

# Bible Summaries

## 52 Brief Overviews of Biblical Content

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Note: These summaries were written in 2017 while the church in Vestavia systematically read through the Chronological Daily Bible. The summaries are just that—brief overviews of selected material, each one between 800-900 words. Due to the limitations on space and time, there are significant portions of Scripture not adequately represented in these overviews. This was not meant to be a full and complete exposition of Scripture. The idea was to have one per week that approximated something in the readings for that week. These might help in weekly devotions as we read through the Bible. Perhaps later more can be added. The biblical text used most is the NASB. (DM)

2017

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## **From the Beginning to Judgment** (Genesis 1-19)

### **In the Beginning (Genesis 1-3)**

Genesis is the book of beginnings, but before anything material existed, there was God (Gen 1:1; John 1:1). God created the heavens and the earth, which includes all things visible and invisible (Col 1:16; Heb 11:4). The universe, and life itself, did not happen by chance (Acts 17:25). Humans are not the products of naturalistic evolution. Rather, God created. He spoke, and everything came into existence and is upheld by the word of His power (Heb 1:3).

On the sixth day of creation, God made man in His own image (1:26-27). Adam and Eve were placed in the Garden of Eden and told to tend it. He gave them much freedom, but did place one restriction on them: they were not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If they did, they would die.

The devil, in the form of a serpent, deceived Eve, and she ate the fruit of the forbidden tree. Then Adam ate with her. They knew better, and when they realized it, they tried, unsuccessfully, to hide from God. As a result of their sin, curses were placed upon man, woman, the ground, and the serpent. Sin had entered the world, and death, physically and spiritually, came as a result. However, God did leave one ray of hope by saying that the seed of woman would crush the head of the serpent (3:15).

### **Cain, Abel, and Seth (Genesis 4-5)**

Cain and Abel were sons of Adam and Eve (Gen 4). Abel was a shepherd and Cain a tiller of the ground. They both brought a sacrifice to the Lord. Abel brought the best of his flock, and Cain brought an offering from the fruit of the ground. God respected Abel's offering, but did not accept Cain's. Cain was angry because of this, and he killed Abel. For this, he was cursed and became a wanderer. Eve had another son, named Seth, who would preserve a lineage through which God would work. Chapter 5 follows this line of people. Since the consequence of sin was death, Genesis 5 stresses this by repeating the phrase, "And he died."

### **Noah, the Flood, Babel, and the Nations (Genesis 6-11)**

People were becoming so evil and corrupt that God decided it was time to bring judgment. The "sons of God," by marrying the "daughters of men," were corrupted. God determined that He would destroy the wicked and start over through Noah, who had found God's favor. God's method of destruction was a massive flood.

God told Noah about His plans and commanded Noah to build a huge ark (like a big box) in order to save his family and preserve animal kinds on the earth. Noah followed God's instructions exactly; and while building the ark, he preached. No one listened.

Noah, his wife, his three sons and their wives, along with various animal kinds, were saved through the flood. Through them, God would populate the earth once again. The account of Noah is a wonderful example of how God's grace works with man's faith and obedience. Noah is an example to us of one who, through faith, was persevered in doing what was right, though so many around him continued to do wrong.

As the population grew, nations began to separate and become more distinguished. However, there was resistance to this, and the efforts at the tower of Babel demonstrate efforts to build a unified mankind by making a name for themselves and essentially trying to become their own gods. God would not let this happen, so He saw to it that they were scattered.

### **Abraham (Genesis 12-19)**

Abraham was chosen by God to be the one through whom He would carry out His plan for mankind's salvation. God called Abram to leave his home and go to a land that God would show him. By faith, Abraham went (Heb 11:8). God made several great promises to him (Gen 12:1-7), and these promises are the foundation for following the rest of the Bible story. God promised Abraham that his descendants would become a great nation (Israel). God promised that these descendants would be given the land (v. 7). Most importantly, it would be through Abraham that "all the families of the earth" would be blessed (see also Gen 22:18). This seed would be Jesus Christ, and the blessing is the removal of sins through Him (Acts 3:25-26; Gal 3:16).

Abraham struggled with knowing how God would fulfill the promise, and even had one child (Ishmael) through Hagar. This did not turn out as planned. However, God reaffirmed the promises, and Isaac would be the child of promise.

In the meantime, Abraham showed great faith. For example, we see this in his going after the kings who took Lot (Gen 14). We see it in his pleading with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, where Lot lived (Gen 18-19). Even so, throughout these chapters, we find how serious God is about the problem of sin. Where sin is, judgment is sure to come.

In these opening chapters, we find great lessons about faith, grace, obedience, and judgment.

## **Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob** (Genesis 20-33)

Abraham had great faith that we are called upon to follow (Gal 3:7; Rom 4:12). Still, there were times in his life when he struggled. For example, in addition to the failed attempt to have Hagar produce the child of promise (Gen 16), Genesis 20 records Abraham going to Egypt and telling the king that Sarah was his sister, which led Abimelech to think she would be free to be with him. The Lord put a stop to this before something disastrous happened.

Though Abraham and Sarah were older, “at the appointed time of which God had spoken to him,” Sarah conceived and bore a son, named Isaac (Gen 21). Ishmael, Hagar’s son by Abraham, mocked Isaac, and this created a problem that resulted in Hagar and Ishmael having to leave. God still blessed Ishmael because he was Abraham’s son.

The greatest test of Abraham’s faith came when God told him to take Isaac and offer him as a sacrifice (Gen 22). Abraham did what God said, taking Isaac to the appointed place. God prevented the sacrifice, as Abraham demonstrated total trust in Him. So great was this trust that the Hebrews writer says that Abraham believed God would raise Isaac from the dead (Heb 11:17-19). The episode shows that it was not God’s intent to have Isaac actually sacrificed, but rather to give Abraham an opportunity to show absolute trust. The event typologically points to the sacrifice of Jesus.

When Sarah died, Abraham purchased a piece of the land for her burial (Gen 23). Abraham then asked his servant to go back to Abraham’s home in order to find Isaac a wife (Gen 24). The servant did that, and by the Lord’s help, he found a young woman named Rebekah. She came back with the servant and became Isaac’s wife.

Abraham remarried and had other children. He died at the age of one hundred seventy-five (Gen 25:8), having become of the greatest examples of faith in the Lord. God’s plans through his descendants would continue. Ishmael also had many descendants, but God was true to His promise to carry out His will through Isaac.

Rebekah could not have children, so Isaac prayed and God answered (Gen 25:21). Rebekah conceived twins, and the Lord told her that “two nations” were in her womb. One would serve the other. The first to be born was Esau, but Jacob held onto Esau’s heel as they were born. Esau became a skillful hunter much loved by his father Isaac. Rebekah loved Jacob more.

Esau came in hungry one day from the field. Jacob was cooking a stew, and Esau begged Jacob for some. Jacob told Esau he could have some if Esau gave over his birthright. Esau agreed, and for some food gave up one of the most important inheritances he had (Gen 25:27-34; see also Heb 12:15-17).

Isaac lived near the Philistines for a time, making the same mistake Abraham had made

in calling his wife his sister. Still, the Lord blessed him (Gen 26). Because of some quarrels over wells, Isaac moved away and came to Beersheba. There the Lord reiterated His promises that He had given to Abraham (Gen. 26:24), “so he built an altar there and called upon the name of the Lord” (v. 25).

When Isaac got older and lost his sight, he called Esau to hunt and cook for him so that he could bless Esau before he died (the oldest son received a special blessing). Rebekah overheard and helped Jacob deceive Isaac. Jacob dressed up like Esau, cooked a savory dish, then went in to Isaac and pretended to be Esau. The trick worked and Jacob received the blessing that should have gone to Esau (Gen 27). When Esau found out what Jacob did, he bore a grudge and determined to kill Jacob after Isaac died.

Rebekah told Jacob to leave and go back to her home to her brother Laban. Isaac wanted him to find a wife there (Gen 28). As Jacob left he had a dream and God gave him the same promises He had given to Abraham and Isaac. Jacob would later return to this place to seek the Lord.

Jacob came to Laban’s and fell in love with his daughter Rachel. Jacob agreed to work for seven years, but Laban tricked Jacob into marry Rachel’s older sister Leah. Jacob continued to work for Laban so that he could also have Rachel (Gen 29). Leah was the first to have children, then God blessed Rachel to have sons. Altogether Jacob had twelve sons and one daughter (Gen 30). This is the foundation for the tribes of Israel.

God greatly blessed Jacob, and Laban was blessed, too. The time came, though, for Jacob to leave, and after many years of working for Laban, he came back to the Promised Land. One of the more significant events occurred when Jacob wrestled with a “man” who blessed him. The blessing was from God, and Jacob’s name was changed to Israel (Gen 32:24-32).

Jacob feared meeting Esau again, but when they met Esau no longer wanted to kill him. Jacob eventually settled in Shechem, in the heart of the land.

## Jacob and His Sons (Genesis 34-50)

The focus now shifts to Jacob and his sons. Almost immediately we are shown the sons trying to take vengeance upon a man who took advantage of their sister, Dinah (34). In the process, they were guilty of deceit and were charged, by Jacob, with bringing trouble upon him.

Jacob moved to Bethel, where God had previously appeared to him. He built an altar there, and God reaffirmed that Jacob's name would be *Israel* (meaning "God strives"). God further reaffirmed the promises made to Abraham. Interestingly, God told Jacob to be fruitful and multiply (sound familiar?), and that a nation, nations, and kings would come from him. He would also be given the land, as promised to Abraham and Isaac. In other words, the land, nation, and seed promise would continue through Israel and his offspring.

Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife, had two sons. The first was Joseph, and the second Benjamin. After she gave birth to Benjamin, she passed away. Yet because Joseph was the oldest of Jacob's favorite, he would receive special treatment.

At this point, the text reminds us that even though Esau was not the one chosen to receive the promises, he would still have many children (36). The significance of Esau's descendants is found in the fact that they would later have an impact on Israel as a nation. This nation that came from Esau became known as the Edomites, and their land possession was situated south of Israel, just below the Dead Sea. The Edomites and Israelites would become longstanding enemies of one another, thus fulfilling the statement to Rebekah, that two nations were in her womb, and one would be stronger than the other (Gen 25:23).

From Genesis 37, the main narrative focus is on Joseph, again Jacob's favorite of his twelve sons. Joseph generally was a remarkable young man, and a fine example to all who desire to live godly. He demonstrated great faithfulness to God in very difficult circumstances, as the rest of Genesis shows (37-50).

Because he was his father's favorite, the brothers would do terrible things to Joseph. One of the signs of Jacob's love for Joseph was that he made him a special tunic to wear. This tunic likely indicated that he was not expected to work out in the fields, and it distinguished him well from the others. Jacob's love for Joseph over the other sons created many problems (as such favoritism often does). His brothers "hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms" (37:4).

To make matters worse, Joseph told his brothers of dreams he had, indicating that they would bow down to him one day. Joseph came out to the field to check on his brothers, and they plotted to destroy him. At first, they wanted to kill him, but decided rather to throw him in a pit. When some Ishmaelite traders came through, his brothers sold him to

them, and they took him down to Egypt where he would become a servant. The brothers took Joseph's coat, dipped it in blood, and gave it to Jacob so that he would think his son was dead. This brought Jacob great grief. The rest of Joseph's life would be lived in Egypt, but it would all become a part of God's greater plans.

One of the breaks in the story of Joseph is a narrative that focuses on Judah (38). The text records the sin of Judah, showing his indiscretions. Why is this here? Likely because by the end of the chapter, one of the sons born to Judah was named Perez (38:29). Perez would be the one through whom the seed promise would be fulfilled, as he is in the lineage of Christ (Matt 1:3).

In spite of the difficulties faced, God was with Joseph, and everything he did prospered. Joseph showed himself to be a man of great integrity. He rose to a high position in the household of Potiphar, a captain in the Egyptian army. When he was thrown in jail under false accusations of Potiphar's wife, he became a supervisor under the chief jailer. After a time, the cupbearer and baker for the Pharaoh were thrown in jail, and Joseph was able to interpret dreams that they had. Because of this, after a couple more years, he was given an opportunity to interpret a dream for Pharaoh himself. In this, he foretold of a famine that would come. Pharaoh then put Joseph in charge of storing up enough food to take care of the period of famine. Joseph's rise to power in Egypt set up the situation that would allow God's plan to flourish.

The famine, which spread into Palestine, led to Joseph's brothers coming down to Egypt. They did, in fact, bow down to Joseph. Yet Joseph had no desire to exact vengeance. Rather, he treated them kindly. Eventually, Joseph's family, including his father Jacob, all moved down to Egypt where they would grow into a great nation of people over many years. All of this was made possible because of Joseph and God's working through him. Before Joseph died, he asked his family to bring his bones back to Palestine, where he knew the promises of God would be fulfilled.

## **Moses to the Law** (Exodus 1-24)

The sons of Israel were squarely under Egypt's watchful eye, and they survived the tragedy of the famine thanks to Joseph's wisdom. After Joseph, with his generation, died, another Pharaoh came to power who did not know Joseph. The sons of Israel were multiplying, and this concerned Pharaoh, so he forced the Israelites into slavery. Yet the more Pharaoh afflicted them, the more they multiplied and spread out. The Israelites' lives were made hard and bitter, and Pharaoh even attempted to have all the male sons put to death as they were born. Because of midwives who feared the Lord more than Pharaoh, this plan failed.

Under these difficult circumstances, a boy was born to a Levite father. The boy's mother, to save his life, put him in a basket and set him on the Nile (Heb 11:23). The daughter of Pharaoh shortly found him, while the boy's sister looked on. The boy was named Moses, and his sister offered to find a nurse for him. Consequently, Moses' own mother became his nurse.

Moses became as a son to Pharaoh's daughter. He learned from the Egyptians (Acts 7:21-22), but he also became aware of his Hebrew background. When Moses saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, he killed the Egyptian. Later, he saw two Hebrews fighting and he tried to make peace. Their answer indicated to Moses that his killing of the Egyptian was known, so he fled to Midian, where he would stay for several years, marry, and have children.

While Moses was pasturing flocks, the angel of the Lord appeared to him from a burning bush at Horeb (Exod 3). God revealed that Moses had been chosen to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt. Moses was reluctant, but God showed Moses how He would be with him, and even indicated that Moses' brother, Aaron, would help him. Finally, Moses, with Aaron, went back to Egypt. The Great "I AM" was with them.

Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh to tell him to let God's people go. Pharaoh responded, "Who is the Lord that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and besides, I will not let Israel go" (Exod 5:2). Because Pharaoh had a hard heart, a series of ten plagues were unleashed on Egypt to show God's power and superiority over the false gods of the Egyptians (Exod 12:12).

Pharaoh increased the labor of the Hebrews, but God reassured Moses that Israel would be delivered "with an outstretched arm and with great judgments" (Exod 6:6). The plagues began to wear on Pharaoh, and he would agree to let the people go if the plague was removed. Then he would change his mind and make them stay after the plague was gone.

Israel did not suffer as the Egyptians. In the death of the firstborn plague, God instituted the feast of the Passover for them. They were to take blood and put it on their doorposts

so that their houses would be passed over by death. Then they were to hurriedly eat, prepared to leave the land. The last plague meant Pharaoh's firstborn son died, so he finally drove the people away.

They were led out to the Red sea, and the Egyptians pursued only to die. God separated the waters for Israel, but closed them back in on the Egyptian army. Further, God indicated His presence among them by going before them in a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night (Exod 14-15).

From there, they traveled to the Sinai Peninsula, where they received the Law. God continued His care for them, though they often complained. He gave them water and manna from heaven during this time. God's mighty works were sufficient to show them, and all generations since, how powerful God is, and how much He loves His people.

The covenant God made with His people was founded on this promise: "Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." The people responded by saying, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do" (Exod 19:4-6). It was a good start. Sadly, the situation would quickly deteriorate.

Israel stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai as it smoked and quaked violently. God answered with thunder, and the people were frightened. Moses, also trembling, went up the mountain to receive the commandments, and there stayed forty days. These Ten Commandments were engraved in stone, written by the finger of God. They served as the foundation for the covenant that God had with Israel.

The Ten Commandments are elaborated upon through several chapters and books of Scripture. They show the importance of loving both God (1-4) and fellow human beings (5-10). Jesus said the Law and the Prophets hang on the two greatest commands: love God with all the heart, soul, strength, and mind, and love neighbor as self (Matt 22:36-40). This was the Torah, and the Torah was their instruction for life.

## **The Tabernacle and Priesthood**

(Exodus 25-40; Leviticus 8-10; Numbers 3, 7-8)

Moses had gone up on Mt. Sinai for forty days and nights to meet with God. Here he would receive the Law and the particulars of the tabernacle. Many details are spelled out about the tabernacle, priesthood, and the various laws that were integral to the covenant with Israel. From this point, the covenant will be a driving force in the text as the people learned what God meant when He told them, “Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:5-6).

### **The Tabernacle**

As part of the covenant that God made with the children of Israel, God instructed Moses to build a tabernacle. The tabernacle (“dwelling place”) was to be God’s “dwelling place” among the people as they wandered in the wilderness (Exod 35-40). It was essentially a portable “tent,” made out of materials gathered from the people.

The significance of the tabernacle was that it indicated God’s presence on earth among the children of Israel. It was to be erected in the middle of the camp, so all the people could see it. “Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle” (Exod 40:34). When the cloud was taken up from over it, the people were to pick up camp and move on. The cloud was seen during the day, and fire was seen at night.

The tabernacle was to be built according to an exact pattern that God had revealed. They were not to deviate in any way, and God spelled it out in detail. “According to all that I am going to show you, as the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furniture, just so you shall construct it” (Exod 25:9). “See that you make them after the pattern for them, which was shown to you on the mountain” (Exod 25:40). This is quoted in Hebrews, and it shows the importance of doing God’s work in God’s way as He directs. It also serves as a shadow, along with the priesthood, to the heavenly things revealed in the New Testament (Heb 8:5).

Further, the tabernacle was built out of materials that the people willingly contributed. “Take from among you a contribution to the Lord; whoever is of a willing heart, let him bring it as the Lord’s contribution...” (Exod 35:5). The workers who made it did so because of their skill and understanding. “Let every skillful man among you come, and make all that the Lord has commanded...” (Exod 35:10). This is a testimony to the kind of work that can be accomplished when people work together, do it willingly, and do it to the best of their abilities. Surely this is a lesson for us to learn.

### **The Priesthood**

In establishing the Israelites as His people, God ordered that there be a priesthood established from the house of Aaron. “Moses said to the congregation, ‘This is the thing

which the Lord has commanded to do” (Lev 8:5). Though one must have been a Levite to be a priest, not all Levites were priests. However, the Levites were given special duties relating to the work of God, particularly in the tabernacle (Num 3:5-10). “Thus you shall separate the Levites from among the sons of Israel, and the Levites shall be Mine” (Num 8:14).

The idea of the “priesthood” was that these special servants could “draw near” to God for the people (Exod 19:22; 30:20). They were to tend to the work of God, offer up sacrifices for the sins of the people, and direct the people’s attention to the Law. The priesthood was given by God to maintain a fellowship between the Holy God and the sinful nation. They brought the gifts and sacrifices of the people to God, and they conveyed God’s gifts and blessings to the nation (Lev 8-10).

Moses gives a good overview of the idea of the priesthood in Numbers 16:5, when dealing with the rebellion of Korah. First, they were chosen by God to be His servants. Second, the primary qualification was that they were to be holy; and third, their essential function was that they would draw near to God for the people. The High Priest was the culminating point of the priesthood. Aaron was the first, and their requirements were very stringent.

The significance of the priesthood today is that it foreshadowed Jesus as the great High Priest, and all Christians as those who could draw near to God through Jesus (Heb 8:1-6; 10:19-22; 1 Pet 2:5, 9).

Together, the tabernacle and the priesthood came to stand for the relationship that Israel had with God. Through the tabernacle (later, the temple), God made His presence known, and the through the priesthood, Israel was able to draw nearer to God.

## **Israel in the Wilderness** (Numbers)

God brought Israel out of Egyptian slavery to bless them as His own people. He spared them during the plagues, then demonstrated His power by providing for and protecting them. Sadly, they often complained about their conditions and failed to be thankful (Num 2-14). God was not pleased.

After receiving the Law, they journeyed to Kadesh-Barnea where one man from each tribe went up to spy out Canaan. The most notable of these were Caleb (from Judah) and Joshua (from Ephraim). The land was beautiful, but the other ten men argued that they were unable to go up against the strong people there. Caleb and Joshua disagreed, arguing that they could go up and take the land because God was fighting for them. The people wouldn't listen.

Because of their disbelief, they would have to wander in the wilderness for 40 years, waiting for that first generation to die. Of this generation (over 20 years old), only Joshua and Caleb would go into the Promised Land.

### **Confirming the High Priest**

Korah was a Levite who desired to be a priest. He thought that Moses and Aaron had exalted themselves above everyone else, so he gathered 250 leaders together against them. Moses was distraught, telling Korah that God would show whom He had chosen. They gathered with firepans for incense outside of the tabernacle, and the glory of the Lord appeared. The ground opened up to swallow the rebels, demonstrating that God had chosen Aaron and his family for the priesthood (Num 16).

As an added confirmation of Aaron, God had leaders of each tribe write their names on a stick (Num 17). These were then put in the Tabernacle, and the one that sprouted would indicate whom God had chosen. Aaron's budded, showing God had chosen him.

### **Moses Sins**

Though Moses was a man of faith, he was not flawless. This is seen in the fact that he sinned himself. After the people complained again, Moses disobeyed God in striking a rock for water and speaking in a way that failed to honor God (Num 20). The consequence of his actions was that he could not bring the children of Israel into the land. Not even Moses could sin against God without repercussions.

### **The Bronze Serpent**

The people once again began to complain about food and water, saying that they loathed the "miserable food." In response, the Lord sent "fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died" (Num 21:6).

The people confessed that they had sinned, and Moses was told to set up a serpent on a standard. Whoever was bitten could then look at it and live. Moses made one of bronze and set it up so that the people who looked at it were spared. Jesus compared this to His death on the cross (John 3:14-15). As the serpent was lifted up among the people to save them, so Jesus was lifted up.

## **Balaam**

Moab feared Israel. Balak, the king, tried to hire Balaam, a prophet, to curse Israel (Num 22). God told Balaam not to go, but as Balaam insisted, God allowed it. The angel of the Lord stood in Balaam's path, rebuking him via his donkey. When Balaam's eyes were opened, he confessed his sin, and as the story unfolds, we find Balaam unable to place a curse on Israel.

God's plans cannot be thwarted. No matter who it is, or how much one has, no one can stand against God. As Balaam spoke in one of his oracles: "God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent; has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?" (Num 23:19)

Sadly, there were other ways to curse Israel. Israel began to "play the harlot with the daughters of Moab" (Num 25 -26) They offered sacrifices and bowed down to the gods of Moab (Baal). Because of this, God had the leaders who engaged in this slain out in the open.

While the people wept over this, one of the Israelites brought a Midianite woman to his brothers. Phinehas, a priest, saw this, took a spear, and pierced the man and woman through so that "the plague on the sons of Israel was checked." 24,000 died because of the sins of the people.

Idolatry is the one problem that the children of Israel allowed to plague them through their history. They did not completely drive out the idolatrous people around them, and so was a thorn in their side. The following generations would still "play the harlot" with false gods.

The book of Numbers shows how the people journeyed through the wilderness to the border of the Promised Land. God provided for them, protected them, and even judged them in the process. The first generation out of Egypt would not enter, but their children would. As the book closes, the people are poised to go into the land and receive that inheritance long before given to Abraham.

## **Holiness in Service** (Leviticus)

The giving of the Law began at Mt. Sinai when Moses received the Ten Commandments (Exod 19-20; Deut 5). This was just the beginning. The specifics of God's requirements, both for priests and all the people, were revealed also. Leviticus contains many of these specifics regarding God's Law.

God had already made clear whom He had chosen to be His priests. From the Levites, God chose the family of Aaron. Aaron would be the first High Priest, and his sons would be the priests. Many of the regulations in Leviticus were directed to them. These regulations also had much to do with the tabernacle and temple (the earthly sanctuary), which was given as an indicator of God's presence among the people. Consequently, any work associated with this sanctuary was to demonstrate holiness.

The book begins by giving laws relative to offering up sacrifices. There were five different sacrifices to be offered by the priests: 1) whole burnt offerings (Lev 1); 2) grain offerings (Lev 2); 3) peace offerings (Lev 3); 4) sin offerings (Lev 4); and 5) guilt offerings (Lev 5). Together, these demonstrated praise and devotion on the one hand (burnt, grain, peace), and forgiveness of sin and guilt on the other. These showed the cost of sin, but also served as types of the greatest sacrifice of all through Jesus Christ (the book of Hebrews discusses this in more detail).

To offer these sacrifices, the priests (Aaron's family) had to especially prepare themselves, indicating their own devotion and holiness. Sadly, there were some priests, like Nadab and Abihu, who did not honor God properly, so they paid for this with their lives (Lev 10). This served to reinforce the importance of dedicated holiness before God when serving at His sanctuary.

Perhaps the most significant passage of Leviticus is found in chapter 11, verses 44-45. This passage captures the essence of God's purposes in giving the Law: "For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. And you shall not make yourselves unclean with any of the swarming things that swarm on the earth. For I am the LORD who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God; thus you shall be holy, for I am holy."

To be holy means that one is devoted to God and separated for His purposes and glorifying Him. God set apart His nation, but also set apart the priests and Levites as special servants. God's intent for the people was that they be a holy nation. To be what God wanted, they had to keep the Law as He instructed them. However, it was not just a list of commandments God wanted them to keep. He wanted their hearts. He wanted them to love Him as He loved them (see Deut 6:4-6).

There were also seven feasts or festivals that were given by God for the people celebrate every year (Lev 23). These included: 1) the Passover, 2) the Feast of Unleavened Bread

(associated with Passover, celebrating freedom from slavery and a new life out of Egypt), 3) the Feast of Firstfruits (celebrating the initial harvest), 4) the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost, a celebration of the harvest, Acts 2), 5) the Feast of Trumpets (the civil new year, thanksgiving), 6) the Day of Atonement (removal of sin), and 7) the Feast of Tabernacles (or booths, celebrating God's protection and care in the wilderness). Three of these feasts later required pilgrimages to Jerusalem (Deut. 16:16: Unleavened Bread, Feast of Weeks, Feast of Tabernacles).

Only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, could the High Priest enter the Most Holy Place of the sanctuary (Lev 16). He would offer a sacrifice for himself first, then for the people. He would take the blood of the offering into the Most Holy Place and sprinkle the blood on the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant. The sacrifice would atone for the sins of the people that they may continue in fellowship with God.

As the sacrifices foreshadowed the Messiah (Jesus Christ), so the feasts also foreshadow Him. For example, Paul says that "Christ our Passover has been sacrificed" (1 Cor 5:7). Jesus Christ fulfilled the purpose of the sacrifices as well as the feasts. "For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near" (Heb 10:1). The sacrifice of Jesus perfectly fulfilled God's plans in bringing about forgiveness.

Leviticus gives many rules by which the people were to live, but the purpose remained that through these they could remain holy and bring glory to God. God's people today are, likewise, to maintain holiness (1 Pet. 1:13-16). Christians are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession" purposed to proclaim His excellencies (1 Pet 2:9). Christians fulfill the role of priests, with Christ as the High Priest, serving God through the new and better covenant brought about by the blood of Jesus (Heb 8).

## Deuteronomy I

(NOTE: in the daily readings, there is a good bit of moving from one text and book to another, so instead of strictly following the readings, we will provide a broader overview of Deuteronomy in two parts).

“Deuteronomy” (“second Law”) comes from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. Though it is a “restatement” of the Law of Moses, there is more involved. The book picks up from Numbers, provides an overview of the journeys of the children of Israel, then records a series of speeches delivered by Moses in Moab shortly before his death. Recall that Moses could not enter the Land.

Deuteronomy serves as a covenant renewal for the new generation of Israelites who would enter the Land. The generation that came out of Egypt has died in the wilderness, and this new generation is ready to accept the responsibilities of being in God’s covenant. To that end, they needed to be prepared for several matters that they had not previously had to grapple with:

First, they needed to get ready to deal with losing Moses. This generation had never known another leader. Moses had been with them from their earlier years. Now they would, for the first time, be without him. This means that they needed to be heavily embedded in the Law so that their faith would not be shaken. With their faith in God and His Law, they could continue in God’s will and know that God was still with them even when Moses was gone.

Secondly, they needed to get ready for entering the Land, which would mean levels of fighting and warfare they had not yet known. They would be entering a land that was filled with pagans and enemies. God told them how He would dispossess these peoples from the Land, and warned them that they needed to stay faithful to the covenant if they wished to be blessed in the Land and remain long in it. Concerning the people in the Land, they were told, “You shall not dread them, for the Lord your God is in your midst, a great and awesome God” (Deut 7:21). God would fight for them.

The Law demonstrated that the reception of the Land was received because of God’s Promise to Abraham. However, staying in the Land was conditioned on their faithfulness to God. The danger they faced was not just from the enemies within, but their own sense of apathy and self-reliance that would later settle in. They were warned:

“When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you. Beware that you do not forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you today; otherwise, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them, and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God who brought you out from the land of

Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” (Deut 8:10-14)

Deuteronomy contains speeches of Moses that focus on God’s great faithfulness to Israel as He led them through the wilderness (chapters 1-4), what it means to live in covenant with God (5-26), and various sanctions that would be imposed if they didn’t ultimately listen (27-31). Many have recognized that there are similarities between Deuteronomy and other Ancient Near Eastern vassal treaties made between kings and subjects. The point is that Deuteronomy would be seen as the official document that ratified the formal covenant between God and His people. This was serious, and they needed to be impressed by the gravity of the Law.

As a charter document of the covenant, their way of life would be completely based on it. This informed them of their religious, political, and civil responsibilities; they knew no “separation of the church and state.” Most of the emphasis is on their dwelling in the Land and what that meant. It also served as an elaboration on the Ten Commandments. Deuteronomy restated the Ten Commandments (ch. 5), but then began to show how these would be practically lived out. Among the instructions we find what Jesus would later call the greatest commandment along with their need to diligently instruct their children for generations to come:

“Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” (Deut 6:4-9)

## Deuteronomy II

As previously noted, Deuteronomy served as the charter document for Israel's covenant relationship with God. Since the original generation that came out of Egypt died in the wilderness, Moses formalized the covenant with the younger generation that would now be entering the Promised Land.

The book, in many ways, serves as the "hinge" book of the Old Testament (like Acts in the New Testament). Genesis through Numbers finds a culmination of thought and expression in Deuteronomy. It also serves as a foundation to the rest of the books in the Old Testament, especially the books that immediately follow. Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings show very strong connections to Deuteronomy as it sets a stage for the unfolding history of Israel in the Land.

There are multiple themes that have been recognized as interwoven throughout.\* Here we wish to overview a few of these.

**1. Israel is Yahweh's covenant people.** God is their God; they are His people, and they are defined by this covenant relationship (chapters 5-6). This is God's chosen nation, and He is their King. They existed because of God's grace, and their only reasonable response was to lovingly obey Him.

"For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth" (7:6).

**2. History as God's History.** This was not just a series of events written down for its own sake. This was Yahweh in action. This was the outworking of God's presence with His people, protecting them, and bringing them into the Land to fulfill His promises. The repetition of their history was significant for their knowing who they were, but even more for knowing God and His mighty power. The first few chapters rehearse not just what the people did and where they went, but emphasizes more what God did with and through them.

**3. The Importance of Yahweh's name.** "Yahweh," God's personal name, is used multiple times and emphasizes His authority, power, presence, and lordship of His people. At the beginning, we read, "Moses spoke to the children of Israel, according to all that the LORD (Yahweh) had commanded him" (1:3). This helps set the tone in recognition of God's authority. He was in charge. The people belonged to Him. The Land was His. They needed a deep sense of honor and reverence for Yahweh.

**4. The Importance of Law.** The Law is authoritative because it is Yahweh's Law, Yahweh's Word. Because of this, the people needed to learn how to listen and obey. They also needed to be able to distinguish between true prophets and false prophets (chapters 13 and 18). God's Word in the mouth of Moses and His prophets would never fail.

Having it written down was important for preserving God's Law for future generations. By God's grace, He told them exactly what they needed to do to please Him and how to avoid disaster. Sadly, Moses knew they would quit listening:

“For I know that after my death you will act corruptly and turn from the way which I have commanded you; and evil will befall you in the latter days, for you will do that which is evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking Him to anger with the work of your hands.”  
(31:29)

Because of this, they would lose the land and be driven into captivity, just as chapters 28-29 show.

**5. God's Sanctuary.** “But you shall seek the Lord at the place which the Lord your God will choose from all your tribes, to establish His name there for His dwelling, and there you shall come ... then it shall come about that the place in which the Lord your God will choose for His name to dwell, there you shall bring all that I command you” (12:5, 11). They had the tabernacle in the wilderness, but there would come a time, once established in the Land, that God would choose the place where a permanent sanctuary could be built. That place would be Jerusalem. It would be a centralized place where God's name was established and the people could gather. His presence would continue among them once in the Land.

Think, though, of how egregious a sin it was when Jeroboam the king later put golden calves at Dan and Bethel, then changed the nature of their worship and priesthood (1 Kgs 12:25-33).

**6. Blessings and Curses.** The basic point is that conforming to God's covenant would result in great blessings, while ignoring or forgetting the covenant would bring great curses. This was God's Land, and He had every right to tell His occupants how to live in it. If they didn't, they would lose it (chapters 27-28). With this, the people are called upon to choose life over death and receive God's blessings (ch. 30).

In the New Testament, Deuteronomy is one of the most cited books. It pointed to Jesus, who would be the Prophet like Moses (Deut 18). We, still, are to learn to love God with all our hearts.

\*Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000. (See pp. 140-142).

## Joshua and Conquest

Moses would not enter the Promised Land because of sin (Num 20). Yet before he died, he delivered the speeches in Deuteronomy, and he saw the land from Mount Nebo (Deut 34). His chosen successor was Joshua, who was “filled with the spirit of wisdom,” and the Israelites “listened to him and did as the LORD had commanded Moses” (34:9).

Moses died. Now it was time for the Israelites to cross the Jordan, and God told Joshua to encourage the people not to be afraid, for He would be with them as long as they kept His covenant (Josh 1-2). Joshua commanded the people to prepare, and they promised again that they would obey.

Joshua sent two men into Jericho, where a woman named Rahab helped them. Though she was of questionable character, she knew God had given Israel the land. The people of Jericho feared because they heard about the mighty acts of God. The men escaped back to their own camp, and Joshua was convinced that God had indeed given them the land.

Though Rahab did not know much about Yahweh, she demonstrated faith in His power. She and her family were spared when the Israelites marched around the city and the walls fell. She would even be later found in the genealogy of Christ (Matt 1:5). God’s power and protection is seen through the account.

As the people prepared to cross the Jordan, they were told to follow the Ark of the Covenant. When the priests carrying the Ark stepped into the water, the river would be cut off and the people would be able to cross on dry ground.

Joshua selected twelve men, one from each tribe, to pick up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan. These stones were set up as a memorial to this occasion, “so that when your children ask later, saying, ‘What do these stones mean to you?’ then you shall say to them, ‘Because the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD; when it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off.’ So these stones shall become a memorial to the sons of Israel forever.” (Josh 4:7)

After crossing, the people set up camp at Gilgal, east of Jericho, and the stones were set up there (another group of stones was set up in the Jordan where the priests had stood). God’s power would be remembered through these memorials.

Upon hearing that Israel crossed the Jordan, the people of the land were disheartened because they knew they couldn’t stand up to Yahweh. Soon the city of Jericho would fall to the Israelites.

Before taking Jericho, Joshua was confronted by a “man” standing with a drawn sword. Joshua asked, “Are you for us or for our adversaries?” This was the “commander of the army of the LORD,” and he told Joshua to remove his sandals. Then God told Joshua that He had given Jericho into their hands on the condition that they march around the city

once a day for six days, while seven priests carried trumpets of rams' horns before the Ark. On the seventh day the people were to march around the city seven times. Then the priests would blow the trumpets, and the people would shout. When they did this, the walls of the city would fall, and God's people could take it.

Israel followed God's instructions. The walls fell flat "so that the people went up into the city, every man straight ahead, and they took the city" (6:20). This took faith. One can only imagine what the people of Jericho were thinking, but God's way worked as He planned. These are great lessons for those trying to please God.

The Israelites had been warned to take nothing from Jericho for personal gain. The city was under a "ban," and all was devoted to the Lord. If one violated this, he would be "accursed and bring trouble" on the nation.

Achan thought he could get away with it (Josh 7-8). He took some spoil, and "therefore the anger of the LORD burned against the sons of Israel" (7:1). About three thousand men went to the city of Ai to attack it, but were defeated. Israelites were being killed, and "the hearts of the people melted and became as water" (7:5). God was not fighting for them now. Why? That's what Joshua wondered.

God told Joshua that Israel had sinned. In order to find the guilty person, they would have to go through a process specified by God (lots). They eventually found that it was Achan, so he confessed that he had sinned, whereupon he and his family were put to death.

Sin is serious business. We cannot disregard what God teaches and expect to go unpunished. Sin is an attack on the character of God Himself, and we must not take that lightly.

With the sin out of the camp, Israel could go back into battle with God on their side. After defeating Ai, Joshua built an altar. The people stood, half in front of Mt. Gerizim, the other half in front of Mt. Ebal, and the blessings and curses of the Law were read. The entire assembly once again heard the Law.

## **Dividing the Land** (Joshua)

The people of Canaan knew what Israel had done to Jericho and Ai. The Gibeonites, instead of fighting, decided to try to trick the Israelites into making a covenant. The Gibeonites dressed up and acted like envoys from a far country. They found Joshua at the camp in Gilgal and said, “We have come from a far country; now therefore, make a covenant with us” (Josh 9-10).

The Israelites were not free to make a covenant with people in the land, and they were a bit skeptical. Yet the Gibeonites insisted, “We are your servants.” Their plan worked. The mistake that Israel made at this point was that they “did not ask for the counsel of the Lord” (9:14). Joshua made a covenant with them, and the Gibeonites then returned to their city.

A few days later, Israel came up against the city and found that the Gibeonites were indeed in the land. Because of their oath, they did not destroy Gibeon, but made them servants instead. Joshua was angry about their deception.

When other kings in the land heard of this, they tried to fight against Gibeon. Israel came to their aid and defeated the other armies. While the armies fled, Joshua asked God that the sun would “stand still” to give them time to pursue the enemies. God granted this, and Israel destroyed their enemies. The reason why Israel was so effective is stated several times: God fought for Israel. The pattern was consistent throughout. When God fought for His people, they would win. As long as they trusted Him, they would be able to dwell in the land without fear of their enemies.

The taking and dividing of the land was a slow process, not an overnight matter. The book of Joshua describes how this happened. After Joshua defeated the five kings, they continued to overtake southern Palestine, where the tribe of Judah would primarily take up residence. Then they started working on the northern territories. When the enemies would come against them, “The LORD delivered them into the hand of Israel, so that they defeated them...” (11:8). Joshua was intent on doing exactly as God had said. “Just as the Lord had commanded Moses his servant, so Moses commanded Joshua, and so Joshua did; he left nothing undone of all that the Lord had commanded Moses” (11:15). What a great example!

As they were now taking command of the land, Joshua began dividing the land up according to the tribes. Much of the book of Joshua describes how the land was divided up and where each tribe would live. Recall, though, that Levi would not get territory, but rather certain cities. There were forty-eight cities given to the Levites in all, including six cities of refuge (chs. 20-21). Also recall that Joseph, through Ephraim and Manasseh, would receive a double portion. The summary statement given in 21:43-45 is instructive:

“So the Lord gave Israel all the land which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they

possessed it and lived in it. And the Lord gave them rest on every side, according to all that He had sworn to their fathers, and no one of all their enemies stood before them; the Lord gave all their enemies into their hand. Not one of the good promises which the Lord had made to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass.”

Let’s refresh ourselves: God promised Abraham that his descendants would become a great nation, that they would possess the land God had shown him, and that through his seed (Jesus) all the families of earth would be blessed (Gen 12:1-7). While in Egypt, Abraham’s descendants grew into a great nation. Their defining moment came when they departed from Egypt and received the Law from God through Moses (cf. Exod 19-20). However, before they would receive the land promise, they would spend 40 years in the wilderness.

Finally, under Joshua’s leadership, they conquered the land of Canaan and divided it up according to their tribes as God had commanded. Before Moses died, he told the people that if they remained faithful to God, He would bless them “in the land which the Lord your God gives you” (Deut 28:8). Their blessings would be great. The warning was also given that if they did not continue to obey God, then they would lose the blessings God was offering, including the land. They simply needed to listen to God.

As long as Joshua was alive, the people stayed faithful. Joshua spoke to the people, reminding them that God had kept His word and that no promise had failed (23:14). Yet there was concern that when Joshua was gone, the people would transgress the covenant (23:15-16). Thus Joshua reminded them of their history, what God had done, and warned of turning away. He told them, “fear the Lord and serve Him in sincerity and truth,” and to put away false gods (24:14). They were always to choose the Lord, just as Joshua’s choice was clear: “but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (24:15).

May we so choose the Lord today!

## Judges and Ruth

When we think of a judge, we usually think of someone sitting at a bench and overseeing a court case. That's not what we are looking at in the biblical book, however. Instead, we are reading about "deliverers," those who were given strength for a time to defeat particular enemies. The period of the judges begins with the death of Joshua and lasts a little over 300 years, ending with the beginning of Saul's reign in ca. 1050 B.C. Since the judges worked more locally instead of nationally, it is likely that some of them overlapped each other in time. Bear in mind that at this time in Israel's history, there was still no centralized government, no capital, and no physical king.

While Joshua's conquests gave the Israelites the land initially, the process of weeding out the nations would take time. This should have been happening in the days of the judges, but sadly it did not. The period of the judges would be a picture of a people who lost their way. It became dismal and dark for the nation. What was supposed to be a theocracy with Yahweh as their king became rather more like anarchy, with no real leadership and little concern for righteousness. This is summed up both Judges 17:6 and 21:25.

"In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes."

With no standard, no real purpose, and no sense of God's covenant, the people strayed horribly. They gave themselves over to idolatry and relativism, politically, religiously, and morally. There was confusion, apostasy, and a spiritual wasteland that came from it all. To get the sense of this, consider Judges 2:11-19, which describes the situation and the general cycle of the judges period.

First, the sons of Israel did evil and went after false gods (Baals). In doing this, they forsook the Lord and provoked Him to anger, which is exactly what He had warned them about. Idolatry became one of their worst problems.

Second, because they provoked God, He gave them over into the hands of plunderers and enemies. God's hand was against them for their sins, "as the Lord had sworn to them, so that they were severely distressed" (v. 15).

Third, after a time, God would raise up judges, "who delivered them from the hands of those who plundered them." Typically, after being severely distressed for a time, they would cry out to God for deliverance. He would listen and send them relief through a deliverer.

Fourth, they would refuse to listen and learn, and so after the judge was gone they would revert back into sin: "they would turn back and act more corruptly than their fathers" (v. 19). As time progressed, the sins of the people were becoming worse. Each generation carried sin even further. Sadly, that is typically the way sin operates. However far one generation goes, the next will take it further.

Because of the sins of the people, what Joshua had begun in conquering the land was hindered. The nations were not, then, completely driven out, and they would become thorns in the side of Israel.

There are several deliverers mentioned in Judges, and a few that stand out. Sadly, even among the standouts, there are few that would be considered righteous overall. While God gave His Spirit to strengthen them to defeat the enemies, they didn't always exhibit great personal character. Think of men like Jephthah and Samson. They showed elements of faith, to be sure, but also greatly struggled with carnal attitudes. The only woman to be a deliverer was Deborah, a prophetess, and her contrast with Barak seems to demonstrate that Israel was lacking in serious male leadership at the time (ch. 4-5). Gideon, though scared at first, showed great promise and did some good, but then his wicked son tried to make himself king, which didn't end well.

One striking issue in Judges is the lack of worship for Yahweh, and precious little mention of the tabernacle. This silence highlights the depth of Israel's movement away from God at this time in their history. One might wonder how Israel could survive at all. The answer still lies with God, who, through all of this unfaithfulness, would still keep His promises to Abraham alive.

This is where the story of Ruth comes in. The amazing facet to this story is how God take's a Moabite woman and accomplishes His purposes of redemption through her. The Moabites had been forbidden from being in the assembly of Israel. Yet the evil in Israel at this time contrasts with God's will, and He uses a gentile woman to keep His plans alive.

While the story of Ruth is itself fascinating, showing the concept of the kinsmen-redeemer, the final purpose of the book is found in the genealogy. The last word in the book is "David." This period was a time in which they recognized no king, doing what they wanted, and "David" contrasts with this as the man who would become the standard of the kings and type of the Messiah. In such a dismal period, God kept alive that great promise made to Abraham that through His seed all nations would be blessed.

## **Samuel and Saul**

(1 Samuel)

Toward the end of the era of the judges, Hannah, the wife of Elkanah, was unable to have children. She was distressed over this, so she prayed to God and promised that if God gave her a son, she would give him back to the Lord. Eli, the priest, thought she was drunk, but she told him that she had poured out her soul before God.

God listened to Hannah and gave her a son named Samuel. She kept her vow and gave him back to the Lord, bringing him to Eli and praising God for what He had done for her. As a boy, Samuel ministered before the Lord. He would wear a linen ephod that his mother made for him every year. During these days, visions were infrequent, but one night, God called Samuel. Samuel thought it was Eli calling, so he ran to see what Eli wanted. After three times, Eli figured out that it was God, so he told Samuel how to answer. When God called again, Samuel responded, "Speak, for your servant is listening" (3:10).

God told Samuel what was going to happen to Eli and his house because of Eli's wicked sons. Samuel did not want to tell all of this to Eli, but Eli insisted that Samuel not hide anything from him. Samuel told Eli what God said, to which Eli responded, "It is the LORD; let Him do what seems good to Him." Thus did Samuel grow up serving the Lord, and everyone in Israel came to know that Samuel was a prophet of God. They knew that Samuel spoke the word of God to them, and he would become the last judge of Israel.

### **Samuel and Saul: 1 Samuel 8-12**

As Samuel aged, the people became concerned about a future leader. They did not trust Samuel's sons, so they demanded that a king, like the nations around them had, be appointed. Samuel was displeased about this, and he prayed to God. The Lord told Samuel to listen to the people, for it was not Samuel that they had rejected, but God Himself as their King. God would grant them a king, but Samuel was to warn the people of the problems that would come as a result.

The first king to be chosen was Saul, from the tribe of Benjamin. He was a "choice and handsome man," and he was "taller than any of the people." He seemed to be the perfect choice for a king. At first, Saul appeared to be a humble man, intent on doing what was right. This was going to change quickly, however. Because of the sins that Saul subsequently committed, his dynasty was not going to be established.

Israel was thrilled to have a king. On the day they made Saul king, they offered up sacrifices of peace offerings to God and they all "rejoiced greatly." To the children of Israel, it seemed like a great day. Samuel addressed the people again, making it clear that he had walked uprightly with God and before the people. He then reminded them of their past, how God had brought them out of Egypt and settled them in the land. Yet they had forgotten God, so He allowed them to be punished. Samuel reminded them that they

needed to be faithful to God if they will continue to prosper, especially now that they had a king. If they did not abandon God any more from that point, God would not abandon them. “But if you still do wickedly, both you and your king will be swept away,” he warned.

### **King Saul: 1 Samuel 13-15**

King Saul began his reign with the support of the people, but he soon departed from the ways of God. He was a great warrior, but his presumptions about serving God caused him much trouble. The Philistines were pressing on Israel, and the people were starting to scatter. Saul was waiting in Gilgal for Samuel to come and offer sacrifice. Since Samuel didn't come right away, Saul decided to offer the sacrifice himself. Samuel told Saul that this was foolish, against the commands of God. As a result, his kingdom would not endure; his dynasty would end with his death.

As a warrior, Saul was successful. He fought his enemies with courage. “He acted valiantly,” and delivered Israel from those who would plunder them. It was his disobedience to God that would be his downfall. This disobedience is again exemplified in 1 Samuel 15 when God told Saul to strike the wicked Amalekites. Saul did defeat the Amalekites, but he did not fully obey God. He captured the king alive and spared the best of the animals, destroying only that which was “despised and worthless.” God told Samuel how Saul had turned from following His commands. When Samuel confronted Saul, Saul made an excuse for his disobedience: they were kept alive for service to God. Samuel's response, “to obey is better than sacrifice,” shows that God wants obedience first. Sacrifice is nothing if it's not according to His will. Because of Saul's disobedience, he would be rejected from being king. He began as “little” in his own eyes. He ended as one who did evil in the sight of God.

## **David** (1-2 Samuel)

### **David and Saul: 1 Samuel 16**

God rejected Saul and chose to replace him with David, a man after God's own heart. David was not chosen because of his stature or looks, but because of his heart. Even before David officially became king, Samuel anointed him as the next king over Israel.

Saul's troubles kept increasing. The Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and an "evil spirit" was terrorizing him. Saul's servants suggested that he seek someone who could help calm him with music. Saul agreed, and they brought David to him. David was a shepherd, described by Saul's servants as "a skillful musician, a mighty man of valor, a warrior, one prudent in speech, and a handsome man; and the LORD is with him" (1 Sam 16:18).

Saul initially grew to love David. When he became depressed, David would play for him and the evil spirit would depart. Unfortunately, Saul would eventually turn against David in fits of rage, attempting to kill him. However, David would ultimately prevail and become the next king over Israel.

### **David and Goliath: 1 Samuel 17**

The Philistines continually challenged the children of Israel. Both armies were camped on opposite sides of the valley of Elah. The Philistines sent their champion, Goliath, to taunt the Israelites, and they were fearful of him. Goliath's challenge was that the Israelites should send one of their men out to fight against him. Whoever would win, the other people would become servants.

Meanwhile, David was sent by his father to bring some supplies to his brothers, who were camped with Israel. When he arrived, he saw what Goliath was doing. He was dismayed by Israel's response, and he determined that he would go out and face Goliath. "For who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should taunt the armies of the living God?" He knew this was God's battle.

The men of Israel did not think David could fight Goliath, but David convinced them and Saul finally conceded. David went to the brook where he picked out five smooth stones for his sling. Goliath was insulted that they sent David out, but David's confidence in God was unshaken: "This day the LORD will deliver you up into my hands, and I will strike you down and remove your head from you ... that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel."

David took a stone, slung it, and struck Goliath in the forehead. Goliath fell to the ground, and David took Goliath's own sword and removed his head with it. The Philistines fled, and David's reputation began to grow.

### **David and Jonathan: 1 Samuel 18-20**

Jonathan, Saul's, became a close friend to David. Though Saul liked David at first, he became jealous and suspicious of David, even trying to kill him. Through all of this, Jonathan and David remained very close. Jonathan helped David escape from Saul, and spoke highly of David in Saul's presence. Even so, Saul was determined to kill David. David had married Michal, Saul's daughter, and she also helped David. Jonathan came to David's side, vowing to do anything that David asked. They worked out a plan to determine Saul's intentions, but it was clear that Saul wouldn't stop.

The friendship that existed between David and Jonathan is expressed again in 1 Samuel 20:17. "Jonathan made David vow again because of his love for him, because he loved him as he loved his own life." It was this brotherly love that they had for one another that caused Jonathan to defend David against Saul. Jonathan later died in battle with his father.

### **King David: 2 Samuel 1-12**

After Saul's death, David returned to Judah and was established as king. At first, his capital was in the city of Hebron, but later moved to Jerusalem. David's reign became the standard for future kings of Israel. God was with him, and established his throne over the people (2 Sam 7:9). While David reigned, the borders of Israel grew and the nation was blessed.

David was not without his problems. Though he was a man after God's heart, he still sinned in some terrible ways. For instance, he was responsible for the debacle of trying to move the ark on a new cart (2 Sam. 6). Yet the most notable sin of David was his adultery with Bathsheba, then trying to cover it by having her husband, Uriah, killed in battle. Because of his sins, David was severely rebuked and suffered serious consequences the rest of his life.

The defining characteristic of David was that he always returned to God. He did not let his pride ruin him forever. He repented of his sins and still was a great king. Before the end of his life, he arranged for a temple to be built, paving the way for Solomon to complete it. Ultimately, David's legacy would be complete in Jesus Christ, as God promised:

"When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Sam 7:12-13).

## Temple Preparations

David had wanted to build a temple for the Lord. However, because of David's situation and the fact that he was involved in so much war, God told him that his son would build it instead. When the time came, David told Solomon:

“My son, I had intended to build a house to the name of the Lord my God. But the word of the Lord came to me, saying, ‘You have shed much blood and have waged great wars; you shall not build a house to My name, because you have shed so much blood on the earth before Me. Behold, a son will be born to you, who shall be a man of rest; and I will give him rest from all his enemies on every side; for his name shall be Solomon, and I will give peace and quiet to Israel in his days. He shall build a house for My name, and he shall be My son and I will be his father; and I will establish the throne of his kingdom over Israel forever.’ Now, my son, the Lord be with you that you may be successful, and build the house of the Lord your God just as He has spoken concerning you. Only the Lord give you discretion and understanding, and give you charge over Israel, so that you may keep the law of the Lord your God. Then you will prosper, if you are careful to observe the statutes and the ordinances which the Lord commanded Moses concerning Israel. Be strong and courageous, do not fear nor be dismayed.” (1 Chr 22:7-13).

David then told Solomon that “with great pains” he had made preparations for the temple to be built. There is much in these verses that remind us of God's promises, David's commitment, and the importance of following God's will.

As part of the preparations made for the temple, David gathered materials, but he also set in order the work of the priests, established their respective responsibilities, and appointed singers and musicians. This would become the pattern for later restorations of the temple. He also told the leaders, “Is not the Lord your God with you? And has He not given you rest on every side? For He has given the inhabitants of the land into my hand, and the land is subdued before the Lord and before His people. Now set your heart and your soul to seek the Lord your God; arise, therefore, and build the sanctuary of the Lord God, so that you may bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord and the holy vessels of God into the house that is to be built for the name of the Lord” (1 Chr 22:18-19).

David further addressed the people by calling on them to serve God faithfully. They were to support the great work of the temple, “for the temple is not for man, but for the Lord God” (1 Chr 29:1). David had provided for this with all his ability, and he asked for the people to consecrate themselves willingly in order to provide for and work on the temple. The people responded and “offered willingly” to the work. This, in turn, had a great effect on their own attitudes: “Then the people rejoiced because they had offered so willingly, for they made their offering to the Lord with a whole heart, and King David also rejoiced greatly” (1 Chr 29:9).

David also responded by praising God in front of the entire assembly of people, then praying for the people and the work of the temple. They recognized that what they had

given for the temple was God's all along: "But who am I and who are my people that we should be able to offer as generously as this? For all things come from You, and from Your hand we have given You" (1 Chr 29:14).

When David was finished, he told the assembly, "'Now bless the Lord your God.' And all the assembly blessed the Lord, the God of their fathers, and bowed low and did homage to the Lord and to the king" (v. 20). They offered up appropriate sacrifices, then once again recognized that Solomon would be the king in the place of David. "The Lord highly exalted Solomon in the sight of all Israel, and bestowed on him royal majesty which had not been on any king before him in Israel" (v. 25). When David died, he was "full of days, riches and honor; and his Solomon reigned in his place" (v. 28).

At this point in their history, Israel was poised to truly be a great nation. Solomon would begin well, seeking the Lord and doing what is right. If he and the nation had stayed on that path, they could have been blessed beyond measure. All was in place. The temple would soon be built, and the nation would know the fulfillment of God's promises. Justice could have rolled "down like waters" and righteousness "like an ever-flowing stream" throughout the land (cf. Amos 5:24). What began so well, however, would soon take some terrible turns.

## Biblical Poetry

### Parallelism

Biblical poetry is important for many reasons. The fact that so much of Scripture is comprised of poetry shows that God places great value on its form and purpose. Biblical poetry, however, is not exactly like modern English poetry with all of its typical rhymes and meters. Hebrew poetry is often characterized by what has been termed “parallelism,” which is the idea that thoughts from one phrase correspond to thoughts in a subsequent phrase in important ways (some have called this “thought-rhymes”). Parallelism is seen in differing senses, as well. For example, there is what is often termed “synonymous parallelism,” which can be seen in passages like Psalm 6:1:

O Lord, do not rebuke me in Your anger,  
Nor chasten me in Your wrath.

We can see the synonymous nature of these phrases, where “rebuke” corresponds to “chasten,” and “anger” corresponds to “wrath.” Yet, this is more than a synonymous idea. The second phrase takes the idea of the first phrase further to strengthen and intensify the thought. This is a common feature of the Psalms.

Another type of parallelism is often termed “antithetical,” where the second phrase strengthens the thought of the first phrase by making a sharp contrast (usually seen with the contrasting term, “but”). For example, notice the way Psalm 20:8 uses this:

They have bowed down and fallen,  
But we have risen and stood upright.

The contrast strengthens the overall point being made. It’s not just that enemies have bowed down and fallen, it’s that this happened in contrast to the victors rising and standing. The Psalms contain many of these, but these contrasts are also very noticeable in the book of Proverbs, where wisdom is continually contrasted with folly.

Of course, not all lines of poetry have such well-identified parallels. Sometimes the thought of the second phrase simply carries forward and finishes what the first phrase began. For example, we might see a cause and effect relationship between the phrases. Psalm 119:11 says,

Your word I have treasured in my heart,  
That I may not sin against You.

Here, by storing up the word in the heart (cause), sin becomes minimized (effect).

Within this feature of parallelism we will find many other types of patterns and ways to emphasize the text. For example, did you know that Psalm 119 is an alphabetic acrostic?

This means that each successive line (or verse) begins with the next letter in the Hebrew alphabet. Psalm 119 has 176 verses, formed by 22 separate stanzas with 8 lines in each. Each line of the respective stanza begins with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and each letter is represented throughout the Psalm. Imagine 8 verses that begin with “A,” then the next 8 all begin with “B,” and so on through the alphabet. It would have been a great memory aid for the people. This feature occurs in several Psalms and Proverbs (e.g., Prov 31:10-31 forms a complete alphabetic acrostic where each line takes the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet—hence 22 verses).

There is much more. For now, we simply want to be aware that this is an important part of what we are reading. We should be looking out for these kinds of features because they can enhance our understanding and appreciation for what we are reading.

### **Figurative Language**

Another strong feature of poetry are the uses of symbolism and figures of speech. Reading the Psalms in some kind of rigid, literalistic way simply cannot work. For example, when David referred to himself as a “worm and not a man” (Ps 22:6), we don’t really think that at some point David literally became a worm. When David said, “Every night I make my bed swim, I dissolve my couch with my tears” (Ps 6:6), no one thinks that David’s bed literally swam or that his couch was actually dissolved by his tears. These are figures of speech, helping us understand what was in his heart during difficult times.

There are multiplied types of figures. There are metaphors (direct comparison by saying one thing is another, Ps 5:9), similes (comparison using *like* or *as*, Ps 58:4), personifications (giving human character to inanimate objects, Ps 98:8), hyperboles (intended exaggerations, Ps 73:7), anthropomorphisms (giving human-like features to God, Ps 8:3), ironies (ideas or actions that turn on themselves, Ps 9:15), and so on. There are far too many to try to catalogue here.

Why are figures used as they are? They give us vivid, memorable images that help us understand the more concrete ideas that they convey. They capture our attention and leave deep impacts on our minds. We can “see” what they represent rather than just think about the words. We are shown, rather than just told, and they appeal to our imagination. Consider the powerful imagery, then, when reading:

The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer,  
My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge;  
My shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. (Ps 18:2)

As we read the Psalms and any other poetry in Scripture, let us be aware of the powerful ways in which God’s mind has been revealed.

## The Psalms

The book of Psalms is a collection of hymns inspired by the Holy Spirit. The unique part of this is that rather than the Psalms being like a letter written to us (as in the New Testament epistles), they represent the feelings of men poured out to God. Even so, they were considered to be inspired by the Holy Spirit. For example, when Jesus referred to Psalm 110, He said that David said what he did “in the Spirit” (Matt 22:41-44). When the apostles had been threatened and came back to pray with the disciples, they quoted Psalm 2 as being spoken “by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of our father David” (Acts 4:23-26). The Psalms are quoted multiple times in the New Testament and given the weight of inspired Scripture. Even though the thoughts of men are being expressed to God, God still shows that He stands behind it.

Because of the nature of the Psalms, we recognize that we don’t read them exactly the same way that we read historical narrative or the epistles. We see the beauty of ancient poetry, the praise of God through masterful figures of speech, and the loftiness of song addressed from heart to heart. Yet with all of the emotion filling up the Psalms, they are much more than that.

The Psalms are rich in theology and doctrine. These are songs and prayers that are filled with covenant concepts. That is, these are written from within the perspective those in God’s covenant. The psalmist, for example, sees the beauty of the covenant when contrasted with what the world offered outside the covenant. Psalm 1, for example, shows this contrast:

How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,  
Nor stand in the path of sinners,  
Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!  
But his delight is in the law of the Lord,  
And in His law he meditates day and night.  
He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,  
Which yields its fruit in its season  
And its leaf does not wither;  
And in whatever he does, he prospers.

This way of thinking is found throughout the Psalms. God is seen as sovereign, the Almighty Creator who showed His lovingkindness toward Israel in making them a people through whom He would fulfill His promises to Abraham. Then, in contrast to God and His greatness, the lowliness of the human condition is seen as well. Note, for example, Psalm 8:3-5:

When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,  
The moon and the stars, which You have ordained;  
What is man that You take thought of him,  
And the son of man that You care for him?

Yet You have made him a little lower than God,  
And You crown him with glory and majesty!

God takes what appears to be weak and makes it strong. This is a major theme of Scripture overall, and the Psalms show this theme time and again. Yet the human condition is also seen in the Psalms of confession and those that lament the difficulties in which the psalmist found himself. David saw all of these situations and more (see, for example, Psalm 51 as a psalm of confession, and Psalm 22 as a lament of great difficulty). The Psalms put into words the feelings that all feel, the difficulties in the range of emotions, and the desires to rise above the hardships of life often brought on by sin.

The Psalms are often seen in two great categories: psalms of praise and psalms of lament. On the one hand, God is lifted up in praise and adoration. Yet the expressions of lament are throughout and give us the heart of the sufferer. These demonstrate that prayer is not about saying a certain formula. We are to praise God, but we can also pour out our hearts to Him. When we don't understand why, when we feel abandoned, when we are on the verge of doubt, when we feel that the world is against us, the Psalms speak to all of these and help us express ourselves to God.

Throughout the various types of Psalms and themes, we find consistent foreshadowing of the Messiah in the Psalms. Jesus taught that the entire Old Testament pointed to Him, and the Psalms are a significant part of this (see Luke 24:44-45). For example, in Psalm 22 we see the righteous sufferer being mocked, abused, and yet ultimately victorious. Jesus quoted from this Psalm while on the cross. In Psalm 110 we see the beauty of the kingly priest who serves after the order of Melchizedek (Heb 5-7). In Psalm 2 we have glimpses of God's great King who proclaims victory over those who have tried to fight against Him. Over and over again we find that the Psalms are fulfilled in Jesus, and this helps Christians today see the value and applications of this great prayerbook and hymnal.

We need to read, study, and reflect upon the Psalms because not only will we find the attitudes and issues that we see in ourselves, we will find God. We will find Christ Jesus our Lord. This, in turn, will help us better understand and enjoy the beauty of the relationship we have with our Creator.

## Varieties of Psalms

The Psalms can be broadly divided into two categories: psalms of praise and psalms of laments. Often we find a blending of these two, as in Psalm 22 where the psalmist begins with strong laments but turns to praise before he is done. Yet across these broad categories we also find a number of kinds of psalms with different focal points. Again, there are areas of overlap, but here we wish to overview some of these kinds (and this won't be exhaustive). This helps us to see where stress is put upon the various circumstances and relationships between God and His people.

**Wisdom.** In Scripture, wisdom is often seen through the contrasting of godly wisdom with folly. Proverbs are well known for this, but even in the Psalms we find these contrasts. Psalm 1 is a perfect example of a wisdom psalm. In this psalm we find the blessed man who refuses the path of sinners and takes delight in God's Law. In contrast, the wicked have no foundation and they will perish. God's wisdom versus the folly of men is on full display.

**Torah.** While we often think of the Law when we think Torah, the Torah was more than a checklist of rules. It was their instructions for life, and it encompassed everything they did. The Torah psalms focus on this. Probably the best-known example of a Torah psalm is Psalm 119, where the psalmist speaks of the Law, the precepts, ordinances, statutes, commandments, etc. Yet these are not seen as any kind of a burden, but as a delight. The Torah was to be loved and cherished, obeyed and taught. "How blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord" (v. 1).

**Kingship.** Kingship, or royal, psalms exalt God's rule and God's king. God is the King, and the foundation of His throne is justice and righteousness (Ps 89:14). Yet the Davidic King represented God to His people. Further, in the face of opposition from those who wanted to cast off the fetters of God's rule, God brings forth His King, His Son, to answer them. Psalm 2, which is also messianic, shows that God's King is not One to be trifled with, but will rule and is worthy of honor. "Worship the Lord with reverence and rejoice with trembling" (Ps 2:11).

**Temple.** Many of the psalms demonstrate a temple context. These psalms would be used in corporate worship when they came to the temple. Praise psalms fit this pattern very well. For example, Psalm 47 shows this (vv. 6-7):

Sing praises to God, sing praises;  
Sing praises to our King, sing praises.  
For God is the King of all the earth;  
Sing praises with a skillful psalm.

Other psalms show a longing for worship at the sanctuary. For example, Psalms 42-43, a lament, shows this longing: "For I used to go along with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God, with the voice of joy and thanksgiving, a multitude

keeping festival” (42:4). The Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120-134) would have been used as they went up to Zion to worship (some limit these to the Levites). The point is that the temple background throughout the psalms is important to understanding the content of many. While other psalms are more individual in nature (e.g., Psalm 51), the temple still plays a major role in the Psalms as a whole.

**Imprecatory.** Imprecatory psalms are the most difficult, as they entail some kind of request to curse the enemies. For example, Psalm 35 asks God to “Fight against those who fight against me” (v. 1), “Let those be turned back and humiliated who devise evil against me” (v. 4), and to “Let destruction come upon him unawares, and let the net which he hid catch himself; into that very destruction let him fall” (v. 8). While understanding why men of God would pray such, we need to bear in mind the covenant context in which we were written. God Himself had promised to protect His people and bring judgment upon the enemies, so the psalmist is really asking God to remember the covenant relative to the enemy nations. There is much more to consider, but the lessons in these psalms are also extremely valuable.

**Messianic.** Messianic psalms point to Jesus. Jesus Himself said that the psalms are fulfilled in Him (Luke 24:44-45). Some of them are more direct than others. For example, Psalm 110 is specifically about the Messiah who would be a priest after the order of Melchizedek and stretch out His scepter as the King. Psalm 22 portrays the events of the cross in vivid imagery. Psalm 2 shows the power of the King. The Psalms have very strong messianic connections, and we are blessed to read them today with a Christological focus.

Much more can be said, but this should help us as we think more deeply about the Psalms and see how they help us gain perspective on how we can come to God in worship and prayer. While we are no longer under the stipulations of the Law of Moses, the principles and topics covered still help us tremendously in our relationship with God today.

## **Solomon Becomes King** (1 Kings 1-3)

By the end of David's life, David had made arrangements for Solomon to build the temple. Solomon was clearly God's choice to succeed David as king. Yet David's fourth son, Adonijah (2 Sam 3:2-4), also desired to be king. He, like Absalom, was a handsome man who took the initiative to control the kingdom. As loyal as Joab and Abiathar had been to David, Adonijah was able to gain their help in this attempt. By all normal thinking of the time, Adonijah was next in line. However, this was not a kingship based on normal ideals of dynasties. This was a kingship determined by God. While Adonijah gathered a following, many stayed true to David, including Nathan the prophet and several of David's mighty men (1 Kgs 1:8).

Nathan was well aware of what Adonijah was doing, so he spoke to Bathsheba because her and Solomon's lives were in danger. Bathsheba and Nathan went to David and explained the situation concerning Adonijah's attempt to be king. David vowed that Solomon would indeed be king (1 Kgs 1:29-30). David called Zadok the priest, Nathan the prophet, and Benaiah the commander and had them bring Solomon out on David's mule (think about that a moment relative to Jesus) down to Gihon where they would proclaim Solomon as king. Then he would be brought to sit on David's throne to become the king in David's place (1 Kgs 1:33-35).

Solomon was then anointed as king and "all the people went up after him," rejoicing and making great noise (1 Kgs 1:40). Adonijah and Joab heard the uproar, and Adonijah was told that Solomon was just made king and took his seat on David's throne. Everyone with Adonijah became terrified over this, and Adonijah was afraid of Solomon. He went out and took hold of the horns of the altar. Solomon was told about this and, for the time being, he let Adonijah go home.

As David was about to die, he called Solomon in and charged him to be faithful to God. In words similar to what Joshua was told (Josh 1), Solomon would find success if he stayed true to what the Law taught, and God's promise that David would not lack a man to sit on the throne would be realized (1 Kgs 2:1-4). David encouraged Solomon to show kindness and wisdom, while also warning him about enemies that posed threats.

David died after having reigned forty years. After David's death, Solomon's kingdom was firmly established (1 Kgs 2:12). Soon after, Adonijah approached Bathsheba asking her to ask Solomon if he could have Abishag, a woman who took care of David in his old age, as a wife. This request did not settle well with Solomon, as it appeared to him that Adonijah was trying to find a way to take the kingdom. Adonijah was shortly put to death by Benaiah. Abiathar was dismissed as priest and Joab was also executed for his part in Adonijah's rebellion. Shimei, a descendant of Saul who had cursed David, was also put to death. The kingdom was secure.

While Solomon loved the Lord (1 Kgs 3:3), he began making marriage alliances with

foreign nations, starting with Egypt. Yet initially Solomon was trying to please the Lord. God appeared to Solomon and asked what he wanted, and Solomon's famous prayer was uttered (1 Kgs 3:6-9). Solomon praised God's lovingkindness and recognized that he was on the throne based on God's promise to David. His humility shows as he expresses his ignorance about how to proceed, so his request was based on this humility: "So give Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people to discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?" God was pleased with Solomon's request and told him that because he asked for wisdom rather than riches, he would be given both.

Solomon's wisdom would soon be tested (1 Kgs 3:16-28). Two harlots came before him with a difficult problem. Both had given birth and one of the sons died. The accusation was that mother who lost her child stole the other one's child and put her dead child in the arms of this other mother. They argued about the truth of this and Solomon came up with a brilliant solution. "Get me a sword," he said. Solomon's solution was to divide the living baby in half so that each mother could have half. When he said this, the mother of the living child begged that the child be given to the mother of the dead child. At this, Solomon recognize who the true mother was and she was given the baby.

The wisdom of Solomon became well known throughout the land: "When all Israel heard of the judgment which the king had handed down, they feared the king, for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him to administer justice" (1 Kgs 3:28).

Solomon's fame grew, and he started his kingship in the right way, loving and pleasing God. His wisdom was unparalleled, and he would soon grow the kingdom without going to war. For now, Solomon's efforts are good and the kingdom is established.

## Solomon: From Success to Failure

Solomon's father, David, had already made plans and preparations for the building of the temple, yet Solomon was the one chosen to actually build it. The temple project was indeed impressive, and it took Solomon 7 years to build it (1 Kgs 6:38). God had made the promise to Solomon: "Concerning this house which you are building, if you will walk in My statutes and execute My ordinances and keep all My commandments by walking in them, then I will carry out My word with you which I spoke to David your father. I will dwell among the sons of Israel, and will not forsake My people Israel" (1 Kgs 6:12-13). Solomon had started out on the right foot and it was up to him to keep it going in the right direction.

Solomon was also warned that if he turned aside from covenant, there would be consequences: "But if you turn away and forsake My statutes and My commandments which I have set before you, and go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will uproot you from My land which I have given you, and this house which I have consecrated for My name I will cast out of My sight and I will make it a proverb and a byword among all peoples" (2 Chr 7:19-20).

Solomon also built his own palace, and it took him thirteen years to do so (which may indicate a problem itself in proportion to the time spent on the temple). Much of the work that Solomon had done was through the use of forced labor, which would also be a problem on its own.

The wisdom and wealth of Solomon were well known far and wide: "So King Solomon became greater than all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. All the earth was seeking the presence of Solomon, to hear his wisdom which God had put in his heart" (1 Kgs 10:23-24). Sadly, this would not inoculate Solomon against that which would turn him against God.

There is an interesting connection in the story of Solomon that helps explain this turn. From Birth, the Lord loved Solomon (2 Sam 12:24). Initially, Solomon loved the Lord (1 Kgs 3:3). But the turning point for Solomon is seen in 1 Kings 11:1: "Now King Solomon loved many foreign women..." Solomon's love for these women put him in severe spiritual danger. With 700 wives and 300 concubines, he was bound to compromise the covenant principles, and he did.

"For when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away after other gods; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians and after Milcom the detestable idol of the Ammonites. Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not follow the Lord fully, as David his father had done" (1 Kgs 11:4-7).

Solomon's sins would have serious consequences. Instead of unifying the nation as David had done, Solomon's actions would hurt the nation and create a divide that could never

be fully healed (apart from Christ, that is). He was beginning to do the very things that were warned against in Deuteronomy 17:16-17: “Moreover, he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor shall he cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, since the Lord has said to you, ‘You shall never again return that way.’ He shall not multiply wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; nor shall he greatly increase silver and gold for himself.” Solomon multiplied both horses and wives, and even took for his first wife a princess of Egypt. The irony abounds, and his heart was turned away.

“Now the Lord was angry with Solomon because his heart was turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice, and had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods; but he did not observe what the Lord had commanded. So the Lord said to Solomon, ‘Because you have done this, and you have not kept My covenant and My statutes, which I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you, and will give it to your servant’” (1 Kgs 11:9-11).

God was talking about Jeroboam, the one who would become king of the northern kingdom. Solomon even sought to put Jeroboam to death, to no avail. Other enemies rose up against Solomon as well, and what had been so peaceful would be disturbed by rebellion. Sadly, the legacy of Solomon would be remembered, not for his wisdom, but for his failure to stay true to God. This, of course, represents a great irony, for there is no greater wisdom than staying true to God.

Solomon surely teaches us that wisdom and wealth can only be truly valuable when harnessed within the boundaries of doing God’s will.

## Proverbs and a Song

The book of Proverbs was in large part written by Solomon. 1 Kings 4:32 says that Solomon wrote 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs. Proverbs 1:1 refers to it as the proverbs of Solomon. Later, we find, however, that there were other authors who wrote proverbs in this book, but Solomon was a primary author.

A *proverb* is generally a short, compact statement that expresses some truth about life or human behavior. These statements are typically meant to be “truisms,” or generalized observations about various aspects of life. While one should not be surprised to find an occasional exception, wisdom requires that we seek out and hold to the truth of the statements.

Proverbs find their strength in using comparison. By comparing what is similar, we may draw conclusions about the way we should approach other situations that may be comparable. Why are the proverbs written? The best answer is to let the wise man tell us:

To know wisdom and instruction,  
To discern the sayings of understanding,  
To receive instruction in wise behavior,  
Righteousness, justice and equity;  
To give prudence to the naive,  
To the youth knowledge and discretion,  
A wise man will hear and increase in learning,  
And a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel,  
To understand a proverb and a figure,  
The words of the wise and their riddles.  
The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;  
Fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Prov 1:2-7)

Notice up front that the purpose is to provide wisdom, to instruct readers on how to discern and live life with prudence and understanding, to help all to fear the Lord so that true knowledge will be possible. Then we see the contrast, which is made throughout the Proverbs, that fools despise wisdom and instruction. We are immediately confronted with the challenge of whether or not we want to be wise or foolish. Wisdom is a choice that can be made; folly can be avoided through understanding and discernment. This is not just about one’s intellect; it is about one’s heart. “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life” (Prov 4:23).

Proverbs covers a range of topics, including: wisdom, folly, morality, parental responsibility, righteousness, wickedness, life, conduct, etc. These writings describe how to be wise, how to avoid immorality, and generally how to please God. They describe the character of righteous people, such as is found in the Proverbs 31’s description of the worthy woman.

Because of its nature, and even though it was written so long ago, Proverbs is one of the most practical books in the Bible. It deals in depth with the “art of living.” Wisdom is based completely upon a proper respect and fear of the Lord. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (Prov 9:10).

By living according to the principles found throughout the book, one is assured success in service to God. For practical instruction on attaining wisdom, knowledge, and understanding about life, turn to Proverbs. The book is a blessing to read and learn.

### **Song of Solomon**

The Song of Solomon is unique among the books of Scripture. Was this written by Solomon or was it written for Solomon? There are many unanswered questions. There are questions not answered relative to the characters in the song, and because of this the work has been subjected to many and varied interpretations. Are there just two main characters (Solomon and his bride)? Are there three (adding a shepherd boy)? How is this meant to be read? The inspired text contains none of the markers of characters often found in Bible versions. However, none of this means that we cannot find high value in the book. It is, after all, inspired Scripture, and it is beautiful.

I will suggest that the book is meant to be read as a series of poems praising the physical love shared between a husband and wife. Because of this, the work is unique in that it really does touch upon a significantly vital issue in marriage that is not spoken of so directly through the rest of the Bible. While Scripture is clear that the marriage bed is to be undefiled and marriage to be held in honor (Heb 13:4), the Song of Solomon presents beautiful imagery that helps us understand that such love between husband and wife is not only to be desired, but is directly given by God as a blessing.

The theme is seen toward the end (8:6-7):

“Put me like a seal over your heart,  
Like a seal on your arm.  
For love is as strong as death,  
Jealousy is as severe as Sheol;  
Its flashes are flashes of fire,  
The very flame of the Lord.  
‘Many waters cannot quench love,  
Nor will rivers overflow it;  
If a man were to give all the riches of his house for love,  
It would be utterly despised.’”

Love is as strong as death. May this book give us a great perspective on what marital love is all about, and may we teach our children the honor of godly marriage.

## Ecclesiastes

The title, “Ecclesiastes,” comes from the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures). It is the word sometimes translated as “preacher” or “teacher,” and indicates one who convenes an assembly (compare the word for congregation or church in the New Testament: *Ecclesia*). The Hebrew term is *Qoheleth*. While there is debate over the exact authorship of the book, Qoheleth directs our minds toward Solomon, who was “the son of David” (vs. 1) and “king over Israel in Jerusalem” (v. 12). The book doesn’t tell us much else about that, aside from what we may gather from the contents of the work.

Ecclesiastes begins by reminding the readers of the vanity of life. The opening words are somewhat chilling: “Vanity of vanities,’ says the Preacher, ‘Vanity of vanities! All is vanity’” (1:2). The idea is that all is fleeting and transitory. This expression is found throughout the book, serving somewhat as bookends to the entire work (12:8). As an illustration, Qoheleth appeals to the way that generations come and go and how nature takes its circular courses. Things pass on, seem to move in circles, and “there is nothing new under the sun” (1:9). Where can life really find meaning and purpose? It’s all so fleeting.

Qoheleth first appears to present a fairly dim view of life “under the sun” (a recurring phrase). There is a futility to the ways of the world, and he tried it all. He gave himself to wisdom and knowledge and found it to be “striving after wind” (1:12-18). He gave himself to pleasure, and “behold, it too was futility” (2:1-11). Even though he withheld nothing that he wanted, he still saw there was no profit under the sun. It seemed that everywhere he turned, no matter what he did, he hit that same dead end and came to the same conclusion. All is vanity. Nothing worked.

But for God. Qoheleth, then, presents a masterful case for the unprofitable vanity of life without God. Nothing “under the sun,” all by itself, can provide purpose and meaning. With this view, he tackles the problem of suffering and evil. He shows that life is time (ch. 3) and that time presents many challenges, both good and bad. Yet the only thing that can give life any real semblance of meaning and coherence is a life that is focused and centered on pursuing God. Nothing in life is fulfilling in and of itself, but once God becomes the focal point, everything in life takes on a new meaning. This life is fleeting, but eternity is not: “everything God does will remain forever” (3:14).

Considered from the perspective of serving God, Ecclesiastes is not *ultimately* the negative book it is often made out to be. While the work destroys one’s sense of finding hope or answers in the things of this world, it is done with a view toward building one back up with a new perspective that changes everything. Materialism cannot work, and the book can move one from the despair of worldly futility to the recognition that life finds ultimate fulfillment in fearing the Lord. We move from the fleeting to the eternal.

Qoheleth directs us to the difficult questions. If God is in control, why is there wickedness and injustice (3:16-17)? Why do men seem to die just like animals (3:18-21)? Why is there

oppression and great suffering (4:1-3)? Why are people so greedy, so inhumane, so selfish (4:4-6)? Why is there loneliness and poverty? Why do people seek popularity and high position only to have it taken from them? How does life make sense?

We begin to see clues to the answer early on in the book. While focused on the things of life, Qoheleth learned to hate it (2:17-18). However, he also began to show that the enjoyment of the fruit of his labor was “from the hand of God. For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him?” (2:24-25) The idea that life and its enjoyment is the gift of God is then seen throughout (2:24; 3:12-13, 22; 5:19-20; 8:15; 9:7-9).

“Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, He has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his reward and rejoice in his labor; this is the gift of God. For he will not often consider the years of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart” (5:19-20).

God must be the focus of our lives. Wealth, power, and pleasure without God is empty. With God, one can enjoy life and the fruit of our labor. All need not ultimately be vanity if eternity is in view.

Qoheleth finally reaches the great conclusion: “fear God and keep His commandments for this is the whole of man. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.” (12:13-14) If we keep this in mind, we can enjoy our lives “under the sun” and find the greatest meaning and happiness through serving God. This is divine wisdom.

## A Divided Kingdom Overview

Because Solomon's heart had turned away from the Lord and did evil, God told him that the kingdom would be torn away and divided (1 Kgs 11:9-13). Jeroboam, who had been a servant of Solomon, would be given ten of the tribes and become king of the northern kingdom. He would be given the opportunity to establish his own dynasty in the north. After these promises, Solomon sought the life of Jeroboam, who fled to Egypt until Solomon's death.

When Solomon died, Rehoboam became king. Jeroboam returned from Egypt, and Rehoboam convened a meeting in order to establish his kingship overall both north and south. Solomon had enacted some policies that were harsh on the north, and those who represented the north asked Rehoboam to lighten their load. When Rehoboam listened to his younger counselors, he promised he would be even more harsh. At this, the north rebelled and the kingdom officially divided. From this point, the north is called Israel, and the south is called Judah. Rehoboam remained king of Judah, while Jeroboam became the king of Israel. Rehoboam tried to prepare for war against Israel because of this, but God's message to him was to refrain, for this was God's doing (1 Kgs 12:21-24).

Jeroboam had an opportunity to start out with God's blessings, but he quickly created problems by not following the Lord. Out of fear that the people would turn to Judah, he had golden calves set up in Dan and Bethel (at the tips of the north and south of Israel). The Levites, for the most part, were going to Judah, and Jeroboam appointed priests from other tribes. He also changed the feast days. In short, Jeroboam took control of their religion and standardized idolatry in Israel. Because of this, his dynasty would not last beyond a short reign of his son.

The northern kingdom of Israel never would have a righteous king. Of the nineteen or so who reigned, not one of them turned the people back to the Lord. Judah, on the other hand, would have at least have a handful of kings who tried to initiate reforms and do what is right (including Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah). This is one of the reasons why Judah would outlast Israel. In the end, however, both kingdoms would fall due to their failure to adhere to God's covenant.

The most notorious of the rulers of Israel were Ahab (son of Omri) and Jezebel. While Ahab was savvy as a military commander, he was wicked to the core. Jezebel, from Phoenicia, brought Baalism to its peak in Israel. Her influence over Ahab and the nation was, sadly, very strong in its negative influence. During this time, God sent prophets to try to turn the people back to Him. Two prophets especially noted for miracle-working were Elijah and his successor, Elisha.

Elijah was sent to Ahab to tell him that he needed to repent. He was a godly man who became known for his uncompromising stand for God. The most well-known episode demonstrating this was when he summoned the 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah to Mt. Carmel in order to challenge them (1 Kings 18). They each made altars to

offer sacrifices. The prophets of Baal called upon Baal, but to no avail. Finally, Elijah, after having his alter drenched with water, called upon Yahweh, who responded with fire that consumed the altar. While the people responded by acknowledging Yahweh, it was too late. The prophets were taken and slain. Jezebel responded by threatening Elijah's life, and he fled for a time in discouragement. His message, however, was loud and clear, and Elijah became a type of John the Baptist.

After these events, Ahab was killed in battle. He would have two sons reign for shorter periods (Ahaziah and Joram). Jehu was commissioned to destroy the family of Ahab, and he did so swiftly. This included the death of Jezebel. However, Jehu did not kill the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, whose name was Athaliah. She would end up trying to kill her own family and usurping the throne of Judah, causing untold damage to the south.

Though there was so much wickedness throughout the land, Elijah and Elisha demonstrated that God was still at work. The miracles worked by Elisha were powerful reminders that God was still in control. The Lord could heal the land. He could raise the dead. He could feed the people and do what seemed impossible. These miracles showed that God was able to take care of the nation, if only they would repent and turn back to Him. Sadly, for the north, this would not happen.

The northern kingdom of Israel started out poorly because of Jeroboam, and it only spiraled downward and became worse over time. For Judah, there would be a few lights in the darkness, but it wouldn't be enough in the end to overturn their destruction. Samaria, the capital of the kingdom of Israel, fell in ca. 722 B.C., while Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, fell in ca. 586 B.C.

Such an overview hardly does justice to the events, but there are many blanks yet to fill in.

## Bad Alliances, Consequences, and Solutions

Though Israel was officially divided between the north (Israel) and the south (Judah), there was still interaction between the two. Sometimes that interaction involved war, but at other times it involved making alliances and working together. While that sounds decent enough, the sad consequences of these alliances would soon be realized. Take the case of Ahab and Jehoshaphat.

Recall that Ahab was a wicked king, remembering especially the influence of Jezebel upon him and the nation. Jehoshaphat, on the other hand, was a basically good king of Judah who wanted to serve Yahweh (2 Chr 17). Sadly, one recorded vice of Jehoshaphat was that he was prone to make alliances with evil kings, and this got both him and Judah into deep trouble. The fallout from this alliance alone would be devastating for the future of Judah. How so?

Alliances often involved marriage, and in this case, Jehoshaphat's son, Jehoram, married Ahab and Jezebel's daughter, Athaliah (2 Chr 18:1). Though Jehoshaphat did good during his reign, this influence over Jehoram would prove very damaging. When Jehoram became king, he killed his own brothers, walked in the ways of Ahab, and did evil in the sight of God (2 Chr 21:4-6). The only reason God didn't destroy "the house of David" at this time was because of his promise to David (v. 7).

When Jehoram died, his son, Ahaziah, became king over Judah.\* Ahaziah made an alliance with Joram of Israel, and they were both killed by Jehu in the purge of Ahab's family (2 Chr 22:5-9). Jezebel was also killed at this time (2 Kgs 9). At this point, things get even worse. Athaliah, who was not killed in this purge, takes the bold move of usurping the throne of Judah. In doing so, she "destroyed all the royal offspring of the house of Judah" (2 Chr 22:10). Imagine the grandmother who tries to completely wipe out her own grandchildren out of fear that one of them might become the next king. She was that evil.

All of this was made possible because of a bad alliance initially made between Jehoshaphat and Ahab. The "butterfly effect" of this wreaked havoc on Judah and nearly ended up with the complete destruction of David's dynasty. The reader is made to wonder how any of this can be worked out. How would God spare the house of David?

God would indeed spare the house of David once again. Athaliah almost killed all the offspring, but she missed one in particular. 2 Chronicles 22:11-12 records:

"But Jehoshabeath the king's daughter took Joash the son of Ahaziah, and stole him from among the king's sons who were being put to death, and placed him and his nurse in the bedroom. So Jehoshabeath, the daughter of King Jehoram, the wife of Jehoiada the priest (for she was the sister of Ahaziah), hid him from Athaliah so that she would not put him to death. He was hidden with them in the house of God six years while Athaliah reigned over the land."

Jehosheba (as spelled in Kings) was the sister of Ahaziah, also the daughter of Jehoram (and presumably Athaliah), and the wife of the high priest named Jehoiada. Together, Jehosheba and Jehoiada kept Joash safe for these six years while Athaliah's reign of terror continued over Judah.

At the end of those years, the time came to make a move. Under Jehoiada's leadership, a coup was staged. He brought in captains of hundreds who would keep guard and protect young king Joash. The boy was brought out and the crown was put on his head as he was anointed and proclaimed to be the king (2 Kgs 11:12). Athaliah heard the noise and came out to see what was happening at the temple. When she saw it, she cried, "Treason!" Then Jehoiada commanded the captains to bring her out and put her to death. She was promptly dispatched.

Jehoiada wanted to restore Judah back to God: "Then Jehoiada made a covenant between the Lord and the king and the people, that they would be the Lord's people, also between the king and the people" (2 Kgs 11:17). This initiated reform in Judah, in which the altars of Baal were torn down and the temple was repaired. As long as Jehoiada was around, Joash (or Jehoash) did what was right (2 Kgs 12:2). Sadly, once Jehoiada was gone, Joash reverted to wickedness and listened to evil, idolatrous counselors. He even had Jehoiada's son, Zechariah, murdered.

All of this demonstrates how influences can work. The influence of the terrible alliance between Jehoshaphat and Ahab did terrible damage in Judah. Jehoiada was able to turn that around for a short time, but as is so often the case, the kings once again turned away from the Lord. God sent prophets to provide the warnings and turn them toward repentance. Ultimately, however, both Israel and Judah would fall because of their failure to adhere to God's covenant.

\*Not to be confused with the fact that Ahab also had a son named Ahaziah who reigned over Israel. He also had a son also named Jehoram (Joram) who likewise reigned over Israel. The same names are used, but these are different kings.

## Introduction to the Prophets

“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him” (Deut 18:15).

While Moses looked ahead to Jesus Christ as the ultimate prophet, there were, between them, a series of prophets sent by God, all of whom pointed to the same fulfillment in Christ (Acts 3:19-26). Many of these prophets never left writings. Men like Nathan, Elijah, and Elisha are well known prophets, but they did not leave behind the types of writings we associate with the corpus of Scripture. There are, however, a number of written records left by the prophets that comprise a significant portion of Scripture. Some of the writings are shorter (cf. Obadiah), while others are lengthy (cf. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel). The zenith of the period of the prophets lies between 800 B.C.—400 B.C., during the period of the divided kingdom of Israel and Judah, through the period of Judah’s exile in Babylon.

A prophet is a mouthpiece for God, who “spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways” (Heb 1:1). The prophet was charged with a vital task of faithfully transmitted God’s inspired message to the targeted audience. Again, though Moses pointed ultimately to Jesus, the charge of every prophet was the same:

“I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. It shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of him. But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.” (Deut 18:18-20)

The prophets were sent to the people during tumultuous times. This was not for the light of heart, for their messages were indeed heavy and, sometimes, harsh. Yet this is what it took to wake up a people who had forgotten their covenant with Yahweh.

Each prophet was unique in message and presentation. Though they each have their own contexts and were sent to different groups of people at different times, they also share some common, well-recognized themes. We can boil these themes down to the following three:

**1. The Covenant.** The people are in trouble because they had broken the covenant. God was longsuffering with them, but the prophets came to tell the people that God was not happy about the way they were treating Him and the covenant under which they were bound. Isaiah says it this way:

“The earth is also polluted by its inhabitants, for they transgressed laws, violated statutes, broke the everlasting covenant. Therefore, a curse devours the earth, and those who live in it are held guilty” (Isa. 24:5-6).

God also had in mind to establish a new, better covenant under the Messiah. Jeremiah says, “Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (Jer 31:31). This found its fulfillment in Christ, as the writer of Hebrews shows (Heb 8).

**2. The Day of the Lord.** This is a day of visitation and judgment upon the nations. Really, anytime a nation faced such judgment, it was the “day of the Lord” for them. For example, Isaiah warned Babylon: “Wail, for the day of the Lord is near! It will come as destruction from the Almighty” (Isa 13:6). Ezekiel prophesied:

“For the day is near,  
Even the day of the Lord is near;  
It will be a day of clouds,  
A time of doom for the nations.  
“A sword will come upon Egypt,  
And anguish will be in Ethiopia;  
When the slain fall in Egypt,  
They take away her wealth,  
And her foundations are torn down.” (Ezek 30:3-4)

Every nation, including Israel and Judah, would face the day of the Lord if they failed to repent. The concept of repentance is key here: “For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies,” declares the Lord God. “Therefore, repent and live.” (Ezek 18:32)

**3. The Messiah.** The prophets pointed to the Messiah (Acts 3:19-26). They did this in different ways, whether through direct prophecy or through typological prophecy. Perhaps the most well-known of the Messianic prophecies coming from the prophets would come from Isaiah. Isaiah 53 is a monumental messianic prophecy of Christ’s death on behalf of the sins of the people.

“Surely our griefs He Himself bore,  
And our sorrows He carried;  
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,  
Smitten of God, and afflicted.  
But He was pierced through for our transgressions,  
He was crushed for our iniquities;  
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,  
And by His scourging we are healed.” (Isa 53:4-5)

Yet all the prophets in one way or another pointed to the Messiah. Jesus said that “all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44).

The prophets present great lessons for us even today. Let’s pay attention!

## The Judgment of Israel

Of the various kings and dynasties of the northern kingdom of Israel, not one was a good king. Some had the potential to do good and help get spiritual matters straightened out in the north, but they all failed to do so. Recall that when Jeroboam (the first) became king, he immediately began changing the religion of the people. He set up golden calves at Dan and Bethel, changed the priesthood, and changed the special days. From here, matters only worsened, and the spiral downward would not be stifled enough to ward off the impending judgment that would come.

Prophets were sent to Israel in order to warn the people of the judgment. The people had been guilty of idolatry (religious harlotry), of religious ritualism, and of social injustices. They were giving no indication that they were willing to turn back to Yahweh.

Hosea, using the imagery of the unfaithful wife, warned the people:

“Listen to the word of the Lord, O sons of Israel,  
For the Lord has a case against the inhabitants of the land,  
Because there is no faithfulness or kindness  
Or knowledge of God in the land.  
There is swearing, deception, murder, stealing and adultery.  
They employ violence, so that bloodshed follows bloodshed.  
Therefore the land mourns...” (4:1-3)

“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.  
Because you have rejected knowledge,  
I also will reject you from being My priest.  
Since you have forgotten the law of your God,  
I also will forget your children.  
The more they multiplied, the more they sinned against Me;  
I will change their glory into shame.” (4:6-7)

Likewise, Amos speaks bluntly of the impending judgment:

Thus says the Lord,  
“For three transgressions of Israel and for four  
I will not revoke its punishment...” (2:6)

Thus says the Lord,  
“Just as the shepherd snatches from the lion’s mouth a couple of legs or a piece of an ear,  
So will the sons of Israel dwelling in Samaria be snatched away—  
With the corner of a bed and the cover of a couch!  
“Hear and testify against the house of Jacob,”  
Declares the Lord God, the God of hosts.  
“For on the day that I punish Israel’s transgressions,

I will also punish the altars of Bethel;  
The horns of the altar will be cut off  
And they will fall to the ground.  
“I will also smite the winter house together with the summer house;  
The houses of ivory will also perish  
And the great houses will come to an end,”  
Declares the Lord. (3:12-15)

God gave the people time to repent. They knew better; they had been recipients of God’s covenant. However, they continually failed to listen, and soon their destruction would be complete. Amos describes a series of blessings that God had provided for them, then each time ends with the tragic phrase, “‘Yet you have not returned to Me,’ declares the Lord” (4:6-11). Consequently, this grave message was given: “Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel; because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel” (4:12).

2 Kings 17:7-19 gives a summary of the reasons why Israel fell (please read it). The passage spells out many of the sins committed against Yahweh. These verses can be summarized to demonstrate what happened:

1. They repeatedly sinned and served idols in spite of God telling and warning them not to.
2. God sent them prophets to tell them to repent of their sins.
3. They refused to listen, but continued to forsake God and His commandments.
4. Therefore, God was angry with them and removed them from His sight.

This is exactly what God warned about from the beginning of His covenant with them. “But it shall come about, if you do not obey the Lord your God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes with which I charge you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you...” (Deut. 28:15). God spelled out exactly what would happen. Nevertheless, they still refused to listen. “‘Yet you have not returned to Me,’ declares the Lord.”

Jeroboam II was the last of Jehu’s dynasty. Under him, Israel experienced an upturn in military strength, but spiritually remained destitute. Jeroboam died in ca. 753 B.C., and after him a series of weak kings reigned until the capital city of Samaria fell to the Assyrians in ca. 722-721 B.C. No matter the strength shown by Jeroboam II, the nation fell in less than 30 years after he died. No amount of strength can ward off judgment when the people are so intent on disobeying God.

The sad legacy of Israel is one of disobedience. It didn’t have to be that way. They could have stayed true to God and His covenant. Now the question is, what will we do with this information? Will we listen to the Lord? Will we stay true to our covenant with God?

## Reforms Under Hezekiah

By the time that Hezekiah ruled on the throne of Judah (ca. 715 B.C.), Isaiah had already been prophesying in order to point the people back to Yahweh. Israel in the north had finally fallen (ca. 722-1 B.C.), and Isaiah had been addressing Hezekiah's father, Ahaz, warning him not to put his trust in other nations. Ahaz paid little attention. Hezekiah, however, would pay attention and strive to turn the nation back to God.

When Hezekiah became king, "He did right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his father David had done. In the first year of his reign, in the first month, he opened the doors of the house of the Lord and repaired them. He brought in the priests and the Levites and gathered them into the square on the east" (2 Chr 29:2-3). He spoke to the Levites and told them, "our fathers have been unfaithful and have done evil in the sight of the Lord our God, and have forsaken Him and turned their faces away from the dwelling place of the Lord, and have turned their backs" (vs. 7). He recognized the consequences of God's anger and the breaking of the covenant, so he was intent: "Now it is in my heart to make a covenant with the Lord God of Israel, that His burning anger may turn away from us. My sons, do not be negligent now, for the Lord has chosen you to stand before Him, to minister to Him, and to be His ministers and burn incense" (vv. 10-11).

The Levites consecrated themselves, went into the temple and began to clean it out, including all that was considered unclean (that fact that any of that was in there shows their previous disrespect and negligence). They then reported back to Hezekiah what had been done. Now Hezekiah was in a position to restore the temple worship back to the way it was supposed to be. This included the priesthood, with the sons of Aaron, offering up appropriate sacrifices on the altar. "He then stationed the Levites in the house of the Lord with cymbals, with harps and with lyres, according to the command of David and of Gad the king's seer, and of Nathan the prophet; for the command was from the Lord through His prophets" (v. 25; we note here that the instruments were connected to the temple and its offerings, and was ultimately based on the command of God). With all of the years of neglect, the temple was once again being used for its intended purpose. "Thus the service of the house of the Lord was established again" (v. 35).

Once the temple was back in order, Hezekiah made plans to celebrate the Passover. As he did so, he wrote letters and invited Israelites surviving in the north, asking them to come and join with Judah. He pleaded with them to return back to Yahweh: "For if you return to the Lord, your brothers and your sons will find compassion before those who led them captive and will return to this land. For the Lord your God is gracious and compassionate, and will not turn His face away from you if you return to Him" (2 Chr 30:9). Some men from the north "humbled themselves and came to Jerusalem." Then the "hand of God was also on Judah to give them one heart to do what the king and the princes commanded by the word of the Lord" (vv. 11-12). They were acting according to God's word.

The effect of these reforms was great. "So there was great joy in Jerusalem, because there

was nothing like this in Jerusalem since the days of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel. Then the Levitical priests arose and blessed the people; and their voice was heard and their prayer came to His holy dwelling place, to heaven” (2 Chr 30:26-27). The reforms continued as the people began to break down the idols and high places.

The summary of Hezekiah’s work shows the commitment that he had: “Thus Hezekiah did throughout all Judah; and he did what was good, right and true before the Lord his God. Every work which he began in the service of the house of God in law and in commandment, seeking his God, he did with all his heart and prospered” (2 Chr 31:20-21).

Hezekiah would have to deal with trouble, too, but at least his commitment to doing what was right was both obvious and rewarded. Some time had passed since reforms like these had been seen in the land. He was able to return hearts back to Yahweh, which was not an easy task. There was finally a sense of faithfulness and recognition once again that they were the people of God and in covenant relationship with Him. Hezekiah stands out as one of the great kings primarily because of his reforms and his commitment to serve God with his whole heart. He wasn’t flawless, but he was commended by the Lord Himself as one who did good and right. This, in turn, serves as an example for us who strive to seek the Lord and be found faithful in Him.

## Decline in Judah

Judah lasted longer than Israel before destruction, but that time of judgment would also come for Judah. Men like Hezekiah and Josiah, due to their reformation efforts, were able to put it off a while, but decline in Judah would, nevertheless, come. The sad truth of this is seen in what Isaiah says:

Now go, write it on a tablet before them  
And inscribe it on a scroll,  
That it may serve in the time to come  
As a witness forever.  
For this is a rebellious people, false sons,  
Sons who refuse to listen  
To the instruction of the Lord;  
Who say to the seers, "You must not see visions";  
And to the prophets, "You must not prophesy to us what is right,  
Speak to us pleasant words,  
Prophesy illusions.  
"Get out of the way, turn aside from the path,  
Let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel." (Isa 30:8-11)

The same attitude toward God's message and messengers found in Israel prior to its destruction would also be found Judah. The only question would be when judgment would come.

Even though Hezekiah did right and demonstrated faith in Yahweh, one mistake that showed his pride was recorded in 2 Kings 20 and Isaiah 39. After Hezekiah's illness and recovery, envoys from Babylon came to visit. "Hezekiah was pleased, and showed them all his treasure house, the silver and the gold and the spices and the precious oil and his whole armory and all that was found in his treasuries. There was nothing in his house nor in all his dominion that Hezekiah did not show them" (Isa 39:2). Isaiah asked Hezekiah what these men had seen. Hezekiah essentially told Isaiah that they saw everything, to which Isaiah replied, "Hear the word of the Lord of hosts, 'Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house and all that your fathers have laid up in store to this day will be carried to Babylon; nothing will be left,' says the Lord" (Isa 39:5-6). In other words, here was the prophecy that Babylon would be the nation that would come to Jerusalem and carry everything away. However, this would not happen during Hezekiah's reign.

Sadly, Hezekiah's son, Manasseh, would not have the same godly attitude as his father. When Manasseh became king, "He did evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord dispossessed before the sons of Israel" (2 Kgs 21:2). He rebuilt the idolatrous high places that Hezekiah had destroyed, erected altars for Baal and Asherah, and put idolatrous altars in the temple of Yahweh. Like the pagans, he "made his son pass through the fire, practiced witchcraft and used divination, and dealt with mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the sight of the Lord provoking Him to

anger” (2 Kgs 21:6). The text says that Manasseh seduced Judah “to do evil more than the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the sons of Israel” (v. 9).

Manasseh’s wickedness over 55 years set Judah on a course from which they would not recover. Because of the sins of Manasseh, God promised that He would bring judgment upon Judah. “Behold, I am bringing such calamity on Jerusalem and Judah, that whoever hears of it, both his ears will tingle. I will stretch over Jerusalem the line of Samaria and the plummet of the house of Ahab, and I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down. I will abandon the remnant of My inheritance and deliver them into the hand of their enemies, and they will become as plunder and spoil to all their enemies; because they have done evil in My sight, and have been provoking Me to anger since the day their fathers came from Egypt, even to this day.” (2 Kgs 21:12-15) Manasseh personally repented at the end, but the damage was done.

Amon, Manasseh’s son, was not any better, but he didn’t last very long. Fortunately, the next in line, Josiah, was righteous and tried to turn the people back to Yahweh. However, these reforms were short-lived and quickly disappeared after Josiah was gone. Josiah served God with all his heart, but, again, the earlier damage was too great: “However, the Lord did not turn from the fierceness of His great wrath with which His anger burned against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked Him. The Lord said, ‘I will remove Judah also from My sight, as I have removed Israel. And I will cast off Jerusalem, this city which I have chosen, and the temple of which I said, ‘My name shall be there.’” (2 Kgs 23:26-27).

Even so, prophets like Isaiah still looked ahead past the downfall of Jerusalem to a future restoration. This restoration would happen in Jerusalem first, but ultimately he was pointing to the Messiah. Isaiah told the future generations:

“Comfort, O comfort My people,” says your God.  
“Speak kindly to Jerusalem;  
And call out to her, that her warfare has ended,  
That her iniquity has been removed,  
That she has received of the Lord’s hand  
Double for all her sins.” (Isa 40:1-2)

More to follow.

## Isaiah's Messianic Message

As a whole, the prophets point to Jesus Christ (Acts 3:24). Yet with all of the messianic messages throughout the prophets, there is a reason Isaiah is known for being a messianic prophet. His work is filled with strong messages and prophecies of the coming Messiah. As one put it, "Some of the most explicit messianic prophecies are found in Isaiah, and the New Testament quotes from Isaiah frequently."\* While Isaiah is often seen as divided into two or even three parts, there is a unifying message throughout and the New Testament attributes all of the parts to Isaiah.

The first 39 chapters are addressing Isaiah's contemporaries mostly. He is warning Judah, especially, of failing to trust in God. Given that Isaiah spanned the time in which Israel (the northern kingdom) was destroyed and taken captive by the Assyrians (ca. 722/1 B.C.), Isaiah was able to point to the sins of the north and warn the south (Judah) that if they followed that same path, they would wind up in the same situation. Sadly, that is exactly what happened.

From chapter 40 to the end, Isaiah looks ahead and speaks to those who would later be in Babylonian exile and beyond. While chapters 1-39 contain many messianic promises, chapters 40-66 especially point ahead to the restoration that would be found in Christ. Following is a brief overview, as it would be impossible here to detail all of the messianic pictures and prophecies in Isaiah.

Early on, Isaiah speaks to the character of the kingdom under the Messiah. Isaiah 2:2-4 promised the establishment of the "mountain of the house of the Lord" (i.e., God's government or kingdom) as something to which all nations would flow (a promise that looked to the gentiles joining with the Jews under Christ). The law would go forth from Jerusalem (cf. Acts 1:8) and the character of those entering would be one of peace, not warfare (cf. also Isa 11:6-10).

In the context of Isaiah telling Ahaz to trust Yahweh, the prophecy was made in 7:14 of the virgin who would bear a son called "Immanuel" (God with us). Matthew quoted this as being finally fulfilled in Jesus (Matt 1:23). Then, 9:6-7 speaks of the child that would be born as being "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." He would sit on the throne of David to rule over His kingdom in justice and righteousness (cf. Isa 16:5).

Later, in addressing Babylonian captives, Isaiah spoke of the "voice" that would be calling, "Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness..." (40:3-6). Matthew quoted this as a reference to John the Immerser, who would precede Jesus and prepare the way for Jesus to do His work. It is interesting that in these chapters of Isaiah, the prophet contrasts Yahweh as the true and living God with the idols that could do nothing. Clearly, if salvation were to be accomplished, it had to come from the one and only living God who could make it happen.

Isaiah 53 contains one of the clearest prophecies of the agony of the Messiah, who was known as the suffering Servant. Here we learn that there was nothing about His appearance that would draw people to Him (i.e., He likely looked like an average Jew). He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. He bore our sorrows, carried our iniquities, and was pierced and crushed for our transgressions. By His scourging, we are healed. We have all been like sheep going astray, but He was willing to have our iniquities fall on Him. He was like a lamb led to the slaughter. Yet God was satisfied with His sacrifice. “By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities” (v. 11). What a powerful testimony to the purpose of Jesus coming to die for our sins! Only by God’s inspiration could Isaiah have known that many years in advance what the Messiah, the suffering Servant, would one day go through so that He might intercede on behalf of sinners.

Isaiah 61 also points to the work of the Messiah’s message:

“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
Because the Lord has anointed me  
To bring good news to the afflicted;  
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
To proclaim liberty to captives  
And freedom to prisoners;  
To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord...” (Isa 61:1-2a).

This is the passage that Jesus quoted about Himself in Luke 4:18-19 as He began His public ministry. As everyone watched and listened, Jesus said of this passage, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (v. 21). Indeed, Isaiah’s messianic messages are all fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

While Isaiah issued strong condemnation against those who refused to repent of their idolatry, mere ritualism, and social injustices, he was also clear in the message about the future: the Messiah is coming and will restore the people back to Yahweh. Today, as Christians, we are participants in this fulfillment and restoration. God be praised!

\*Daniel Hays, *The Message of the Prophets* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 100.

## Josiah's Reforms

Hezekiah had set high standards for reform in Judah. However, Manasseh, his son, destroyed everything that Hezekiah had worked toward. This sent Judah down the path from which they would not completely recover. Manasseh repented, but the damage was done. After Manasseh, Amon became king, and he supported the evil ways that had been established. "He did evil in the sight of the Lord as Manasseh his father had done, and Amon sacrificed to all the carved images which his father Manasseh had made, and he served them. Moreover, he did not humble himself before the Lord as his father Manasseh had done, but Amon multiplied guilt" (2 Chr 33:22-23). Amon was assassinated, and Josiah became king.

Josiah was only 8 years old when he became king, and he reigned for 31 years. Josiah "did right in the sight of the Lord and walked in all the way of his father David, nor did he turn aside to the right or to the left" (2 Kgs 22:2). In some ways he was incomparable: "Before him there was no king like him who turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him" (2 Kgs 23:25). Yet, again, for all that Josiah did in trying to turn the hearts of the people back to God, "the Lord did not turn from the fierceness of His great wrath with which His anger burned against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked Him" (v. 26). The reforms of Josiah were great, but they were short-lived due to the hearts of the people who had imbibed so much wickedness.

As a young man in his teens, "he began to seek the God of his father David; and in the twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the Asherim, the carved images and the molten images" (2 Chr 34:3). They tore down the altars to Baal in his presence, cut down the incense altars, and broke in pieces and ground to powder the carved and molten images in order to spread these on the graves of those who had sacrificed to them (vs. 4). The text then says, "he burned the bones of the priests on their altars and purged Judah and Jerusalem" (v. 5). This is interesting because it is in fulfillment of a prophecy made in the days of Jeroboam I. Jeroboam had come to the altar at Bethel to burn incense (recall a golden calf had been set up there), and a "man of God" from Judah "cried against the altar by the word of the Lord, and said, 'O altar, altar, thus says the Lord, 'Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name; and on you he shall sacrifice the priests of the high places who burn incense on you, and human bones shall be burned on you'" (1 Kgs 13:2). Indeed, Josiah did just that.

The reforms of Josiah went well up into the "cities of Manasseh, Ephraim, Simeon, even as far as Naphtali, in their surrounding ruins, he also tore down the altars and beat the Asherim and the carved images into powder, and chopped down all the incense altars throughout the land of Israel" (2 Chr 34:6-7). He was personally overseeing this whole process.

Then Josiah set out to repair the temple, "the house of the Lord his God" (v. 8). Though Hezekiah had done the same, now many years had since passed and it had gone back into

disrepair. Hilkiah the priest was overseeing the project, and while they were bringing out the money which had been brought into the temple, he found the book of the law (v. 14). Shaphan brought the book to Josiah and read from it. “When the king heard the words of the law, he tore his clothes” (v. 19). Josiah commanded the priests to inquire of the Lord, recognizing that God’s wrath must have been great “because our fathers have not observed the word of the Lord, to do according to all that is written in this book” (v. 21).

God answered that He would still bring judgment upon Judah for their evil. However, God’s message to Josiah was one of peace, and it should teach us a valuable lesson:

“Because your heart was tender and you humbled yourself before God when you heard His words against this place and against its inhabitants, and because you humbled yourself before Me, tore your clothes and wept before Me, I truly have heard you,’ declares the Lord. ‘Behold, I will gather you to your fathers and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace, so your eyes will not see all the evil which I will bring on this place and on its inhabitants’” (vv. 27-28).

Josiah gathered all the people together, “from the greatest to the least,” went up to the house of the Lord, and he read the law to them and renewed the covenant. For the rest of his life, they were faithful.

## Jeremiah's Message

As a prophet, Jeremiah came onto the scene at about ca. 626 B.C. His work spanned the reigns of Josiah, Jehohaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah, and he was present at the destruction of Jerusalem in 586. His work continued when the governor, Gedaliah, was then appointed. When Gedaliah was assassinated, Jeremiah was taken, against his will, to Egypt into exile. The times in which Jeremiah lived and prophesied were the most difficult, and his message was quite unpopular. It is not difficult to see why Jeremiah was known as the weeping prophet. He endured much persecution and affliction, which itself foreshadows the suffering Messiah.

Jeremiah speaks directly to Judah during a time that should have been marked by renewed faithfulness. Josiah had initiated great reforms, but they did not last much past Josiah himself. Jeremiah, therefore, called upon the people to repent. They were guilty of being in violation of God's covenant, and if they failed to repent they would suffer the promised judgment, just as Israel in the north had to face so many years before. Even so, Jeremiah still looked ahead to the hope that would be found in the Messiah. In that way, his message matches the other prophets who focused on the same issues. Further, as is typical of the other prophets, Jeremiah looks back to the book of Deuteronomy as the primary text of the covenant. "Return, O faithless sons,' declares the Lord; For I am a master to you..." (3:14). Sadly, they did not return during Jeremiah's lifetime.

One of the unique aspects of Jeremiah is that the book "provides more insight into the prophet himself than does any other prophetic book."\* It is clear that Jeremiah had many fears and suffered much for his work. God tells him up front (1:8-10):

"Do not be afraid of them,  
For I am with you to deliver you," declares the Lord.  
Then the Lord stretched out His hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me,  
"Behold, I have put My words in your mouth.  
"See, I have appointed you this day over the nations and over the kingdoms,  
To pluck up and to break down,  
To destroy and to overthrow,  
To build and to plant."

Jeremiah had to be ready to suffer at the hands of those who were unwilling to hear the message of repentance. He is filled with lament over the sins of the people, and his emotional anguish is evident:

"Oh that my head were waters  
And my eyes a fountain of tears,  
That I might weep day and night  
For the slain of the daughter of my people!" (9:1)

For all of the indictments laid out against Judah, Jeremiah still looked forward to the days

of the Messiah. In one of the most well known messianic passages, Jeremiah points to the New Covenant:

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord. “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the Lord, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.” (31:31-34)

The writer of Hebrews quotes from this passage and shows how the new covenant under Christ was in fulfillment of this (Heb 8:7-13). In the same chapter of Jeremiah, God provides hope:

“Thus says the Lord,  
‘Restrain your voice from weeping  
And your eyes from tears;  
For your work will be rewarded,’ declares the Lord,  
‘And they will return from the land of the enemy.  
There is hope for your future,’ declares the Lord,  
‘And your children will return to their own territory’” (vv. 16-17).

Jeremiah thusly looked ahead to the restoration in the land, but even further to the restoration under the Messiah. That said, the book does focus a great deal on the judgment that would first take place. Before they would see any of the restoration promises, they would first experience the loss of the land and their loss of God’s fellowship. Then they would be restored: “For thus says the Lord, ‘When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place’” (29:10). God also promised that Babylon would be judged for her wickedness.

Much more needs to be said about Jeremiah, of course. Through his own personal suffering he preached a message of judgment and repentance. His lessons are still needed today.

\*Daniel Hays, *The Message of the Prophets* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 147.

## The Last Kings of Judah

Judah had an opportunity beyond Israel to continue in the land. Sadly, Judah watched her sister Israel plunge into destruction, and then she followed suit (Jer 3:6-10).

Consequently, Jeremiah prophesied that there would be period of 70 years in which Judah would go into Babylonian captivity (Jer 25:8-11). In 605 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar took the first group of captives from Judah to Babylon. Jerusalem itself would fall to destruction in 586 B.C., an event described by Jeremiah (ch. 52).

After Hezekiah reigned and set in order the reforms to help Judah, his wicked son Manasseh took over and destroyed everything that had been gained. For several decades, Manasseh practiced idolatry, including the evil of passing his children through the fire (child sacrifice). Because he plunged Judah so deeply into evil, they would not recover before being destroyed. Manasseh's son, Amon, was no better; he just didn't reign very long.

Then came Josiah. As previously seen, Josiah initiated a series of reforms that should have helped the nation. Sadly, it was only temporary. Though Josiah personally was righteous, the reforms did not ultimately penetrate the hearts of the people. As Jeremiah put it, "Judah did not return to Me with all her heart, but rather in deception" (Jer 3:10). God spared Josiah the pain of seeing what would happen next, but very soon after Josiah's death in 609 B.C., Judah would be going into captivity.

Josiah had three sons and one grandson who reigned in Jerusalem. First, Jehoahaz reigned for only 3 months. "He did evil in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his fathers had done" (2 Kgs 23:32). He was imprisoned by Pharaoh Neco of Egypt (who also killed Josiah). Neco then put Josiah's second son, Jehoiakim (a.k.a. Eliakim), on the throne, and Jehoiakim paid tribute to Egypt. He would reign for 11 years, but he, too, did evil in the sight of the Lord.

Jehoiakim was one of the kings who gave Jeremiah a difficult time. His attitude toward Jeremiah and the word of God is seen in Jeremiah 36. Jeremiah had his scribe, Baruch, write on a scroll the prophecies about Judah and take it to Jehoiakim. Jehoiakim's officials took it to him to read, but the king cut the scroll up and cast it into a fire (Jer. 36). The scroll was replaced, but the attitude of Jehoiakim toward God's message was clearly one of contempt.

Before Jehoiakim's reign ended, the Babylonians gained control of Judah, forcing Jehoiakim to submit to Nebuchadnezzar, though he tried to rebel. When he died, his son, Jehoiachin was made king. He also did evil, and he only lasted three months before he was taken as a captive into Babylon in 597 B.C. One interesting note about Jehoiachin is that he was later treated with some kindness, and there is record of his being on the rations list of Babylonian captives. The very end of Jeremiah records that he took his meals in the king's presence and was given an allowance.

When Jehoiachin was taken, Nebuchadnezzar set Zedekiah (a.k.a. Mattaniah) on the throne as a vassal. Zedekiah was Jehoiachin's uncle, Jehoiakim's brother, and Josiah's son. He reigned 11 years in Jerusalem, but was under the thumb of Babylon. The text tells us, "He did evil in the sight of the Lord, according to all that Jehoiakim had done. For through the anger of the Lord this came about in Jerusalem and Judah until He cast them out from His presence" (2 Kings 24:19-20). Zedekiah then tried to rebel against Babylon, and what happened next was not pretty. 2 Kings 25:1-7 describes the scenario:

"Now in the ninth year of his reign, on the tenth day of the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came, he and all his army, against Jerusalem, camped against it and built a siege wall all around it. So the city was under siege until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah. On the ninth day of the fourth month the famine was so severe in the city that there was no food for the people of the land. Then the city was broken into, and all the men of war fled by night by way of the gate between the two walls beside the king's garden, though the Chaldeans were all around the city. And they went by way of the Arabah. But the army of the Chaldeans pursued the king and overtook him in the plains of Jericho and all his army was scattered from him. Then they captured the king and brought him to the king of Babylon at Riblah, and he passed sentence on him. They slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, then put out the eyes of Zedekiah and bound him with bronze fetters and brought him to Babylon."

Subsequently, the city of Jerusalem was burned to the ground, as was the temple, the king's house, and all the great houses. All that the prophets had predicted concerning Jerusalem happened. Jeremiah wrote about the fallen city in Lamentations. After this, Gedaliah was made governor, but was soon assassinated. Jeremiah was taken to Egypt into exile. Judah was indeed fallen. Even so, there was still hope. Restoration would be coming.

## Daniel's Message

Judah was now in captivity. Their sins had finally led them to this point. At the beginning of the captivity, around 605 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem and took some young men who were to be trained to serve in the Babylonian king's court (Dan 1). Among these youths were Daniel and three others. The king had choice food that he wanted these youths to eat, "but Daniel made up his mind that he would not defile himself with the king's choice food or with the wine which he drank; so he sought permission from the commander of the officials that he might not defile himself" (1:8).

God granted Daniel favor and compassion in the eyes of the commander, and Daniel convinced him to let them eat vegetables and drink water for ten days. At the end of that time, they were in better shape than those who ate the king's food. Daniel, with his friends (Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah) showed more wisdom than all others, and they entered the king's personal service.

What really set Daniel apart, in addition to his unwavering faithfulness, was his God-given ability to interpret dreams. Nebuchadnezzar had a troublesome dream that his own wise men could not interpret, so Daniel was called in. Daniel 2 records Nebuchadnezzar's dream of a large statue made of different elements. Daniel was able to interpret the dream and show that the different parts of the statue stood for differing kingdoms. Then, in the dream, the stone that struck and destroyed the statue stood for God's kingdom:

"In the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever" (Dan 2:44).

Daniel was promoted, and he played a prominent role in the court. His friends also made a tremendous impact on the king because of their faithfulness (ch. 3). What all of this pointed to was God's power and rule. Chapter 4 describes more visions of Nebuchadnezzar that were interpreted by Daniel. These visions meant that Nebuchadnezzar would fall from pride and power. He would return, but he would finally recognize "that it is Heaven that rules" (4:26).

The dreams were fulfilled, and when Nebuchadnezzar came to his senses, he recognized God's authority. This leads to a primary theme of Daniel: God rules in the kingdoms of men. Nebuchadnezzar saw this and said:

"blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever;  
For His dominion is an everlasting dominion,  
And His kingdom endures from generation to generation.  
All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,  
But He does according to His will in the host of heaven  
And among the inhabitants of earth;  
And no one can ward off His hand

Or say to Him, ‘What have You done?’” (4:34-35)

“Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise, exalt and honor the King of heaven, for all His works are true and His ways just, and He is able to humble those who walk in pride” (v. 37).

This theme stretches across the book of Daniel. Daniel himself was the living testimony of the truth that God was in control. This is seen in the changing over of kingdoms (ch. 5), Daniel’s survival in the lion’s den (ch. 6), and the subsequent visions that demonstrate God’s sovereign power over the nations.

From chapters 7 to the end, Daniel contains a great deal of symbolism, and it was very alarming to Daniel. Among these, Daniel saw the vision of the Son of Man figure:

“And He came up to the Ancient of Days  
And was presented before Him.  
And to Him was given dominion,  
Glory and a kingdom,  
That all the peoples, nations and men of every language  
Might serve Him.  
His dominion is an everlasting dominion  
Which will not pass away;  
And His kingdom is one  
Which will not be destroyed.” (7:13-14)

The messianic implications are clear. Jesus, the Son of Man and Son of God, would rule over His kingdom. The various visions that included beasts, rams, and goats would represent various nations and rulers of the earth, including those among the Persians, Greeks, and Romans. The unfolding of what would happen through the nations is remarkably detailed and accurate.

Daniel also prays for the nation. Recognizing the sins of the people that brought them into captivity, Daniel prayed for forgiveness and healing. “O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and take action! For Your own sake, O my God, do not delay, because Your city and Your people are called by Your name” (9:19). Daniel’s prayer is answered by the angel Gabriel.

At the end, a great statement of resurrection is found: “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt” (12:2; cf. John 5:28-29). There is far more in the book of Daniel than can be easily summarized, but let’s remember for now that all of it supports the point that God rules in the kingdoms of men, and His kingdom established through the Messiah would crush all others.

## Ezekiel's Message

Ezekiel is one of the prophets of the Babylonian exile. Indications are that he would have been among the captives taken in 597 B.C. He was still a relatively young man and married, but his wife died while in captivity. While Daniel's message was to the Babylonian administration, Ezekiel's message was to the Jewish captives directly. The time given by Ezekiel for when the word of the Lord came to him would be at about 592 B.C. (1:1-2).

The theme of the book of Ezekiel is, essentially, the Glory of the Lord. The opening visions of the book are about God's glory. They would have been overwhelming to behold. Imagine a storm with bright light flashing. Figures resembling four living beings appear. They had human-like forms, but with four wings. The face of each looked like a man, a lion, a bull, and an eagle. Two wings were spread out to touch one another, and the other two wings covered their bodies. In their midst were burning coals, lit up, darting back and forth while the living beings also ran "to and fro like bolts of lightning" (1:14). Each had a wheel next to them, full of eyes, and they moved with the creatures. Over their heads was an expanse, then a sound like the voice of the Almighty, then a throne. A figure appears, lit up with radiance, and this was the Glory of Yahweh. Ezekiel fell to his face.

That opening scene sets the stage for the rest of the book (compare with Isaiah 6 and Revelation). God then called Ezekiel and told him:

"I am sending you to them who are stubborn and obstinate children, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God.' As for them, whether they listen or not—for they are a rebellious house—they will know that a prophet has been among them. And you, son of man, neither fear them nor fear their words, though thistles and thorns are with you and you sit on scorpions; neither fear their words nor be dismayed at their presence, for they are a rebellious house. But you shall speak My words to them whether they listen or not, for they are rebellious." (2:4-7)

Ezekiel was given the commission to be a "watchman" to the house of Israel, to give them the warnings they needed to hear. As with other prophets, his was a message of repentance. In a nutshell, the message is this: if the wicked man turns from wickedness, he can be blessed. If the righteous man turns from righteousness, he will die (see ch. 3).

In chapters 4-7, Ezekiel speaks of the coming destruction of Jerusalem. Bearing in mind that Ezekiel began in 592 B.C., and Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 B.C., there is some time in which he can address that coming situation. Why would Jerusalem be destroyed? Because "she has rebelled against My ordinances more wickedly than the nations and against My statutes more than the lands which surround her; for they have rejected My ordinances and have not walked in My statutes" (5:6).

Sadly, for all the wickedness practiced by God's people, His glory would leave the temple

(ch. 10). We find one of the saddest descriptions of this process in chapter 10. “Then the glory of the Lord departed from the threshold of the temple...” (v. 18). What had long been feared finally happened, and it happened only because the people failed to keep God’s covenant, then failed to repent when they had the opportunity.

A great deal of symbolism permeates Ezekiel, and this is part of what serves as the background to the New Testament book of Revelation. Even so, the message is clear. Israel was in captivity because they followed the path of sin and rebellion. Yet, there would still be hope in the future. After the fall of Jerusalem, there is restoration to come.

One of the great pictures of restoration is found in chapter 37, wherein we find that great depiction of the valley of dry bones and resurrection. Ezekiel is taken to this valley where he sees all of these dry bones spread out. He prophesied over the bones and they began to pull back together, with sinew and then flesh. Then life is breathed into them. This represented what God would do with His people. Israel and Judah would be reunited and one day the Davidic kingdom would be restored (through Christ). God’s dwelling place would once again be with His people.

By the end of the book, the focus is back on the temple. “Then he led me to the gate, the gate facing toward the east; and behold, the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the way of the east. And His voice was like the sound of many waters; and the earth shone with His glory (43:1-2). The temple and city are rebuilt, and the final words are these: “Yahweh is there” (48:35). Restoration is complete.

As a final thought, bear in mind that Christians now comprise God’s temple (Eph 2:19-22). We are part of this great restoration who serve under the Davidic King Jesus, and our job is to glorify Him (1 Pet 2:9). What a powerful mission!

## Lament for Jerusalem

After all of the warnings that had been given by prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the city of Jerusalem would finally fall in ca. 586 B.C. “The city has been taken” (Ezek 33:21). The captain of Nebuchadnezzar’s army, Nebuzaradan, “burned the house of the Lord, the king’s house, and all the houses of Jerusalem; even every great house he burned with fire. So all the army of the Chaldeans who were with the captain of the guard broke down the walls around Jerusalem. Then the rest of the people who were left in the city and the deserters who had deserted to the king of Babylon and the rest of the people, Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried away into exile” (2 Kings 25:9-11). Some of the poorest of the land were left to be “vinedressers and plowmen” (v. 12). Zedekiah was taken, and Gedaliah was made governor of the area, though he would be assassinated.

Imagine how Jeremiah felt after all of this. For years he had poured himself out in God’s service trying to get the people to listen and repent. He was persecuted, threatened, and lived a life of sorrows. Even though he knew people wouldn’t listen, he continued boldly proclaiming the truth about the people and the city. Even so, the destruction still came just as prophesied. Jeremiah had every right to be angry and sorrowful at the same time. His sorry is most prominent, and we hear the great sorrow manifested in what we know as the book of Lamentations. The opening words tell the story of desolation:

How lonely sits the city  
That was full of people!  
She has become like a widow  
Who was once great among the nations!  
She who was a princess among the provinces  
Has become a forced laborer!  
She weeps bitterly in the night  
And her tears are on her cheeks;  
She has none to comfort her  
Among all her lovers.  
All her friends have dealt treacherously with her;  
They have become her enemies.  
Judah has gone into exile under affliction  
And under harsh servitude;  
She dwells among the nations,  
But she has found no rest;  
All her pursuers have overtaken her  
In the midst of distress. (Lam 1:1-3)

Why did this happen? By this time the story should be well known: sin and the failure to repent. Israel in the north was destroyed because of their unfaithfulness to the covenant. Judah saw it happen, yet still followed in the very same path despite the warnings (Jer 3:6-10). Jerusalem fell because she “sinned greatly” and became an “unclean thing” (1:8). Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel had gone into great detail about the nature of the sins of those in

Jerusalem. The idolatry, injustices, and ritualism had finally caught up with them. None of what happened next should have been a surprise. God spelled it out, and He kept His word. Jeremiah's distress and sorrow was in full view.

They have heard that I groan;  
There is no one to comfort me;  
All my enemies have heard of my calamity;  
They are glad that You have done it (1:21).

The message of the prophets did contain hard words of judgment. God meant business when He warned them, and they should have known better. Yet the prophetic messages also contained words of hope, restoration, and renewal, all of which would culminate in the coming of the Messiah. Hope, as with judgment, was based upon the faithfulness of God. If God said it would happen, it would happen.

This I recall to my mind,  
Therefore I have hope.  
The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease,  
For His compassions never fail.  
They are new every morning;  
Great is Your faithfulness.  
"The Lord is my portion," says my soul,  
"Therefore I have hope in Him."  
The Lord is good to those who wait for Him,  
To the person who seeks Him.  
It is good that he waits silently  
For the salvation of the Lord. (3:21-26)

Ezekiel, likewise, pointed to better days (34:12-13). God would indeed restore His people, but it would be several years yet before He made that happen. Jeremiah ended his lamentations with a recognition of God's rule and a plea for that restoration to come:

You, O Lord, rule forever;  
Your throne is from generation to generation.  
Why do You forget us forever?  
Why do You forsake us so long?  
Restore us to You, O Lord, that we may be restored;  
Renew our days as of old,  
Unless You have utterly rejected us  
And are exceedingly angry with us. (5:19-22)

While sin keeps us from God, He does reach out to restore through Christ. Thank God for His lovingkindness!

## Hope for Restoration

The prophets were known for telling the people that they had broken God's covenant. As the time came for the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., Jeremiah and Ezekiel were clear about this. Jeremiah said, "They have turned back to the iniquities of their ancestors who refused to hear My words, and they have gone after other gods to serve them; the house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken My covenant which I made with their fathers" (Jer 9:10). Ezekiel, likewise, said, "For thus says the Lord God, 'I will also do with you as you have done, you who have despised the oath by breaking the covenant'" (Ezek 16:59). This is why Jerusalem fell, and this is why the people went into captivity. They broke the covenant and refused to repent, but that's not the end of the story.

The prophets interspersed the messages of judgment and repentance with glimpses of hope. This hope would be found both in the initial return from captivity and in the future coming of the Messiah. Jeremiah spoke of the new covenant that would be made (31:31-34), and he also spoke of the hope of initial restoration:

"For thus says the Lord, 'When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you,' declares the Lord, 'and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,' declares the Lord, 'and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile.'" (Jer 29:10-14)

God would bring His people back out of the captivity and restore them to their place. To illustrate the power of this hope, let's return briefly to a couple of the visions of Ezekiel:

1. Ezekiel 37 describes the valley of the dry bones. The point of this was to point to the future restoration of the people, to bring them to life once again. Only God would have the power to do this.

2. Then, Ezekiel spends much time on the restoration of the temple from chapter 40 and following. This included sacrifices, the priesthood, and the ordinances. Most importantly, it was a depiction of the return of God's glory and presence in and among the people. "Then I heard one speaking to me from the house, while a man was standing beside me. He said to me, 'Son of man, this is the place of My throne and the place of the soles of My feet, where I will dwell among the sons of Israel forever...'" (Ezek 43:6-7a).

Ultimately, these restoration promises are fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah. Ezekiel ends his message with the words, "The Lord is there" (Ezek 48:35). This is echoed in the promise of Isaiah, that the son to be born is Immanuel, God with us (Isa 7:14; Matt 1:23). Jesus was God manifested in the flesh, and He "dwelt" (tabernacled) among us, demonstrating the glory of God (John 1:14, 18).

Waiting for the fulfillment of hope is difficult. God's people needed patience, especially when they didn't understand exactly what God's purposes and time-frame were going to be. The prophets themselves often wanted to understand and know more than they did (see 1 Peter 1:10-12). Yet they needed to be still and wait on the Lord (recall Habakkuk's message).

As Jeremiah walked through the broken down and burned city of Jerusalem, he was deeply sorrowful and downtrodden. Yet even in the midst of this, he could recall the words that would help provide a sense of hope. He knew that judgment had to happen, but he also was well aware of the promises of restoration. Couple that with the fact that God is always faithful to His word, and we know why he could say this:

This I recall to my mind,  
Therefore I have hope.  
The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease,  
For His compassions never fail.  
They are new every morning;  
Great is Your faithfulness.  
"The Lord is my portion," says my soul,  
"Therefore I have hope in Him. (Lam 3:21-24)

For God's people today, we are also aware of judgment to come (Acts 17:30-31). Even so, we serve the Lord in hope because we have been born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Pet 1:3-5). With this hope in place, we can endure the difficulties of the present and future, knowing something far better is coming. "For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come" (Heb 13:14).

## Overview of Job

The book of Job is unique among all the books of Scripture, probing questions concerning suffering and God in ways that none other do. The events of the book may date to the time of Abraham or before, during what we typically know as the “Patriarchal age,” and prior to the giving of the Law of Moses. No one knows for sure when it was written, or who exactly wrote it. Yet its character and content is a powerful and inspired testimony to God’s greatness and wisdom.

Job lived in a place called Uz. He is described as a man who was “blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil.” He was also a very wealthy man, “the greatest of all the men in the east” (Job 1:1-3). It seems that Job had it all, and he wasn’t taking it for granted as he continually served God.

Job’s story is told in a way that gives the reader more information than Job had. Job could not see behind the scenes. He did not know about Satan’s plan to attempt to make Job turn from God. Satan stood before God making accusations against Job as being one who served God only because it paid him to do so (Job 1:9-10). If Job were to lose his possessions and family, then he would curse God, Satan argued. God expressed confidence in Job and allowed the testing, and Job responded by worshiping God. Satan then argued that if Job himself were to suffer, then he would curse God. God allowed Satan to test Job by not only taking his possessions and family, but also by causing great physical suffering for Job himself. This sets the scene for the rest of the book.

Job lost his children, but his wife remained, and she told him to curse God and die. She was no help to Job in this situation. Then Job had three friends who came to comfort him. They sat silent for seven days before they spoke up, but when they did speak up, they were little help to Job due to their own faulty assumptions about suffering and God. From chapter three on, the book records the conversations that took place between Job, his friends, Elihu, and God.

Job was suffering tremendous pain emotionally and physically. He had lost his children and possessions. He was in a terrible state physically. His wife had told him to curse God and die. His friends would begin to accuse him of sin. How would our faith hold up under such circumstances? What would we say to another who suffered like this? What would we want to say to God?

Job’s friends appeared to have good motives. After all, how many would travel their distance and sit for a week without saying anything in order to comfort one in pain? Job, however, broke the silence. He spoke against the day he was born, expressing his deep turmoil. This opened the door for the friends to speak up and express their views about the reason Job was suffering. The pattern is that the friends speak, then Job answers. There are three rounds in which this happens.

The theological position of the three friends is that suffering is caused by one’s personal

sin. Since Job was suffering so greatly, then he must have done something horrible or committed some terrible sins. It only made sense to them that this was the case, and from their perspective, they were pleading with Job to confess and repent if he wanted to avoid further suffering. Job, however, knew better, defending his innocence against their charges. He didn't know why he was suffering, but he knew he wasn't guilty of what they were charging. It appears that one of Job's challenges was to adjust his own view of suffering. Though he expressed continued faith in God, he did question God's justice and wondered why God had allowed this to happen to him.

Elihu, a younger man listening to the discussion, stepped in to defend God and rebuke Job. Finally, God Himself appeared and spoke, showing that none of them knew as much as they thought they did. He humbled them all and began to question Job: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding" (38:4).

The book deals with the problem of suffering, but does not give us all the answers we may like to have. Instead of God telling Job why he was suffering, God tells Job that he doesn't know all the factors and reasons why He may allow certain things to happen. The answer is to trust God who remains in control and can make things work out even through great difficulties. Even now, we need to trust God in His wisdom and power to do what is right. In the end, Job repented of his false conclusions and his questioning of God's justice, and he was restored to a greater position than before.

Job remains a great book of comfort. Yet it's greatest feature is to give us a renewed perspective on God. "As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives."

## Returning from Captivity

Babylon had been a strong nation for a short time, but they, too, would be judged by God. Nebuchadnezzar witnessed the power and rule of God first hand. He knew of Daniel's ability to interpret dreams (Dan 2), and he saw what happened when he tried to put Shadrach, Meshach, and Adednego to death (Dan 3). He also lost his own power for a time until he finally came to the realization that Yahweh really did reign in the kingdoms of men (Dan 4). Yet soon after Nebuchadnezzar's death, Babylon as a nation would collapse. Daniel 5 records the "writing on the wall" when Belshazzar was throwing a party, and that very night the Medo-Persians took Babylon with little resistance. Even after the change of empires, Daniel played an important role in what would happen. God continued to demonstrate His power through Daniel by keeping Daniel safe in the lion's den and making the future of the nations known. The era of Babylon was over, and a new era for God's people and the nations would begin. God's plans were still intact.

Isaiah had long before prophesied of Cyrus, the ruler of the Persian Empire (Isa 44:24-45:7). Cyrus was anointed by God to fulfill a specific task in God's purposes. Specifically, Cyrus would be the one to issue the decree that allowed God's people to return back to the land. Further, the time given by Jeremiah (25:11) was also coming to an end. The time had come for restoration to begin.

Shortly after Cyrus took over in ca. 538 B.C., he issued a decree that would profoundly affect Israel:

"Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem." (Ezra 1:2-4)

While Cyrus was not a worshiper only of Yahweh, he still saw himself as an agent for Yahweh in bringing about this circumstance for them to return to their homeland. Yet he did not just tell them to go then bid them good riddance. He gave them assistance and returned to them items that belonged to the temple. Cyrus authorized them to go home and rebuild the temple, giving them the freedom to worship the Lord as they had previously done.

Over 42,000 Jews would return to the land under the leadership of the appointed governor, Sheshbazzar (perhaps another name for Zerubbabel). When they arrived, some immediately began to give free will offerings toward the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 2:68-69). The priests, levites, and others began to settle "in their towns, and all the rest of Israel in their towns" (Ezra 2:70). With Joshua, the high priest, "they built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of

God” (Ezra 3:2). They had an immediate concern for following the Law, but all of it was still “according to the grant that they had from Cyrus king of Persia” (3:7).

They started the process of rebuilding the temple itself by first laying the foundation (Ezra 3:10). As this was done, there was joy and praise as they did these according to the directions of David. “They sang, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, saying, ‘For He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever.’ And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid” (Ezra 3:10-11).

There was both joy and sorrow at this occasion. The older ones who had seen the first temple wept, knowing what had been, while others shouted for joy. The sound was loud and indistinguishable between the weeping and the shouting.

Trouble was soon the horizon, however. Some of the old enemies of Judah heard what was happening, and they approached Zerubbabel about participating. Zerubbabel responded, “You have nothing in common with us in building a house to our God; but we ourselves will together build to the Lord God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia has commanded us” (Ezra 4:3). Consequently, “the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and frightened them from building, and hired counselors against them to frustrate their counsel all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia” (vv. 4-5). As a result, God’s people stopped the building project, and it sat for several years before they would return to it.

Not all was lost. God still had more to say about His plans for His people.

## Rebuilding the Temple

Cyrus of Persia authorized the initial return for God's people from Babylonian captivity shortly after taking Babylon. He specifically was allowing them to return home so that they could rebuild their temple (Ezra 1:4). Under Zerubbabel, they did return and started by laying the foundation of the temple. However, due to problems involving those who were already there in the land, the construction came to a halt. This resulted in several years in which the building of the temple project was frozen. Nothing was happening.

Later, when they did start rebuilding again, more opposition came. By this time, Cyrus was gone and King Darius (not to be confused with the Darius mentioned in Daniel) had to reconfirm the order that Cyrus had given over a decade earlier. Darius issued his own decree, and work on the temple in Jerusalem started once again.

The work, however, was not just about what the Persians allowed. Ezra records, "the elders of the Jews were successful in building through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they finished building according to the command of the God of Israel and the decree of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia" (6:14). Note the credit given to the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. Let's overview these prophets.

### Haggai

Haggai began his work in the second year of Darius of Persia, and his message was given to Zerubbabel (the governor) and Joshua (the high priest). His was a narrow, straightforward message: get up from your complacency and get to work on the temple! Haggai exposed their priorities as being more focused on themselves rather than on God.

"Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'This people says, 'The time has not come, even the time for the house of the Lord to be rebuilt.'" Then the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, saying, 'Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house lies desolate?' Now therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, 'Consider your ways!'" (Hag 1:2-5)

*Consider* is an important term used at least four times in the book (1:5, 7; 2:15, 18). They needed to think seriously about what they were doing. God promised that He would still be with them (1:13), and the people listened: "they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God" (1:14).

Though the glory of new physical temple would not match the old, the Lord was still with them. "My Spirit is abiding in your midst; do not fear!" (2:5) Then, God tells them, "'The latter glory of this house will be greater than the former,' says the Lord of hosts, 'and in this place I will give peace,' declares the Lord of hosts'" (2:9). The messianic message here rings loud and clear. By the end, Zerubbabel becomes a type of the coming Messiah.

## **Zechariah**

Zechariah means, “Yahweh remembers.” His message begins with a strong appeal: “The Lord was very angry with your fathers. Therefore say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts, “Return to Me,” declares the Lord of hosts, “that I may return to you,” says the Lord of hosts.’” (1:2-3) He pleads with them not to be like their forefathers who had refused to listen to the warnings of the prophets. God had dealt with the people exactly as promised, and now was the time for restoration.

Recall that the temple was supposed to be about the presence of God, so rebuilding the temple was important for reestablishing that idea. Zechariah encourages the people through a series of visions indicating that restoration and justice would be established once again. Judgment would be rendered against evil doers, and they would overcome to be able to finish the temple.

By the end of the first section, several important messages have surfaced:

First, there is the symbolic unifying of the priesthood with the kingship (6:9-15). The “Branch” (the Messiah) is pictured as a priest sitting on His throne so that “the counsel of peace will be between the two offices” (v. 13).

Second, justice and mercy were still major concerns. “Dispense true justice and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother” (7:9) was the message, and the prior generation didn’t listen. Now they had an opportunity to change.

Third, there would be future restoration, a message again filled with messianic overtones. “Thus says the Lord, ‘I will return to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the City of Truth, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts will be called the Holy Mountain’” (8:3).

In the latter part of the book (chs. 9-14), there are many connections to the Messiah, and the gospels quote from these. For example, we should recognize this:

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!  
Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem!  
Behold, your king is coming to you;  
He is just and endowed with salvation,  
Humble, and mounted on a donkey,  
Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” (9:9)

Together, Haggai and Zechariah were successful in helping get the people back to work and get the temple finished.

## Esther

Esther's place in history is significant, though perhaps underrated. She appeared on the scene during the reign of the Persian King Ahasuerus (also known as Xerxes or, as the LXX has it, Artaxerxes). He was the son of Darius the Great and reigned from ca. 486 to 465 B.C. This was about 100 years after the temple was destroyed, and about 30 years after it was rebuilt in Jerusalem. This would have been a few years before Ezra returned to Jerusalem (ca. 458 B.C.) and Nehemiah returned to rebuild the city walls (ca. 445 B.C.). The book, overall, demonstrates how Esther filled a vital role in helping to save the Jews from a devious attempt at annihilation.

One of the issues often raised from the book of Esther is that the name of God does not appear. However, that should not be mistaken for thinking that God is not present in the actions that take place. There can be little doubt that this book is about God's providence in sparing His people from almost certain destruction. In that sense, the book mirrors other failed attempts in history to destroy God's people.

Esther was a beautiful, young Jewish lady who had no expectations to rise to such a great position as Queen of Persia. What brought about the circumstances that allowed Esther to be so influential? The text tells us that the king gave a fancy banquet, and the wine was plentiful. Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for women. On the seventh day of the banquet, his heart "merry with wine," the king ordered Vashti to come in and display her beauty. She refused, and the king, in his anger, banished Vashti from his presence.

Shortly after, they began searching for another young, beautiful woman to be the Queen. At this point we are introduced to Mordecai, a descendant of one who had been taken as a captive from Jerusalem. He had charge over Esther (Hadassah), for she was a relative but had no mother or father to take care of her. She was one of the young ladies to be brought before the king. She became quite favored among the women and was taken in by the king. However, her national identity as a Jew was hidden because Mordecai told her not to tell, and he continued checking on her welfare. Since the king loved Esther more than all the others, he made her his Queen.

At this point, we are told about a plot to kill the king. Mordecai happened to overhear the plans. He told Esther, and she informed the king in Mordecai's name (2:22). The perpetrators were found and put to death, and all of this, including Mordecai's name, was written in the king's chronicles. This sets the stage for the rest of the narrative.

Enter Haman, a man who rose in the ranks of authority over all the princes to become the king's right-hand man. When he went out, he expected people to bow down to him. After all, the king had ordered it. However, Mordecai refused to bow because he was a Jew (think of what the Law taught), and this caused Haman to be furious. Rather than just punish Mordecai, he "sought to destroy all the Jews" (3:7). The plot was turned into a law, and the decree went out "to destroy, to kill and to annihilate all the Jews" on a particular day. This could not be overturned.

Mordecai learned about this and was very sorrowful over it. He was able to inform Esther about the plans, and she was reluctant at first to try to see the king about it. Mordecai reminded her: “Do not imagine that you in the king’s palace can escape any more than all the Jews. 14 For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?” (4:13-14)

Esther responded positively and resolved to do something about it, regardless of the consequences. Esther invited both the king and Haman to two banquets. Haman was proud, but again when he saw Mordecai became angry. He decided to try to kill Mordecai. With the advise of his wife, Haman made large gallows on which to hang Mordecai.

One night, the king could not sleep. By reading his chronicles, Mordecai’s name came up and the king determined to honor him. He asked Haman how a man should be honored, and Haman described what should be done thinking the king was talking about him. When it turned out to be about Mordecai, Haman was mortified as he had to carry out the honor.

At the second banquet, Esther revealed that Haman’s plot would destroy her people. Haman was declared an enemy, and was hanged on his own gallows; Mordecai was given Haman’s position. The Jews were allowed to protect themselves, and they were spared. Esther showed great wisdom and courage. Because of the events recorded in this book, the Feast of Purim was instituted, and is still observed.

Ironies abound in Esther. God was clearly active in the events, and they show how God can use individuals to accomplish great things for His people.

## **Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi**

Jeremiah had prophesied 70 years of captivity for the Jews. The captivity began ca. 606-605 BC, and for about the next 70 years, God's people would be exiled in Babylon because of their sins. The Babylonian empire was overtaken by the Medo-Persians. When Cyrus became king, he issued a declaration of restoration for the Jews that would free them up to return to Jerusalem and start rebuilding what they had lost. This decree from Cyrus fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy some many years earlier (Isa 44:26-45:1). The return to Jerusalem started ca. 538-536 BC.

After the temple was rebuilt, the work in Jerusalem was not yet done. More men would help influence the direction of the people under God's care. Here are three significant voices during this time:

### **Ezra**

Ezra the priest returned to Jerusalem in about 458 BC., some 80 years after the initial decree from Cyrus (and just shortly after the time of Esther). Ezra's mission was to reform the spiritual condition of the people, to teach the law of God, and restore proper worship (see 7:10). He is often credited with recording and bringing together much of the Old Testament Scriptures.

Ezra discusses the time of the initial restoration. Under the leadership of Zerubbabel, the appointed governor, many of the people returned to Palestine and started rebuilding the temple. Because of opposition, they stopped building for about 15 years. Under the urging of Haggai and Zechariah, and with the support of Darius the Persian King, they finally finished the temple in about 516 BC.

When Ezra arrived, he found the spiritual condition of the people unacceptable. Many of the priests and leaders had entered into marriages that God had forbidden. They married idolatrous, foreign wives, and were in danger of being right back in the condition they were in before captivity. Under Ezra's leadership, this was remedied, and the people could get back on the right path once again.

### **Nehemiah**

Just a few years after Ezra returned to reform the spiritual condition of the Jews, Nehemiah returned to rebuild the walls of the city (ca. 445-425 BC). Together, Ezra and Nehemiah helped to restore the spiritual and political state of the Jews.

Nehemiah was a cupbearer to the king of Persia. He heard that the walls of Jerusalem were still laid waste, and this troubled him greatly. As he stood before the king, the king noticed his sadness, and asked what the problem was. Nehemiah prayed to God first, then told the king. The king, Artaxerxes, granted Nehemiah leave to go to Jerusalem and oversee the work of rebuilding the walls of the city. In fact, Nehemiah became governor of

the area for a time.

Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem and saw what was needed. It would be a formidable task, but with God's help, and the willingness of the people to work, they could accomplish the job. They set their minds to the work, though they were opposed. People from the outlying areas ridiculed, mocked, and threatened. Yet Nehemiah kept right on with his work, refusing to let anyone else stop what he was there to accomplish. He told his detractors: "The God of heaven will give us success; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no portion, right or memorial in Jerusalem" (2:20). It was this mindset that made the people successful. They finished their work in an astounding 52 days!

Of all the great characteristics of Nehemiah, perhaps the most notable is the fact that he was a man of prayer. His faith in God played a vital role in his accomplishments. That's a lesson we all need to learn.

### **Malachi**

Malachi means "my messenger." He is usually considered to be a contemporary of Nehemiah (ca. 430 BC) because what he describes fits with Nehemiah and the general post-exilic period. A primary problem that he addresses has to do with the way that worship was being corrupted. The dialogues in the book make it clear that God was not happy with the way they were treating Him. The issue here wasn't idolatry, but rather a failure on their part to worship Him properly, reverently, and according to their best efforts. God's complaint is seen here:

"A son honors his father, and a servant his master. Then if I am a father, where is My honor? And if I am a master, where is My respect?' says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests who despise My name" (1:6).

They apparently argued with God about this assessment, but they had nothing on which to stand. The priests were not teaching properly, and as a result, "you have caused many to stumble by the instruction" (2:8). They had been breaking their covenants and divorcing their spouses (2:10-16). Their actions were such that they were committing injustices and robbing God (3:8). They needed to repent once again.

God promises to remember those who feared Him. He then ends with an admonition to follow the Law of Moses (4:4) and to wait for the coming of Elijah, who would "restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers" (4:5-6). The promised Messiah would come.

## The Messiah is Born

“But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
Too little to be among the clans of Judah,  
From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel.  
His goings forth are from long ago,  
From the days of eternity.” (Mic 5:2)

“Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel” (Isa 7:14).

“For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us;  
And the government will rest on His shoulders;  
And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.  
7 There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace,  
On the throne of David and over his kingdom,  
To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness  
From then on and forevermore.  
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this.” (Isa 9:6-7)

The time had come. God had been preparing the people for the Messiah since the very first prophecy after sin had entered the world (Gen 3:15). The prophets had looked ahead to this very time: “And likewise, all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and his successors onward, also announced these days” (Acts 3:24).

However, the prophets did not understand exactly how it would all happen. Peter notes:

“As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful searches and inquiries, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look” (1 Pet 1:10-12).

Even so, Jesus Christ is the clear fulfillment of all that God had promised. This promise He would fulfill through a young woman named Mary. Joseph, her betrothed, was told not to be afraid to take her as his wife: “for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins” (Matt 1:20-21).

This was not just anyone. This was God manifested in the flesh, the One through whom all had been made (John 1:1-5). “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth”

(John 1:14).

When Jesus was born, the announcement was made, appropriately enough, to shepherds. An angel brought “tidings of great joy” because “today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11). “And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased’” (vv. 13-14). So great was the birth of Jesus that even kings from the east recognized it and worshiped Jesus: “After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him” (Matt 2:11).

At eight days, Jesus was presented at the temple. A righteous and devout man named Simon was “looking for the consolation of Israel,” and by the Holy Spirit he was told he would not die before seeing “the Lord’s Christ” (Luke 3:25-26). When he took Jesus into his arms, he praised God, saying, “my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a Light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel” (vv. 30-32). Likewise, a prophetess at the temple, Anna, gave “thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (v. 38).

Indeed, the birth of Jesus Christ meant that the salvation promised so long before was finally coming to fruition. His name was called “Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins” (Matt 1:21). Jesus came into this world set for the task of procuring salvation for all who, by faith, would come to Him. Jesus was not just a plan. He was *the* plan. He wasn’t just any way. He was *the* way. He is still the only way.

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6).

By coming as a man into this world, He could then taste death for all, and thereby provide the means for forgiveness of sins through the shedding of His blood (Heb 2:14-18; 9:22).

Praise God that He is always faithful to His word, and that He is merciful and desires the fellowship of those made in His image!

## Jesus' Early Work

Malachi's last words, and those of the Old Testament, promise to send "Elijah," who would "restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers" (Mal 4:6). The New Testament clearly recognizes John the Immerser as the one who fulfilled this promise: "It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17). This fits with Isaiah's prophecy as well (Isa 40:3-5).

John did come before Jesus to prepare the way (Matt 3:1-3). He pointed to Jesus as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) He recognized that he must decrease while Jesus increased. One of the reasons that John came baptizing was so that Jesus "might be manifested to Israel" (v. 31). Jesus came to John to be baptized, not because He was guilty of sin, but rather "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt 3:15). As Jesus was baptized, the Father spoke from heaven and the Spirit descended as a dove upon Him. This identified Jesus as the Messiah from heaven. His baptism was also a way of signaling what He was going to do—it was a foreshadowing of His death, burial, and resurrection (see Romans 6:3-5 as well).

After the baptism, Jesus was led into the wilderness to be tempted (Matt 4; Luke 4). By overcoming and appealing to what is written in the Law, Jesus demonstrated that He fulfilled all that God intended for Israel. He overcame where Israel fell. In doing so, He became the perfect example for all.

Jesus went to the synagogue at Nazareth, His home town, where He was given the scroll of Isaiah to read. He read from Isaiah 61:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me,  
Because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor.  
He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives,  
And recovery of sight to the blind,  
To set free those who are oppressed,  
To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord." (Luke 4:18-19)

He closed the scroll, gave it to the attendant, and said, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (v. 21). Here, the people were "speaking well of Him, and wondering at the gracious words which were falling from His lips" (v. 22). Even so, He anticipated rejection, and it would not be long before people were angry at what He said and did.

He began performing miracles, demonstrating that He was indeed the Son of God. He had a right to speak with authority, and this is seen early on in what Matthew records that which is traditionally called, "The Sermon on the Mount" (Matt 5-7). At the end of the "Sermon" (which likely includes many points that Jesus taught multiple times in multiple

places), Matthew tells us, “When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (7:28-29). What was Jesus teaching about?

Jesus taught about the kingdom of God (think rule or reign of God). Mark records Jesus as saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (1:15). The Sermon on the Mount is filled with kingdom teaching. The Beatitudes begin with, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:3). From there, Jesus taught about the character of those who submit themselves to God’s rule. So important is the kingdom that it is to be sought above all else: “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (6:33).

In this kingdom context, Jesus drew some contrasts between the old and the new, between what they had often heard and what Jesus would authoritatively say about it. “You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you” is the common phrasing. He taught about such matters as what it meant to be disciples in the world, the nature of personal relationships, the proper view of prayer and fasting, overcoming anxieties, and the need to be aware of false prophets. He closed with His illustration of the wise and foolish men who built their houses on the rock or the sand. To hear and act upon Jesus’ words is the heart of wisdom.

Jesus chose twelve particular disciples to become His apostles. He sent them out, trained them, and spent much personal time with them. He was preparing them both to suffer for His sake and to take the gospel to the rest of the world. Sadly, one of these twelve would betray Him, but not for a little while yet. Next, we will overview some of Jesus’ parables and miracles.

## Parables and Miracles

Jesus made Himself known in memorable ways, impressing upon His hearers and followers the need to pay attention and follow the evidence. Two of the avenues of teaching and demonstrating His identity came through parables and miracles. Both of these left people contemplating their meanings, and both effectively showed the nature of His kingdom. Let's briefly consider these.

### Parables

“Why do you speak to them in parables?” The disciples of Jesus asked this question, unclear about why Jesus would not be so direct at that time (Matt. 13:10). Jesus' response shows that parables were meant to be understood by those who really wanted to listen to the teaching of Jesus (vv. 11-17). As Luke records, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is in parables, so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand” (Luke 8:10). Parables separated those who desired to know from those who didn't.

A “parable” (meaning, placing side by side) is a way of figuratively comparing the earthly with the spiritual. It's a brief story in which something spiritual is taught through physical comparisons. The parables of the sower, the tares, or the mustard seed were not really about these physical items (seeds and weeds), but about the spiritual lessons that may be drawn from these by analogy. For instance, Jesus pointed out from the parable of the sower, “the seed is the word of God” (Luke 8:11). In order to understand the teaching, one must understand the point of the analogy.

The parables of Jesus illustrated truth about His kingdom. He began many of his parables with, “The kingdom of heaven is like...” This shows a comparison between the kingdom and the matter he was about to use for the analogy. They used something that was familiar (sower, seed, tares, pearls, dragnets, lamps, etc.) to illustrate truth about something unfamiliar (spiritual). It was a brilliant way of illustrating truth.

The parables have a beauty about them which aids us in our understanding of God's kingdom. They bring the lofty teachings about the kingdom into a common, familiar, and practical level. Jesus “concentrated on the commonly familiar and the practical that is forever part and parcel of human life in the realm of the natural to project man's life in the realm beyond this life” (Zodhiates, *Complete Word Study Dictionary*, 1098).

In a parable, there is usually one primary lesson, and this can be understood through the context which prompted the teaching. Study them well, and we will have a greater appreciation for the kingdom of God.

## Miracles

Jesus both taught and established His identity through the miracles He performed. Peter said to Cornelius, “You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him” (Acts 10:38). Earlier, in preaching on Pentecost, Peter said, “Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know...” (Acts 2:22). The preaching of the miracles of Jesus is an integral part of the message of Christ.

The miracles of Jesus had purpose to them. For example, His healing of the paralyzed man was a demonstration of His authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:1-12). Ultimately, the import is that they demonstrated that He was truly the Son of God—God manifested in the flesh. Nicodemus came to Jesus and confessed, “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God, as a teacher, for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him” (John 3:2). Jesus pointed to His works to establish His identity: “the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish—the very works that I do—testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me” (John 5:36).

When John was in prison, he sent disciples to ask Jesus if He was the Expected One, to which Jesus replied: “Go and report to John what you hear and see; the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them” (Matt 11:4-5). These miracles demonstrated that Jesus was the Messiah. Peter confessed, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God” (John 6:68-69).

The miracles of Jesus help us develop faith in Him. “Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:30-31).

By reading and studying both parables and miracles, our faith will be strengthened and our understanding of Jesus will be greatly enhanced.

## **Preparing for Death**

“But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone” (Heb 2:9).

Jesus came with a purpose. His was not meant to be a life of ease or simply to spend time with mankind. He had nowhere to lay His head. He came to suffer, die, and rise again. Why? Because He wanted to carry out the ultimate goal of salvation for all of mankind. The plan of God had been put into place from the beginning, with the intention of culminating in the death, burial, and resurrection of the Son of God. Only through this means could salvation from sin be offered to a lost world. There would be no other way (John 14:6).

In the process of carrying out this plan, Jesus worked on this earth to prepare the hearts of people to live in His kingdom (Matt 5-7). He worked miracles in order to demonstrate that He was from God (John 10:25; 14:11), and to bring people to faith in Him so that they may have life in His name (John 20:30-31). He taught with authority to show how His word transcends every other teaching (Matt 7:28-29). He worked closely with His own chosen disciples to prepare them for the task to which they were especially called. He demonstrated a love and patience that few would understand or appreciate.

Jesus knew that His last days would be spent in and around Jerusalem. He “set His face” (ASV, i.e., was determined) to go to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). He spent more time there toward the end, fully prepared for what He knew He would have to go through. He took His opportunities to teach, but the religious leaders of the day were becoming increasingly caustic toward Him. They had determined that He should die.

Jesus reached a high point in the eyes of the people. When entering Jerusalem on a colt, people were praising Him (Matt 21:1-10). However, it would not be long before the people would turn against Him. He wept over the city of Jerusalem because of those there who would reject Him (Matt 21:37-39). He faced much confrontation: driving money changers off the temple grounds, facing questions by the leaders who wanted to trap Him in His words, and even having to rebuke His own disciples for the way they acted at times. How foolish it must have seemed to Jesus, the Creator come in the flesh to save mankind from sin. Yet it was because He saw the people as lost sheep without a shepherd that He came to provide what everyone really needed. We must learn to appreciate what the Lord did for us. It was not easy, but it was accomplished out of love.

### **Toward the End**

Jesus faced His last days with resolve. There was no turning back from the plan that God had long before set in motion. Before His death, Jesus would spend some precious days and hours with His friends and chosen disciples, teaching and preparing them for what was about to happen.

Though the desire to kill Jesus was already there from the Jewish leadership, this intensified after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11). The chief priests and Pharisees were actively looking to seize Jesus. They didn't seem to care how it was done as long as it happened. In their minds, Jesus needed to go.

Just a few days before His final Passover, Jesus was at the home of Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary. While Martha was serving, Mary took some expensive perfume and began to anoint the feet of Jesus. The disciples, particularly Judas, were upset at this, but Jesus rebuked them and told them to leave Mary alone, because she was doing this "for the day of My burial" (John 12:7). Just after this, Jesus entered Jerusalem on the colt. The people were praising Him, but within just a matter of days they would be crying for His death by crucifixion.

After Jesus ate His final Passover with His apostles, He gave an example of one of the greatest acts of humility. He rose from supper, girded Himself with a towel, and proceeded to wash the feet of His disciples. This selfless act of service is set before us for all time as an example of the attitude of Christ. He did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:44-45).

Jesus proceeded to teach and comfort His disciples, telling them that the Holy Spirit would be sent to guide them into all truth (John 16:12-13). Though the disciples still had much to learn, Jesus told them that He was about to go back to the Father. He was ready to die for the sins of the world.

"Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify Your name" (John 12:27-28).

## **The Trials and Crucifixion**

Jesus had prepared His disciples for the fact that He would die in Jerusalem. There was no wavering with Jesus. He knew this was the plan of God, and this was the reason He came. As the time was approaching, Jesus made His purpose clear: “Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, ‘Father, save Me from this hour’? But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify Your name” (John 12:27-28a).

Jesus also anticipated the effect His death would have: “‘And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.’ But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die” (John 12:32-33). His death would be by crucifixion (lifting up), but by doing so, people would be drawn to Him in unexpected ways.

### **The Trials: Luke 22; Matt. 26-27**

Jesus had taken His disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane, where He went a stone’s throw beyond them and spent His time in prayer to the Father. His resolve is heard in the words, “not My will, but Yours.”

It was in the garden where Judas would find the occasion to betray Jesus into the hands of the chief priests and Pharisees. Coming out with weapons, Judas led them to Jesus and kissed Him on the cheek. Even here, the events that occurred should have convicted these men of who Jesus was: their falling to the ground before Him (John 18), and the miracle of replacing the ear of the servant were both powerful demonstrations of His identity. None of that mattered to the ones intent on seeing Jesus die.

Jesus did not fight back at this point. He let them bind Him and take Him to where He would stand accused of blasphemy. He would stand before two High Priests (politically and religiously, Annas and Caiaphas), Pilate (the governor of the region), and Herod (the king). In the process of these trials, He would be beaten, spat on, lied against, and unjustly accused. And for what? They had no better motive than envy. Christ’s motive was love.

In all of this, Isaiah’s prophecy was fulfilled:

“He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth. By oppression and judgment He was taken away; and as for His generation, who considered that He was cut off out of the land of the living for the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke was due?” (Isa 53:7-8)

### **The Crucifixion: Matt. 27; Mk. 15; Luke 23**

“But the LORD was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering...” (Isa 53:10a). “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor 5:21). “He

Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed” (1 Pet 2:24).

Jesus prophesied that this time would come. He would have to go to Jerusalem to suffer and die a cruel death (Matt 16:21). The trials were an unjust display of cruelty motivated by envy and hatred. They had no intentions of letting Jesus go free.

Pilate examined Jesus and could find nothing against Him that would warrant death. He attempted to remove himself from the guilt of the situation by washing his hands of it, but the people would prevail and Pilate would send Jesus to His death.

As was their tradition, Pilate brought a couple prisoners before the people to let them decide who would be released and who would be punished. Barabbas, a known criminal, was brought out with Jesus. Justice did not matter at this point to the people. “Release Barabbas,” they cried. Then what to do with Jesus? The cry of the mob still rings out loud and clear: “crucify Him, crucify Him!”

First, Jesus was scourged. This alone could result in death. They then would make Him bear His own cross on His beaten back. Apparently physically exhausted already, they compelled another man, Simon, to help with this. When they reached the “place of the skull,” they crucified Jesus. There was no big fan fare, and the Scriptures do not go into great detail. There were crowds standing against Him and a handful of others watching on as they drove the spikes through His hands and feet, lifting Him up to die the death of a criminal.

Jesus was on the cross about six hours, fully aware of what was happening, and making several statements worthy of examination. He was in control, and when the time came, the choice was His to give up His life. “It is finished,” was His cry (John 19:30). Through all pain, Jesus fulfilled His purpose as the Lamb slain for the sins of the world.

In the end, let’s remember that His death was for us. Because of His shed blood, we can have forgiveness of every sin. Praise God!

## The Resurrection

*Matthew 27-28; Mark 15-16; Luke 24; John 19-21*

The death of Christ on the cross was God's way (and ultimately the only way) of dealing with the problem of sin. "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor 5:21). Without the shedding of blood, there would be no remission of sin (Heb 9:22). This shows us at once both the horror of sin and the love of God. Jesus died because He loved us and desired for us to have fellowship with Him, but we can't have fellowship with God in sin. Because God wanted the fellowship, He provided a means by which sin can be forgiven. "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 6:23). This is His grace at work (Eph 2:8-9).

However, God's plan does not stop only at Jesus' death. In fact, if God's plan ends at the death of Jesus, then we would be miserable people without hope. He came to bring a living hope "through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Pet 1:3). "But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain ... If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied" (1 Cor 15:12-19). The resurrection, therefore, was critical to God's overall plan.

The completion of God's plan includes those wonderful words: "He is risen!" Paul followed up his point with this: "But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep" (1 Cor 15:20). Herein lies the message of hope.

Jesus was taken off the cross and buried according to the Jewish custom. He was wrapped in cloth with spices mixed in. They took him to a new tomb very close to where he was crucified and belonging to Joseph, a rich man of Arimathea (see Isa 53:9). A large stone was rolled in front of the opening, and guards were placed at the tomb due to the fears that the Jewish leadership had of the disciples stealing the body.

Early on the third day, some of the women who followed Jesus were on their way to the tomb to apply more spices to the body. They were concerned about how to move the stone from the opening. But when they got there, they were amazed to find the stone rolled away from the door. Two "men" in "dazzling clothing" were there. They addressed the women:

"Why do you seek the living One among the dead? He is not here, but He has risen. Remember how He spoke to you while He was still in Galilee, saying that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.' And they remembered His words, and returned from the tomb and reported all these things to the eleven and to all the rest" (Luke 24:5-9).

Everything was now falling into place as Jesus began appearing to His disciples. The

apostle Paul reports, “He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also” (1 Cor 15:5-8).

Multiple witnesses could testify to the fact that Jesus, who had died, was seen alive again. That historical reality is the basis for the beginning and growth of His body of Christians from that day forward. All of this was done publicly, with the full intent to spread that news. This is the foundation for understanding our hope, our own resurrection, and our ability to have confidence in serving the Lord, just as Paul indicated: “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor 15:58).

The resurrection of Jesus is also the proof that there will be a coming judgment: “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:30-31).

By the power of God, Jesus was raised up. By that same power, so will we be raised. The significance of Jesus’ resurrection cannot be understated. Praise God, who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ!

## Overview of Acts

Luke begins his gospel account by pointing out that he had investigated everything carefully, including dealing with eyewitnesses. His account was meant to convey the “exact truth” about what happened as Jesus walked the earth. He begins the second part of his account, the book of Acts, with a similar type of statement that connected what Jesus did to what His apostles would soon be doing in preaching the gospel.

Jesus had promised that He would be raised again, and it happened just as He said. He “presented Himself alive ... by many convincing proofs” (vs. 3). However, His purpose was not to remain upon the earth for an indefinite time. In fact, He told His disciples that He would return to heaven in order to send “another comforter” — the Holy Spirit (John 14: 25-29; 16:5-15). This promise is restated in Acts 1. Jesus told His disciples to stay in Jerusalem to wait for the fulfillment of the promise regarding the Holy Spirit, which would be fulfilled on the day of Pentecost.

When Pentecost came, they were all together, waiting for the promise: “And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind...” This was it. The Holy Spirit came upon them: “And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance” (vs. 4).

The prophets had said that this would happen. Peter shows how Joel had prophesied of this, which indicated that the “last days” of the prophets had finally come. The purpose of the ages could be completely preached: Jesus died for sins, was buried, and rose again. The apostles were witnesses. Now the gospel message is being proclaimed according to the plan of God.

“And likewise, all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and his successors onward, also announced these days. It is you who are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’ For you first, God raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways.” (Acts 3:24-26)

### Purpose

The purpose of the book of Acts is manifold. We see an inspired account of the apostles carrying out the great commission Jesus had given them. They were doing what they were told to do, and, through the preaching, were demonstrating how people may turn to Jesus Christ for the salvation of the souls. “Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:19).

Acts shows the fulfillment of God’s promises concerning His kingdom. In the gospels, the kingdom is at hand (Mark 1:15); in Acts, the kingdom has come because Christ, through

His resurrection, was now seated upon the promised throne of David (Acts 2:29-36; 13:28-39). Further, the reign of Christ extends not only to the Jews, but also to the gentiles (Acts 10). The relationship between Christianity and Judaism is seen in the connection the Law of Moses, but the gentiles did not need to become Jews (i.e., be circumcised) in order to become Christians. That question was settled, and the Spirit testified to it (Acts 15).

The role of the Holy Spirit is prominent throughout Acts. Jesus promised that the apostles would receive His power (Acts 1), which happened on Pentecost (Acts 2), and continued throughout. “And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him” (Acts 5:32). The Spirit testified to the truth of the gospel, and so demonstrated God’s authority in the spread of the gospel. Even Gamaliel recognized that if this movement really was from God, then no one could stop it (Acts 5:38-39). Indeed that is one of the great themes running throughout the book. God cannot be stopped.

Acts is often thought of as an early apologetic (defense). It demonstrates that Christianity, while it had connections to the Jews, is not just another Jewish sect like the Pharisees or Sadducees. Neither is it another pagan religion among many in the Roman Empire. Christianity is unique among all religions and deserves to be heard on its own strength.

The book of Acts is the key to understanding the rest of the New Testament. It continues naturally from the four gospel accounts (especially Luke), and it sets the stage for the rest of the books. Since most of what comes after Acts are epistles, we can see how the journeys of Paul, for example, dovetail into those writings. Acts shows Paul going into the various cities, establishing churches, and working among the brethren, many of whom he would later write (e.g., Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, etc.).

The importance of Acts for understanding the earliest history of the church cannot be overstated. To the apostles, Jesus said, “and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Acts shows how that happened.

## Paul's Epistles I

The book of Acts provides the backdrop for many of the epistles that were written by Paul. When he could do so, Paul visited the brethren, showing great concern for their well-being. What are called Paul's missionary journeys occurred between about AD 45-67. From Acts 13 on, Paul's journeys took him from Palestine to Rome and many places in between. His epistles fit within that time-frame. While Paul wanted to encourage the brethren, he also addressed some specific issues that confronted the various congregations who received these epistles. Here we begin a basic, broad overview of each epistle:

### **Romans**

Generally dated to about AD 57, Paul wrote this likely from Corinth (Acts 18:21-21:17). He wanted to visit Rome, but so far had been unable to do so. One of the obvious themes of Romans is the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Paul pointed out the sins of the Gentiles (ch. 1), then showed how the Jews were also guilty (ch. 2). In other words, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23). This leads to a discussion of major salvation issues such as justification and righteousness. Since the righteous would live by faith (1:17), faith is also a major theme throughout. Overcoming the problem of sin by God's grace is highlighted. Then, the relationship shared by believers is addressed, both to the world and to one another.

### **1-2 Corinthians**

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians somewhere around AD 50-54, followed by 2 Corinthians in about AD 55. He had first visited Corinth in about AD 51-52. He wrote this epistle from Ephesus (1 Cor 16:8). Clearly, the Corinthians were having many problems, divisions, and questions that impacted their spiritual health. Paul urges their unity in the face of problems that could tear them apart. Their carnal thinking was leading them to division. Paul addressed an array of problems, such as immorality (ch. 5), openly taking one another to court (ch. 6), marriage questions (ch. 7), relationship with former pagan practices (ch. 8), and even dealt with the misuse of spiritual gifts. By the time he wrote 2 Corinthians, there had been some change, but they were potentially being led by false apostles, and Paul, concerned for their divided minds, defended his own apostleship.

### **Galatians**

While some opt for a little later date (mid-50's), most believe that Galatians was written to the southern part of Galatia in about AD 48-49. The overriding issue addressed in this epistle has to do with the fact there were teachers who were intent on forcing the idea that Gentiles first needed to go through Judaism (i.e., be circumcised) in order to be Christians. This was a problem experienced through much of the early history of the church (see Acts 15). Paul shows that the nature of the gospel message is freedom from the Law of Moses, and that attempts to force people back into the Law would result in

being severed from Christ. Through Christ's death, one is freed from sin and the Law, and must not try to return. The only boast a Christian can make is in the cross of Jesus, through which we are crucified to the world (6:14).

### **Ephesians**

Ephesians was likely written between AD 60-62 while Paul was in prison in Rome; Tychicus delivered it (6:20-22). Paul first addresses the blessings that believers have in Christ (ch. 1-3), which includes God's eternal purpose for salvation to the praise of His glory. Sin brought about death, but God, rich in mercy, made salvation possible as a gift of His grace. Therefore, believers can share in the power of Christ's resurrection. This salvation also becomes the basis for unity. Christ's death brings together Jew and Gentile, and together all should praise Him. Paul then addresses the practical nature of the unity found in Christ (ch. 4-6). The instructions address various relationships, including husbands and wives, children, and servants. He ends with a plea to take up the full armor of God in order to fight against the schemes of the devil.

### **Philippians**

Paul was likely still a prisoner in Rome when he wrote this epistle, perhaps between AD 60-63. The tone of this letter is positive, and Paul has a desire to stay in communication with a congregation that was dear to him and had helped him. He was thankful for them and wanted their love to abound even more. Though there were some who meant Paul harm, his concern was to do God's will, whether through life or death. "To live is Christ." He reminded them of their need to humbly submit to one another, to have the mind of Christ, and to be the lights in the world God called them to be. There is great joy in serving Christ if we think on what is excellent and worthy of praise. "Rejoice in the Lord" and keep pressing on toward the ultimate goal, for "our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil 3:20-21).

More to follow.

## **Paul's Epistles (II) and Hebrews**

We continue our basic overview of Paul's epistles, then will briefly overview the book of Hebrews.

### **Colossians**

Paul wrote Colossians probably around AD 60, perhaps very close in time to when he wrote Ephesians. He indicates that he was imprisoned at the time (4:3), most likely in Rome or, possibly, Caesarea. Epaphras, one of Paul's coworkers, had helped to teach these brethren the gospel (1:7; 4:12). The letter makes it clear that there were heresies on the rise that denied the sufficiency of Jesus Christ. Consequently, Paul shows that Christ is superior to all since He is the Creator in whom dwells the fullness of deity. Therefore, believers need to seek the things above, where Christ is, so that their lives reflect what it means to serve Him in all their relationships.

### **1-2 Thessalonians**

The background for 1 Thessalonians is found in Acts 17-18, and was likely written around AD 51-52. The church is commended for its example and sounding forth the faith (1:6-8). They had accepted the word of God as it is in truth, and now they are told to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel even though they were suffering hardships for it (2:9-16). Reflecting pagan problems, Paul tells them to live in sexual purity, to work hard, and to live quiet lives. They were comforted in the fact that those who died in Christ are safely awaiting Christ's return. The day of His return should not come as a surprise if they are living in God's will.

Shortly after the first letter, Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians (likely from Corinth around AD 52) in order to comfort the brethren in their persecutions and to reaffirm that Christ will come. However, they needed to be careful not to be so anxious about His return that they fail to keep doing what they needed to do. They needed to trust God and be diligent.

### **1-2 Timothy**

Timothy was working in Ephesus. Paul wrote 1 Timothy in about AD 63-65, then 2 Timothy in about AD 67 at the end of his life. The primary concern has to do with Timothy's work as an evangelist there in Ephesus. False teachers were creating problems, and Paul stressed the need for sound doctrine and preaching the word. The false teachers were engaging in controversies and speculations that would upset the faith of others (e.g., that the resurrection had already taken place), so Timothy had to set a proper example and pay attention to the Scriptures both personally and publicly. He was instructed about the need to appoint shepherds who could also teach. Perseverance and reliance on Scripture are both stressed, contrasted with those who promoted error.

### **Titus**

Titus' work in Crete was similar to Timothy's in Ephesus. It was likely written around AD 62. Titus had been left in Crete to "set in order" what was lacking, particularly in the appointment of elders there. Once again, false teachers were upsetting the faith of Christians. Stress is given to the need to teach strong doctrine to all ages and to keep the proper focus and perspective on living the kind of life that glorifies God.

### **Philemon**

Paul was in a Roman prison as he wrote to Philemon, perhaps in about AD 60. The letter is quite personal. Philemon was a brother in Colossae who had a slave, Onesimus, run away. Now Onesimus had become a Christian, and Paul was sending him back to Philemon, not to be a slave, but as a brother. Paul appealed to Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother, as if he were receiving Paul himself. The implications here for slavery and the Christian's understanding of that issue are great. Paul could have ordered, but he appealed. If Philemon received Onesimus as a brother, think of what that would mean for their relationship and how it would change.

### **Hebrews**

Hebrews is an anonymous book likely written before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. This was written to Jewish believers who were now facing persecution that would test their faith. Because of this, they were tempted to return to their former way of life in Judaism. The author, then, stresses who Jesus is—both God and man who died for all and now serves as the great High Priest who ever lives to make intercession. "Better" is a key word, and they were in danger of leaving what was better in Christ to return to what could not save them. Hebrews is filled with connections between the old and new covenants, demonstrating that the new fulfills the old. Instead of abandoning Christ, they needed to persevere, for "we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul" (10:39). The stress on faith is significant, for it was by faith that the forefathers had pressed on even though they had not seen the promises fulfilled (ch. 11). Therefore, they should be disciplined, focused, and resolved to stay true to Christ and be willing to bear His reproach. "For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come" (13:14).

## **James, Peter, John, and Jude**

Here we consider the works of four more men of God who were moved by the Holy Spirit to put into writing the wisdom of God.

### **James**

While there were many men named James in the first century, this is most likely the brother of Jesus who became a very strong leader in the early church (James the apostle was put to death about AD 44, Acts 12). We find James becoming prominent by Acts 15, and his influence in the early church is unquestioned. This work may have been penned as early as AD 50, yet could be as late as the early 60's. There is a strong Jewish element to the writing as James addresses "the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad" (1:1) and even uses the word for "synagogue" to speak of their assemblies (ch. 2). This work, in fairly simple fashion, addresses the need for 1) real faith, 2) genuine works based on faith, and 3) godly wisdom. We read about such needs as having patience in trials, listening carefully to God's word, avoiding partiality, acting by faith, watching how we speak, understanding godly wisdom, avoiding worldliness, and being fervent in prayer. The lessons throughout are practical and always needed.

### **1-2 Peter**

There are two epistles with Peter's name on them. Both epistles were likely written between AD 60-64, not long before Peter's death (which historical tradition places around AD 66-68 under Nero). 1 Peter was addressed to saints scattered throughout Asia Minor (modern Turkey), calling them "aliens." This was a way of pointing out the fact that Christians are strangers in this world. Many Gentile Christians would have read this, understanding that they had now received mercy from God and needed to keep their behavior excellent (2:9-12). The overarching theme of 1 Peter concerns suffering for the cause of Christ. Because they were born again to a living hope, their new identity as Christians would also mean that many would oppose them. How should they handle the suffering that would come their way because they are Christians doing what is right? They needed to look to Christ's example, be committed to doing what is right no matter what may come, and seek after holiness. They were not to be afraid to suffer for Christ, but rather in His name glorify God through their sufferings.

2 Peter also speaks to the spiritual growth that the saints ought to be seeking, especially as they were facing false teachers who could lead them astray. Among the many challenges Christians faced were those who were calling into question God's promises regarding the return of Christ. They needed to realize that the time factor was not a matter of God failing to keep His promises, but rather a manifestation of His longsuffering. Yet, judgment will come, and they needed to keep themselves alert and ready. So do we!

### **1, 2, and 3 John**

Three epistles are attributed to John. Though John's name does not technically appear in the letters, the similarities to the Gospel of John and the early tradition of authorship attest to John's work. Likely, these letters were written near the end of the first century, possibly from Ephesus. John addresses some problems that appear to have been coming on the scene by the end of the first century (perhaps a proto-gnosticism, where the idea of the flesh is considered bad, and this led to the concept that Jesus, as God, was not truly incarnate). Consequently, John deals with the way some were viewing the problem of sin and their understanding of whether or not Jesus came in the flesh. Yet he also addresses the need for loving one another, which is key to all else he is dealing with. They needed to be reassured of the certainties they have if they will follow Jesus and not give up believing that He truly is the Son of God. Christians cannot afford to give up the truth of Jesus, nor can they afford to allow peddlers of error and men who love preeminence (like Diotrephes in 3 John) to take them away from Christ.

### **Jude**

Jude refers to himself as a brother of James, which also meant that he was likely a brother of Jesus (see Mark 6:3 where both names are mentioned). This short epistle was likely written prior to AD 68 (note the similarity to 2 Peter). Jude's purpose is clearly stated. While he wanted to write about the common salvation shared by Christians, there was a more pressing need: "I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints. For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ" (vv. 3-4). These false teachers were threatening to overthrow the faith of Christians, so they are exhorted to "remember the words that were spoken beforehand by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 17). As always, there was the great concern that Christians remain true to Christ.

## Revelation

“The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bondservants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John...” (Rev 1:1). So begins the book of Revelation, one of the most intriguing and controversial books of the Bible. It fires the imagination and inspires us toward greater faithfulness in service to God.

The author is identified as John, and traditionally this is understood as the apostle John. One of questions, and this affects how one might interpret the book, has to do with when the book was written. Some hold to an early date, which places the book prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, making Nero the main Emperor of the time. Many who hold to this date would argue that the beast in Revelation is Jerusalem and the destruction described in the book relates to Jerusalem’s destruction that would happen very soon. On the other hand, there is strong tradition and support for the idea that John wrote Revelation late in the first century to deal with the Roman persecutions, especially under Domitian. In this, the beast is Rome and God would bring down destruction on the Roman Empire. What is more important to the message of Revelation, regardless of its exact date, is understanding that God will defeat any enemies against Christ and His people. This was written at a time when emperor worship was starting to be enforced, and Christians would be severely tested.

Revelation was written to seven churches of Asia. The number “seven” likely represents the greater concept of complete and perfect. Many numbers carry special significance in a book of symbols. The Lord addressed these congregations, both praising and rebuking them as was appropriate to their situation. In every case, He was urging their faithfulness to Him, even though some would be persecuted severely because of their stand. “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life,” He told the church at Smyrna (2:10). This didn’t mean just to be faithful until they grew old and died. It meant to be faithful even if it cost their lives. The reward would be worth it. Faithfulness to the Lord, even in the midst of severe persecution and trial, was critical for these Christians being challenged in their faith.

Revelation is a book filled with symbols and figures. The first verse tips us off on this, given that the word used (communicated) is the word for “signified.” This special type of writing, often referred to as apocalyptic, appeals to readers who might have the background to understand what the figures meant; but those who didn’t know would not have a clue about the meaning. It was an appropriate style during a time of persecution when the Christians could read it and be encouraged, but others would not get it.

Revelation pulls heavily from the Old Testament, particularly from Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah, all of which also contain many symbols and figures. For example, we can see echoes of the four horsemen from Zechariah 6. We see shadows of the beast imagery from Daniel. We see Ezekiel’s powerful influence in the descriptions of the fall of Babylon, the harlot. The Old Testament is strong in the book of Revelation, and this

background would have helped knowledgeable Christians better understand what God was communicating to them.

An argument can be made that chapters 1-11 parallel chapters 12-22. Chapters 1-11 demonstrate the earthly conflict, while chapters 12-22 provide the deeper, spiritual struggle that was really going on (see Ferrell Jenkins' *Studies in the Book of Revelation*). Regardless of how all the specifics are understood, the message of Revelation is the triumph of God's people. There would be persecuting forces to come against the people of God, and many would lose their lives. Yet God is sitting on His throne in heaven, Jesus is fighting for His people, and in the end, God's people win the battle. No matter what others may try to do to thwart the work of God's people, God will fight for His own, and His own will always come out as victors.

Christians need to be impressed with the fact that God is on His throne and worthy is the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, to be praised:

“And when the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, to Him who lives forever and ever, 10 the twenty-four elders will fall down before Him who sits on the throne, and will worship Him who lives forever and ever, and will cast their crowns before the throne, saying, ‘Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created.’” (Rev 4:10-11)

We know who wins the battle. If we will submit ourselves to the King of kings, we will be a part of this victory!

“Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city” (22:14).

Doy Moyer