

# Honest to Goodness

Discovering the  
*Truth* and *Beauty*  
of a Loving God

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*In memory of  
Furman & Rosanne Buchanan,  
my steadfast and loving parents  
who taught me the Christian faith  
by living it so well.*



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# Introduction

The ancient prophets, poets, and storytellers of the Old Testament give modern readers a wonderful gift—the *words of God*.

These writers offer stunning commentary from God in all sorts of situations—religious, military, political, and social. Across thousands of years, they share the thoughts of God, often indirectly but sometimes with direct quotation. God bless them. The world needs faithful people who boldly attempt to translate the truth and beauty of God’s love.

This daily devotional explores selections from Holy Scripture, including some of the most profound, surprising, and even hilarious words attributed to God.<sup>1</sup> A defining feature of these quotations is how direct and honest they are.

Designed for Lent but applicable any time of the year, this devotional book is curated for those who want to discover more about the truth and beauty of a loving God. We

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the quotations are paraphrased to accentuate their directness. For example, in some quotations, God switches to the third-person voice to describe God’s self as “the Lord.” In these cases, I have preserved the first-person voice throughout the entire quotation so it is clear that God is saying “me.” In some of the longer quotations, I have omitted portions to help accentuate the bluntness and overall context of the idea. These edits will be identified.

examine some of God's own words so we might better understand who we are, who God is, what God expects from us, and—likewise—what we can expect from God. We learn how God wants us to worship. And we take a shot at handling some of God's most piercing questions.

On Saturdays, we hear what Jesus has to say. We discover the one-ness of the Father's love, revealed in the beloved Son through the power of God's Holy Spirit. Thus, each week culminates with Christ, *the* Word, who fulfills all the other words we've heard from God. Finally, during Holy Week, we consider how Christ's actions speak even more loudly than words.

The common denominator in all these words and deeds is honesty. And listening to God's honesty leads us to experience God's goodness. In other words, as we discover more of the truth and beauty of a loving God, we—ourselves—can move *from* honest *to* goodness.

God wants us to think, speak, and act in response to how God thinks, speaks, and acts in history—the more honest and good, the better. In a world filled with deception, greed, and violence, people of faith are called to stand up and speak out for honesty and goodness.

The best way to begin thinking, speaking, and acting in this way is by praying our own honest response to what we have

heard from God. Therefore, each day's devotional passage concludes with a simple prayer.

We normally conclude our prayers with the Hebrew word, "Amen." The word itself means truth. So, in the spirit of expressing a desire for our honesty to become enacted for goodness' sake, I've chosen to translate the familiar "Amen" using an action phrase—"So be it!"

By the time we arrive at Easter, I hope you will find not only God's voice speaking through the words of the Bible but also your own voice as you take your turn alongside ancient prophets, poets, and storytellers to speak the truth and spread the goodness of our loving God in our own day.





*Dear mortal,  
this is who  
you are.*



The Opening  
Days of Lent



*You are dust, and to dust you will return.*

GENESIS 3:19

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In the first creation story, God speaks order into a dark, soupy cosmos. In the second story, God begins by silently playing in the dirt. The storyteller declares that “God formed *adam* (Hebrew for ‘man’) from the dust of *adamah* (Hebrew for ‘the ground’).”

Hebrew is not the only language that literally spells out our intimate connection to the earth. Latin-inspired English also reveals the dusty, common denominator of our being *humble*, *human*, *humus*.

Straightaway, we are tempted to reach far beyond our earthiness. We look for a magical shortcut to godliness—fruit that will give us knowledge to be like God instead of simply being ourselves. This is our first trespass.

The first trespass leads immediately to our second trespass—blaming someone else. The dirt-man immediately blames the woman, and the woman immediately blames the serpent.

When the Lord responds to this disobedience and deceit, we get a stark reminder of who we are, where we are from, and where we are going to end up...as humble, human, humus. “You are dust,” says the Lord, “and to dust you will return.”

From the very beginning, God speaks with brutal honesty about our mortal nature. It may sound bleak, but we need to know this truth if we are to have any chance of embracing our humanity and all the goodness that God has in store for us.

### A Prayer in Response

DEAR GOD, why did you pick dust of all things? It seems so limited. I want to think of myself more highly than that. I want other people to think more of me than that. How did you anticipate humans like me having such a fierce, lifelong struggle with humility?

I’m tempted by shortcuts to become more knowledgeable and powerful—like you. And I’m inclined to blame someone else when things fall apart.

Help me to accept my humanity and to be myself. Help me keep in touch with my dusty, humble beginning...and ending. *So be it!*

*Be fruitful.*GENESIS 1:28

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In the first creation story (Genesis 1:1—2:3), God creates the heavens and the earth and all that is therein. The climax of this creative process happens when God creates humankind—male and female—in God’s own image. Humankind is blessed with this spectacular, divine image and these invitational words, “Be fruitful!”

The first story of creation unfolds like a flower, day by day. The storyteller describes God’s daily assessment—it is good...*until* the final moment on the last day when God creates divinely inspired human partners. This is when God’s assessment changes. God looks, and indeed, it is *very good*!

On the one hand, we need to be reminded that we are dust. On the other, we need to be reminded that we share the very breath—the inspiration—of God. So, we try to live lives that are *both* grounded *and* inspired at the same time. We do this so we can be fruitful, for that is God’s idea of what we are supposed to be in the first place.

Being fruitful means much more than having an inordinate number of offspring. Fruitfulness means flourishing—physically, spiritually, mentally—in peaceful relationships with God, other people, and all of creation. It means becoming fully alive, delighting in this gift, and sharing it.

Irenaeus, a bishop in the second century, proclaimed, “The glory of God is humanity fully alive.” Imagine God’s delight when we finally realize, as artist Pablo Picasso did—that “the *meaning* of life is to discover your gift, and the *purpose* of life is to give it away.” This is what it means to become fruitful and—as a result—to glorify God.

The simple, powerful message for humankind revealed in the two creation stories is that we are not created to take fruit that does not belong to us. Rather, we are created to bear fruit that can be shared.

## A Prayer in Response

BREATH OF LIFE, I wonder why you are willing to share your own creative image with me. I don't think I can live up to your image or become as fruitful as you want me to be. Did you anticipate humans like me having such a fierce, lifelong struggle with self-doubt?

After creating humankind, your assessment changes from good to very good. It seems so optimistic.

Please help me trust that your divine image is indelibly marked upon me. And help me accept your invitation to be fruitful and generous with this gift, for goodness' sake.  
*So be it!*

## *Where is your brother?*

GENESIS 4:9

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The original sin of humankind is trying to replace God rather than living fruitfully in the image of God and in partnership with God. The second sin of humankind is fixing blame on someone or something else.

The third sin—jealousy—arises in the second generation. In Genesis 4, Cain nurtures a jealousy so vile that he murders his own brother. And then lies about it.

God knows the answer but still asks the question, “Where is your brother?”

Cain replies, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?”

God’s judgment is silent but clear as can be. The answer is yes.

The first story of God’s invitation to creative, fruitful goodness is followed by stories of destructive and violent evil.

We must always remember that true human nature is not just good, but it is very good. Yet, God-given freedom of



human choice is so broad that we can choose to reject our true nature and God's image—in ourselves and others. We can try to replace God and one another with shortcuts, blame, jealousy, murder, lies, and other sins.

God's judgment is clear. You are better than this. I made you better than this.

### A Prayer in Response

DEAR GOD, source of all freedom, I wonder why you gave us the liberty to reject you and one another. Sometimes, it is hard to live with this much freedom. Did you anticipate humans having such a fierce struggle with you and with one another?

After creating so much goodness, you allowed us the freedom to choose so much worse.

Please help me trust that you made me better than this. Help me use your gift of freedom to choose goodness and to reject shortcuts, blame, jealousy, violence, lies, and other sins. Help me live up to my true human nature and to your dreams of a fruitful, generous, and peaceful human family in which we gladly accept the sacred duty to be our brother's keeper. *So be it!*

*I am the vine, you are the branches.  
Those who abide in me and I in them  
bear much fruit...*

JOHN 15:5

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Jesus has a lot to say at his last supper with the twelve disciples—reminders, directions, promises, and prayers (John, chapters 13-17). One powerful metaphor he uses is the organic, life-sharing connection between a vine and its branches. The vine is the ultimate source of nourishment and support for the branches, but it is the branches that carry the weight of fruitfulness and expectation of blossoming.

After Jesus invites his disciples to abide in his love the very same way branches abide in their vine, he re-states the new commandment he issued earlier that evening. “Love one another as I have loved you.”

In that moment, a subtle and miraculous thing happens. Jesus promotes them (and us) from servants to friends. Are we ready for that kind of promotion? Are we prepared for

Jesus to have that much confidence in our ability to follow through with love as friends? Maybe not.

So, Jesus reassures us with a simple, profound reminder. “You did not choose me. I chose you.” The branch does not choose its vine; it is the vine that chooses to send forth branches.

The good news in Jesus’s assurance is that we have been chosen, nourished, and strengthened to bear fruit that will last. We are invited to become supple branches of a living vine whose fruit is the sort of loving-kindness one would naturally expect to see among good friends.

Notice how this vine and these branches bear forth the divine purpose that was first established with Adam and Eve. God’s purpose from the very beginning has been fruitfulness.

Jesus’s metaphor of the vine and branches helps us remember that nothing in all of creation is as fruitful as love. It is beautiful to behold, and it tastes as sweet as a well-ripened friendship.

## A Prayer in Response

LOVING JESUS, you sustain us with nourishment and strength for life. Thank you for choosing me to be your friend and trusting me to blossom, grow, and bear the weight of fruit that lasts.

I am taking you at your word. I will abide in your love. I will expect it to appear abundantly through me and in all the other healthy branches around me. *So be it!*

## The HONEST Truth

*We are created to be...*

Humble

Fully Inspired

Keepers of Our Brothers & Sisters

Fruitful

For GOODNESS' Sake



Dear mortal,  
this is who  
I am.



*The First Week  
of Lent*





*I am God Almighty.*GENESIS 17:1

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The transformation of Abram to Abraham is one of the most pivotal stories of the Old Testament. When Abram was ninety-nine years old, he was invited on a new adventure. The Lord appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty [*El Shaddai*]; walk before me and be blameless.”

This name, appearing for the first time in the Bible, can be translated as “God, the One of the mountains,” but the main point it conveys is power. *El Shaddai* is capable of anything, including the miracle of bringing offspring as numerous as the stars to an old man who is as good as dead.

Here it is again—God’s vision of fruitful abundance spread and shared throughout the earth for the blessing of the whole human family. *El Shaddai* even makes a promise for Ishmael, Abram’s first son conceived with his slave-girl, Hagar: “I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous” (Genesis 17:20).

*El Shaddai* changes Abram's name to Abraham and immediately proposes to formalize their partnership in an everlasting covenant (*Berit Olam*). If the entire Old Testament had to be distilled down to two words, *Berit Olam* might be the best description of all. In fact, the entirety of our sacred story in both testaments of Holy Scripture is about God's desire to be a covenant partner with humankind for life.

A covenant is much more than a contract. Whereas a contract defines limits on how precise things of value are exchanged for a specified time, a covenant expresses a limitless, open commitment. God's covenant promise is both simple and broad: "I will establish my covenant between me and you... an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you" (Genesis 17:7).

Just like dusty, old Abraham, we need the help of an almighty, powerful partner in order to become the people we are called to be. We need the strength of *El Shaddai* to do what we are called to do. The good news is that God has promised to give us this power and strength as an everlasting blessing. God is in it with us for life—everlasting life.

## A Prayer in Response

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ALMIGHTY AND EVERLASTING GOD, you have offered to partner with us for life. Embolden me to believe in your promise and trust in your everlasting covenant, especially when it seems impossible. Just as you transformed dusty, old Abraham into the father of many nations, you have the almighty power to help me change as well. *So be it!*

## *I AM who I AM.*

EXODUS 3:14

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In the very beginning, God is described as *Elohim*, which usually means *the* God (above all others). Then, when Abram's name changes, so does God's—to *El Shaddai*, God Almighty. Abraham and his descendants keep the everlasting covenant with Almighty God for generations until the day Moses is called to become a partner. Moses has doubts—plenty of doubts.

“When I say to the Israelites, ‘the God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” Moses asks.

God says, “I AM who I AM. Tell the Israelites that I AM has sent me to you.” At that moment, near a burning bush on Mount Horeb, God claims another new name. It is not a noun; it is a verb! God claims the first-person form of the verb “to be.” I AM conveys much more than “the God of our ancestors,” a deity who acted in the past. I AM is a God who is acting in the present and who will act in the future.

We should notice the very first act of I AM because it is yet another pivotal story from the Old Testament. I AM overthrows oppression and slavery. I AM rescues the poor and abused. I AM demands liberty and justice for all.

This new name, spelled YHWH, is also unpronounceable—it has no vowels. It's just as well because the Israelites developed such reverence for their liberating God that they chose not to speak this name aloud. They used substitute words such as *Adonai*, “LORD.”

Whatever name we may choose for God, it is helpful to think of God with a verb—not just as a deity who acted in the past with our ancestors but also one who is acting in the present and who is boundlessly free to act in our future.

Our prayers can remind us of this. In formal worship, we often conclude prayers with a doxology that proclaims the glory of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as it *was* in the beginning, *is now*, and ever *will be*, world without end.

## A Prayer in Response

ALMIGHTY AND EVERLASTING GOD, you invited Moses to experience you in a new and personal way as one who acts in the present for the sake of freedom and justice. Help me to have more reverence for your holy name and for your action in the world.

Give me a thankful heart when I see your action in the past. Give me a courageous will to pray for your action in the present. Give me a hopeful spirit to dream of your action in the future.

O Lord, God of our ancestors and Lord of this present age and all that is to come, I praise your holy name. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever will be, world without end.  
*So be it.*