

ANCIENT INSIGHTS
INTO SEVEN FAMILIAR
BIBLE STORIES

7-DAY DEVOTIONAL

DESCRIPTION

You've heard, read, and even studied the "familiar" stories of the Bible many times: Adam and Eve, the Flood, Jonah and the Whale...

Have you ever considered that there may be some details that you are missing? All of these stories took place in a very different time, culture, and place. There are things that the original readers of the story would have immediately understood that are not obvious to you and me today.

This Bible reading plan will help by giving you ancient insights into some of the most familiar Bible stories. It will reignite your interest in these stories as well as better equip you to accurately apply their truths to your life and to the lives of others.

SEVEN DAILY DEVOTIONALS

Day 1: Adam and Eve-The Desire to Be Like God

Day 2: Noah and the Flood-A Grateful Response

Day 3: David and Goliath-The Battle is the LORD's

Day 4: Daniel in the Lions' Den-A Trial by Ordeal

Day 5: Jonah and the Whale-A Foreign Prophet is Heard

Day 6: Jesus is Born-A Contrast of Two Kings

Day 7: Jesus is Crucified-A Terrible Way to Die

DAY 1:

ADAM AND EVE

THE DESIRE TO BE LIKE GOD

7-DAY DEVOTIONAL

DAY 1: ADAM AND EVE

Genesis 3:1-4

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?” The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’ “ “You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

DAY 1: ADAM AND EVE

We have all read the story of Adam and Eve. We've seen the illustrations, speculated about what type of fruit was on the forbidden tree, and learned lessons about avoiding temptation from this story.

A careful reading of Genesis 3 tells us that Adam and Eve's sin was really not about having a healthy snack—they could, after all, have eaten from many other fruit trees! Their sin was both an act of disobedience against God as well as an effort to be like God.

We have to ask the question, “What would the original readers have thought about the prospect of being “like God?” and, “Why is that a bad thing?”

In the ancient world, there were many tales of individuals who tried to be “like God” in various ways, such as wisdom or physical attractiveness. Some of them were successful and others failed. Adam and Eve's attempt to be “like God” succeeded in one way--they knew “good and evil”, but they failed in another way—they lost their immortality!

DAY 1: ADAM AND EVE

One part of the story in Genesis that sets it apart from other ancient tales is that Adam and Eve lost their unique, personal relationship with God. Because of their sin, they were driven from the garden and were no longer able to fellowship with God as they had in the past. This would have been a surprising development for the original readers! It would have left the original readers thinking, “Why did that happen? What will happen next? Is there any way in which Adam and Eve could be restored and enjoy fellowship with God again?”

Once we understand this insight, we understand the key problem in Genesis 3. The key problem is not a missing piece of fruit from a tree, hard work for Adam, or pain in childbirth for Eve. The key problem is that mankind had lost fellowship with God!

The rest of Scripture goes on to tell the story of redemption through Jesus and of the way that God restores sinful people to Himself. God loved fallible people so much that He made a way for them to be restored and regain what they lost in the Garden of Eden: fellowship with God!

DAY 1: ADAM AND EVE

Application point: Do you believe that God loves you (even when you make mistakes)? Do you believe that He has made a way for you to be restored and experience a personal relationship with Him? God loves you very much. Even though you fail, God has made a way for you to be restored to Him.

Prayer: God, thank you for the truth of Genesis 3. Thank you that, although Adam and Eve sinned and lost their relationship with You, they were not left without hope. Thank you for making a way for Adam and Eve and all people to be restored to God. Thank you for loving mankind and for sending Jesus to give us a way back to You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

DAY 2:

NOAH AND THE FLOOD

A GRATEFUL RESPONSE

7-DAY DEVOTIONAL

DAY 2: NOAH AND THE FLOOD

Genesis 8:18-22

So Noah came out, together with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives. All the animals and all the creatures that move along the ground and all the birds—everything that moves on land—came out of the ark, one kind after another. Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it. The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: “Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done. “As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.”

DAY 2: NOAH AND THE FLOOD

The story of Noah and the Flood (along with the ark and all of the animals) is probably one of the first Bible stories that we can remember learning. Often, the emphasis is placed upon the size of the ark or what it would be like to live on a “floating zoo” for that length of time.

There were many other stories and legends about great floods in the Ancient Near East. There are some very close similarities between these stories and the account of the Flood in Genesis. There are also some key differences.

We see one of the key differences when we read about the sacrificial offering that Noah made after the flood had receded and he was able to leave the ark. Noah’s sacrifice was one of thankfulness because God’s wrath had been satisfied. In other ancient stories, characters had to offer a sacrifice to their gods after a flood had occurred in order to appease the gods, who were angry because they had not been able to have humans serve them during the flood event.

DAY 2: NOAH AND THE FLOOD

This is a key difference! In the biblical account, “Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD” (Genesis 6:8), was delivered from God’s wrath, and then responded in an act of thanksgiving to God. In the other stories, the characters endured the flood and still had to try and earn the favor of the gods.

The message of Noah’s sacrifice is clear: God’s wrath had been satisfied. There was no need for Noah to do anything else to remove God’s wrath. He simply needed to thank God for His deliverance.

Application point: Do you believe that God is a God of justice? The story of Noah and the Flood tells us that He is. The good news is that once His wrath has been satisfied, no further payment is required. This principle is also seen at the cross. Jesus died to satisfy God’s wrath on the sins of the world. Once Jesus’ sacrifice is applied to you by faith, there is nothing else that needs to be done to take away God’s wrath. This should lead us to be thankful to God.

DAY 2: NOAH AND THE FLOOD

Prayer: God, thank you for the truth of the story of the Flood. Thank you that your wrath has been satisfied, and that I am now free to do good works out of gratitude for what you have already done for me. Give me a thankful heart today. Give me the grace today to do good and to honor you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

**Watch a short video to see how the ancient cultural context
sheds new light on another familiar Bible story**

DAY 3:

DAVID AND GOLIATH

THE BATTLE IS THE LORD'S

7-DAY DEVOTIONAL

DAY 3: DAVID AND GOLIATH

1 Samuel 17:43-47

And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. “Come here,” he said, “and I’ll give your flesh to the birds and the wild animals!” David said to the Philistine, “You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hands, and I’ll strike you down and cut off your head. This very day I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds and the wild animals, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord’s, and he will give all of you into our hands.”

DAY 3: DAVID AND GOLIATH

The story of David and Goliath is so familiar that it is often mentioned in popular culture. When an underdog wins a sports game or a political election, he is referred to as a “David” who defeated an opponent who is compared to “Goliath.”

Have you ever wondered why King Saul sent a shepherd boy into battle to fight a giant? Wouldn't that mean certain death for David and defeat for the army of Israel? Saul's move doesn't seem to make sense.

In the ancient Near East, this type of single combat (where one representative from each army fought against each other) was used. The belief behind this type of fight was that the armies believed that the outcome of the one on one battle was ultimately decided by the gods that each fighter served. The gods could work through a lesser fighter if they wished. If a lesser fighter won a victory, it was taken as a sign that his gods were more powerful than those of the other fighter, and that the ensuing battle between the armies would likely end with the same result.

DAY 3: DAVID AND GOLIATH

In the case of David and Goliath, this theory held true! Both fighters claimed allegiance to their gods. The God whom David served showed Himself to be the most powerful God. This was especially clear when God won a victory through a smaller, less experienced fighter who had no armor or heavy weaponry! As anticipated, the ensuing battle had the same result as the one on one combat: Israel won the victory over the Philistines.

Application point: Do you believe that God can work through unlikely people? This does not mean that God will always work in the way that we would like—we may not “win” every battle. We need to see ourselves as “usable” by God, not because we are great, but because He is powerful.

DAY 3: DAVID AND GOLIATH

Prayer: God, thank you that you can use unlikely people to accomplish Your will. Thank You for Your power and for Your gracious plans. Please help me to see myself as someone that You can use. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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DAY 4:

DANIEL AND THE LIONS' DEN

A TRIAL BY ORDEAL

7-DAY DEVOTIONAL

DAY 4: DANIEL & THE LIONS' DEN

Daniel 6:19-23

At the first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lions' den. When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?" Daniel answered, "May the king live forever! My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, Your Majesty." The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out of the den. And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.

DAY 4: DANIEL & THE LIONS' DEN

The story of Daniel and the lions' den seems unfair—why would a king make an irrevocable law that seems nonsensical? Why wouldn't the king anticipate problems with the law? Why would the king allow for a trusted advisor like Daniel to be executed in such a terrible way?

In the ancient Near East, there were certain occasions when a person experienced a “trial by ordeal.” These situations involved placing a person in a dangerous situation and then seeing if a god would intervene on his behalf and save him. If so, the person was seen as justified in his actions.

Daniel was put through a trial by ordeal. He was put in a lions' den and was left there overnight. The king came back to the den in the morning and eagerly wanted to know if Daniel's God had intervened. Did Daniel pass the trial by ordeal? Had he been vindicated?

DAY 4: DANIEL & THE LIONS' DEN

The answer, of course, was “yes.” Daniel’s God had intervened and spared him. Daniel was vindicated, and the evil advisors were executed in Daniel’s place.

To the original audience of the book of Daniel, it would have been clear that Daniel’s God was powerful and was worthy of receiving prayers. The king’s decree in Daniel 6:26-27 affirms this belief.

Application point: How do you view God? Do you see Him as worthy of your prayers? Do you regularly and reverently approach Him in prayer?

DAY 4: DANIEL & THE LIONS' DEN

Prayer: God, thank you that You are worthy of my prayers. Thank You that I can pray to You and that You hear me. Please help me to faithfully seek You in prayer. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Download 3 free infographics on biblical backgrounds!

DAY 5:

JONAH AND THE WHALE

A FOREIGN PROPHET IS HEARD

7-DAY DEVOTIONAL

DAY 5: JONAH AND THE WHALE

Jonah 3:4-9

Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."

DAY 5: JONAH AND THE WHALE

The story of Jonah and the whale is very odd. God's prophet rebels, is thrown off a ship, swallowed by a whale, vomited up, and then goes on to preach in Nineveh.

In addition to the odd details in the story, it is amazing to think that the Ninevites (who were enemies of Israel) actually listened to Israel's prophet.

Ancient rulers placed a high value on the words of prophets (even if the prophet was from another kingdom). In polytheistic societies, a king had to be open to the idea that other foreign gods might be trying to send him a message. Often, prophecies such as the one given by Jonah would have also been tested in some other way, such as looking for other omens or signs in the natural world.

DAY 5: JONAH AND THE WHALE

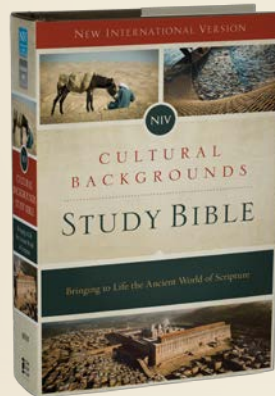
Whether or not the king of Nineveh sought additional confirmation of Jonah's prophecy, he was willing to listen to Jonah. As a result of his actions, the city repented and was spared. God was able to use an ancient cultural norm to have his prophet gain an audience with an enemy ruler and to save a city.

Application point: Do you believe that God can use you to speak His message to others? Do you incorrectly assume that others simply won't listen to what you have to say? God can work through the situations of others to make them ready to hear what He has to say through you.

DAY 5: JONAH AND THE WHALE

Prayer: God, thank you that You can work through the circumstances of people to prepare them to hear from You. Please help me to be willing and able to speak Your truth to others, even if I may doubt their willingness to listen and respond. In Jesus' name, Amen.

**Interested in a study Bible devoted exclusively to understanding Bible backgrounds?
Watch a short introductory video about the *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*!**



DAY 6:

JESUS IS BORN

A CONTRAST OF TWO KINGS

7-DAY DEVOTIONAL

DAY 6: JESUS IS BORN

Luke 2:8-12

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

DAY 6: JESUS IS BORN

The “Christmas Story” is well known and well loved. Every year, during the month of December, people decorate with nativity scenes, play Christmas carols that tell the story of Jesus’ birth, and attend church services and Christmas programs that are based upon the story of Jesus’ birth which is told in Luke 2.

Although the details of the story may be familiar to us, ancient readers would have been surprised by some of the facts of the story. If Jesus was a king, why was he born under such odd circumstances and in such an unexpected setting?

Jesus’ titles of “Savior” and “Lord” would have also drawn comparisons to Caesar Augustus, another king who claimed to be “savior” and “lord.” For example, Augustus lived in a palace while Jesus lived in an insignificant small town. Augustus had human choirs praise him on his birthday while Jesus had angelic choirs announce His birth. Augustus ushered in the *Pax Romana* (era of peace in the Roman empire) while the angelic choirs claimed that Jesus would bring peace. Augustus enjoyed receiving praise from powerful people while Jesus was often surrounded by the lowly.

DAY 6: JESUS IS BORN

The story of Jesus' life led to inevitable conflict between the power of Augustus, the "lord and savior" of Rome, and the mission of Jesus, the Lord and Savior announced by angels in Luke 2. From a human standpoint, the power of Rome "won" when Roman authorities crucified Jesus. The power of the true Lord and Savior was shown three days later, when Jesus rose again to live forever as the Lord and Savior of the world.

Application point: We live in a world that seeks to find "lords" and "saviors" in many places other than Jesus. Do you believe that Jesus is the true Lord and Savior? Do you know other people who are following false "lords" and "saviors"? Jesus is the one true Lord and Savior.

DAY 6: JESUS IS BORN

Prayer: God, thank you that Jesus is the true Lord and Savior of the world. Please help me to believe this and to spread this message to others. In Jesus' name, Amen.

DAY 7:

JESUS IS CRUCIFIED

A TERRIBLE WAY TO DIE

7-DAY DEVOTIONAL

DAY 7: JESUS IS CRUCIFIED

John 19:14-18

It was the day of Preparation of the Passover; it was about noon. “Here is your king,” Pilate said to the Jews. But they shouted, “Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!” “Shall I crucify your king?” Pilate asked. “We have no king but Caesar,” the chief priests answered. Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified. So the soldiers took charge of Jesus. Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). There they crucified him, and with him two others—one on each side and Jesus in the middle.

DAY 7: JESUS IS CRUCIFIED

The symbol of the cross is common in our culture. It is frequently seen on church buildings, worn as jewelry, and portrayed in paintings, movies, and other media.

Ancient people would be surprised to see our uses of the cross today. For example, they would most likely be appalled to see people wear a cross as a piece of jewelry around their necks! In the ancient world, the cross was not something associated with beauty or riches. It would have been associated with horrible pain and death.

In the ancient world, crucifixion was the absolute worst way to die. It involved both intense suffering as well as public disgrace. It was practiced by the Romans, the Jews, and other people groups around the world.

DAY 7: JESUS IS CRUCIFIED

The Jewish community at Qumran even believed that God's curse was upon a person who was crucified. The Jews would have certainly struggled with the crucifixion of a so-called Messiah. How could God both use a man to lead his people and also abandon and curse that man on the cross? It would not have made any sense.

Application point: We know that Jesus was the true Messiah. He was the Son of God. At the same time, He had to endure the worst possible death, public disgrace, and the curse of God. He did this in order to be the sacrifice for the sins of the world.

DAY 7: JESUS IS CRUCIFIED

Prayer: God, thank you that Jesus was willing to endure a horrible, painful, shameful death for us. Thank you that He was cursed by God in order that we might be forgiven. Help me to be grateful for the cross today. Give me opportunities to share the message of the cross with others. In Jesus' name, Amen.