

Black History Month Journey

Under the Skin

A 21-day journey toward healing across cultures

Who Are We?

Day 1: Genesis 1:26-28.

Like God

That kid on the basketball court? Made in God's image. That driver who's following way too close? Created to be like the Creator. The human beings you pass every day are divinely fashioned with an amazing status—we are all *like God*.

Of course there are many theories about what that means. We are not gods ourselves, but there is something sacred about us. All of us. Is it our creativity, our multi-faceted personalities, our penchant for relationships, or the fact that God put us "in charge of" the earth?

We can let the theologians haggle about all that, but at the very least it means that every human being is precious, no matter their language or culture or history, or—of course—the color of their skin.

- What does it mean that "God created man in his own image?"
- How should this influence how we see others that may not look, speak, or act like us?

Day 2: 2 Corinthians 5:16-20.

New Creations

Created in God's image, we are *re-created* in Christ.

We all know the damage done by sin. At the Fall, the whole human race joined the rebellion against God and God's ways. As a result, this poisoned our relationships with each other. Our hearts filled up with hatred and judgment. But that's old news now. Once we're connected with Christ, "the old has gone."

And that makes all things new. We can't judge anyone by human standards anymore—calling them enemies because they look or talk a certain way. God has turned us from enemies to friends—brothers and sisters in Christ, and now we do the same with others. As some Bible versions put it, we are God's "ambassadors." We share a message of "reconciliation." We make peace with others on God's behalf—and on ours.

- What does it mean to be "re-created" in Christ?
- If we are no longer to judge others by human standards, what then are the standards through which we are to engage others?

Day 3: Matthew 22:34-40.

Neighbors

It was like a modern press conference. Jesus was being grilled with tough questions, and he replied skillfully. Asked to name the greatest commandment, Jesus mentioned two.

In that culture, “Love the Lord your God” was the right answer. This was commonly quoted as the ultimate commandment. But Jesus added another, suggesting it belonged right up there with the first. “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.”

Even in that day, Jesus often encountered religious folks who focused on the first commandment and welched on the second. In fact, their spiritual pride led them to put down the poor, the outcasts, and the foreigners. By his words and his example, Jesus showed that the two loves belonged together.

- If Jesus, when asked which is the greatest, offers both of these as his answer, what does that mean for how we are to live our lives?
- In what ways might our own spiritual pride be getting in the way of us truly loving God and loving our neighbors?

Day 4: 1 John 4:19-21.

Lovers

Love is a frequent theme in the gospel and epistles of John. You may have memorized John 3:16—“For God so love the world that he gave his only-begotten Son . . .” (KJV). Love starts with God and flows abundantly to us, but then it flows *through* us to others. Because we are so loved, we are lovers.

Here John makes it clear that the two loves are intertwined, and he doesn’t mince words. Love for God *demand*s love for others. If we claim to be passionate about God but hate the people around us, we’re liars.

That’s not a hypothetical situation. Some of the most hateful people in any era—Jesus’ time or ours—are the most religious. But if we truly love God, that love will overflow toward the people God loves, all those created in his image.

- Why is that though we may be enamored with God’s love for us, and though we may be fully in love with Him, it is so hard to love others as a response to His love for us?
- In what ways is God’s love for you prompting you to show love to others?

The Challenge of Showing Love Across Cultures

Day 5: John 4:27-30.

Not Our Kind

The major racial division in Jesus’ culture was between Jews and Samaritans. This enmity went back centuries. The people of Samaria were viewed as half-breeds

and heretics, sort of Jewish in blood and faith, but not entirely. A lesser race. It was so bad that many devout Jews would avoid traveling through Samaria, even if it added days to a journey.

Jesus was different. Not only did he travel through enemy territory, but he stopped there, sent his disciples into town for snacks, and struck up a conversation with a local resident. When the disciples returned, they were shocked to find him interacting with this person. She had two strikes against her—wrong race, wrong gender. And yet, because of Jesus’ willingness to see past social and cultural prescriptions, this Samaritan woman was able to share the good news Jesus offered with her community.

Cross-cultural connections are fraught with difficulty. Even this redemptive encounter of Jesus was met with dirty looks from his closest friends, or at least raised eyebrows. Are we called to follow Jesus’ example by surprising the people around us in a similar way?

- Have you ever avoided stopping and/or connecting with someone because it might have socially or culturally taboo?
- How might you emulate Christ’s example and “cross the lines” to meet someone where they are?

Day 6: James 2:1-7

Playing Favorites

James describes an unfair situation: Rich folks are pampered while the poor are ignored. We might expect that sort of behavior out in the world, among those who haven’t been transformed by God’s love, but James sees this happening *in the church*. And of course it still happens today.

Wealth isn’t the only factor that makes us “guilty of creating distinctions” or of “making judgments based on evil motives.” Our churches also play favorites with regard to political power, celebrity, looks, and race. These practices are so common, we seldom think twice about it.

As James sums up: “If you treat people according to their outward appearance, you are guilty of sin” (v. 9). Fortunately, God has a different perspective, treasuring those who are “rich in faith.” Elsewhere, God tells us that people “look at the outward appearance, but I look at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).

- Have you ever judged someone too quickly based on their outward appearance, only to find that they were not what you’d assumed them to be?
- In what ways might you need to adjust your perspective in order to see others as God sees them?

Day 7: Galatians 3:28-29

Divided/United

It's hard to express how startling this passage is. Much of the Old Testament established the huge difference between Jews and Gentiles. The Jews were God's chosen people, separate from other races. And the distinctions between men and women, between slaves and free people—these were obvious. But in his letter to the Galatians, Paul describes the new thing God is doing, offering salvation, blessing, and adoption through faith. In Christ, we have a new community, a new *family*, in which these common distinctions no longer apply.

It is always a challenge to find this unity, to make it more than just a religious idea and actually live in it. Our society is deeply divided in many ways. Crossing cultural lines to practice "oneness" with our brothers and sisters in Christ—well, that will shatter some expectations. But it reflects our new reality.

- If the old distinctions between Jews and Gentiles are no more, what are the implications of this for how we see others in our communities?
- In what ways does this change how we connect with others in our communities?

Day 8: Luke 10:29-37

Unlikely Hero

The lawyer was looking for a loophole. He knew he was supposed to love his neighbor, but what did "neighbor" really mean?

Jesus responded with a story, in which the hero is not some pillar of society, but an outsider. Samaritans were despised by the Jews. This was exactly the kind of "non-neighbor" the lawyer didn't want to love. But in a shocking turn-around, it's the Samaritan who crosses the cultural barriers to show love to a needy Jew. Jesus wasn't asking the lawyer to pity the poor down-trodden Samaritan, but to learn from him.

We're told that this lawyer "wanted to justify himself," and many people today seek a similar justification. "See how much I love the people in my neighborhood, my family, my church!" But Jesus called for a love that extends even to enemies (Matthew 5:44), or at least to those on the other side of the tracks.

- It's easy to love and serve those who look like us, believe like us, and behave like us. However, how might Christ's story of the "Good Samaritan" push us to love outside of our comfort zone?
- Are there areas in your life right now where you need to better model the example of the "Good Samaritan?"

Day 9: Ephesians 2:13-22

Walled Off

The Jew-Gentile division we encounter in Scripture is not exactly the same as modern racial tensions, but we can still learn from it. In today's text we learn that unity with Christ leads to unity with others—even across racial barriers. In the church, we are “built together with all the others.”

Notice the rich verbs. Christ *broke*, *abolished* and *destroyed* in order to *create*, *unite* and *bring peace*. You might envision Jesus overturning the tables of the Temple's money-changers in order to allow greater access for the poor. There are steep walls in our society that keep people apart, and they often keep people away from God. The Prince of Peace wants to smash those walls and turn strangers into family members.

- What walls in your community might God be looking for you to “smash?”
- Are there areas in your life where you've been building walls instead of tearing them down?

What Does God Call Us to Do?

Day 10: Exodus 3:7-12

I Am Nobody

God calls nobodies to do amazing things. An old woman gives birth to the child of promise. A prisoner interprets Pharaoh's dream and saves the nation. A shepherd boy slays a giant. And here, at a burning bush in the desert, God calls a nomad to set his people free from slavery.

“I am nobody,” Moses replies—just one of many excuses he offers in these two chapters.

“I will be with you,” God answers.

In our world today, we are faced with a great challenge. Racial prejudice abounds. Violence runs rampant. God hears the cries of oppressed people and calls us to action. Yes, nobodies like us. How will we respond?

Samuel said, “Speak; your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:10). Isaiah said, “Send me” (Isaiah 6:8). Peter and Andrew left their nets to follow Jesus (Matthew 4:20). And even Moses eventually ran out of excuses and stood in the royal court demanding freedom in God's name.

- What excuses have you been using to avoid the challenges that God has been showing you?
- What in God's name are you going to do?

Day 11: 2 Chronicles 7:13-14 (NIV)

Face Time

After the dedication of the Temple, the Lord warned Solomon that he might send various calamities in response to his people's disobedience—but he also offered a solution. And if we feel plagued by racial discord in our country now, maybe we should consider the same prescription.

Humble ourselves. Are we willing to listen and learn from those outside our own experience? Do we always have to prove ourselves right?

Pray. The power necessary to change things will certainly come from God.

Seek the Lord's face. This common biblical term describes an encounter, a speaking-and-listening session.

Turn from our wicked ways. This is repentance. And, sure, this is difficult when we're convinced that everyone else needs to turn from *their* wicked ways, but that drives us back to humility.

- Are their areas of your life where you feel you've been experiencing "calamity," possibly because of disobedience to God?
- What might you need to change? What is the Lord telling you?

Day 12: Micah 6:6-8

Required

For the most part, the Old Testament prophets weren't asking people to be more religious, but to be more obedient. That's exactly what we see here: God wants justice, love and humble fellowship rather than elaborate sacrifices. This passage bears a striking resemblance to the opening of the famous Love Chapter—1 Corinthians 13. Without love, religious displays are just noise.

This challenge is just as important today as it ever was. Millions of people sit in churches each Sunday, performing religious actions. Of course there's nothing wrong with that, but what if we went further with our faith? What if we all committed ourselves to pursuing justice in society, searching for new ways to show love to those who need it most, and humbly seeking God's direction for our lives?

What kind of difference what that make in our world?

- What's the difference between being "more religious" and being "obedient?"
- How might God be calling you to move beyond the four walls of your "community" and to "do just, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?"

Day 13: James 2:14-17

More Than Words

Many Christians have argued over this passage, pitting the “good works” of James against the “faith alone” of Paul. Let’s put that debate aside for the moment and see what James is really saying.

The scene he describes could be a comedy sketch, if it weren’t so sad and so common. It’s easy to say nice things about justice and mercy and charity. Kind words are great, but they don’t feed the hungry. That requires action. And this is the point James is making. True faith is more than pious words. Don’t just say you believe in God—even demons believe there’s a God—but show that your trust in Christ has transformed you. Do this by actually helping the people Christ cares about.

- If James message is such, how might you respond practically in your own life?
- In what ways might God be calling you not only to offer a kind word or pray, but to get out and “do?”

Day 14: Isaiah 61:1-4

Good News

Early in his ministry, Jesus stood up in his hometown synagogue and read from this passage. Then he sat down and said, “This passage of Scripture has come true today, as you heard it being read” (Luke 4:16-21). These verses talk about talking—bringing good news, announcing freedom, proclaiming that the day of salvation has come. And by uttering Isaiah’s words, the Savior fulfilled them.

Today, followers of that Savior (Jesus) carry on this ministry. We bring a healing message to the broken-hearted. By our actions, we assure people that God is still active, saving people, turning grief to gladness, and even rebuilding cities.

Even in times of deep sorrow, we have this hope. And by sharing this vision of peace, freedom and salvation, we begin to fulfill it.

- If we are truly “heirs of God,” and “heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:17), what are the implications of this verse for how we are to live our lives?
- Today, in what ways can you bring the good news of Jesus Christ to those in your life who are need of it?

Day 15: Matthew 25:31-46

The “Least”

The “goats” were shocked. They were being flagged for an infraction they knew nothing about. When did they ever have the opportunity to help the Master? When was he ever in need?

This is, of course, a parable of final judgment. The king divides the nations, as a shepherd divides sheep from goats. The “sheep” are blessed for meeting the king’s needs, and they are welcomed into eternal bliss. The “goats” are rejected, and when

they complain, the king replies with one of the most powerful “aha moments” in Scripture. When they neglected the poor and needy—the “least important ones” in society—they were neglecting *him*.

The king in this story is clearly Jesus, and that leads us to a life-changing idea. The needy people we encounter each day—in a way, they are Jesus in disguise. We show our love to him by showing love to them. So when we see someone suffering injustice and we do something to help, it’s not just an act of charity, it’s an act of worship.

- What does it really mean to serve “the least important of these” as Christ points to in this parable?
- While it’s easy to get caught up in the busyness of life and miss what sometime may seem as little opportunities to serve, how might you overcome the distractions and stay aware of the opportunities to serve those in need around you?

What Does This New Reality Look Like?

Day 16: Ruth 1:15-18

Your God and Mine

Ruth and Naomi came from different nations, different cultures. Once related by marriage, now both were widows. So Naomi begs Ruth to go back home to her own people. In this passage, Ruth refuses.

This beautiful expression of commitment is often read at weddings, despite the fact that it was originally said by a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law. Still, a new family is being created here. It’s a bit puzzling why Ruth would do this. Naomi doesn’t seem to have a winning personality (later she names herself Bitter). Our strongest clue comes from a phrase at the core of Ruth’s commitment: “your God will be my God.”

People naturally have strong connections to their families of birth, but Ruth reminds us that we can form new bonds based on faith. The New Testament strengthens this point. Followers of Jesus become a new family, not based on lineage or culture, but on a common devotion to the Lord. No matter what color our skin is, we are brothers and sisters in him.

- What does it look like to live as this “new family” despite our differences?
- How does Christ’s example point us toward overcoming our cultural, racial, and even social differences?

Day 17: Acts 2:1-11, 17-18.

Fire Power

Can you imagine what it would have been like in that room? The Spirit of God falling like fire upon these disciples. The sound of a rushing wind, but then what did

the voices sound like? Was it the hubbub of different languages turning into a clearly understood message? So many questions here for sure...

However, part of the miracle of Pentecost can be seen in the gathering of diverse cultures and language groups. The scattering caused by human pride at the Tower of Babel was reversed by the unifying Spirit. Young and old received power to proclaim God's wonders. Sons and daughters alike would join in this ministry. And as the church grew and extended throughout the world, people of all races carried the message to nations beyond their own.

The gospel can never be hoarded by one people-group. It is always propelled outward, to change new lives.

- While our denominational and doctrinal differences have in some ways scattered us again, how should the re-unification at Pentecost move us to see our brothers and sisters in Christ?
- How does this same understanding prompt us to see those who have yet to receive the "Good News?"

Day 18: Acts 13:1-3

Launch Pad

Jerusalem was the first power center for the early church, but as the gospel spread outward, the church at Antioch became the main launching pad. The book of Acts gives us a few snapshots of the activity there (Acts 11:19-30; 14:27-28; 15:30-35). It was a multi-racial church that recognized people's gifts and equipped them for ministry. Its location in a coastal city provided access to the many different cultures of the Mediterranean world.

Barnabas and Saul (aka Paul) were commissioned there. And it's worth noting that one of the "prophets and teachers" in that church, Simeon, is explicitly described as a black man—equal to his fellow workers. Given the ease of travel in the Roman Era and the frequency of migration, it's likely that the names we find at the end of New Testament epistles belonged to people of many different ethnic groups.

This is what it looks like when a church lets the Spirit lead. There's less concern over what people look like, and more excitement over the ministry God gives them to do.

- What gifts and talents has God equipped you with to do the work that God is calling you to do?
- Sometimes, we can let the "unknown" keep us from truly seeing the Spirit of God in those around us. What are some ways that you might overcome the unknown and connect with those in your community to encourage their God-given gifts and talents?

Day 19: Acts 8:26-39

New Trails?

Who is this Philip? Not an apostle but one of the deacons chosen in Acts 6. He's in the second generation of leadership, but he's already on the cutting edge of ministry. Sometimes it takes a newer leader to blaze new trails.

And where did the Ethiopian official get the scroll he was reading? Very few people had personal copies of the Scriptures. Did he get this expensive text in Jerusalem? Was he taking it back home for the queen or for himself?

Then see how the encounter goes. Philip doesn't barge in, but gets close to the chariot, listens, and asks a question. The man then invites Philip into his carriage. (Some lessons here for our own evangelistic efforts.)

And once the Ethiopian believes, he asks, "What is to keep me from being baptized?" The answer is . . . *nothing*. Certainly not his nationality or color. In the Spirit-guided church, this man can share freely with Philip in the joy of Christ.

- Often, our differences keep us from actually listening to understand each other, leaving us instead listening to be understood and make our case. How might we learn from Philip's example though?
- In what areas of your life might you need to put aside your differences with someone in order to listen?

Day 20: Revelation 7:9-17

Future Perfect

Many things in the book of Revelation are hard to understand, but not this. It's clearly a magnificent worship service. Praise and thanks are offered to the Almighty God. And who is in attendance? An enormous crowd "from every race, tribe, nation and language."

This is a picture of God's church through time and into eternity. We are a vast assembly from many different cultures but with a common passion—the exaltation of our Lord. Are there more tribes and languages to reach with the good news of Christ? Absolutely. We strive to make sure everyone has the opportunity to trust him.

But let us also celebrate the involvement of different races that come together to worship one God. We are one, the human race, honoring our Creator, in whose image we all are made.

- In your own community, how might you be an advocate for diversity?
- Where might you need to stand or serve as a voice for greater inclusion?

Day 21: Ephesians 3:14-21

Sometimes it seems too difficult. Will we ever find peace between races? Misunderstandings run rampant. People are stuck in their prejudice. Violence is an all-too-frequent option.

The prayer in Ephesians 3 leads us through this troubling terrain. Notice the reference to “every family” receiving its “true name” from the Father. Black or white, we are all God’s offspring, and so we have the right to ask for divine aid.

We need help in our “inner selves” but also in the community of faith. We need to understand the full dimensions of God’s love, and we need to sink our roots into it. Just when we’re about to run out of hope for our wanton world, the final lines of this prayer call on the One who “is able to do so much more than we can ever ask for, or even think of.”

So if we can’t imagine what true unity would look like, that’s fine. God will surprise us.

- How might your finite view of possibility be limiting you from seeing the unimaginable referenced in this passage?
- How does this understanding of God’s ability to greater than we can ever ask or think change your view of the situations that seem impossible in your life?