

been conquered, these old promises gave a vision about who God's people might be again in the future." In what ways is God's promise not just ancient history, but a pointer to God's ideal for you and your church family?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, you wanted Abraham to care about blessing "all the families of earth." Plant that kind of heart in me, too, as one of Abraham's spiritual descendants. Amen.*

Wednesday, January 16 – Read Joshua 24:1-3, 14-15. Left to ourselves, we humans always have an urge to make our "founding fathers" into grand figures, ideal examples of what we hope to be. Joshua's final charge to the people of Israel took the opposite tack. Their ancestors, he said, "served other gods." "The sites of Mari and Alalakh have yielded archives of cuneiform tablets from this period that attest to many deities worshiped by peoples of the region and same linguistic background as the patriarchs. This demonstrates that Abram did not come from a long line of unbroken monotheism."

- One hundred years ago, much popular Christian writing divided the world's population into two groups: Christians and "heathen." In those writings, there was little if any recognition of what Joshua knew clearly: our faith began when God reached out to "heathen," and found honest hearts like Abram's who responded to God's call. If that happened back in the very beginnings of our faith, does it make sense that it may still happen today?
- After years preaching mainly to Gentiles, the apostle Paul wrote to Roman Christians about people beyond the "right" faith who "instinctively do what the Law requires," who "show the proof of the Law written on their hearts" (cf. Romans 2:11-16). There is debate about some details of Paul's meaning. But does it not seem clear that Paul knew there were (and are) honest people outside the Christian faith who love God? Can't we, without compromising our own faith, believe God is also at work in their lives?

Prayer: *Lord God, forgive me when I try, even unconsciously, to make you the exclusive possession of my religious "tribe." Help me keep growing in my understanding of the wideness in your mercy. Amen.*

Thursday, January 17 – Read Jonah 4:1-11. What did Jonah think was, "utterly wrong"? Jonah 3:10 said, "God stopped planning to destroy [the people of Nineveh], and he didn't do it." The story said when Jonah grudgingly went to Nineveh, his entire message was, "Just forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4). He wanted to see Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, flattened! This story was in the Bible, not to endorse Jonah's spirit, but rather, through God's challenge to the sulking prophet, to show that God's love truly extended to the whole world.

- The writer of Jonah described an astounding preaching success—a whole city repenting and turning to God. The preacher's attitude? "Jonah thought this was utterly wrong, and he became angry" (Jonah 4:1)! What made Jonah so angry? Is it possible for God to care about people without endorsing violent or other hurtful actions, like Assyria's violence toward Israel?
- The story of Jonah ended with a question, not a statement. God asked Jonah, "Can't I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than one hundred twenty thousand people who can't tell their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" Is there any person or group of people you'd rather see God "zap" than to see them repent? Is it right for God to extend heaven's offer of mercy to all people?

Prayer: *Lord God, sometimes, like Jonah, I wish you'd hate people I hate. But you call me to change my attitude, not yours. Guide and lead me as I wrestle with that change of spirit. Amen.*

Friday, January 18 – Read Matthew 28:16-20. A disciple is not just a person who knows some things about Jesus. A disciple intends to follow Jesus in all parts of life. So "making disciples" is not a one-time effort, but a continual choice to invest in making the lives of others better. According to Jesus' "Great Commission," that included (and includes) caring about "all nations." As Paul wrote, after wrestling with questions of identity and faith, "God's riches, wisdom, and knowledge are so deep!" (Romans 11:33)

- This passage offered a command, and a promise. Jesus addressed the command to all his followers: "Go...make disciples of all nations... baptizing them... and teaching them." In what ways are you gifted to help carry out this commission? In what ways does this make "the church" like a hospital that is open 24/7 rather than a fortress with gates tightly shut against "enemies" or "outsiders"?
- Jesus' promise was more priceless than anything a MasterCard could get you: "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." In what situations has it made your life better to remember and live in the light of that promise? How can knowing Jesus is with you give you courage, strength and peace to reach beyond your comfort zone to bless others?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, I need you to stay with me, every day, every minute. Thank you for promising to do just that. Amen.*

Saturday, January 19 – Read 1 Corinthians 13:9-12. The apostle Paul was a forceful advocate for his faith (as seen in Acts 17:16-34). Yet he spoke to the Athenian intellectuals with respect and humility. He honored their desire to serve an "unknown god," and quoted from their writers in support of some of the truths he wanted to share. His deep-seated faith didn't make him arrogant, holding others in contempt. It made him humble, as he revealed in 1 Corinthians 13. He realized that his faith was about worshipping and serving the God who was bigger than everything even his exceptional mind could take in.

- 1 Corinthians 13:9 ("we know in part") reminded us that we don't know everything about God. Reflect on where you were in your faith journey 1 year, 5 years, 10 years ago. What have you learned in the meantime? In what areas, as you look back, can you sense how partial your understanding of God and God's ways was? Could it be that at this time next year, or five years from now, you'll have the same sense as you look back on some of the things you're sure you "know" today? Given the scale and scope of the God we worship, do you think you will ever reach a point before eternity where you have nothing left to learn (or unlearn)? How does that realization shape the way you relate to other people with different beliefs?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, thank you for the gift of a mind that can grapple with the great realities of life, learning more of your principles and your ways, and yet remaining humble in the light of all that I have left to learn. Help me grow in my understanding of you during 2019. Amen.*