bond of faith, what does that say to those who are yet to know Christ as savior?

Then, Jesus calls us to love as he loves. What does that look like?

Christ's love is sacrificial. Christ's love is honest. Loving us too much to leave us in our own sin, Jesus calls us to account and calls us to change. Christ's love never leaves us, even when we are at our worst. Jesus's love is encapsulated in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a: patient, kind, not envious, not boastful, not proud, not rude, not self-seeking, not easily angered, not keeping score, not delighting in evil, rejoicing in truth, protecting, trusting, hopeful, persevering, never failing.

So, what does that look like in practical ways, in difficult days? How can you demonstrate Christ's love to a world that is hurting and confused and searching?

Perhaps it looks like only buying what you need at the grocery store and leaving something for the next person. Perhaps it looks like making telephone calls to people you know who live alone and may be feeling especially isolated. Perhaps it looks like writing notes of encouragement. Perhaps it's offering to grocery shop for someone you know is at high risk should they come in contact with this virus. Be creative!

When we act in love toward the world, it is the best demonstration of our love for God, and it is the best possible example of Jesus to the world.

# EYES TO SEE



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I love the Old Testament prophets. They were bold, sometimes outrageous, fierce in their commitment to speak God's truth, human, sometimes distraught by the world's condition, and they possessed audacious faith. When I grow up, I want to be like them.

We have an enemy, who wants us to cower in fear when uncertainty comes our way or when life gets hard. In John 10 Jesus tells us that he is the good shepherd and the gatekeeper. John 10:10 says, *"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."* We have an enemy, but God is greater.

In nature, there are scores of animals with physical characteristics that are there to protect them, to oftentimes make them look bigger than they are and to strike fear into their enemy. The frilled lizard, lionfish, pufferfish and porcupines come to mind. Bears will stand up on their haunches rising up to their full height. I would like to suggest that our enemy often uses the same tactics. And, at that point, it's important for us to remember just how big our God is.

### BEHIND THE SCENES

Read what Scripture says in 2 Kings 6:8-23.

It seems this is an appropriate story for times like these. First, I will say that there is a very real need to take precautions and to make decisions that will help protect yourself and the community around you. Second, the need to be aware and cautious is not the same as being ruled by fear.

The King of Aram was at war with Israel. Israel had a real, physical enemy who desired to do the people harm. That reality is not to be minimized or dismissed. They would have been foolish to ignore the movements of the Aramean army. And, they would have been equally foolish to dismiss the words of instruction and warning they received from Elisha.

Now, we may not have an army breathing down our necks, but that does not mean we are without threats; they're just different in the 21st century.

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The enemy may be downsizing at work, it may be a relationship that has gone bad, it may be anxiety, it may be mental illness, it may be addiction, or as we have all become aware, it may be a highly contagious virus.

The thing the enemy of our souls wants us to believe is that we are somehow outnumbered and all alone in the fight. But what the enemy knows is that we are anything but alone and outnumbered.

### BEYOND THE SURFACE

The King of Aram became fixated on Elisha who was foiling his plots to rout Israel. He sends “horses and chariots and a strong force” (a bit of overkill to capture one prophet) to surround the city of Dothan.

Elisha’s servant wakes up and sees all those surrounding the city and is dismayed. I would be, too. You can almost see the pacing and the hand wringing. *“Oh, my lord, what shall we do?”* (2 Kings 6:15).

This next scene is what we need to remember and take to heart in those moments we feel outnumbered and overwhelmed.

Elisha doesn’t skip a beat. *“Don’t be afraid,” the prophet answered. “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.”* (2 Kings 6:16). Then he prays that his servant will be able to see what Elisha sees.

The servant’s eyes are opened *“and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha”* (2 Kings 6:17).

What battles are you facing today?

You are not alone! The God of Elisha, who sent heaven’s army to defend him, is still present with us. God—present with us—gives us the strength to do what we must. God—present with us—gives us the courage for the battle. God—present with us—gives us a place of refuge when we feel we are at our wit’s end.





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### **BETWEEN THE LINES**

To conclude this study, take in the words of Psalm 121. Read it slowly, consider its promises and the affirmations of God's presence and protection.

The world is in a state of flux and uncertainty. This is not the first time in human history, and it is likely to not be the last. Amidst uncertainty, we can believe and trust in the certainty of the presence of God.

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