

GRACE AND FIRE

ZACHARY A. HATTON

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HOW TO USE THIS MATERIAL

As are most works, this study material is only restricted by the will of the one consuming it. This study guide can be used for personal reading and personal growth, or can be presented as part of a group study.

However, it is recommended that if it is desired to use this work in a group setting, the facilitator of the group should take the conceptual constructs of this work, rather than simply reading through each paragraph.

INTRODUCTION

“You should read your Bible all the way through.” growing up in church, this was an admonition I heard quite often. And if you’re like me, you would take this admonition to heart and make up your mind, “You know what? I’m going to do that.” To most, the idea of reading the Bible cover to cover is a badge of honor. Certainly, it is a fantastic feat. But I think, for most christians, it might be more appropriate to ask “Have you ever given up on reading the Bible all the way through?”

If so, You are not alone.

Many people, who really do love the Bible, have repeatedly started their journey in Genesis with the high ambition to make it through to Revelation, but became exhaustingly defeated while reading through the Old Testament. Even with the use of study guides to help, the vast amount of content feels overwhelming. Most readers only have a minimal tolerance for “begat”’s before throwing in the towel. Sadly, we get lost in genealogies and complex prophecies and loose out on the richness of the Old Testament.

One reason readers become overwhelmed is that they are introduced into a foreign culture several thousand years ago, confronted with nearly unpronounceable names, placed into situations they can’t identify with, and given information difficult to process in today’s mindset. As a result, the Old Testament becomes marginalized and viewed as irrelevant. Therefore, the majority of our attention is given solely to the New Testament.

While the focused emphasis in the New Testament is well placed and not without it’s own benefits, it should not be at the expense and ignorance of the Old Testament.

It is interesting to think about Paul’s second letter to Timothy in regards to the use of scripture. In **2 Timothy 3:16** Paul says, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.” What Paul is saying is that every last word of scripture is inspired — it is ‘breathed out’ by God— and relevant. Even more interesting is at the time Paul wrote this letter, the New Testament cannon was not yet completed. In other words, what we currently enjoy in having a completed New Testament, did not yet exist at the time Paul wrote these words. This tells us that what Paul had in mind for young Timothy was for him to focus on the doctrine, reproof, correction and instruction primarily from the Old Testament.

Granted some of the information in the Old Testament is not incredibly stimulating. When we come to portions of Old Testament Scripture like this, we have run into what theologians call the “Perspicuity of Scripture.” That is a pious way of saying, all portions of Scripture are inspired by God, but not all portions of Scripture are not particularly “awe inspiring.”

The truth is that the information recorded for us in the Old Testament is about the formation and existence of the nation of Israel; the specific nation God used to bring about our Savior, Jesus Christ. The reason we need to have a high regard for learning, studying, and understanding what is contained in pages of the Old Testament is to better understand Christ; the two are inseparable.

This book is designed as an overview of the Old Testament to guide in personal growth and a more well-rounded knowledge of the Scriptures. Each chapter will be dedicated to providing a concise look at the contents of a particular book of the Old Testament, a brief synopsis of how the truths in that book fit into redemptive history, and why it matters today.

1. ZOOMING-OUT

It is always helpful to have a nice, large layout of exactly what ground you are covering. Mountain orienteers use terrain maps in order to gain a working knowledge of the mountain range they will climb. Military strategists use general, overview mapping for supply and troop placement. City Planners, need diagrams with a topical view of a particular area before considering any minute details of planning they might be trying to put into place.

Professions such as these understand the value and necessity of getting a basic picture of the whole, before diving into the depths. So why should it be any different when it comes to Scripture?

Sadly, however, many Christians begin in the details of the Bible by starting some new reading regimen and then get lost in the intricacies of Scripture, especially when it comes to the Old Testament. In other words, they failed to get an over-view layout of how the Old Testament works. This can quickly lead to despair, frustration, and ultimately, Biblical ignorance.

Therefore, the goal of this chapter is to give you the picture that is so desperately needed for your understanding of the Old Testament. And the way this will be accomplished is by taking everything contained in the Old Testament, and zooming-out in order to give us a large overview so that we can see the whole picture. And the way this will be accomplished is by asking two basic questions:

1) *What Does it Look Like?*

2) *Where Are We?*

As you follow along, the first question will answer how the sections of the Old Testament are broken up and then provide the basic content contained in that work. The second question will briefly explain how the Old Testament flows together.

So let's take on the first question and see what we can find:

What Does it Look Like?

We'll first start with the layout of the Old Testament.

What is confusing to many people is the fact that the Old Testament has **three major sections** and is not one long successive story.

Section 1: The first section consists of the books Genesis through Esther. These 17 books contain the **law** and **history** of the nation of Israel. This section of the Old Testament is written in a 'pros', style of writing: meaning that what you are reading, is just a straight forward, everyday style of communication.

Section 2: The second section of the Old Testament consists of the "Poetic Books" or, "Wisdom Literature" consisting of the next 5 books: Job through Song of Solomon. These are the books that relate more to the heart and emotion of an individual. This is exactly why many people find so many personal helps in these books of the Old Testament; because they speak to our emotions and issues everyday life. Has calamity ever struck your life? Then you can find comfort reading in the book of Job. Have you needed guidance in worship? You have more than likely found it beneficial to read a Psalm or two. Have you needed some specific wisdom on a particular matter? There may have been more than one occasion when you found yourself in Proverbs seeking guidance. Has there ever been a time when you needed relationship advice? Well, then you may have blushed when you came across the writings of Song of Solomon.

These are the books that reach right into your life and immediately meet you right where you are.

Section 3: The third section of the Old Testament involves the final 17 books and are known as the "Prophetic Books." The Prophetic Books are those which levied warnings, judgments, and prophetic hopes to God's people.

It is also important to recognize a couple of other things when considering these books. First, it is important to remember that the Prophetic Writings are broken up into two groups: 1) The Major Prophets and 2) The Minor Prophets. Now, this is not to say that one set of prophets are more important than the other. These phrases have to do with the length of the books. For example, the prophetic writings of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel are far longer books than the remaining books of Joel through Malachi. Therefore, the larger books are "major" and the small are "minor."

The second matter of significance when considering these books is that these writings occurred inside of the historical section (section 1) of the Old Testament. What you will find also is that the Prophetic Writers are either speaking to God's people warning them of judgment and exile, speaking to God's people during their exile (because the people would never repent), or speaking to God's people after their exile.

Where Are We?

A Glimpse of History

What we are witnessing when we read the first first section of the Old Testament— The Historical Books— are little glimpses of history that guide us along through the creation of the universe, mankind, and the formation and preservation of the nation of Israel.

But even as brief as these 'glimpses' are, the historical books are still formidable in terms of their content. Therefore, it is necessary to narrow the scope a bit and only cite the "major themes" of this section.

Genesis 1& 2— God's creation of all things

Genesis 3— The Fall of man

Genesis 4&5— God's children increase in wickedness

Genesis 6-11— God has had enough with the wickedness of mankind, and determines to wipe the world clean of His creation, however, until Noah found grace in His sight. Through Noah and his descendants, God pushed a "restart button" on humanity and once again, the earth began to be relished by mankind. But just as before, God's crown of creation fell away from Him and this led to the unfolding of God's plan of redemption through the nation of Israel.

Genesis 12-50 — Abraham (formerly Abram) comes on the scene and becomes the Patriarch of Faith as God promises him that a nation would be created from his seed and a land would be given as an inheritance.

From the time Abraham begins following God in Genesis chapter 12, all the way through to chapter 50, you see God putting together this special nation from whom the Savior of the world would come.

Exodus- Deuteronomy— Provides the account of the Hebrew people leaving Egypt, the giving of both God's Moral Law (The Ten Commandments) and national laws, the people at the edge of the Promised Land but refusing to go in, the 40 years of wilderness wanderings, and Moses final address to the people.

Joshua— Provides the account of the Promised Land being entered, conquered, and inhabited by God's people.

Judges— Cites the rebellion of God's people after Joshua. The people go through a cycle of disobeying God, God giving them over to other nations, the people repenting, and God raising up a 'judge' to lead them out of bondage. You will see this cycle occur fourteen times during the course of this book.

Ruth— This is a side story that occurs during the time of the Judges. In this book you'll not only read a compelling story of love, but you will also see how God begins to build and preserve the family line from which Jesus would come.

1&2 Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles— These books catalog the history of the kings and the different directions God's people took. One thing God's people found unsatisfactory was the fact that they did not have a "king" to rule over them as other nations. However, on this point, they were completely wrong; God was to be their king. But this still (suggested: still, this) did not satisfy them. They wanted a king that was physically present—one of their own people— so God finally allows it. That said, the people choose a king, but they choose the wrong king— King Saul.

During the reign of King Saul, his pride and sinfulness is more than God is willing to bear so God dethrones Saul and chooses a king for Himself— King David. The story of David, you'll find, occupies a large portion of narrative of in the nation's history, and for good reason. David was God's choice to rule as king, and once again, we find that Christ would come through the royal line of David. Further, God expresses to David that He would establish his throne forever and thus, David is used as a 'type' (a shadow, or picture) of Christ ruling His people.

After David comes Solomon. During Solomon's reign, the nation experiences the greatest and most prosperous time under his leadership despite the poor treatment of some of his own people.

Once Solomon leaves this world, the throne is left to Rehoboam. Rehoboam was a wicked king and it was under his reign that the kingdom split into the Northern and Southern kingdoms— 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel made up the northern kingdom which Jeroboam eventually took kingship over, and the southern kingdom consisted of the remaining two tribes of Judah and Benjamin, of which Rehoboam had ruled.

After this, we read about several other mentioned kings, their reigns, and the successes and conflicts in which the children of Israel find themselves because of them.

Ezra and Nehemiah— In these books, the entire nation is in ruin from being in exile, the nation must rebuild. Ezra is an account of God's people rebuilding the temple, and Nehemiah is the account of the wall being built around Jerusalem. However, in both of these books it is recognized that their full restoration will only come with the final coming of Messiah.

Esther- Esther is the last of the historical books and in this work we read of Israel's return back into exile by the Persian Empire.

A Warning of Judgment

As an aid to the reader, we will move from the Historical Books to the Prophetic Books. This requires that we move out of order and look at sections 1 and 3. The reason this is beneficial is because the Historical books run in tandem with one another.

Imagine for a moment that the historical books are the bricks of a house. Now, if these are the bricks, then the prophetic books are the mortar that fill in the gaps and binds the bricks together. All of the prophet's writings can fit inside the national historic narratives of the Old Testament and then binds it all together. Let's take a look at the Prophetic Books and see how this works.

Isaiah- Malachi—From the historical books of the Old Testament, we find that during the reign of kings, it is like listening to a broken record in terms of the pattern for this nation. Once again, we first see Saul on the throne, then David, then Solomon, and then Rehoboam.

From the rule of Rehoboam, he begins to take an extreme position against his own people and treats them more like slaves than subjects. As mentioned before, this causes a split in the kingdom; and what makes the situation worse is that though you will occasionally find kings who lead the nation into godliness and prosperity, the majority of the nation's history is plagued with wicked king after wicked king in both kingdoms. Subsequently, these wicked kings took the people they had rule over, down with them, which caused no small amount of problems. It was during this portion of Israel's history that the prophets began to play a more prominent role.

God used these mighty men of faith as a mouthpiece to guide God's people in wisdom, encourage them toward righteousness, and condemn them in judgment.

As you move through the different prophets, you will eventually find that God sends some prophets to the Northern kingdom (Israel), and some to the Southern kingdom (Judah). Ultimately, neither kingdom could be persuaded to wisdom and righteousness and God's warning through His prophets became a reality.

In 722 B.C. just as God's prophets declared, the Northern kingdom fell to the Assyrian Nation and this portion of God's people was sent away into exile. The southern kingdom (Judah) did a little better and held on a little longer, but eventually, they too fell and were carried away by the Babylonian empire about 150 years later in 586 B.C. But God in His mercy used the prophets to minister to His people both during and after these times as well.

It is actually in this very portion of Scripture where many well intending Bible students become confused. They read the historical books, and subsequently, of the split of the kingdom, not realizing that they are suddenly reading an account of two different kingdoms. This then creates a huge problem when the prophets are read. Because if the reader is unaware of what particular people group the prophet is speak to, then confusion is sure to follow.

But if it can be realized that since there are two kingdoms, and that God sent some prophets to speak to the northern kingdom (Israel) and God sent others to prophesy to the southern (Judah), then you will have far greater success understanding these prophetic writings.

A Touch of Emotion

If the historical books are the bricks of the house, and the prophets are the mortar that binds it together, then please think about the wisdom literature as the furnishing decor that makes the house, a home.

In your personal life, you have a story that you are writing with every decision and action you make; and in this this story, your life is filled with trials, joys, worship, and pain.

Well, if you were to write down all of your personal thoughts, reflections, throughout the history of your life, you would have something similar to the Poetic books in the Old Testament. These books come down to our level and give real, identifiable emotion to some of the people of whom we are reading.

In these writings we are taken from general facts about a nation's history and are led to examine the heart of certain individuals. With Solomon we learn about wisdom, relationships, and the true meaning of life. It is in the Psalms where we find David and other hymnal writers on the top of the mountains of faith declaring their praise to God, but also brought down low to a valley of despair. By the record of Job we see what it really means to suffer and what it is really like to trust God like never before at the end of our trials.

The Poetry Books touch us with real emotion.

Summary: If we were going summarize the Old Testament with just two words, it could easily be described by the words, grace and fire.

God's grace is found all over the Old Testament. Sin entered the world, but God, from the very beginning, showed us what He was going to do about it— He was going to give grace.

But along with the grace we also see fire. God takes sin very seriously.

2. GOOD, THEN EVIL

GENESIS 1-3

What you really need to know about the book of Genesis is that this is the book that takes us all the way back to the beginning and gives us the account of the origin of everything. This is actually what the word “Genesis” means: “Origins.” Simply enough, right? Of course you knew that. Well what about this? The book of Genesis comes as the first part of a five part book known as the Pentateuch, which is a word that literally means “Five Part Book.” Therefore, Genesis is the first part, to the first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), which were all written by God’s servant, Moses.

At this point, you might be tempted to pass by this information and not give it any real consideration, but you really shouldn’t. This five part book, in a sense, kick starts the rest of the Bible for us and provides real substance, meaning, and understanding for the remainder of Scripture. Furthermore, what we have in Genesis, are the seedlings that begin to grow and develop into the rich theology that we see in the whole of Scripture. For example, the book of Genesis is where we first learn about the power of God. We learn that He is self-existent, eternal, and creates literally out of nothing. He speaks, and it happens. It is in the book of Genesis where we learn about the character of God. We find that when God does create, it is a “good” creation. We also learn from this book the nature of God. From just the first few verses of Scripture, we are introduced to the beginning understanding of the ‘Trinity’ as God begins to reveal Himself. There is much more that can be said, and will be said both in this chapter and in latter chapters, but the point is this: Genesis is extremely important. If you get Genesis wrong, you get the entire Bible wrong. This is exactly why Satan has levied a major assault against this book. I mean, the truth contained in the book of Genesis has become so taboo in the world’s ‘modern’ societies, that many Christians are now ashamed of it. Instead of defending Genesis with boldness and love, its truth has been given away to the scientific community to be scoffed at and made into an intellectual laughing stock. And as a result, Christians have been giving away the very foundation that explains man’s greatest questions: 1) How did we get here? 2) What is the meaning of Life? 3) What went wrong? 4) How is it fixed? All of these questions are answered in Genesis. But if the answers are taken away, where do we go for answers? Ourselves? Others? Where? I am under the persuasion that we need to get recommitted to and reacquainted with, the book of Genesis. And being reacquainted with Genesis, really is to be reacquainted with who God is. In fact, this is exactly the truth that we are first confronted with... Who “God is.”

God Is— Genesis 1:1

Genesis 1:1 “*In the beginning God...*”

There is so much packed into this one fraction of a verse it is incredible! In this verse we see God’s absolute oneness. There is no spouse along with God. There is no “Great Counsel” of deities as other pagan religions have maintained. There is only God.

Now just look at what this teaches us about God: It first teaches that GOD IS *self-existent and self-sufficient*.

He doesn’t need anyone and he doesn’t need anything to sustain Him. He doesn’t rely on external power in order to survive; he is the power. If the universe, or anything else were never created, God would have still always existed, and would continue to exist, right on into the foreverness of eternity.

A second aspect this verse teaches about God— and something that will become more clear as the chapter unfolds— is that GOD IS speaks of the *plural nature of God*.

We come face to face with this truth as we read the word “God” in verse one. The name that you are reading here is the name “Elohim” which is the word “God” written in the plural form. Do you see the last two letters at the end of the name “Elohim”— “**IM**”? This is indicating *masculine plural nouns*.

We get a little more insight when we come to **Genesis 1:26** when the Bible says, “*And God said, let US make man in OUR image, after OUR likeness.*”

Furthermore, once we get into the New Testament where we have a more perfect knowledge of God’s revelation, this teaching loses all ambiguity and debate and we simply see that God reveals Himself as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Now, pay attention to what I said. I said that that this teaching loses ambiguity, not it’s depth in terms of explaining it. I tell you this only to assert what the Bible is telling us here. God is plural in nature.

God Creates— Genesis 1:1-31—2:1-25

Genesis 1:1 “...created the heaven and the earth.”

I want you to think about how simple, yet profound that statement is. As was stated previously, as far as our universe is concerned, there was a time when it did not exist. There was a time when the only thing that sat where the entire cosmos are currently operating, was a thick pitch of impenetrable blackness. Nothingness. Nothingness used to reside where our world is right now. And once again, even when there once was black nothingness, there was God.

But there came a time when God stepped into the darkness and turned on the light of creation. Out of His own volition and self-will, God created the heaven and the earth. He wasn't bound by obligation. He was not coerced by some external force. He created because He wanted to. More specifically, God created, because He wanted you.

And understand, God didn't create as some have suggested He created and just simply started the process of creation, and then allowed let evolution to take over. That is not what the Genesis account tells us. What Genesis tells us is that when God began to speak the cosmos and life into existence, He did so by giving everything the fulness of maturity. The stars began to shine as if they had always been shining. The spinning and courses of the solar systems began operating as if they had been doing so for eons. Plants, waters, lands, and animals not only suddenly existed at God's Word, but began behaving and functioning in complete wholeness.

But then we have to stop for a moment and consider God's crown of creation— man-kind— separately. When you are reading **Genesis 1:26-30**, your taking in a general, overall synopsis of God's creation of, and intention for, all of man-kind. In this instance, Adam and Eve were create, were a married couple, and had already received their instruction from God concerning the purpose for their lives.

However, once we get to **chapter 2**, we are taken from a “general overview” in the creation and formation of man-kind, to a specific explanation of how this was accomplished. **Genesis 2:1-25** is a retelling of the same story mentioned in **chapter 1** and explains a great deal.

First, we learn that we, mankind, are the only creation who received the “breath of life.” Meaning, that as God is eternal, we reflect who He is by having an eternal side to us. In Genesis 2:7 the Bible says, “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” The first act God completed in creating us, was giving us the ability to be with Him forever. God made an eternal commitment to us before anything else.

Second, God gave a job assignment to Adam. In **Genesis 2:8-15**, God planted a garden, placed Adam inside of it, and then instructed him to care for it. I want you to notice again how we were created to reflect God in this instance. Ultimately, God created and therefore, He is the Supreme Owner, but Adam— representing mankind— was to be God's vice-regent on the earth. As God was productive in creation, man was to be productive in the garden. As God cared for His creation by providing resources, man was to care for God's creation and cause it to produce. As God's design in creation displays His magnificent intellect, man was to use his intellect to “dress and keep” the garden in which he was placed, as well as naming the animals as God instructed (**Genesis 2:19-20**).

A third truth we find in this passage is the moral standard of our Creator. God created a moral law for Adam. Have you ever wondered why someone is able to know right from wrong? Have you ever wondered why every culture, no matter the age, had some set of varying rules for living? It starts right here with God. God IS the standard of moral perfection. In other words, moral law flows out from His character and not the other way around. And in this passage, God places the “*Tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil*” before Adam and instructs him not to eat it or death would follow. Adam, everyday thereafter, had a moral choice to make: would he believe and trust God by believing His word, or would he refuse God's word?

Fourth, we find that just as God is a Being in relationship, man was also created to be a being “in relationship.” What is meant by this is that just as the Trinity is explained in the fulness of the New Testament, we see that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit operate in complete harmony and exclusivity with One another. God is a Being “in relationship.” There is a complete Oneness in the Godhead that cannot be broken or added to.

This is where the creation of Eve comes into the story. **Genesis 2:21-25** tells us about God's creation of the first marriage. God said, “*It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him*” (**2:18**). So as the narrative continues, God caused Adam to sleep, took a rib from him, and then formed from Adam his wife, Eve. Adam, then recognizing this significance after Eve was brought to him and said, “...This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh” (**2:23**).

Together they were a complete compliment to the person of God. They were one, just as God is One. There was a complete harmony among them, and there were no additions.

God Restores— Genesis 3:1-24

This is where we move into the **third chapter of Genesis**. In Chapter 3, we are introduced to the most ardent enemy of God, His creation, and everything God stands is; Satan Himself. To be sure, one really does need a good working knowledge of the New Testament in order to piece this together. In just reading this account, we would be left with some very intriguing questions were it not for the the full revelation of Scripture given to us. Questions like: what is this serpent's origin? If God created all in the earth, and all creation was “very good” what happened to this creature? How did it learn to communicate? How did it determine to levy an attack against God? However, once again, we know from passages like **Revelation 12:9** and **Revelation 20:2** that this is the Devil, the deceiver of the whole world.

Once the stage is set for this serpent, we know what happens next. We read on in sorrowful anticipation as Adam and Eve are lead away from their trust in God, from the bliss that He has created for them, and from their sinless innocence, and toward the prospect of being “gods” themselves. How would this happen? By eating of the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” and thus breaking the one command that God had set before them.

From here, there is only a spiral downward as Adam and Eve begin to cover themselves, then they hide from God, and then a “blame game” immediately follows as God confronts them about what they had done (**Genesis 3:1-13**).

What happened after this event left reverberating mark on all of human history. God’s image in His creation of man was now marred and ruined. Man was now able to know good and evil, but chose evil in order to come to that knowledge. Therefore, they became inconsistent with God’s character and both spiritually died that very moment, deserving eternal spiritual judgment having sinned against God’s eternal justice.

However, this is not where the passage stops. God instead, gives mercy. Where immediate judgment was warranted, mercy was given.

God also began providing grace. From the time Eve finished her explanation in verse 13, the next words come from God as He instituted the curse. Now, many people may not like to think of this curse as a measure of God’s grace, but in reality, that is exactly what it was. Because mankind was now separated from God relationally, but He still desired relationship, there had to be a way for us to be drawn to Him. God’s curse is our signal that something is wrong in the universe.

It was also in this instance when God gave a promise of full restoration. God, in essence said, you failed, but I love you, and I’m going to restore you to your original position.” We see this in Genesis 3:15 when the first prophecy is given in Scripture. It was a prophecy that spoke of how ultimately a Savior would come and crush the curse of death and restore us back to Him.

Also, if you drop down to **verse 21**, you will find that God killed an innocent animal to cover their shame. This was a picture of God’s promise of restoration. Because of our shame, God’s justice still demanded death. But the picture here is that God would provide an eternal sacrifice to cover our shame.

Summary: In just these first three chapters of Genesis, we’ve covered a tremendous amount of history. It is in these very pages where we first learn about the power and nature of God. We learn His name, His character, and His desire. Furthermore, this is where we learn our origin, purpose, and function. It is because of this first part of Genesis that we learn why there is evil in the world and how we recognize it.

If it were not for Genesis, we would be completely adrift and hopeless. That said, it is painfully obvious that these first few chapters not only show us who God is, but actually reach down and show us who we really are, and that God wanted us anyway. It has a message for us if we would simply take the time to listen.

3. THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL

GENESIS 4

If Adam and Eve didn't understand the full effect of the fall before, they definitely understand it by the time we reach Genesis chapter four. The way the course of events come about, it seems almost breath-taking how fast humanity spiraled downward as a result of sin entering the world. In just one generation, we go from "paradise" in a Garden of Eden, to "sorrow" at a graveside service, and it only gets worse.

Let's follow the progression:

Marriage and Procreation— Genesis 4:1-2

God issues a command for mankind to replenish the earth and this is exactly what happens. Adam and Eve have their first child and call him, Cain. Directly after this, we read that Adam and Eve had another child and called him Abel. At this point, we're not given a tremendous amount of information, but we do know that both grew to lead productive lives: Cain as a farmer, and Abel as a shepherd. So far so good!

Interestingly enough, this story begins with a tremendous amount of optimism. Eve was full of faith and hope and realized that by God's grace and with his help, she conceived a son... and no doubt, had this same understanding with all of her other sons and daughters.

To Eve, life meant something. She knew it was special. This is also indicated in the names that are selected for these two boys. Cain means "possession." It was an indication that God had given him to her. The name Abel means "Breath." It's an indication that there is an importance to life. That he has life in him. What a special moment this was for Eve!

Acceptable Worship and Unacceptable Worship— Genesis 4:3-7

In just a few short verses, we are fast-forwarded through time and are able to see the boys grow into men, and men who have been taught to serve God. Apparently, both Cain and Abel decided to give spontaneous acts of worship to God. As we read, we find that in this act of worship, Cain brought some of his produce and offered it to God, and Abel brought one of the 'firstlings' of his flock. You might say, "Perfect, I've done that as well! I love giving God spontaneous acts of worship!" The problem here however, was that God accepted Abel's sacrifice and did not accept Cain's.

This really is an important lesson for us to grasp; God does not accept anything we would like to call an "offering." We have to come to God on His terms, and with only those offerings that He has deemed worthy.

Now, as far as this situation is concerned, several ideas have been given as to why God did not accept Cain's offering. Perhaps it was what he gave that became the issue. Perhaps it was the attitude in which he gave that made it unacceptable to God. Perhaps it was a combination of the sacrifice given and his attitude while he gave it. From the passage, we learn that Able gave God the first and the best of his flock. These verses seem to indicate that Cain's offering was neither. Whatever the case, there is every reason to believe that Cain knew exactly what God required, but decided to give what he wanted anyway.

In contrast, we see a detailed difference in Abel's offering. Abel gave not only the first of his flock, but the best of the first of his flock. There it is: God gets what's first, and God gets what's best. That kind of giving comes from the heart.

However, what is most significant is that during God's correction of Cain, God graciously gave Cain a means for correction in verse 7.

At this point, you might expect to read about how Cain asked God for forgiveness and made a correction for his sacrifice, but this is not how the story unfolds.

Jealousy and Murder— Genesis 4:8-18

It is incredible when you're reading this story, that out of all of the things that might have happened, this does not seem to fit. Cain speaks to his brother Abel, walked with him out in a field, looked around to see if anyone was looking, and at once, all of his jealous rage poured out over his own brother and in a single moment of violence, killed Abel. The way the Hebrew text reads is that he actually butchered him.

What is worse is that once God confronts Cain about this act, he attempts to avoid God's question. **Verse 9** says, "*And the LORD said unto Cain, 'Where is Abel thy brother? And He said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper?'*" As we said, one generation removed from mankind experiencing complete perfection and the ability to go in and out of God's presence at will, to murder.

And I wish this was the worst part of the story: not only was Cain so captured by wicked jealousy that he killed his own brother; not only did he not take responsibility for it, Cain actually complained about his punishment! After God calls out Cain and issues his punishment, in **Genesis 4:13-14**, Cain says, "... *My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, thou has driven me out this day from the face of the earth: and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that everyone that findeth me shall slay me.*"

Lastly, Cain has one last act of defiance. Shamefully, this happens after God graciously provides protection even in light of his callousness toward what he had done (Genesis 4:15). Cain moves further east from where God had once been able to dwell with his people and he built his own city in a land called Nod. This tells us just how hardened Cain's heart was and is a picture of a man with no faith and in complete rebellion against God. Ironically, The name "Nod" is the same word used for the word "fugitive," a perfect description of Cain's life.

Polygamy and Retaliation— Genesis 4:19-24

From here, the story doesn't get any better. In this portion of chapter 4 we are introduced to a man named Lamech— A descendant of Cain. And once we are introduced to him, we are simultaneously introduced to the supreme breakdown in God's pattern for marriage known as polygamy (the taking of multiple wives).

What can also be seen in this passage is that murder was here to stay. According to these verses, Lamech had killed a young man (perhaps a young worrier), who had offended him. You should notice also Lamech's outrageous assumption for this crime, "*And Lamech said unto his wives, Adah and Zillah, 'Hear my voice; ye wives of Lamech, hearken unto my speech: for I have slain a man to my wounding, and a young man to my hurt. If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy and seven fold (Genesis 4:23-24).*" Lamech assumed that since God had showed the father of his lineage (Cain) a measure of mercy by avenging his death seven times (Genesis 4:15), that he should be protected seventy-seven times for his sin.

There was no repentance, no sorrow, no remorse, and no responsibility taken. Only an expectation of God to take care of any negativity to come his way if things didn't go his way. Sound familiar?

Summary: In our time, sadly, we are very familiar with death. We've got funerals down. We know who to call, we know what to wear, we know to find the right memorial. Just think about that: In our time, there are people who actually make a living conducting services and maintaining cemeteries for our fallen.

But just try to imagine this situation. You've not been acquainted with death yet and suddenly your oldest child kills his younger brother. You're standing at the grave. What do you say? Who might you call? This first couple are feeling the aftershock of the gritty reality of what a deceased human life actually looks like. Shaking their heads they look down and simply think, "What have we done?"

Sadly, this is the world we understand... but this was not how it was supposed to be.

Discussion Points:

Discuss how each of these points are applied to this Biblical narrative:

There comes a time in every person's life when they are completely responsible for their actions.

A Heart Turned from God, is also a heart turned from humanity.

There is always a personal price to pay for unrepentant sin.

True worship is more than just a religious act.

The Closer we are to God, the more we are alienated from the world (1 John 3:11-13)

4. THE SCARLET-LINING

GENESIS 5-11

You know, it's interesting that sometimes we hear of people tell those who experience some sort of hardships to look for a "silver-lining." That is, they are to look for a possible "good" in a bad situation. That may be good advice to an extent, but in Christianity, it's a little bit different. Instead of looking for a silver-lining, what we need to be looking for is the Scarlet-Lining, the hope for all mankind, Jesus Christ.

When we learn to do this, suddenly, our circumstances suddenly have a purpose. Now, we may not know what that purpose is every time, but we do know that because of Christ, every single circumstance can be endured with a knowledge that 1) God loves us and 2) God can gain glory out of it.

This is important to remember in light of the depressing scenes from which we've just come. Jealousy, premeditated murder, shock, callousness in light of the crime; pain, chaos, destruction, sin, and corruption— a world and way of life we are very familiar with— all occurring just one generation after the fall of mankind.

But if you remember, in **Genesis 3:15** God promised that He would raise up a seed from Eve that would ultimately crush sin and death forever and completely restore what was lost in the fall. And from that point forward, all throughout the pages of the Old Testament, God continued to remind His people of this very promise.

Moving forward through the Bible, we know this seed was the God-Man, Jesus Christ our Savior who became sin for all mankind, bore our inequity and sorrow, and was crushed under the judgment of God the Father in order that God's prophecy be fulfilled and mankind could be redeemed back to God.

However, it is important to remember that at the time when all of these events were taking place, the people who knew and honored God could not see the full picture that we can see on this side of the cross. They simply relied upon God's promises, looking for that Scarlet-Lining, and it all begins right here.

Just follow along as these passages unfold.

The Scarlet-Lining Was God's Promise of Hope— Genesis 5:1-6:8

Starting in **Genesis chapter 5**, you might see something disturbing if you look close enough. You'll read the words, "... and he died." As this generational account is given, it is reminding us of something very sobering, death continually comes for us as a result of the fall. Over and over again we read this pattern: 1) The telling of how long a particular individual lived 2) How old they were when they had their first child 3) They die... which equates to: A person is born, they get married, they have children, and they die.

The above passage was written as a separate section, but is still a continuation of the "Creation Drama." It was actually written to be a shock to the reader so that we would know what was happening to us, as the only creation made in God's image, was in complete contrast to God's original design. However, what we find inside of this passage is very interesting. When you're examining this portion of Scripture you should notice is that an entirely new line of genealogies are being given. In Genesis four we're given a genealogy out of the line of Cain. In Cain's family line we see an obvious departure from from God and His way. But starting in **Genesis 4:25** we see something exciting, "*And Adam knew his wife again; she bare a son, and called his name Seth: For God, said she, hath appointed me another seed instead of Abel, whom Cain slew.*"

These are sad words, but great words. Though Eve recognized that her own son had become the murderer of her younger son, God had blessed again and given her a third child named, Seth. The name Seth means "Compensation" and holds the idea that God not only provided her a son to replace Abel (as compensation), but a son that could possibly be the one whom God had promised and would bring restoration. She was looking for the "Scarlet-Lining" because of God's promise.

Obviously, we know that Seth was not the Messiah, however, it is through this line that God started building and preserving a righteous line that would lead to the Messiah. Just look at what happens in the line of Seth in verse **26 of chapter 4**, "*And to Seth, to him also there was born a son; and he called his name Enos: then began men to call upon the name of the LORD.*"

If we were to follow this lineage in chapter 5 in detail, we would see that there was growing anticipation of God's fulfillment of His promise with each generation, and this anticipation came with fathers from the line of Seth teaching their children how to follow after God, and more than that, explaining to them that God promised to do away with sin and death.

And because of this promise, fathers were so expectant of it, and had such faith in God to complete it, they began to wonder if their sons could possibly be the One whom God had promised. Just look at some of these names:

"Mahalaleel" means "Praise of God"

"Enoch" means "Dedicated"

"Lamech" means "Powerful"

"Noah" means "Rest"

Note: Look at what Lamech said about his son Noah in **Genesis 5:29**, "*And he called his name Noah, saying, This same shall comfort us concerning our work and toil of our hands, because of the ground which the LORD hath cursed.*"

The Scarlet-Lining Was God's Promise of Mercy— Genesis 6:1-10:32

Obviously we have entered into the flood narrative when God justly poured out His judgment on the earth for the pervasive sin that existed throughout mankind. If we were simply thinking of this event in terms of its bare facts, we could categorize it simply as:

Man's wickedness was pervasive on the earth

God decided to send judgment by way of a world-wide flood

God provides grace to one family (Noah and family) and instructs him to building an **arc**

The **arc** is to sustain Noah and his family, as well as two of every kind of animal for over a year

Judgment is carried out with 40 days and 40 nights of rain

God pushes a "restart" button on humankind with Noah and his family

God gives a promise never to flood the earth again and gives the sign of the rainbow.

This is what we might know as the "Sunday School" version, but there is a tremendous amount more to the story than this. The flood narrative actually centers around a theme of God's commitment to mankind and to the New Covenant He would establish. It is from this point, God would continually be known by His people as a "Covenant-Making" "Covenant-Keeping God. And what makes this so very significant is the fact it is revealed in this passage the absolute depravity of man and the absolute holiness of God.

This section starts out by telling us a story... about us. We can certainly get stuck on information in this passage about who the "Sons of God" were or, who are the "Daughters of men?" We can give ideas about how they must be evil angels taking wives of mankind, thus creating giants, corrupting the human race, and becoming a threat to God's plan in sending a Messiah. We can talk about how they are simply a ruling body of men who were evil and corrupting the line of Seth and therefore a threat to God's plan in sending a Messiah. Or, if there those don't work, we can talk about other theories that could possibly apply here. However, ideas like this muddy the water a little bit and miss the point as to what the real issue is. The real issue is the heart of man.

In **Genesis 6:5** we read, "*And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and the every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.*" This was not merely an indictment of people living during this time, this was a holy observation of a holy and righteous God made toward all of humanity. That said, what this passage makes abundantly clear is that before God, we are all hopelessly guilty and worthy of death.

However, in this passage, we are also introduced to the Scarlet-Lining of God's mercy and grace; mercy because just judgment was held back, and grace because a means of salvation was provided for all who would receive it.

This is when we read of a man named Noah who, "... *found grace in the eyes of the LORD.*" This one man understood the significance of why he was alive; he understood the significance of who he was and who God was and this caused him to be... "*a just man and perfect in his generation, and to... walk with God.*"

This is what a true understanding of God's mercy and grace will do. It will overwhelm you to follow hard after God, no matter what anyone else does around you. And it is this kind of person that God loves to use as a vessel for His glory; and that is exactly what we see here.

Despite the fact that all of humanity stood guilty before God (even Noah), He used Noah as a vessel of His glory by commissioning him to build an **Arc** of salvation. Where there should have been judgment on all, God gave mercy and grace.

We also need to pay attention to the fact that God's grace is even more amplified after He commissioned Noah to preach of the coming judgment the entire time the **Arc** was being built. However, only the animals God provided to the ark and Noah's immediate family.

And just as God promised, everyone and every creature on the arc were completely saved; and every person on the outside of the arc were completely destroyed.

A last piece to this narrative comes by way of the rainbow that came after God's New Covenant with Noah, and really, to all of mankind mentioned in **Genesis 9:1-19**. This was unilateral and binding covenant of God's mercy that explained that God would continue to allow the flourishing of the human race and would never again flood the earth. Actually the reason we are still here, is because this convenient is still in effect.

The Scarlet-Lining Was God's Promise of Preservation— Genesis 11:1-9

The third major theme in this section happens at the infamous “Tower of Babel.” After the flood, God had given a command once again to be fruitful and multiply, and further gave instruction about the sacredness of human life.

However, in this section, we find that once generation after generation had passed, the sacredness of human life turned into an unholy pride, and instead of being fruitful and multiplying, we find that people were centralizing and unifying. And in this centralization and unity, they all have what they think is a fantastic idea. They’ll build a tower.

Now, if it was just a tower that would be one thing; but it was not just a tower, it was a challenge to God. **Genesis 11:3-4** says, “*And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. And they said, Go to, let us build a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.*”

They wanted recognition and show God and the rest of the world, in case they were scattered abroad, just what they were made of! What is funny is that the way verse 5 reads in the Hebrew text is that God was illustrating how He actually had to come down to see this little tower and little city that they thought was so big and impressive. “*And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.*”

What we learn ultimately from this situation is that when people are unified, sin actually compounds and gets worse and worse. But with God’s covenant, His objective is to preserve us— and so what He does is given to us in Genesis 11:6-9:

“*And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech. So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of the all the earth: and they left off to build the city. Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.*”

The point is that God had promised to preserve the human race but that we posed a threat to ourselves by this kind of unity. Therefore, God separated the people groups so that we could be saved from ourselves. God had to separate us in order to preserve us.

Summary:

Though we do not look to the same promises that these people looked to, we can still look back and see that our God is truly a promise keeping God. Further, we can see that since He is a promise keeping God, then He will certainly fulfill those promises that have yet to be fulfilled. We look to the promise of that Scarlet-Thread of hope Jesus to come back for His own.

Discussion Points:

Discuss how each of these points are applied to this Biblical narrative:

There is always cause to praise God in light of the continual mercy and grace He has shown us.

Like Noah preached salvation by way of an **arc** in his day, we must preach salvation by Christ in our day.

Pride always leads to disobedience

God never allows the proud to ultimately succeed

5. FAITH 101

GENESIS 11:26-25:11

It is interesting to think about the fact that there are only a handful of chapters given to provide the accounts of creation, all that it contains, and God having to “restart” the entire human race, but by the time we start reading **Genesis:11:26**, an entire thirteen chapters dedicated to the life of one man, His relationship to God, and the promise regarding his family.

After learning this, the question that I had was, “Why?” I mean, you would think it would be the opposite. Why did God choose to give more information here than He did in creation or providing more clear and concise answers for other portions of Scripture? Further, once we even get into Abraham’s life, it’s not like we’re reading a satisfying biography. There are substantial pieces of Abraham’s life and origin that are missing. Once again, the question “Why?” comes to mind.

But could it be that God’s primary objective is to teach us about who He is, rather than only teaching us about what He did? Could it be that God desired a right Theology from us, before we became concerned with anything else?

This should tell us a great deal about the central purpose in God, and Him providing us Scripture in the first place. Yes, of course, we would like to know answers to different questions not specifically answered in the Bible. But when we come to the story of Abraham, it becomes very clear that God did not give us Scripture to satisfy our taste for philosophical or metaphysical questions; He gave us Scripture to teach us about how we can have a right relationship with Him.

Keep this in mind as we briefly follow Abraham’s life and enroll with him in Faith 101.

God, I Will Go— Genesis 11:26- 12:6

At the time when we are first introduced to Abraham, we find that his name is not Abraham at all— it’s Abram— and Abram was not a follower of God, he was a pagan. He was actually on a trip with his father, Terah, who was moving his family from Ur to Haran and both were large places of worship for the moon god, Sin.

If we do a little Bible research though, we find from **Acts 7:2**, that while Terah and his family were in Mesopotamia as they were traveling, Abraham received a call from God (Genesis 12:1-3) and told him to leave everything behind in order to go into a land that God would show him once he got there.

Now, for the most part, we are creatures of habit. We usually like where we live, we like our acquaintances, friends, and family, we like our livelihoods, and we certainly like our security. Any step into the unknown most of the time will cause us to think twice before actually doing it. But what we witness with Abraham is God telling him to leave everything— including comfort and companionship of some of his closest family members— and go to a place that he will only know once he gets there. Also, in this passage we see that Abraham was also promised that his seed would be made into great nation.

I don’t know how much you like surprises... but this was a significant surprise. If you can imagine the breakfast conversation the next morning, you might get a feel of just how significant it was. This wasn’t a situation where Abraham would merely be blindfolded and told that when he opened his eyes, there would be a huge present waiting for him. This was a life-altering decision. You can almost guess the response of his father after hearing the news, “God, spoke to you... and told you to leave your family?” “Yes,” said Abraham. “Well, have you ever met this God before? How do you know He is better than the god we serve? You would be willing to trust Him?” Abraham would say, once again, “Yes.” His father might then ask questions like, where are you going? How long will you be there? You can’t just trust any god, you know. However, Abraham, at 75 years old, trusted God, took his wife and his nephew Lot, and started traveling (Genesis 12:4-8).

This was the beginning of Abraham’s faith journey. The time in his life when he told God, “God, I will go.” and never looked back. Now, certainly in this chapter, and in a few following, we find mistakes and trials in Abraham’s life (and they won’t be his last), but this first step of obedience was a critical turning point. Abraham’s faith in God began to be solidified right here.

And just like Abraham, there was a critical act of obedience toward God in the life of the believer— a crucial moment when we trusted Christ as our personal Savior. Does that mean that this was the end of our trials or mistakes? Absolutely not. But this was where our faith in God began, and the point from which it started to grow.

God, Let Me Help— Genesis 12:7-21:34

In the next major event in Abraham's life we find that it had to do with the promise of his seed. God promised to make from his seed, a great nation, and that whoever would bless him, God would bless, and whoever cursed him, God would curse (Genesis 12:2-3). However, there was one major problem (at least Abraham and his wife Sarah thought there was a problem), they were getting well out of range of 'normal' parental age— especially Sarah.

Years passed; and as they did, Abraham had to endure the pride of his nephew Lot (Genesis 13:1-13), God renewed his vow with Abraham (Genesis 13:14-18), Abraham had to rescue Lot from a kidnapping (Genesis 14), and God promises Abraham an heir and renews his covenant with him again. During all of this time, doubt was lingering in the heart of Abraham and his wife Sarah, despite God's reassurance that in fact a son would be given.

So after what was deemed to be too much time for God to work out this situation, Sarah decides she needs to help God out. (That doesn't sound like anything we would do does it? We never think that God isn't working fast enough or is incapable of dealing with your situation so you try and handle it yourself, do we? Sadly, we do. And sadly, just as in this situation, it worked out terribly.)

As the story continues, Sarah gave Abraham Hagar, after convincing him that God needed help, and told him that the child Hagar would bare would be the heir that God had promised. Abraham consents and eventually has a son named Ishmael, and a tremendous amount of family drama was created (Genesis 16).

Let's pause right here for a moment and speak about how God, in His grace, began to intervene in this situation, and eventually built a great nation out of the line of Ishmael. This is what God does, He provides grace even in the middle of our sin. However, as we have seen all throughout the pages of Genesis this far, and will continue to see throughout the Bible (and our lives), that consequences of sin always remain. God's grace does not erase our action just because we are sorry.

God, You Are Good— Genesis 21

After the birth of Ishmael, a significant amount of time passes again, however, this time, Abraham and Sarah wait. And during this waiting time, several events have taken place:

- 1) Genesis 18:1-15— Abraham and Sarah host angelic guests and reaffirm God's promise.
- 2) Genesis 18:16-22— The angelic guests tell Abraham of the impending judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah.
- 3) Genesis 18:23-33— Abraham starts his intercessory prayers for these two cities but can't find any righteous so that the cities will be spared.
- 4) Genesis 19:1-11— The angels visit Lot and give instruction that he and his family must leave. Besides this, there are several heinous acts that occur.
- 5) Genesis 19:12-29— Lot and family are finally forced to leave and the two cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed. Also, Lot's wife is taken for looking back to the city.
- 6) Genesis 19:30-38— A grotesque sexual act takes place between Lot and his two daughters.
- 7) Genesis 20:1-18— Abraham has another bout with dishonesty between he and Abimelech.

Finally, after all of this we get to read these words in **Genesis 21:1-2**, "*And the LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did unto Sarah as he had spoken. For Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him.*"

Directly after this event, you can tell that there is great joy in the receiving of this new life. They are so overjoyed that they just had to laugh. In fact, because they laughed so much they named their son Isaac, which means "he laughs." Later on, there was a full feast celebration after Isaac had weaned from his mother. They were so overjoyed because of this promised son.

It's a good thing the story finally. Once again, there has never been a single promise that God has not fulfilled, or will forget to fulfill.

God, You Provide— Genesis 22-25:11

If we were writing this story, we might write, "*And they all lived happily ever after...*" once Isaac was born— that perhaps this family was set in their faith, and that there was just a type of "spiritual costing" that took place where they would just enjoy God, He would enjoy them, and there were no more trials. But once again... that's only if we were writing the story, not God.

In the final portions of Abraham's life we find that the trials aren't done yet and actually, the test of his faith was going to be greater here than ever before. The question Abraham would face would be this: "Can I fully trust God? Or do I fully trust myself?" This is a question we all have to face, but most of us never reach the degree of trust that Abraham displays here.

In **Genesis 22:1-2**, we find these words, "*And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.*"

Attempts have been made to try and run through the emotional distress of Abraham here and give some sort of indication of how confused, hurt, challenged, shocked, and saddened Abraham might have been once this instruction was given, but I've never read or heard anything that could touch what it must have been like.

Surprisingly, the Bible is silent on this issue, and the next thing you read after God speaks to Abraham is that he rose up early in the morning to do exactly what God told him (Genesis 22:3). This should tell us something significant about the trust that had been cultivated in Abraham by God. There was no hesitation, there was no protest as there had been with Sodom and Gomorrah, there was only an immediate response of obedience.

As we follow the passage, other indications are given that tell us a great deal about his faith. In **Genesis 22:5** Abraham tells the other young men that are with he and his son to stay at a specific location while he and his son went to worship. He further said that they both would be return from the mountain. In **Genesis 22:7** when Isaac was finally piecing all of this together and realized that they did not have a “*traditional*” sacrifice, asked a gut wrenching question, “*but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?*” and Abraham’s response is stunningly optimistic in **verse 8**, “*And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together.*”

And as the story continues just before Abraham was about to puncture his son with the knife, God stopped him and told him “*... Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.*” (Genesis 22:12)

From this point, Abraham is suddenly directed toward a ram that was caught in the thicket and this became the substitutionary sacrifice for his son. Abraham immediately notices that this gift from God and right then and there declares God as “Jehovah-Jireh” “The LORD GOD Provides”. God truly had provided for Abraham, and in this moment of faith, it was formally recognized.

Once again, we come to a place where we feel like the story can end. In reading this portion of God’s word our emotions are running high, our hearts cry “hallelujah!”, as we sit satisfied at the story’s end. However, the story doesn’t end. There is one final portion to Abraham’s faith journey, and it has to do with his son.

As Abraham’s life is drawing to a close, his wife Sarah dies and his son, Isaac, is left motherless and is still not married. So Abraham sends out his most trusted servant to travel to his homeland and select a wife for him there rather than from the land of the Canaanites (Genesis 24:1-9).

With the conclusion of the narrative, Rebekah is selected and agrees to marry Isaac, God once again provides.

Summary:

Discussion Points:

Discuss how each of these points are applied to this Biblical narrative:

Deception is usually the first response whenever we sense danger.

God promises that the blessings on His people will be both supernatural and eternal.

God’s people are often impatient when it comes to waiting on God.

Always lean on God’s promises when we don’t want to wait.

It is always better to trust God than to trust ourselves.

6. IT'S ALL ABOUT THE CHANGE

GENESIS 25:11-36:43

Our focus for this section of Genesis is going to be on the person of Jacob; and to do that, we are going to move quickly past the person of Isaac. This is not to say that Isaac has a lesser significance, and therefore we can skip him; but it is to say that our focus in this portion of Genesis should be on the creation of the promised nation God gave to Abraham. And if this is where our focus is, then it is Jacob we need to center on because it is through him that a significant leap is made in the forming of this promised nation.

If we're getting to Jacob from Isaac, we need to understand a few things that happened in the life of Isaac. We find that just like his father Abraham, Isaac's wife, Rebekah, also had trouble conceiving children. For years they tried to have a son, but still Rebekah remained barren. In so much that Isaac felt like the plan of God was threatened, and so he came before the Lord in prayer to remind God of His promise (Genesis 25:21).

Immediately after this, God caused Rebekah to conceive, and this is when the narrative really begins to get interesting. Rebekah feels that there is a little bit of a war going on inside of her, and so this time, she goes to the LORD in prayer and asked what was happening to her and God told her that she had two sons and that two separate nations would come from them. In other words, they bargained for... twins!. God also tells her that against tradition, the older son would serve the younger (Genesis 25:22-23).

As the story unfolds, we are eventually introduced to two little boys— one named Esau, and one named Jacob. Esau, we find was a red-haired, hairy mess, and Jacob was a heel-grabbing troublemaker; and oddly enough these are characteristics that would identify their personalities and personal relationship with each other well into their adulthood. However, perhaps it is not so odd when we realize that their parents did not help this situation much since each parent was brash enough to select a “favorite” child. Rebekah selected Jacob to love more, and Isaac selected Esau to love more. Any parent reading this should immediately note the danger that this can create in the life of their family and this becomes more and more obvious as this narrative continues (Genesis 25:24-28). From verse 28, we are taken directly to what appears to be the young adulthood of these two brothers. We can safely assume many things at this point: We can assume that these two men had learned about God. We can assume that these two men had learned about God's promise to them about their future heritage. We can also assume that they knew each other very well (as brothers tend to do). And this is what causes this next scene in the narrative— a multilevel scheme for Jacob to inherit Esau's birthright and inheritance. Jacob, as we can tell from this situation, cared about spiritual things. He cared about blessing. He cared about what God would do through his family. He cared about the promise that one day he would rule over Esau— which his mother no doubt had told him about. And this is what caused a couple of ambitious moves in his life. He wanted a blessing so bad he could taste it; and as far as he was concerned, Jacob thought he knew exactly how to get it. So let's see what Jacob's ambitions lead to and what we might learn from his life.

When God Isn't In It, You Can't Change It— Genesis 25:29-27:46

This is where we learn that Jacob first has his eye on Esau's birthright. He knew what kind of man his brother had grown to be. He knew that Esau didn't really care for spiritual things. He knew that all his brother really cared about at this point was hunting and being outside; and so Jacob capitalizes on this brother's hunger to see if he could secure a 'birthright victory.'

Once again, Jacob knew exactly what the birthright meant. He thought that if he could pull this off that it would settle the question of who would carry on the promised seed. Jacob was trying to take on himself, the changing of the birthright from Esau's hands to his instead of leaving this up to God.

In verses 29-34 we see how Jacob planned on doing this. Jacob made some food and wouldn't you know, he was done at just the time his brother came in from a day of being out in the wilderness. Obviously, once Esau came in and smelled the food, his stomach let him know and he asks Jacob for some.

Everything was going according to plan for Jacob. Food... check. Hungry brother... check. Now comes the exchange. Once Esau asks for the food, Jacob tells him to sell his birthright first. Esau consents and the deed is done... Esau sells Jacob his birthright for a single meal.

It is important to stop right here for a moment and think about what just happened. This story (like many that we've seen) moves so quickly that you can hardly see any significance here— but what we're looking at is the ploy of one individual to change his path, be the master of his own destiny, and gain spiritual significance his own way. At the other end, we have another individual who could care less for spiritual things and sold his right to have any spiritual significance at all with a single meal.

If we are not careful, this can definitely happen to us. We can certainly be like Jacob and attempt to follow God on our own terms and make up what we believe to be spiritual or not. Or, we can be like Esau and stop caring for spiritual things altogether, so much so, that we lose any type of credible testimony and lasting legacy.

So here is Jacob; the new owner of a birthright. And here is Esau; the proud owner of a new kind of shame. But the story isn't over yet. Jacob had one more objective to complete— the securing of his father's primary blessing.

Once we get into chapter 26 we find that God renews his covenant with Isaac and prospers him financially despite several disputes over some wells in the land. After this, we find ourselves in chapter 27 and the clock has moved forward quite a bit and Isaac is now old and ready to give his sons his final blessing. As the oldest son, Esau was entitled to a double portion and the greatest honor of the blessing. And this is something that Jacob and his mother could not stomach.

Now, if deceiving your own brother is bad, then deceiving your own partially senile, hard of hearing, and mostly blind father is multiple times worse. But this is exactly what happens when Isaac wants to bless Esau.

Rebekah overheard this conversation and actually came up with a plan to steal Esau's blessing and they are successful. Rebekah wanted to secure the Messianic line for her favorite son, and does exactly this; however it did not come without its cost. Once Esau discovers what had happened, he immediately wanted to kill Jacob. Rebekah then comes to the rescue again convinces Isaac to send Jacob away to find a wife in Paddan-aram, but really this is an attempt to get Jacob to 'lie low' for a while so his brother can cool down a little bit.

Before God Uses You, He First Changes You— Genesis 28:10-32:21

All of the pushing, all of the pulling, all of the deceit, all of successful trickery to get everything he ever wanted, and suddenly he's on the run for his life. Someone once said, "You can get what you want, but you might lose what you had." is true in Jacob's case. He got what he wanted, but the cost was substantial. He would have to live with the fact that the very last act toward his father, on his death bed, was a lie he told instead of the words "I love you, dad." He would have to live with the fact that when he was sent away, that this was the last time he would actually see his mother. He would have to live with the fact that he had absolutely wounded his brother, in so much that Esau literally wanted to kill him. Good job Jacob. Little did he know also that this little move was going to cost him years of his life when met his dear old, uncle Laban.

Did God make a promise to Jacob? Yes. Did that give Jacob the right to make sure that promise was kept? No. Jacob had to learn the hard way that if God isn't in what you are doing, then there is nothing that is going to make it happen. God would bless Jacob, but it was going to be on His terms, not Jacob's.

As we approach God actually working in Jacob's life, we are going to see God doing a lot of ground work in order to prepare him. Jacob thought he could just be what God wanted him to be on His own. God, however, works on His own terms. And before anyone is used of God, there is a change that must take place. And that is what this section of Jacob's life is all about. This section starts out with Jacob on the run, and while he is resting for the evening, Jacob has a special dream. Here, for the first time, God confronts Jacob directly. At this point I believe it is important to notice what God didn't say. God never rebukes Jacob for his actions. God never tells Jacob what he must change in himself. God simply lays out line by line His promise to Jacob (Genesis 28:10-15). This is the beginning of the change in Jacob's life. However, the rest of the journey to get to where God wanted him to be was not going to be easy. In fact, Jacob was going to face some of the hardest years of his life. Jacob would spend 20 years of his life in service to a man that Jacob discovers was just as deceitful and manipulative as he was. God often gives us a taste of our own medicine when He's looking to change our lives. He let's us see who we really are. If we fast forward through the narrative we find that Jacob ends up with two wives (Leah and Rachel— both daughters of Uncle Laban), he had multiple children, and had accumulated a tremendous amount of wealth (most of which he cheated his father-in-law out of) before God finally gave instruction to leave that area and go back to his homeland.

When God Changes You, You know It— Genesis 32:22-32

Jacob obeys God, and this is where the pivot of change begins. Suddenly, we find Jacob in prayer to God before reuniting with his brother Esau after 20 years. You would think that this was a sufficient time to get over a wrong done to you, but Jacob isn't convinced and this causes him to pray. This is the first prayer we see from Jacob and it is an absolutely beautiful one. It is a prayer of protection before he meets Esau:

"And Jacob said, O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac, the LORD which saidst unto me, Return unto thy country, and to thy kindred, and I will deal well with thee: I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast showed unto thy servant; for with my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two bands. Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau: for I fear him, lest he will come and smite me, and the mother with the children. And thou saidst, I will surely do thee good, and make thy seed as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude." Genesis 32:9-12

It's amazing what a little faith and a little trouble can do for our prayer life. It can put us exactly where we need to be— directly in the hands of God.

That very night, in the black stillness, God comes to Jacob once more. Remember, the last time Jacob met the Lord was 20 years before while he was running away from the promised land, and now God comes to him again as he is moving toward the promised land.

However, this time, it's a little different meeting. You see, God didn't come in a peaceful dream, this time, God, in the form of a man starts a wrestling match with Jacob; and it lasts from the middle of the night until just before dawn. This was the fight of Jacob's life. You see, Jacob was used to always coming out the winner of all of his encounters. He had beaten his brother. He had beaten his father. He had eventually beaten his uncle Laban. But in this match, Jacob was severely outmatched. God put Jacob's thigh out of socket and he literally couldn't fight anymore. Now, all that he had left to do, was to cling on to his "Heavenly Assailant." After this event Jacob had no question as to who should be the Master of his life— God was to be his New and only Master.

We also see from Jacob that along with his changing life, Jacob was beginning to have a new hunger despite his pain. He refused to let God go. If we can rewind a bite, his first attempted to obtain God's blessing on his life was through deceit. Now, he wants God blessing by struggling, asking, and refusing to let go. This was something in his life that he realized that only God could do.

But here comes the question in **verse 27**, "*And he said unto him, What is thy name*" *And he said, Jacob.*"

What this means is that Jacob's old nature was going to be a problem— and so God makes some undeniable changes in his life:

God gives Jacob a New Name— Verse 28 "And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel (God Prevails): for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed."

God gives Jacob a New Story— Verse 29-30 "And Jacob asked him, and said, Tell me, I pray thee, thy name. And he said, Wherefore is it that you dost ask after my name? And he blessed him there. And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel (Facing God): for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved."

God gives Jacob a fresh start— Verse 31a "And as he passed over Peniel the sun rose upon him..."

God gives Jacob a New Reminder— Verse 31b "... and he halted upon his thigh."

Jacob had no question in his mind if God met with him and if he had been changed. And just like Jacob, we know when God has changed us. There is a real, literal difference in us that we are fully aware of. But we should not be the only ones. Because as we look a little closer in the life of Jacob, we find one final major truth.

When God Changes You, Others Should See It— Genesis 33:1-36:40

In this section we see Jacob finally meeting Esau. Part of Jacob's reconciliation with God was to also reconcile with his brother, and this is exactly what happens. And notice how it happens: we see that Jacob has a new found courage. The first part of Genesis 33:3 says, "*And he passed over before them...*" There was no hiding, shifting, or avoiding. Jacob came directly to his brother. We also see that Jacob came with a new humility. In the second part of verse 3 we read "*...and bowed himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother.*" As we continue reading you find that Jacob gave his brother generous gifts, Esau then warmly embraces his brother and accepts him, and the hate-filled brother of chapter 27 is now a reconciled one in chapter 33.

Though the rest of this sections covers a scandalous rape of his only daughter, his sons (Simeon and Levi) murdering all involved, a false god dilemma because of Rachel, and ending with Esau's genealogy account in chapter 36. In all of these narratives where Jacob is mention, we can tell that there is an extreme regard for righteousness and everyone around him can see it.

7. DREAM LAND TO GOD'S PLAN

GENESIS 37-50

There are not many passages in the Bible that set the tone of the narrative or passage as forcefully as this one. After just a couple of verses telling us where Jacob was living and some brief background information in **verse 2 of chapter 37**, we read these words in **verse 3**, “*Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of many colors.*” We have already seen the strife that this can cause, and here we are again—a perpetual cycle of spiritual and psychological damage caused by a parent who feels the need to pick a favorite child.

This is how we are introduced to young Joseph—he was the favorite son of Jacob. And what makes this worse is the fact that Scripture is telling us that this was not something secretly hidden in the heart of Jacob, this was something that was obvious to the family. They weren't just suspicious of it, they had evidence for it. **Verse 4** tells us that they physically watched this special affection take place between their father and Joseph; and they watched so much of it that they began to hate Joseph, “*And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him.*”

This is how the tone of this narrative starts—it starts with hate. A hatred spurred by the envy and jealousy of nine older brothers toward their younger brother, Joseph. And so when Joseph is first given his call of greatness by God, this only spells trouble for him.

I Have a Dream— Genesis 37:5-11

Joseph said, “I have a dream!” And he did. God gave him a dream— actually a couple of them. In the first dream we find out that Joseph had a dream about sheaves, and one set of sheaves (which were his brothers), bowed before his sheaves. And then, we see that he had a second dream. In this the second dream, Joseph begins to tell about how he observed that the luminaries in the sky bowed before him.

Now, understand, the problem here is not the fact that Joseph had a couple of dreams. The problem is that he actually began telling his family about them, including his brothers, who had already started to hate him. And so, as you can imagine, the dreams did not help matters much whenever they realized that there were having to pay respect to him. Next time you find someone who really hates you, tell them that you had a dream that they were paying respect, and bowing before you and see how well that works out.

However, we might wonder what would have happened if Joseph would have just thought quietly about these dreams, or simply lit a candle late at night and began to write these dreams down in a journal somewhere. Would things have turned out differently?

We might also wonder what Joseph's motives were in revealing these dreams to his family. Why would he even say such a thing? Was he simply excited about God's plan? Was he simply trying to verbalize what God had revealed to him regarding the future of his family? Or was he your typical 17 year-old who just couldn't help himself?

I personally believe that this conversation came out of Joseph's heart, and that he truly understood that God had a plan for his life. But this sense of direction and enthusiasm is something his brother's could not stand.

There is something important here, I think. We should really beware if we cannot rejoice in the prosperity and direction of others in our lives.

This is Not What I Thought— Genesis 37:12- 41:

Don't misunderstand this. If God has revealed a path for your life, that is truly wonderful. But what God often does not include is the path it takes to get there. I happen to believe that if God revealed exactly what His plans were to us from the very beginning, many of us would have abandoned ship long before we even got started.

But to be God's vessel, you have to be refined God's way. There is a process— a way— that God uses to make an individual his masterpiece.

That said, if you experience confusion, heart-ache, pain, suffering, betrayal, loss, or fear, I want you to take heart, because you're in good company. It's really easy for us to peer into our situations and try to pair them up with God's promises and think, “This is not what I thought.” “This is not

what I think of when I think of God's blessing in my life." It's about at this point that you may become confused when you read or remember verses like **Romans 8:28**, "*And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.*" In the confusion of a circumstance, this verse is quoted almost like a battle cry among some Christians who think that if they can just love God enough, then He will eventually turn out something that they think is "good" for them. It's as if the "undesirable experience" that has come into their life is to be endured simply for endurance sake, until God finally breaks through with the 'good' that is supposed to come out of it. But the question is, what is the good that all things work together for whenever life isn't going quite like you thought it was supposed to? Well that is found in the verse right below, "*For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son...*" (vs. 29) Now this gives us the full picture. The 'good' that all things work together for, is to be 'conformed into the image of Christ.' It is to that end that we have hope. Despite what is going on in our lives, God is using it to conform us, or mold us, into the very image of Christ. And I have to tell you, you're not going to have a greater good come from your life than God shaping you to look like Himself, so that you can be the most effective vessel for His glory that you possibly can be.

And that is what we begin to see in the life of Joseph— God was beginning to mold him.

As his narrative unfolds, it all starts by his father, Jacob, asking Joseph to go check on his brothers and on the flocks. **Verse 14** says, "*And he said to him, Go, I pray thee, see whether it be well with thy brethren, and well with the flocks; and bring me word again. So he sent him out of the vale of Hebron, and he came to Schechem.*"

As we find in the the following verses, Joseph's brothers see Joseph well before he is within earshot of them, and their hearts immediately fill with envy and anger simply by just looking at him. They begin verbally expressing their hatred. In fact, this hatred is so uncontrollable, that as they were speaking, they weren't satisfied with simply feeling an emotion, they needed to do something about it, permanently. They looked at Joseph, they remembered his dreams, and they saw his coat. Everything about Joseph reminded them about their father's favoritism and their own insecurities. Now, what were they going to do about it?

The plan at first was to kill him; but eventually the consensus is to sell him to some of the nomadic Ishmaelite people who happened to be passing by in that area. So a deal is struck for twenty pieces of silver and away the 17 year-old Joseph is taken. He is taken by a people whom he doesn't know, and into a land he doesn't know, and now is forced into a way of life he doesn't know as a human slave.

What did Joseph think about his dreams now? Joseph did have a promise from God by way of a dream, but this dream seemed to be more of a nightmare at this point. How in the world does this fit in to God's plan?

Chapter 39— Despite the traumatic experience we've just left, by the time we enter into chapter 39, everything seems to be going as well as could be expected. Joseph has a good job, he has a good testimony, he has learned the value of hard work and responsibility. In fact, he is so successful that the master of the house, Potiphar, made him ruler of all his possessions. This is not a bad gig considering that Potiphar was an officer (or official) of Pharaoh's court. But still, there is this waiting game. This looked like a waste of time. Once again, what do we do about God's plan? What about the dream? This could not have been anywhere near what Joseph thought, when he thought about God's plan being fulfilled in his life. Where is the good that can come out of this slave life, even if this particular area of slavery happened to be a good one?

To make matters more confusing, Joseph's life as he knew it, again, was about to come to a screeching halt as Potiphar's wife becomes more pronounced in the story. She begins to make several sexual advances on Joseph, of which Joseph promptly and concisely refuses every single time. And instead of simply getting the point, she eventually, after he last advance, feels the need to accuse Joseph of attempted rape which lands him in prison.

And this is where chapter 39 ends. It ends with Joseph in prison, but once again finding favor with those placed over him.

Chapter 40— As we get into chapter 40, Joseph proves to be so dependable, even in the small things, that he was given charge over all of the prisoners, and had even made a couple of friends while he was in there. These men, one the chief baker, and the other the chief butler, had in some way made Pharaoh angry. Obviously, we can imagine how upset and timid these men would be about their condition, but they became even more upset once they were both troubled by dreams that each of them had.

Well dreams just happened to be Joseph's specialty. Joseph told these men that if they told him about their dreams that they were so upset about, then he would pray to God for the interpretation and tell them what these dreams meant. Joseph only has bad news for the Baker, but good news to the Butler, and asks that when he gets out of prison and is restored, to not forget what Joseph had done for him and plead his case of a wrongful accusation before Pharaoh.

Sadly though, the Butler is restored, but completely forgets about Joseph. As a result, Joseph is still stuck in jail for an offense he did not commit. You can hear the questions again can't you? Where is God in all of this? How is this helping? What about God's promise? Has God forgotten about me? Though we don't read anything like this from Joseph's life, we certainly know that he didn't want to be where he was, else he wouldn't have asked the Butler to remember to plead his case. The fact is, every temptation was there to feel resentment, anger, bitterness, self-pity and any other negative emotion that we want to throw in there. For two more years, there is plenty of time for Joseph to think about all of this.

Chapter 41— However, as we move to the next chapter, we find that Pharaoh himself has a dream. Pharaoh is so troubled by this dream that everyone begins to hear about it— including our Butler who suddenly remembered what he was supposed to do two years ago.

This brings about a rapid turn of events. Joseph is suddenly brought before Pharaoh and asked about his ability. Joseph tells Pharaoh that he actually has not power, but that anything he receives, he received of God, and from there, God reveals the meaning of the dream to Joseph. Suddenly, after the course of a single conversation, Joseph is set up as second in command in the most powerful kingdom in the world at the time.

I See it Now— Genesis 42-50

When we first meet Joseph, we meet him at the tender age of 17. Now, as the second in command of the nation of Egypt, he is 30. Thirteen years have passed in order for Joseph's life to finally make sense.

This becomes immediately obvious after we see that these final chapters have to do with several trips made by Joseph's brothers, traveling from Canaan to Egypt in order to buy grain because of the massive famine that struck all the lands in the area. But because of God's inside information to Joseph by way of Pharaoh's dream, Egypt was more than ready for this event. These chapters build and build before Joseph finally reveals himself to his brothers, reconciles with them, and is given a final chance to be with his father after all of this time. In chapter 37, Joseph is sent to go see his brothers. By the time we reach chapter 42, Joseph's brothers are instructed to go see him.

If this was our story, we can easily think of all kinds of clever ways to get back at his brothers. If this was a Greek play, I'm sure the audience would have expected a just reward for the thirteen years stolen from Joseph. And so as anticipation builds, as we're waiting for revenge, we suddenly find that Joseph's response was more powerful and cut more deeply to the heart than anything else he could have done— he reconciles with them.

In fact, Joseph's response is such a shock to his brothers that they can hardly believe it. They fully expected to be judged for what they had done. And this is when we start to learn something very significant about Joseph's outlook in response to his brother's surprise after everything was said and done. He tells them in **50:19** "... *Fear not, for am I in the place of God?* He continues in **verse 20**, "*But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.*"

Joseph said, "I see it now." He finally realized everything that he had gone through completely had a purpose. God had not forgotten him and was very much in control the entire time. Joseph was going to lead, but it was going to be in God's time and in God's way. God had to first give Joseph a make-over before he was to sit in the place that God had for him.

Summary: There is an important phrase to follow all throughout Joseph's life, and those are the words, "But the LORD was with Joseph..."

Circumstances can't do much to an individual who recognizes God's power and presence is always with them. Now, this doesn't mean that we go through life emotionless and untouched by our circumstances, but it does mean that God can use all of it to bring about his purpose and that we can trust in Him for it to that end.

We might still be waiting for answers in light of God's promises that seem to be far, far in the distance. We may look around and say, "That's not what I thought." But according to the Bible, there will be a day, in this life or the next, when we say, "I see it now... It all makes sense... and God you were getting glory the entire time." The story of Joseph provides us a powerful example of God's complete sovereignty over all of human history and that no matter what we face, God can always be trusted.

Discussion Points:

Discuss how each of these points are applied to this Biblical narrative:

A Mature Faith does not lose sight of God's Promises.

Never Losing Sight of God's Promises means Never Losing sight of God's Word.

A Mature Faith knows how to use both current circumstances and past circumstances as an advantage for the future.

God does not work the way that man thinks He should work.

8. THE WAY OUT

EXODUS

Congratulations! You finally made it through Genesis! From this point, we're going to be moving a bit faster as far as content is concerned. This is not to say that the other books are not important, but there is a huge need to lay a solid foundation with Genesis so that the rest of the Old Testament might flow more fluidly from it.

Let's begin.

When you are reading through Exodus, the very first word that you read in the very first chapter, of the very first verse is the word, "Now".

The word "Now" is an indication to the reader that there is a continuation here that connects this book with the book of Genesis. However, by the time we reach Exodus, you need to have in your mind that 400 years have passed from Genesis 50 to Exodus 1. If you go back to Genesis 15:12-14 you'll read these words:

"And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and, lo, an horror of great darkness fell upon him. And he [God] said unto Abram, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance."

And just as God had said, this did happen to His people. Joseph moves his family to the land of Goshen and they originally have the job of taking care of Pharaoh's cattle. But as the years came and went, and Pharaohs lived and fell, there came a time when this job task for Israel's children, became a free slave labor workforce for the Egyptian hierarchy. Somewhere along the way, the people moved from hired labor, to slave labor; and 400 years later, here we are.

However, even in the midst of this slavery, God was building a nation. This one family that had consisted of merely husbands, wives, brothers, sisters, cousins, nieces, and nephews had now grown to a population of about 2-3 million. Their population is actually what caused the drama given at the beginning of the book. The Egyptian leaders looked at the sheer numbers of the Israelites and were afraid of them. So in order to get this under control, they first tried to harden the labor, but they found that this only made the people stronger. Then, the leader tried a far more horrific tactic—population control by way of killing all of the newborn male children. This caused a groan to go up to God from His people, and God heard their cry. The time had now come for their rescue.

This is the dominant theme and purpose of the book— God redeems and rescues His people from their bondage in Egypt. This is actually what the word "Exodus" means— it means "The way out." God was going to give them the way out of the land of bondage (Egypt), by way of redemption, and take them to the land of promise (Canaan).

How to Think About Exodus

You might start reading the book of Exodus with a tremendous amount of excitement and enthusiasm. And why wouldn't you? It's easy to follow, it's exciting, and eventually, we get to see God's people cross the Red Sea. Who doesn't like to read about our God coming to the aid of His people? However, by the time you reach past chapter 15, things usually start to get a little confusing— and then, by the end, you're just completely confused.

But if you could think about the book of Exodus in three major sections, and then identify the purpose of those three sections, I think you'll have a much easier time reading and understanding this book. So let's talk about that for a moment.

The Exodus— Chapters 1-18: Historically speaking, the first major section you come to when reading Exodus, is chapters 1-18. It is here that we first see how incredible God's provision is for His people. Even though they had endured tragedy and hardship, God protected them and used this time to strengthen them as a people as well as giving them a sense of unity. After these 400 years, they were unified by a common family identity. Through their labor, they were physically and mentally strong and there is no doubt that they would be able to take on the hardships of the wilderness. What we're reading is that God really does bless Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob's seed just as He had promised, and now they had a nation-sized population. By God's preservation, they were a family, but were now ready to be a nation.

Further, in these chapters are God's first lessons to these people about how they could trust in Him, rather than the false gods of the Egyptians. This section is a showdown between the false gods of Egypt, and the true God of Israel.

Lastly in this section, we're carried to the crossing of the Red Sea and into the wilderness journey. This is the actual "exodus" in the book of Exodus. God really does show them the way out.

The Law— Chapters 19-24: In this section, we have the giving of the law. Chapter 20 contains what is known as the "Decalog", or more widely known as the ten commandments. These commandments are the complete expression of our relationship to God and our fellow man. The first half has to do with our relationship to God, and the second half has to do with our relationship to our fellow man.

The Tabernacle— Chapters 25-40: This last division has to do with the construction of a building called the tabernacle. A full 16 chapters are given, detailing everything from how it was originally to be funded by offering, all the way to its dimensions, specific furniture, and who could serve in it.

What to Look for in Exodus

Just like every portion of the Bible, when we are given historical facts, it is not to be taken as an arbitrary accumulation of facts. That said, while we do find historical facts in Exodus, there are also real, tangible, spiritual significance all over this book; you just need to learn how to look for it.

Typology: For instance, there is typology. There are some obvious major characters, locations, and events in Exodus, but aside from their literal understandings, some of these things are a direct "type" in relating to spiritual significance. In other words, many of the people, locations, and events in Exodus are a "picture" of spiritual truth.

Moses: Moses is God's main character of the book. This is the man whom God uses to lead God's people out of bondage. Not only this, but you might be interested to know that Moses is mentioned 720 times in the Bible— more than any other Biblical character. So at this point, there is no question as to how important this character is. However, Moses is also used as a "Type," or a picture of, Christ. There are several evidences for this— here are a few:

- He is God's anointed.
- He leads God's people out of bondage.
- He acts as a mediator between God the Father and His people.

Pharaoh: When we see Pharaoh in this story he is a picture of Satan. He is pictured as trying to hinder the work of God and keep people in bondage.

Israel: Israel is a picture of sinners in need of redemption and rescue from God.

Egypt: Egypt is a picture of the 'land of the world'.

Canaan: This is a picture of the believer's life.

Theological Divisions: We spoke briefly about the historical divisions of the book, but you also need to be able to identify the corresponding theological divisions of the book.

God Saves His People From Sin (Exodus 1-12): So if we go back to the beginning of Exodus for a moment, and we know that Egypt is a picture of the "world" (A system of thought ruled by Satan), and if we know that Canaan (the Land of Promise) represents the believer's life, then we can easily conclude that since God saved Israel here, that in theological terms, God saves people from sin.

God Separates Us From Our Old Life (Exodus 13-18): As you noticed, God did not leave Israel in the land of Egypt; He brought them out in a mighty and powerful way. There was no question that once these people stepped foot on the other side of the Sea that their lives were going to be completely different. They were a free people, completely removed from bondage. They were removed from their old way of life: their labor, no doubt people that they knew, the language that they had grown used to, the places where they used to live. Everything that they had known, they were to leave behind. When God saves us, He does indeed separate us from our old life.

God Teaches Us to be Set Apart (19-40): Here we find the law and the Tabernacle. These were to dominate the life of the Israelites. The Tabernacle was placed directly in the center of the different tribes— and for good reason— God was to be at the center of their entire existence both as individuals, and as a nation. In the law, God taught what it meant to worship Him and what it meant to really respect each other. Further, the law taught that we can't worship God any way that we please. God set up a model of worship that was completely unique and unparalleled in the ancient world, and even today.

What to Gain from Exodus

What we first come to in the book of Exodus is a list of individual names along with the information that told us that these individuals came into this land with the individual people that made up their families. Now, don't miss this— it's important. The entire book of Exodus, once again, has to do with redemption. But what we learn here, and what God has always taught, is that redemption is done on an individual basis. It is between that individual and God. Redemption has to do with names because it is an individual responsibility. An individual does not obtain salvation because their parents believed in God; they obtain salvation through their personal faith in God— in His Word and in His work on their behalf. Obviously, on this side of the cross of Christ, we look back on the Words and Work of Christ— His substitutionary atonement on the cross, dying, and rising again on the third day. However, the point is, God has only one way of salvation; by faith.

Next, we move to the purpose of the law. The law was not given as a list of "do's and don'ts" simply to occupy our time. The law actually displays two things: The purity of God's character, and the depravity of man's character. God gave the law so that by the time it was done with us, there was no doubt as to how hopeless we are without God. That's exactly what Paul describes when we read in Galatians that the law was a "School Master"

so that we would be brought to Christ. In other words, it shows us what we need to know about ourselves so that we would come before God in real repentance and real faith.

Finally, by the time we reach the 25th chapter in Exodus, we come to one of the most unusual and wonderful buildings that has ever been constructed. When you're reading through this section you'll find that it consisted of a certain arrangement of materials. You'll also find that it had three different sections: the outer court, the inner court, and the cube-shaped room called the "Holy of Holies." Reading further you'll learn about the 7 pieces of furniture consisting of candles, brass alters, brass basins, and the Mercy Seat. In this section you will also notice that there was a specific way to set it up, to tear it down, and that depending on your ministry purpose, different areas of the tabernacle were restricted to only certain people (most notably of which was the Holy of Holies which was behind the veil— only the High Priest was allowed in this section once a year at the Day of Atonement).

You might also marvel in confusion at all of the other rules, provisions, ritual, clothing, and most importantly, the sacrifice that took place here as God's people met to worship Him. You might read all of these things mentioned in this section and think "Why in the world is all of this in here?" Well, dear Christian, this Tabernacle was a picture showing the basis of our acceptance by God was by the mediation of blood shed for our sins, and how we actually approach God.

However, once we get into the New Testament, we run across a verse like **John 1:14**, "*And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.*" And then, we break open that phrase that Jesus "...dwelt among us...", we find that this literally means that when Jesus came, He "Tabernacled" among us. In other words, everything that the Tabernacle was, was fulfilled in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, and now, through the Holy Spirit, we are the Tabernacle.

9. HOLINESS UNTO THE LORD

LEVITICUS

“And the LORD called unto Moses, and spake unto him out of the tabernacle of the congregation, saying,”

When you read those words, you really are reading something exciting. First, you are reading about how that the Tabernacle was finally completed. This mysterious building that we find in Exodus, has finally been accomplished and all of its parameters were verified and up to the “code” God had set before it. Second, you are reading about how there was a new way God was going to communicate to His people. God would now be communicating through the Tabernacle and the entirety of their worship life would center around this building.

If we were going to do a brief comparison from Exodus to Leviticus, we might say that Exodus is God showing His people the way out of Egypt, but Leviticus is God getting Egypt out of His people. And how God would do that is through the worship services and care ministries led by the tribe of Levi. This is actually how the book was named— The tribe of Levi was the designated tribe to conduct ministry and was responsible for the worship life of the entire nation. That is why there is so much information about the worship of God’s people— it’s because the book of Levi is a book of worship— and it was the Tribe of Levi who were over all of it. It was this tribe that led God’s people to be both separated from the rest of the world and have uninterrupted fellowship with God, all by their service in this Tabernacle.

And really, it is extremely hard to miss the fact that this worship life is covered here. If you didn’t understand anything else, there are at least two things you would understand by the time you were done: 1) God demands holiness from the worshipper, and 2) God requires a blood sacrifice in order to approach Him in order to worship. And the reason I know this is clear is because you’ll read the word “Holy” eighty times in these pages and you’ll read the word “Blood” a total of eighty-eight times.

However, despite these heavy keywords, you really need to approach this book carefully or you will lose the significance of them— and other repetitious procedures given to us in this book— and it will become a much harder read than it needs to be. Because in Leviticus, it really is easy to get lost in the flooding of what seems to be simply, raw repetitious information. But it isn’t simply raw, repetitious information. Remember, God has a purpose for allowing us to see everything that went on here.

How to Think About Leviticus

The Offerings (Chapters 1-7): The primary function of Leviticus once again, is worship, and worship was primarily done through sacrifice and offerings. And so when you read the first seven chapters of this book, that is literally all you see— procedures for the five main offerings. There is the:

- 1) **Burnt Offering:** This offering is a statement made that says God is willing to accept those who come to Him with a proper sacrifice. In this offering, the whole animal was consumed on the altar, and it was a picture of the atoning of sin. (Leviticus 1:3)
- 2) **Meal (Flour) Offering:** After the burnt offering was made, a person could respond in gratitude through this offering. It was to be an expression of praise and the worshipper was to bring the best of their agricultural produce. Further, an additional “Drink Offering” could be given with this Meal Offering, as a symbol of joy, and was poured on top of the Meal Offering. (Leviticus 2:2; Drink Offering Leviticus 23:13)
- 3) **Peace Offering:** This was an optional offering made by the worshipper. This one was unique in the fact that the priest, the worshipper, and close friends ate together. This sacrifice had to be eaten in one or two days. In this Offering, the priest would represent God and would portray a picture of closeness in relationship. This offering can be broken down into three separate offerings. This is when you will read of the Thanksgiving Offering, the Wave Offering, and the Freewill Offering. (Leviticus 7:12-31)
- 4) **Sin Offering:** This offering had two primary functions: 1) It first dealt with the need for forgiveness of unintentional sins, and 2) It dealt with ceremonial uncleanness. Its purpose was to cleanse the tabernacle of human defilement and thereby making continued fellowship possible and God’s presence to remain on the tabernacle. (Leviticus 4:2-3)
- 5) **Trespass Offering:** This was intended to cause an individual to look past their personal sin and how it affects them, but to see the total damage of sin. A payment was made with this offering as well as a reparation for the actual sin. (Leviticus 5:16)

The Feast Days (Chapters 23-24): Another way God's people were to worship God is found in the feast days. There are seven feast days mentioned in the book of Leviticus. What is hard to catch though when reading about these feasts, is that the first four happen in rapid succession as far as the calendar year is concerned, then there is a break, and finally, the last three were to take place. So let's look briefly at these feasts:

- 1) **Passover:** Now, this one is pretty easy to understand after you get done with the book of Exodus. Obviously, this corresponds directly with God's tenth and final plague before leading His people out of Egypt. (Leviticus 23:5)
- 2) **Unleavened Bread:** Fifteen days later, there would be this feast, and they were to eat unleavened bread for seven days. They also were required to put out all Leaven from their household. Leaven represented sin and evil and symbolized having a holy walk before the Lord. (Leviticus 23:6)
- 3) **First Fruits:** Then, the Sabbath after the feast of unleavened bread, there would be the feast of First Fruits. The people were to bring the very first and best of their harvest and wave a sheaf of wheat before God. It was a symbol that God provided this first fruit and that there was much more to come since it is God who replanted the earth and causes prosperity. (Leviticus 23:11)
- 4) **Pentecost:** Fifty days after the feast of first fruits, Pentecost was held (which puts us in late May or early June as far as our calendar is concerned). This offering required two loaves of bread baked with leaven. (Leviticus 23:16-17)
- 5) **Trumpets:** This was the first of the fall feasts (September). God seems to bring a lot of attention to the use of the trumpet throughout Scripture. In this case, God commanded its use as a proclamation of liberty. (Leviticus 23:24; Leviticus 25:8-10)
- 6) **Atonement:** This was the highest of holy days for the children of Israel. A day of affliction of the soul and repentance of sin. (Leviticus 23:27)
- 7) **Tabernacles:** This was so that the people of Israel would remember that God sheltered His people throughout their journey in the wilderness. On this occasion, they built shelters or booths and made these their places of worship for seven days. (Leviticus 23:34)

Getting Ready for Canaan (Chapters 25-27): In this section, God is giving additional rules and guidelines so that His people would be ready to enter the land of Canaan. This covers rest for the land, additional information about hired servants and bond servants, blessings, cursing, and personal vows.

What To Look for in Leviticus

Sacrifice (Chapters 1-17): Leviticus is not as easy to divide as other books, but it is not impossible. For example, the first 17 books have to do with the peoples' fellowship with God. And the basis by which one approaches God becomes abundantly clear— they could only approach God by way of a blood sacrifice. Blood was the mediation by which a sinful person could be accepted by God.

Separation (Chapters 18-27): You'll notice that these chapters have to do with being set apart as a vessel of holiness. The first section has to do with the sacrifice being the basis of fellowship, but that is only part of the picture. You see, if the sacrifice was all that mattered in terms of fellowship, a legalistic mindset would be inevitable. "Don't worry, I'll just bring a sacrifice and all will be okay." Does that kind of thinking sound familiar at all?

But God makes it clear that the sacrifice is worthless without repentance and holiness. In fact, God tells His people, "*Sanctify yourselves therefore, and be ye holy: for I am the LORD your God*" (Leviticus 20:7). You don't get to God's kind of holiness without continual repentance and a complete lifestyle change.

That said, in chapters 18-20, God deals with holy separation for His people, in chapters 21-22, God deals with holy separation for His priests, in chapters 23-24 the entire nation gets vivid reminders of separation through the feast days, and in chapters 25-27, God gives the entire nation of Israel final commands for separation before they were to enter Canaan.

What to Gain from Leviticus

As far as a takeaway is concerned for Leviticus, it is extremely hard to do without understanding how this book relates to the ministry of Jesus Christ. We have spoken about this before, but the Bible is a book of "Gradual Revelation" and you can't understand the Old Testament without understanding Jesus— especially in this book. So let's take moment to talk about how we find Christ in Leviticus so that we can make sense of it.

Christ in the Sacrificial System: When you read of the sacrificial system, you need to be able to see the laborious nature of the job of the priest. This ministry filled up his life daily. And at certain portions of the year, he was extraordinarily busy. We see these priests going in and out of the tabernacle area. Day after day, month after month, and year after year there they were— ministering and sacrificing constantly. It was a massive job. In fact, dealing with the people's sin was so labor-intensive and so massive, that out of all the pieces of furniture mentioned as part of the Tabernacle, there is one piece that you will never read about— and that is a chair. And the reason why is because under the law, dealing with sin is a job that is never done— there was no sitting down, and there was no stopping— they had to keep coming... and keep coming...

However, once we get into Hebrews 10:1-18, we find a wonderful truth there that explains why we don't worship that way anymore. When Christ was on the cross, just before He died, He gave out three words that fulfilled the law and defeated sin, and those three words were, "It is finished." And when Christ finishes something, it is finished. Once again, the Old Testament priests had to keep coming and offering sacrifice... coming and offering sacrifice. But when Christ finished His assault on sin, by His death, burial and resurrection, Christ sat down at the right hand of the Father— It is finished! Christ, as our Great High Priest and our Great and Ultimate Sacrifice, put an end forever to the old sacrificial system because His eternal, righteous blood covers sin forever, and therefore, Christ fulfilled every sacrifice previously required by His people... forever.

Christ in the Feast Days: As we just mentioned, as far as the feasts are concerned, the first four happen rapidly, then there is a pause, and the final three are celebrated. This corresponds directly with the first and second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's briefly look at how this works:

- 1) **Passover:** Jesus is our Sacrificial Lamb. You should remember these words of John the Baptist, "... Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (**John 1:29**). And now, for those of us who receive Christ, are now marked with the blood of Christ, spiritual death passes over us just as physical death passed over those who had the lamb's blood applied to their house.
- 2) **Unleavened Bread:** Jesus said that He was the bread of life. He had no sin and when we receive Him as our Savior, He becomes a part of our life.
- 3) **First Fruits:** Jesus rose from the dead! And by His promise also, we know that this is just the beginning... there is more to come!
- 4) **Pentecost:** This was the sign that Christ's people would now include the Gentiles as well as the Jew. It was for this purpose that God empowered His church; so that the Gospel could go around the world to every tribe, tongue, and nation. These are the orders that we are still under as we await the return of Christ.
- 5) **Trumpets:** The trumpet was used for all kinds of reasons, but primarily it was used to signal the workers to stop what they were doing and come to the temple. When the high priest would blow the trumpet, the people would stop working and come directly to the temple, before God, and give themselves wholly to worship. As far as we're concerned, Christ will use the trumpet one more time, and when that happens, we will all be caught up together with Him in the clouds. The time of our harvest will be over, and we will forever be with Him and worship before our King!
- 6) **Atonement:** This too looks forward to the Second coming of Jesus when God's people (The Jewish People) will finally see Jesus, whom they crucified and rejected, and receive Him as their Messiah.
- 7) **Tabernacles:** It seems that this feast is an indication that when Jesus returns, He will once again physically "tabernacle" or dwell with His people forever.

10. IN THE WILDERNESS

NUMBERS

It's a little bit of an unusual name if you think about it. I mean, we know the purpose of numbers. We know that there are numbers to do math, recall dates, or remember how many kids you're supposed to have when driving back to your house; but why "Numbers" for the title of a book?

Well, this actually has to do with the numbering of those who were ready for battle. And you will further notice as you make your way through this book, that there are two sets of these numbers given. In chapters 1-4, you read the first set of numbers listing the men of war for an older generation, and in chapters 26-27 there is a second set of numbers, representing the men of war for the following generation.

Initially, this book was supposed to be about conquest. God's people were supposed to go into the promised land and possess it. But in order to possess it, they first had to subdue it— and this took a military. Understanding this then, you can also understand that the numbering of these troops was important when attempting to come up with a battle strategy for the various campaigns in which the people were to be engaged.

However, though we find lists of numbers for the soldiers, the actual Hebrew name for this particular book is called, "In the Wilderness" which comes from the first set of words written in the book, "And the LORD spake unto Moses in the wilderness..." And this wilderness, at least at first, was full of potential and possibility. It would either be a place of deeper trust or miserable tediousness; a place to grow in faith or a place of failure.

But even understanding all of this, the book of Numbers is a little difficult to grasp when we're trying to break it down logically. There seems to just be a collection of facts, rather than a flow that would guide the reader safely down the stream of understanding, before safely landing them to a unified purpose.

That said, I think there is a great deal of information to be gained even from this. I think what we are observing when we approach the book of Numbers is the fact it reads like our lives. In your life, you are confronted with decisions, plans, and opportunities. And in all of these, you have successes, struggles, problems, and failures. If you wrote down everything in your life simply as the events came, it probably would not make much sense at all in terms of a unifying purpose. However, what we would have is a collection of facts about your life. That is one way we can look at the overall information given to us in the life of this young nation.

But still the question is raised: Is there any cohesion in this book that would help us in understanding it? Let's find out:

How to Think about Numbers

You can think about Numbers in this way: "God's people on the move." And this is really broken down into two different groups. In chapters 1-20, we see that God moved His people in order to set aside a rebellious, older generation, and in chapters 21-36, God moved His people in order to set apart the following generation. Let me show you how this works:

The Setting Aside of a Rebellious Generation (1-20): This is exactly how it sounds. Once again, what once started off as hopeful, turned out to be just sad. Just watch the progression:

What's the Count (1-4): These chapters, as previously discussed, are devoted to giving an accurate count of battle-ready soldiers so that provisions could be made to sustain the army, and battle plans could be established. Further, information was given here regarding the numbering and role the tribe of Levi would have in all of this.

What's the Word (5-9): In chapters 5-9 you read various instructions given to the people. You'll see laws about how to conduct relationships. Laws regarding a jealous husband, Nazarite vows, and blessings. You will also find offerings given by the princes of Israel, cleansing rituals for the priests, and the terms for their service.

What's the Plan (10-14): Here you can kind of sense a little restlessness from the people which causes several problems. From the outset you start reading about two silver trumpets and the different calls these trumpets were used for, and then, by the time you get into chapter 11, the people started complaining, then Moses started complaining and then starts to question God on a matter. God then answers all of these problems, but more are only created when Aaron and Miriam start to rebel against Moses. Then, after God took care of all of this, by the time we reach chapter 13,

the twelve spies are sent to survey the land they were to take, and once we get into chapter 14, the people, except for two, refused to believe God's promise, and would not go in to conquer the land.

As you can see, in this section there is not a tremendous amount of cohesion, but operates sporadically just like our real life does.

What's the Consequence (15-20): In these chapters, God basically tells this older generation, "You don't want to go into the land? Fine, you're not going." because that is exactly what He does. God sends this generation on the longest funeral march in history as He had the people march around in the wilderness for 40 years until this rebellious generation had died away. These chapters are dedicated to fully preparing the next generation to do what the older generation should have done.

The Setting Apart of a New Generation (21-36): This entire section is devoted to the preparation of the new generation to pick up where the mothers and fathers left off. This was a new generation and so these individuals get to experience what their mothers and fathers experienced before them.

New Journeyings (21-25): This section is replete with successes and failures as God continued to move His people in the wilderness. You get the sense that not much has changed from one generation to the next.

New Numbering (26-27): Once again, the objective is taking the land God had given. That said, in these chapters, you'll find a second numbering system as Israel prepares to do exactly this.

Renewed Instructions (28-36): Before these people were to enter Canaan, just to put everyone on the same page, God gives some final instructions to clear up any confusion in regard to how they were to conduct business when they became established in the land.

What to Look for in Numbers

There are several major narratives to look at and study. However, you run into the same problem in regard to how the book was designed— it's simply hard to grasp to capture what and when everything is happening. That is just not how our minds like to think. We like to think of things in order and in progression. If this doesn't happen, our tendency is to bypass that information quickly until we can find something that does make sense.

However, if order is what we need so that these larger narratives make more sense, then it is probably best to look at these events in the context of where they occurred. After the people were led out of Egypt by way of the Red Sea, God took them to a place called Sinai. This is where we want to start if we're following the Children of Israel through the wilderness. And if we do this, we will be able to see a pattern that is very easy to follow as we move through the book of Numbers in order to start taking in and processing these major events.

Major Events at Sinai (1:1-10:10): It was at this location that the people were numbered and the tribe of Levi was given instruction as to what exactly they would be doing. We also spoke about the additional instruction given in chapters 5-9, and the silver trumpets used as a form of communication to let everyone know what was going on at any particular moment. There were signals for worship festivals, the call to gather the people to make public announcements, and warnings that the camp was under attack.

Major Events at Kadesh (10:11-20:21): After Sinai, God moves His people to a place called Kadesh, which was near the border of the land they were going to be instructed to conquer. Needless to say, there are some huge events that take place at this location. This is where you find Moses' need to have some pressure taken off of him and God allows authority to be delegated to 70 elders. You also find God's miracle of sending quail to His people after they were complaining of food and Miriam and Aaron's rebellion against Moses.

However, no doubt the biggest event that you need to see in Numbers is the sending of the spies and the failure to believe God because of their fear. As a result, God punishes His people and denies all but two of this generation entrance into the Promised Land (13-14).

Another major event that happens in Kadesh is the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram against Moses (16). A drastic drama occurs here as God's people prove themselves to be so rebellious that God declares that He is ready to destroy His people.

Major Events at Moab (20:22-36:13): From Kadesh to Moab, you're immediately taken to a battle, another judgment of God against His people (which is where you see the narrative of the "brass serpent", and another battle with the Amorites. But perhaps the most famous narrative in this section occurs in chapter 22, when we see that curious story of Balak, Balaam, and Balaam's talking donkey. God's people are starting to build a reputation for being a very capable and formidable foe, and the surrounding nations start to fear them. This section takes up a full three chapters as Balak tries his hardest to have Balaam curse God's people, but God simply will not allow it.

You should notice also how the game has changed for the Moabites. nearly 40 years earlier it was the Israelites who looked at the Moabites and thought they were giants. Now, as the Moabites look at the Israelites, it is God's people who look like giants.

Lastly, the rest of the book is devoted to final instructions given to God's people before entering into their battle campaigns.

What to Gain from Numbers

When you are reading the book of Numbers, understand first of all, that you are reading a book of failure. Out of an entire generation, only two made it to see the Promised Land— Joshua and Caleb. Not Aaron, not Miriam, and not even Moses were able to enter. It is sad to think about. This journey could have been completed in eleven days, yet their rebellion cost them 40 years with no forward progress. That said, this book leaves some staunch warnings for believers today.

For instance, the writer of Hebrews actually used these people as a warning for us in chapters 3 and 4 about the dangers of hardening your heart against God. In Hebrews 3:7-12 the Bible says this,

“Wherefore (as the Holy Ghost saith, Today if ye will hear his voice, Harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness: When your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my works forty years. Wherefore I was grieved with that generation, and said, they do alway err in their heart; and have not known my ways. So I share in my wrath, they shall not enter into my rest.) Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God.”

Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, used the history given to us in this very book in order to explain to them the importance of holy living and belief in God. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:1-11, that these people, despite seeing the mighty hand of God work in their life, still lusted after evil, were idolaters, and committed fornication. Therefore, Paul’s conclusion to these people was this:

“Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.” 1 Corinthians 10:9-11

What all of this is saying is that whenever you are reading the book of Numbers, don’t shake your head and say, “How dare they... I can’t believe they would do such a thing.” Instead, you should think, “I need to pray for God’s grace so that I make sure not to make the exact kinds of mistakes these people did.”

Remember this lesson from the rebellious generation’s forty-year wandering. You can choose not to follow God, but sometimes it is impossible to regain what you lost. Not in terms of forgiveness; but in terms of having God’s rest.

11. THE SECOND LAW

DEUTERONOMY

If “Numbers” was an odd name for a book, “Deuteronomy” might be considered a name from another planet, as far as comparisons are concerned. The name is of Greek origin and is made up of two Greek words. The first word is “Deuterous” which means, “Two” and the second is the word “nomos” which means “law”. If you put those two words together, you have the name “Deuteronomy” and it literally means “second law.” Now, understand, this is not an altogether different law. Instead, this book is one where information is being given again. It is a deeper interpretation of the law that had already been given.

The book of Deuteronomy is a series of messages given by Moses to God’s people before entering into the land of Canaan, and each sermon highlights new challenges the people would face. Deuteronomy was a final word from a loving leader before the official transitions took place.

The purpose of here was to encourage and equip a new generation to continue in the truth that they had to been taught, and to avoid the failures that caused a tremendous amount of problems for their parents and grandparents.

Furthermore, Moses, in this address gave an admonition to these people to make sure to pass on those things that they had learned to their children.

How to Think About Deuteronomy

In refreshing our minds a bit, in Numbers 20, in an outburst of anger, Moses disobeyed God before the people. And because of this massive public failure, God denied Moses entry into the Promised Land. Although, Moses asked, and Moses pleaded, in the end, God’s decision stood— Moses would not be the leader to take this nation into the land of promise.

That said, by the time we reach Deuteronomy, Moses had taken these people as far as he could go. So with his time soon running out, Moses thought and Moses prayed. No doubt the idea of abruptly ending a 40-year ministry of caring for an entire nation was troubling to him. What would he do? Should he just slip off into the night? Would a simple goodbye do? What was the best way to end this kind of ministry? Well, our answers to that question are found in this book. God led Moses to write and deliver a set of sermons that would forever stand as a testament to God’s standard and God’s blessing. In other words, Moses gave the people a few final words that would solidify the transition.

And this is a good way to think about this book. When you think of Deuteronomy, think of the word, “Transition” because this is what Deuteronomy is, it’s a book of transition— the leadership of Moses would soon be transitioned, and we’ve already seen how an entire generation has been transitioned.

Therefore, we need to look at this book through this lens and study these final instructions that this generation would take with them into the Promised Land.

A Series of Sermons—

Sermon One- Look at Your Past in Light of God’s Grace (1:1-4:40): This sermon is broken up into two different sections. The purpose here is to cause God’s people to focus on how the people came to be where they are in the first place. In times of blessing from their past successes, in times of judgment from their past failings, and in times where they just simply needed help, it was always God’s grace that kept them then, and keeps them still. And to prove his point, Moses highlights eight events within the first four chapters that illustrate exactly this.

- 1) 1:9-18— Moses recalls the selection of leaders to help judge the people (Exodus 18:13; Numbers 10:1)
- 2) 1:19-46— Moses retells the story of the 12 spies sent out to gather intelligence in the land of Canaan (Numbers 13-14)
- 3) 2:1-8a— Moses reminds the people of their passage through the territory of Edom (Numbers 20:14-21)
- 4) 2:8b- 25— Moses reminds the people of their journey through the territory of Moab (Numbers 21:4-20)

5) 2:26-7— Moses explains their victory over Sihon of Heshbon (Numbers 21:21-32)

6) 3:1-7—Moses explains their victory over Og of Bashan (Numbers 21:33-35)

7) 3:8-22— Moses re-explains the divisions of the land by each tribe after they pass over Jordan (Numbers 32)

8) 3:23-29— Moses tells of his request to God to allow him to enter into the land of Canaan with the people, and the denial God gave him (Numbers 27:12-14)

The second division in this sermon is found in chapter 4 and the purpose is to explain what to do in light of that history. In other words, Moses thought that history should mean something. You see, there is always a danger of forgetting, and Moses knew that. So in chapter 4, you have one overarching message, “Don’t forget!”

Sermon Two— Look at Your Heart in Light of God’s Heart (4:41—26:19): In this section, Moses provides additional insight into the law. In Deuteronomy 4:44- 11:32 there is an explanation regarding the Ten Commandments, in Deuteronomy 12:1-16:17 there is a further explanation of the Ceremonial Laws, in Deuteronomy 16:18-20:20 additional insight is given regarding the Civil Laws, and in Deuteronomy 21:1-26 information is given regarding the Social Laws.

However, before you get to the bulk of these instructions, you find in Deuteronomy 6 the intended motivation that binds it all together:

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.” — Deuteronomy 6:4-7

This is the first time you read the word “love” in the Bible. What is important to recognize in this sermon is that God’s people do not (nor have they ever) simply followed a set of rules just to follow a set of rules. Instead, they are to obey God because they love God and desire to become a reflection of who He is. Then, they were to teach this same love to their children, and their children to their children.

What we learn in this sermon is that in everything God’s people do, they are to examine their hearts in light of God’s heart because it is by God’s heart that we received the law in the first place.

Sermon 3 Part 1—Look at Your Future in Light of God’s Faithfulness (27:1-30:12): The most prominent portions of this sermon occur in two different sections. The first of these major events happen in 27:1-30:20 with the blessing and cursing. This is when one group of people assembled on Mt. Ebal to repeat the ‘cursings’ found in the Law, and in chapter 28, we read of a second group that assembled on Mt. Gerizim to pronounce the blessings. Now, to give a little context as to where this occurred, take your mind over to John 4 and to the conversation between Jesus and the woman at the well. Well, where that conversation was taking place was directly in between these two mountain areas.

This section is dedicated to binding the nation to God’s law so that everyone completely understood that their continued success as a nation depended upon their faithfulness to God.

A Final Farewell—

Sermon 3 Part 2— Look at Your Future in Light of God’s Faithfulness (31:1-34:2): Moses gives a final word of encouragement about what God would do for them. And the reason he speaks so confidently here about God’s blessing is that God had been completely faithful to them in the past. Over and over again in this section, you will see phrases that say, “God will go...” “He will destroy...” “He will do...” Moses had no doubt that God keeps His promises.

Then in Chapter 32, Moses gives them a beautiful song, after this, in chapter 33, Moses gives a final blessing, and in chapter 34, Moses is allowed to see the Promised land, and then is taken up by God in death.

What to Look for In Deuteronomy

There are several themes and challenging messages that can make a study of Deuteronomy very exciting. Just remember all the changes that are happening:

A New People: This is a portion of the Bible, once again, when there is a change from the old generation to a new generation. And as you are reading this book, there is a little anxious anticipation as you are watching all of this unfold, in wanting these people to succeed. No matter if you know the outcome or not, there is still a sense in which you want them to do well after God had been so gracious, and the people had been through so much to get to this point.

A New Challenge: Unlike their parents, this generation would actually get to enter and experience the Promised Land. There would be failings, there would be victories, there would be losses, and there would be gains. Any new change in your life always brings with it a new set of temptations and a new set of challenges.

A New Leader: The leadership of this nation was transferred over from Moses to Joshua— and every leader is different— different likes, dislikes, skill sets, and abilities. And there is no doubt that this transition of leadership made many worry for the future...especially since this leader had to follow directly after a leader like Moses.

So understanding all of this then, you can see why Deuteronomy would be particularly compelling. But is there anything to focus on that would help to provide additional insight for our understanding of this book? There most certainly is!

Look for Key Words—

Land: The word “Land” occurs 153 times in this book. It is an indication that God will do what He said that He would do. Along these lines, you also see the word “possess” 65 times and the word “inherit” 36 times.

Hear: You’ll see this word 44 times during the course of your reading of Deuteronomy. It is a word to remind God’s people that God’s Word is worth listening to and building their life around.

Love: Once again, this is the first book in the Bible in which the word love appears, and after it is mentioned, it becomes a prominent one as it is used a total of 20 times to describe what God’s feeling is toward His people, and what He expects in return from His people.

Worship: This word is mentioned 5 times, but its meaning is great. This word has to do with bowing oneself down both physically and by the bending of the will. Worship is the primary expression of love that God’s people display toward Him. Whenever God gives a statute or a command, because we recognize Him as our great Provider and Creator, we bow ourselves down, both physically and spiritually, bending our will toward His because He is worthy. You cannot love God without worship.

Look for Key Promises—

There are many promises in Deuteronomy and much of what could be applied physically to Israel can be applied spiritually to us today. Let’s look at just a couple of examples:

1) **God Gives Our Daily Strength:** Deuteronomy 33:25 says, “Thy shoes shall be iron and brass; and as thy days, so shall thy strength be.” This means that whatever you face in the day, God will give you the specific strength you need to endure it.

2) **God is Your Continual Refuge:** Deuteronomy 33:27 says, “The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms: and he shall thrust out the enemy from before thee; and shall say, Destroy them.” Do you know what this means? It means you can trust God because He wins in the end.

Look for Key Attributes—

Several attributes of God are highlighted in the book of Deuteronomy. Here are a few attributes you should look for:

God is Approachable— 4:7

God is Eternal— 33:27

God is Just— 10:17; 32:4

God is Glorious— 5:24; 28:58

God is Merciful— 4:31; 32:43

God is Loving— 7:7; 10:15

God is Wrathful— 29:20, 27-28; 32:19-22

God is Righteous— 4:8

God is a Promise Keeper— 1:11

God is One— 4:32; 6:4-5; 32:39

What to Gain from Deuteronomy

If you understand what the Pentateuch is— that it is a five-part book— and then you try to put all of these books together in a way that makes sense as far as having a beginning, middle, and end, you are going to be very disappointed. This just isn’t the purpose of why these books were written. But once again, if we stop and just take a closer look, it is possible to bring a little closure to our understanding.

At the beginning of this chapter, we spoke briefly about the name “Deuteronomy” and why this title was given. That the name means “second law” and that the purpose of this title was not to bring about an entirely new set of laws, but to expand and explain those laws which were originally given.

But then we spoke about the introduction of the word “love”. Well, if you put the other four books of the Pentateuch together alongside this one, we find that the first four books are dedicated to giving us the information that explains why we **need the law**, but the book of Deuteronomy gives the spiritual significance of why we **have the law**.

The reason why we need the law is that in our natural state, we are diametrically opposed to God and all of His ways. And so we need the law to that we know both “Who” to worship (we are only to worship God) and “how” to worship (we are only to worship God, God’s way). This is the dominant theme of Genesis through Numbers.

However, the reason why we even **have** the law is that God loved us and wanted to have a relationship with us. And it is in Deuteronomy that displays this significance and tells us that the foundation upon which the law is built, is a foundation of love.

Furthermore, in the book of Deuteronomy, another spiritual theme emerges as we consider Moses and Joshua. As the New Testament progresses, it is very clear that Moses was the representative figure of the law. We know also that he was not allowed to take God’s people into the land of Promise. But Moses’ predecessor Joshua was able to.

Now, what is interesting is that the Hebrew name for Jesus is Joshua. That said, when you’re putting all of this together, John 1:17 becomes very significant, “For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.”

What we learn from Deuteronomy is that grace did what the law could never do.

12. COMMAND AND CONQUER

JOSHUA

From this book, the subject of transition continues— with the exception of a major difference of course— in the book of Joshua, the transition was not simply spoken about, it was carried out:

In the book of Deuteronomy, we find that it was marked by a series of sermons given by Moses, about what the nation could accomplish. In the book of Joshua, we find that it was marked by a series of victories led by Joshua, explaining what they would accomplish.

In the book of Deuteronomy, we find truth was being explained. In the book of Joshua, we find truth was being experienced.

In the book of Deuteronomy, victory and possession of the land was a promise to be believed. In the book of Joshua, victory and possession was a goal that was achieved.

That is the progression from the book of Deuteronomy to Joshua. It was a transition scene, moving from ‘talking’ to ‘doing.’

God’s Man—

But before we can go any further, we can’t give an adequate introduction without introducing the individual this book is named after. The book of Joshua obviously gets its name from the primary earthly character in the book, Joshua, himself.

If you remember, Joshua, along with Caleb, were the only two people who were able to enter the Promised Land from the previous generation. God blessed both of these men for their faith in His promise and their strong standing among all of the people who opposed their report that the land they had spied out could actually be conquered. This means that by the time we are looking at Joshua’s leadership once Moses passes from the scene, Joshua is about 85 years old.

Also, as we watch his life progress up until this point, we see that Joshua was a great servant and a great war hero, but now, we watch him transition into the role of one of the great leaders mentioned in all of the Bible. His name actually means Jehovah Saves, and by God’s grace, Joshua was able to live up to his name. As we spoke about in the previous chapter, this name is the same name the Messiah, Jesus Christ was given. The Hebrew name for Jesus is Joshua— Jehovah Saves. And as we will see in greater detail in a moment, we learn that the physical victories the children of Israel won under Joshua’s leadership are a picture of the spiritual victories we can win under the leadership of the Lord Jesus Christ. Joshua is a type, a picture, of Jesus.

God’s Mission—

Furthermore, by way of introduction, we need to look at the mission that God gave to Joshua. The job Joshua is tasked with is defeating the inhabiting nations inside this land before it could be occupied by Israel. Understanding this, the book of Joshua is a book that is given a tremendous amount of moral criticism. Questions invariably arise regarding God’s command for the ‘utter destruction’ of the inhabiting nations of this land.

That said, let’s spend a brief moment addressing the seemingly ‘moral dilemmas’ that take place in this book; and we’ll address these in ranking of importance.

1. God was Creating a Pure People: God commanded that His people be pure. Remember that it was through this nation the Messiah would come. If we are rightly to understand God’s providence in relation to this command, then it should become clear how easily disease could spread because of the immoral practices of these pagan cultures. Gross immorality always comes with a price. We know how devastating disease can be for a culture that has no exposure to specific strains of germs. In our own history books, there is credible documentation citing how European settlers brought new strains of diseases to the Americas which led to the deaths of thousands. Therefore, we can see God’s wisdom in preserving His people in such a way that the diseases of their enemies would not be a problem.

2. God had given Adequate Time for Repentance: God’s commands for the removal of these nations occurred because they were given a chance to change and repent, however, there was a rejection of God’s warning. In fact, God’s warnings were answered with violent rebellion against His own people at times and even were given over to even greater forms of depraved practices, such as human sacrifice of both adults and children

alike. So, if God the Just, in His mercy, had given both time and warning to these people in order that they repent, but they chose not to, why would anyone be surprised that God did exactly what He said He would do? Furthermore, we can look to the story of Rahab (Joshua 6:22-23) as evidence of God's forgiveness. Understand, God would have done the same for Jericho as He had done for Rahab and her family if they had only repented.

3. God Does not Owe a Single Person the Gift of Life: All life belongs to God and He is no debtor to any man. If life is given, it is a gift from God. If life is taken, it is taken by God. **Romans 14:8** says, *"For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's."* Therefore, when God claims one of His lives back, or an entire nation full of lives back, there should not be any shock to realize that God is claiming back what is rightfully His. The only way this would be a problem is if we do not understand God's absolute sovereignty, absolute holiness, and absolute justice. Sure, if you compare God to our flawed standard of all of these things, then we can look at God's judgments in shock and confusion. But if we have a Biblical understanding of all of these things, then what we learn is that God created us out of His love, but sin ultimately must be dealt with because of who He is. Therefore, we either repent and allow God to take care of covering our sin, or we can reject and allow God to bring judgment against our sin.

How to Think About Joshua

A good way to think about the book of Joshua is to understand the difference between inheritance and possession. An inheritance is something that is given to you, but a possession is what must be claimed in order to become yours to possess. And that is where the nation of Israel is at this point. They had inherited the land, but in order for it to be literally in their possession, they were going to have to literally possess it. It was potentially theirs to possess, but they needed to actually possess what was theirs. Keep this in mind because we'll have to address this truth later in this chapter.

Aside from this, you can also think about Joshua in terms of the major divisions. There are many exciting events that occur in Joshua that make reading this book very interesting:

Gathering at the River (Joshua 1-5): In these chapters, we see Joshua, along with this new generation, begin their campaign of victory with a miracle. If you remember, this is exactly how the previous generation began. Moses, along with the old generation stood before the Red Sea and God miraculously parted the waters and sent them across on dry land. In these chapters we see the same thing, but for different purposes as God's people approach the Jordan River. At the Red Sea, God provided this passage as a means of escape. At the Jordan River, God provided this passage as a means of conquest.

The Covenant with Rahab (Joshua 2): Joshua sends two spies to scope out the land of Jericho, and during this mission, they would have been caught had it not been for Rahab. Once she throws those in pursuit of these spies off their trail, they make a covenant with her to save her and her house once the invasion happened.

The Crossing of the Jordan (Joshua 3:9- 4:1-14): God gave instruction to have the priests step into the water with the ark, and once this happened, *"... the waters which came down from above stood and rose upon upon an heap..."* (Joshua 3:16)

The Setting of the Memorial Stones (Joshua 4:1-9): God called for 12 stones to be set up on the other side of Jordan as a continual public memorial to the nation about what God had done that day. Also, Joshua took 12 stones himself and placed them in the middle of the river. This signified a secret covenant. What we need to know is that what is hidden from man is revealed before God.

The Circumcision of the Men (Joshua 5): After years of disobedience in regard to the law of circumcision, Joshua will not lead the people any further until this sign of the covenant is complete. Also here you find the Passover observed at Gilgal and Joshua confronted by "Captain of the Host of the LORD".

Getting A Victory (Joshua 6): In this chapter, there is the exciting story of the Battle of Jericho and it's a battle tactic unlike any other, and there is a reason for that. The reason it was unlike any plan that could have possibly worked is that it was a plan solely devoted to highlighting the power and glory of God.

Growing from Defeat (Joshua 7-8): Obviously, the people felt extremely excited at the tremendous victory of the heavily fortified city of Jericho. However, along with that victory, God gave specific instruction in explaining to the people what were to be done with the spoils. He told them that everything was to go into the treasury of the LORD. Further, they were not to take any of the idols. But unknown to the rest of the people, a man named Achan violated this command, took spoils for himself, and hid them in his tent. This sin cost the entire nation dearly. In their excitement, Joshua set his sights on the lesser battle-ready people of Ai. The thought was, "God is with us, these people will be no problem compared to Jericho, and so we'll take it. However, because there was sin in the camp, Israel suffered a humiliating loss and sent Joshua straight to his knees before God, and in complete confusion. The narrative in chapter 7 ends with a confession made before God and Achan, along with his family, received capital punishment for this offense. Once you reach chapter 8, though, God gives Joshua a new battle plan and Ai is finally defeated.

Guarding Against Deception (Joshua 9-11): This is the story of the deceitful Gibeonites. These were the people who pretended like they were travelers from afar and requested a treaty from Israel. They pretended like they had heard and watched what God was doing in the nation of Israel and they wanted to join them. Their deception was eventually discovered, and the treaty was kept, but you can be sure that Joshua was more guarded in the future after he had been tricked by these people. Further, we find several confederacies created as the surrounding kings attempted to join forces in order to defeat the Israelites. However, God's people proved to be unstoppable and defeated everyone they met no matter the numbers.

Gaining Their Inheritance (Joshua 12-22): These chapters are a bit of a hard read as Joshua changes roles from a Military General to a Real Estate Administrator. The land had been subdued to a manageable degree and so now was the time when Joshua could establish the borders and send each tribe to their territories. And that is what makes this section a little difficult. There is very little in this section other than land divisions.

Good-bye from Joshua (Joshua 23-24): Just as Moses had done before him, Joshua gave a final address to the people before he would pass from this life to the next. Once again there is an emotional scene from a strong leader who begged his people that no matter what, to serve the Lord.

What to Look for in Joshua

If we are going to really understand the book of Joshua, then we need to determine the represented meaning behind the major events in the book. This means that we need to once again revisit the subject of typology. If you remember from previous chapters, a “type” is a “picture” of spiritual truth. The book of Joshua is full of pictures of spiritual truth that become immediately relevant for our lives today.

Joshua: As has been mentioned before, Joshua is a type of Jesus Christ. Moses, once again, represented the law, and the law could never lead us into victory. However, Joshua was able to lead God’s people from victory to victory, just as Christ can do for us.

Canaan: The Promised Land Israel entered into is a picture of the saved life of the believer. Now, some people believe that Canaan represents heaven, but I am glad that it doesn’t. These people had to fight in battle to possess Canaan, and I’m glad we don’t have to fight in battle to get into heaven. There was sin in Canaan, but I’m happy to report that there is no sin, nor will there ever be sin found in heaven. These people were eventually kicked out of Canaan, and that is what I am most glad of all about. Once God takes us to heaven, we are there to stay for eternity. No, Canaan is not a picture of heaven, it’s a picture of the believer’s life in Christ. There is struggle, confusion, pain, and sorrow, but in trusting Christ, He can move us along, causing us to defeat every opposition that would come against us.

Jericho: There is more to Jericho than just a victory won on a few pages that we read. The Battle of Jericho is a spiritual picture of the world. It is heavily fortified. It is arrogant. It is resilient in its opposition to the campaign of God. However, it is no match before the power of God, Himself.

Ai: The narrative is a picture of pride and the flesh. In reading this story, Joshua never consults God, nor do any of the people. They simply assumed that God was going to be with them as they engage this next foe just as He had before. It was the inflated pride of the people that caused them simply to act on their own, expecting the same result as before. If Joshua had gone before God prior to this battle, the outcome would have been completely different in terms of losing soldiers. We should never assume that just because God worked a certain way at a certain time in our life that God owes it to us to do the same as before. Before any decision, and before any action for anything, God always must be put first.

Gibeonites: This is a picture of the subtle devices of the Devil’s tactics. Satan uses all kinds of ways to deceive and undermine our credibility. Satan’s deception will look legitimate. It will sound reasonable. It will even flatter us and seem to be in accord with our cause. But in the end, if a decision is made without the wisdom of God, we set ourselves up perfectly for attack from within.

What to Gain from Joshua

Christ is to us, what Joshua was to the nation of Israel. You’ve heard this many times during the course of this one chapter, but it is vital and real, it cannot be overstated.

We spoke at the beginning of this chapter about the difference between an inheritance and a possession, and that an inheritance is something that you have, but a possession must be taken into possession.

Well, if we turn our attention to **Ephesians 1:3**, we’ll read these words, *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.”*

This verse is really a spiritual counterpart to the entire book of Joshua. Spiritual blessings is the possession of each believer in Christ, but those possessions must be possessed. In other words, you have to claim what has been given.

This means that you can be the owner of Christ’s blessings, but if you don’t claim them, you do not possess them. For instance, as one being in Christ, you have the blessing of the Holy Spirit literally becoming your guide to understanding Scripture (1 John 2:27), but if you’re not in Scripture, you’re not possessing what God has given you as your inheritance. In Christ, you have inherited and have been blessed with the privilege of coming directly before God in prayer when we need help (Hebrews 4:16), but if we never take the time to pray, then our inheritance is really worthless because we have not claimed this possession. Or, we know that because of Christ’s blessing, in dealing with matters like anxiety, God, with His peace will keep our hearts and minds (Philippians 4:7), but if we have no idea that this can be taken hold of, then God’s peace will never be truly possessed as it could be. And there are many more resources that could be explored, just like those mentioned.

The point is, just as Israel had to possess their physical inheritance in the land, we must possess our spiritual inheritance in the Lord.

Much of this nation’s problems came because they failed to drive out all of the inhabitants of the land they were to claim. And much of our problems come because we fail to drive out all of the sin in our lives and then claim all of the spiritual blessings we have in Christ.

13. WHEN THERE WAS NO KING

JUDGES

There are not many Biblical situations that can rival the terrible and repetitious failings of the book of Judges. The preacher Jerry Vines called this book the smelly armpit of the Bible. Moving from Joshua to Judges is the account of a nation that has moved from national public victory to national moral defeat.

The book of Judges gets its name from a series of leaders God raises up to guide his people out of their moral depravity. Some of these judges are well known, and some have hardly more than a sentence written of their rule, but all the same, they were God's chosen leaders who would become a guiding light to lead God's wayward people out of their moral darkness.

Over a 350-year period, the book of Judges continues a nauseating cycle of Rebellion against God, Retribution from God, Repentance before God, and Restoration of God. Fourteen times, from the beginning of the book to the end of the book, you will read this cycle.

Furthermore, in introducing the book of Judges, it is important to know that this is one of the few books in the Bible that gives a mission statement as to the purpose of the book. **Judges 21:25** says, *"In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes."*

We will discuss this in greater detail in a moment, but this book serves as a warning to any nation that would be tempted to go the way of this one.

How to Think about Judges

Judges is all about recognizing the great moral cost that comes with God's people allowing the culture to change them, instead of God's people changing the culture. Just watch the moral spiral downward as we take a look at these chapter divisions.

Ignoring God's Word (Judges 1-2): Chapter 1 is where we find the catalyst for Israel's downfall. In Judges 1:28, we find that Israel did not drive out all of the inhabitants of the land of Canaan, and in some places, certain tribes were even pushed back altogether. As a result, Israel thought it was easier to make a league with the remaining inhabitants than to do what God said. By the time you reach chapter 2, Israel had been rebuked by an 'angel of the LORD' (Judges 2:1) for ignoring His command.

Then, you have a little bit of back story about how the people began to possess and settle in their respective lands of inheritance, but it isn't long when you read this words in Judges 2:11, "And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served Baalim."

Just imagine. Baalim didn't remove them from Egypt, God did. Baalim didn't provide for them in the wilderness, God did. Baalim didn't cause victory in their newly settled land, God did! In fact, Baalim didn't do a single thing for the children of Israel, because Baalim wasn't real! He was a false idol. A fake. And this is who this new nation decided was more worthy to receive worship than God Himself.

Igniting God's Wrath (Judges 3-21): This section is really broken up into two categories. And the first category has to do with God's mercy. Before you get into chapter three, there are some words that you need to pay attention to. After a detailed account of how wicked and terrible God's people had become, and after they were given over to God's wrath by way of surrounding nations taking them over, Judges 2:16 says, "Nevertheless the LORD raised up judges, which delivered them out of the hand of those that spoiled them". Their failure was great... nevertheless, God rescued them.

That is how we get into the first division in this section:

Running from Consistency (3-16)— What becomes completely obvious in chapters is that God's people have absolutely no desire of being consistent. They continually lose the battle with the culture and must be rescued over and over again.

Running to Collapse (17-21)— Nearing the end of this 350-year period, the second division has to do with Israel's complete unwillingness to change. What happens in the end of the book are exaggerated forms of the two centuries prior. Now watch the order in which this collapse happens:

1) **God was Irreverent (17-18):** In these chapters, you read a story about a man named Micah who was very wealthy. And in using his wealth, just to

cover all of his 'religious bases', he built a 'house of gods' that he hoped would bring him even more fortune. Well, as providence would have it (so he thought), Micah came across a young man who was a Levite. This young man was supposed to be a consecrated preacher for God. However, Micah persuaded him to be a private priest— another 'collector's item' among all of his other religious possessions. Micah was actually quite happy with his new purchase and at the end of chapter 17 he said, "Now know I that the LORD will do me good, seeing I have a Levite to my priest." This story ends with members of the tribe of Dan stealing everything that Micah had (including his priest) and created their own 'house of worship' and their own idol worship services. God, as the true God, became completely irrelevant as far as the nation was concerned.

2) Morality was Unimportant (19): In this chapter, you read the story of a 'certain Levite' and his concubine. As the story progresses, you find that after a brief time of his concubine running away to her father's house, the Levite retrieves his wife, and as they are making their return journey back home, they had to stay in a place called Gibeah. Once at this location, the men of the city knocked on the door of the house in which they were lodged and demanded a sexual encounter with the Levite. The lord of the house refused but offered his daughter and the Levite's concubine. The story then moves to the concubine being given over to this perverted mob and they both sexually and physically abused her all night, insomuch that she died from the encounter. The narrative ends with the Levite taking a knife and dividing her up into twelve pieces, and sending her to all the coasts of Israel as a message. As you can see, morality had no bearing on the way these people lived their lives.

3) Government was Ineffective (20-21): Once the 'body part message' was received all of Israel set themselves up for battle against the tribe of Benjamin and demanded that the offenders for the crime against the concubine be handed over so that they could be put to death. However, the tribe of Benjamin refused and decided instead to become battle ready and set themselves against the other 11 tribes. This led to a violent civil war and ultimately ended with the defeat of the Tribe of Benjamin; however, not before the loss of heavy casualties on both sides.

You can see the progression, can't you? First, the nation's problems came when God was abandoned. Then, this viral way of thinking spread to the moral condition of the people. This affected the home, it affected civility, and it the purpose of sexuality and justice. This then moved in for the final blow to the government. The government was not effective in the least and soliciting a response from their own brethren, which then led to an all out war. This was nothing short of anarchy.

What to Look for in Judges

Like the book of Numbers, the book of Judges stands as an ugly reminder of what happens without the absolute standards of God. However, there are rays of light that shine through every once in a while that let us know that though we are completely unworthy, God chooses to work with us and through us in spite of ourselves.

Key Characteristics—

Compromise: The most glaringly obvious characteristic that defines this book is the word "Compromise." And this all happened because God's people did not follow God's instruction and eject all of the inhabitants of the land. We have mentioned this previously, but please understand the weight of the situation. Because the children of Israel were given over to disobedience in this way, it led to intermarriage. Intermarriage then led to ungodly influence, which then led to idolatry. The result of this led to a nation that was almost unrecognizable compared to the people that were first led into this land by Joshua.

Slavery: Over and over again, you see these words, "And the LORD sold them into the hands of..." or "... and the LORD delivered them into the hands of..." This is an indication and a literal illustration that your decisions dictate whom you will serve. There is a real bondage that comes from sinfulness. The children of Israel were taken over by foreign nations and forced into slavery.

Repentance: Throughout this book, after God would give his people over to other nations, they would decide that slavery was not for them. They would cry out to God in repentance, and God would graciously rescue them.

Key Individuals—

Othniel (Judges 3:9): This was Israel's first judge who came after the Mesopotamian king had taken them over. Othniel was actually Caleb's brother and after God had used him to defeat this powerful kingdom, Israel experienced forty years of peace.

Ehud (Judges 3:15): This man had some interesting characteristics written about him. The Bible says that he was the son of Gera, was a Benjaminite, and that he was left-handed. This judge was the man whom God used to deliver Israel out of the hand of the king of Moab after Israel had been enslaved for eighteen years.

Deborah (Judges 4:4): Deborah, the Bible tells us, preceded the judge named Shamgar, and we further learn that she was a prophetess. God used this woman, along with a military leader named Barak to destroy this army and bring about a great victory against Jabin, king of Canaan. In fact, they were so awestruck by what God had done, the whole of chapter 5 is dedicated as a song to God for what had been accomplished.

Gideon (Judges 6-8): Gideon is Israel's famed, fifth judge who was allowed by God to gain a victory over the Midianite army.

Abimelech (Judges 8:31): This man was Gideon's son and by himself, announced that he was king of Israel and went on a family killing spree trying to sure up this reality.

Jephthah (Judges 11:1): God rose up this judge to deal with the Ammonites.

Samson (Judges 13:24): Besides Gideon, this is probably the most famous judge in the history of Israel. This man was born as a Nazarite from birth and possessed great, super-human strength. Though there was a great moral tragedy in his life, God used Samson to defeat the Philistine kingdom.

What to Gain from Judges

Proverbs 14:34 says, “Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people.” The message of Judges is a warning as to what can happen to a nation when God is taken out of the equation. We are led into a completely different atmosphere from that of the book of Joshua. From victory there is defeat. From freedom there was slavery. From progress there was decline. From joy there was sorrow.

Justice and integrity depended on simply who you met; because it was stated in this book, “Everyone did what was right in their own eyes.”

Any serious Christian in America doing any comparing and contrasting with what happened to Israel here and what is happening now in our nation should begin to weep, pray, and get involved with the civic processes of this nation, or else the warning from the book of Judges will turn and instead become our accuser.

14. BEAUTY FROM ASHES

RUTH

This is a small book, but a very powerful book. Named after the main character of the book, Ruth is about a gentile woman who found herself struck by tragedy, but in the end became blessed beyond measure; and as we move through this chapter, we'll see how. However, the point is, the story of Ruth is one that takes the reader from the ashes of one woman's life, and how God creates something completely beautiful out of it.

Further, it is important for the reader to understand that the events that took place in this book occurred directly in the time of the Judges. This is another "Beauty from Ashes" illustration. Even in the midst of the moral ash heap that described the whole of the nation at this time, God was still working in the lives of individuals. Truly, God created some of the most beautiful pieces of His handiwork from the ugliest of situations.

This should be a reminder to all of us. No God-fearing Christian likes to look around at the culture and see moral decay. But understand; God is not limited at all by the culture— this cannot be overstressed. And what we learn from Ruth is that God can, and God does, continue to work in the lives of those who choose to follow Him no matter what the rest of the world is doing.

How to think About Ruth

Because Ruth is such a short book, taking in the basic meaning of the book is quite simple. Your main thought of Ruth should be that even in the worst of times, God can still work out His best for His people.

Another way you can think about Ruth is to recognize it as a love story. So let's watch it unfold:

Tragedy and Traveling (Ruth 1): This narrative starts out with a tremendous amount of sadness. Tragedy had struck Naomi's family. Her husband, Elimelech, had moved his entire family (his wife and two sons) from Bethlehem because of a famine in the land, and had them move to Moab to see if a better life could be found there.

However, while they were in Moab, Elimelech died. As we continue in the story, we find that Naomi's two sons married women of Moab— one named Orpah and the other named Ruth.

Everything seemed to be going well until after about ten years, both of Naomi's sons died as well and this absolutely devastated her. And after Naomi decides that there was nothing left for her in Moab, she decides to go back to Bethlehem, but not before attempting to send both of her daughters-in-law away. Orpah takes this advice, but in verse 16, you see a moving scene where Ruth begs Naomi not to send her away and dedicates her life to Naomi.

The chapter ends with Naomi agreeing to Ruth's request; both of them travel back to Bethlehem together.

Gleaning and Giving (Ruth 2): In this chapter we find Naomi and Ruth starting out their life attempting to survive off of a process called "gleaning." Gleaning is a lot of work. If you were poor and needed to glean, you were usually restricted to small portions of a particular field and then, in this small area, you were forced to find the pieces that other people missed. Furthermore, you could be kicked out of a field at any time.

However, Naomi and Ruth were left with no choice. They had no husbands and work was very scarce for women at this time. But if there was something working in their favor, it was the fact that Naomi's deceased husband, Elimelech, was related to a rich and powerful man named Boaz. That said, if you are in need, and are desperate and need to resort to glean a field, you want to get the best odds that you can and so you pick the field that would be the most favorable. Naomi and Ruth did what any of us would do— they picked the gleaning land of the man to whom they were related.

As chapter 2 unfolds, the next time we see Ruth, she is doing exactly what she had set out to do— she was gleaning in the field of Boaz. And as she is working, she catches Boaz's attention. Men usually are not known as good listeners, but they see really well. And as Boaz sees Ruth, he begins asking about her and gathering even more information that peaks his interest. Actually, Boaz is so intrigued that he approaches her in the field and completely takes Ruth off guard.

Chapter 2 ends with a tremendous blessing for these two women as Boaz gives Ruth food and permission to gather food with the rest of his handmaids and he tells her that she could keep what she gathered for the rest of the harvest season.

This meant that these poor women would be continually taken care of when they had no idea initially what they were going to do.

Bowing and Blessing (Ruth 3): This is the part of the story where you really begin to see the love story unfold. Here is the tender story about how Ruth pursues Boaz and announces herself as a “near kinsman” by way of her deceased husband and mother-in-law and humbly asks if Boaz would be willing to redeem her.

Boaz blesses Ruth for her request and the way she asked. However, Boaz also announces a problem— There was a kinsman that was closer in relationship than Boaz. So Boaz tells Ruth that he would confront this matter and see if this other man wanted to redeem her.

So chapter 3 ends with a suspenseful kind of waiting as Boaz goes out to meet this individual.

Requesting and Redeeming (Ruth 4): In this chapter, we find that Boaz goes to the gate of the city (where all of the business is conducted) and sits and simply waits for this kinsman of Ruth. When Boaz finally sees him, he calls out to get his attention and immediately requests a meeting and sets before him the prospect of owning property in the land of Moab that had been left behind by Elimelech. As Boaz is explaining this he also mentions that the individual who redeems this land would also need to redeem Ruth. The man refuses because he doesn’t want to mar his own inheritance and leaves the decision to Boaz.

The story ends with Boaz officially redeeming Ruth, them getting married, and starting a family.

What to Look for in Ruth

Even though Ruth is four chapters long, the waters of its significance are very deep. Many people look at Ruth like a welcomed refreshment after reading the book of Judges or other Biblical narratives that are hard to understand. And in some ways, that is completely reasonable. We can look at this love story and smile and marvel at how God brought about a beautiful ending for two sweet ladies with a seemingly desperate future ahead of them. However, if this is as far as we go, then we really miss out on the bigger picture.

Key Purposes—

Historical Purpose: It is this book that begins to bridge Israel’s history into the time of the kings. We’ll talk about this in greater detail in a moment, and further in the chapters to come, but after a time, Israel demanded a king to rule over them as all of the other surrounding nations had and it is through the birth of a son to Ruth that the royal line of David begins to form.

Dispensational Purpose: Starting from the time of Rahab of Jericho, it begins to become more and more clear that where the Law was restrictive, as far as receiving the gentile people in terms of the covenant of Promise, grace was beginning to include them. Ruth was a Moabite, but through her redemption, became adopted and received the blessing God had promised to Israel.

Key Words—

Gleaning: Gleaning, as we mentioned before, is the process by which a person gathered together, or picked up various types of produce or items. This word is used 12 times in Ruth and it has to do with God’s desire for His people to be a gracious people. This was a law given to Moses for the people to indicate that it was God’s desire that if you had resources, to not guard and keep them all to yourself.

Virtuous: This word is only mentioned once in the book of Ruth, but it was important to Boaz and it should be important to us personally. What stood out to Boaz in terms of what made Ruth attractive to him, was her personal and observable virtue among the community.

Ruth 3:11 And now, my daughter, fear not; I will do to thee all that thou requirest: for all the city of my people doth know that thou art a virtuous woman.

Kinsman Redeemer: This is an individual who acted as a protector of the family rights. A Kinsman Redeemer had a wide range of tasks that he could accomplish:

- 1) Buy back property that the family had sold
- 2) Produce an heir for a brother who died. The Kinsman Redeemer would take his fallen brother’s wife and have a child with her.
- 3) Avenge the murder of his brother by bringing the offender to justice.
- 4) Buy back a relative that had been sold into servitude.

Typology—

Boaz: In this narrative, Boaz serves as a picture of Christ after he redeems Ruth into the nation of Israel.

What to Gain from Ruth

The book of Ruth really comes to life when we look at two things:

First, we come to chapter 4, where we find the climax of the story. Ruth is redeemed by Boaz in a dramatic scene when, in front of the elders, he performs a public oath that seals forever the issue of the land that was owned by his relative and thus, secures Ruth to be his wife.

Then, later in the chapter the Lord blessed Ruth and Boaz with a child. Not only did this son represent present joy for this family, but by the time that you reach verse 22, you read these words:

“And Obed begat Jesse, and Jesse begat David.”

What this is saying is that Obed was the grandfather of David, the king. Which means that Ruth, by being Redeemed, is directly in the line of Christ.

Furthermore, when we get to Matthew 1:5-6 we read,

‘And Salmon begat Boaz of Rachab; and Boaz begat Obed of Ruth; and Obed begat Jesse; and Jesse begat David the king...’

You see, the genealogy proves that Jesus is the only Jew who can prove His reign as Messiah. I mean, think about it, who would be able to come along and prove what Jesus is able to prove here? No one!

A second fact that needs to be considered is how the Kinsman Redeemer Boaz ties in with becoming a type of Christ.

In order to be a Kinsman Redeemer there were three qualifications that needed to be met:

- 1) The Kinsman Redeemer had to be near of kin.
- 2) The Kinsman Redeemer had to be able to redeem the requested party (they had to have the finances to be able to accomplish this task).
- 3) The Kinsman Redeemer had to be willing and make an agreement to redeem.

Boaz obviously met all three of these qualifications. But think about this, spiritually speaking, Jesus Christ met all of these qualifications:

- 1) Jesus was became near of kin to us by becoming a man
- 2) Because of His perfection and divinity, Jesus is the only one who could pay for our spiritual bank account and cover it forever
- 3) Jesus was willing to Redeem us

“Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.” — John 10:17-18

15. WHEN THERE WERE KINGS

1 & 2 SAMUEL

From the book of Ruth, we mentioned that this was the book that was the beginning of a bridge that led to a completely new form of government, and coming to the section of 1 & 2 Samuel we have crossed that bridge. When we were in Ruth, the nation of Israel was a Theocracy. A theocracy is a people or culture ruled by God. Now, we have entered into the realm of a Monarchical form of government. A Monarchy is a form of government where there is one ruler who oversees the entire nation. 1 Samuel is where all of this begins.

Also, as we watch this young nation grow politically as the new office of “king” is put into place, at the same time, we get to watch a new spiritual facet begin to form as the new office of “prophet” is put into place. 1 Samuel is where we see the office of prophet emerge and it begins with none other than Samuel himself.

Another interesting fact about this book that many do not know is that 1 Samuel, along with its counterpart, 2 Samuel, is known as a doublet book. A ‘doublet’ in literature are two words (or, in this case, narratives) derived from the same source but end up with different routes of transmission. For instance, take the words potion and poison. These words have the same source and are very similar, but take a different route in transmission. That is a doublet.

Well, the same is true with 1 & 2 Samuel. 1 & 2 Samuel is a doublet to 1 & 2 Kings, and 1 & 2 Chronicles. You may have noticed this if you’ve read these books together how they convey similar portions of history but take different routes when it comes to transmission.

Furthermore, another interesting feature is the divisions of 1 & 2 Samuel (as well as Kings and Chronicles) are relatively new. In the original Hebrew writings of these historical accounts, there was only Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles. The “1” and “2” divisions were separations placed there by English translators as a study aid to the reader. These books were divided (just like the chapter and verse divisions) so that a Bible student could easily find the significant portions of history associated with those books.

It is also important to note how these doublet books operate with one another. And the best way to see this operation is to look at the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. These gospels are overlapping accounts of the ministry of Jesus and provide the reader with additional insights and perspectives that provide an altogether clearer picture of the events that occurred during the life of Christ. Well, this is exactly how Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles operate. They are overlapping historical accounts of this nation that together provide a clearer picture of the events that occurred during the life of this nation.

With this information, in these next few chapters we will combine each of these doublet books and present each as whole sections.

How to Think About 1 & 2 Samuel

This first and second part of Samuel are really about four main individuals: Eli the priest, Samuel the prophet, Saul, the peoples’ king, and David, God’s king.

Understanding this will help you tremendously when trying to navigate your way through Samuel. That said, let’s take a brief look at the lives of each of these individuals:

Eli (1 Samuel 1-4): There is not much written about Eli and what is written about him is not flattering. Eli really was a failed priest and a failed parent. As a priest we see his failings in recognizing the spiritual depth of Hannah as he mistakes her prayer life for drunkenness. As a parent we see his failings by way of his sons in the fact that he continued to allow them to commit abominations before God and allow God’s people to be carried away in their worship of Him.

It is true that every God fearing parent would love to see their children grow in the knowledge and respect of the Lord. But it is also true that this is the personal decision of the child and if it ever comes down to a parent having to choose between God and their children, God must win.

Samuel (1 Samuel 1-25): The life of Samuel spans from the time of Eli all the way to just before the death of King Saul. Samuel had a particularly long and influential ministry as God set him up to be the first of the prophets. We find ample evidence as we come into the New Testament as Samuel

was mentioned as part of Israel's history. For instance, in Acts 3:24 the Bible says, "Yea, and all the prophets from Samuel and those that follow after, as many as have spoken, have likewise foretold of these days." Also, in Acts 13:20, we read, "And after that he gave unto them judges about the space of four hundred and fifty years, until Samuel the prophet."

Another interesting fact about Samuel is that he set up different schools for prophets. You see, the office of a prophet was an office of "forth-telling" and usually came on the scene when something was wrong in the lives of God's people. However, Samuel was under the persuasion that these men needed to be good at their craft. And so as he traveled around as a kind of circuit preacher, he also set up institutions that taught men how to teach God's people.

Furthermore, as a prophet, it was this man whom God used to institute the kingdom of the nation of Israel. It was by Samuel's hand that God anointed the first two kings of Israel (Saul and David) during this government transition from a Theocracy to a Monarchy.

Saul (1 Samuel 9-31): This is an interesting man. If you try to understand him, prepare to be disappointed. In reading the story from the beginning of his life, apparently, if we were able to see him, Saul would look like a person that you would identify as a king. The Bible says he stood head and shoulders above everyone else and everything from his outward appearance suggested that he was the best candidate for the job. However, this was just it; he was right on the outside but wrong on the inside.

During Saul's reign we find that he battled with severe mood swings, he was captured easily by jealousy, and that he had a low view of God. The reason we know this is because this is what ultimately costs Saul his throne. Two major sins come out in the life of Saul 1) the sin of presumption and 2) the sin of disobedience. Both of these sins were very public in nature and we learn later on that Saul's primary concern was his own name being protected in his failure instead of God's name being protected because of his failure.

God then takes the throne from Saul, but not before attempting to overthrow God's replacement for the position of King. During Saul's reign, David was anointed king of Israel and once jealousy invaded Saul's heart, we find that he tried to kill David nine different times, causing David to be on the run for years.

David (1 Samuel 16- 2 Samuel 24): When you are reading 1 Samuel, this spans from the birth of Samuel to the death of Saul, which is a period of about 115 years. Once we get into 2 Samuel, this section of the book is dedicated to covering the forty year reign of David.

David is no doubt the most famous king in Israel's history and truly led the people into a golden age of both prosperity and justice. Now, in a moment we talk about his great pride and moral failures, but as a whole, David's life and reign are nothing short of amazing. By God's grace David experienced great victories, and by God's grace David experienced great forgiveness.

What to Look for in 1 & 2 Samuel

Because of the narrative-style flow in Samuel, there are numerous people, accounts, and places to look as you are reading this book. Every page is filled with events that are not only compelling to read over and over again, but also exhilarating spiritual truths that can give both assurance and warning to the heart that is open.

Look for Victories— It would be completely overwhelming to accumulate all of the victories mentioned in these volumes. So instead, what we want to look at is the primary spiritual mindset and attitude that led ultimately to each victory.

Allow God to Make You in Times of Waiting: David was anointed at a very young age, but it was years before he ascended to become Israel's king as God had promised. David served as a shepherd and a court official before he would be king, but he was patient in his waiting and allowed God to use these common experiences in service to bolster his effectiveness as king.

Allow God to Mold You in Times of Trouble: Once Saul became jealous to the point that he felt he needed to take David's life, David quickly found himself on the run as a fugitive. This was no doubt a miserable experience for him. However, many of the Psalms were written in these times of trouble and David began to know God in a way that he had never known Him before. As a result, there was real maturity that took place in David's life. David found himself running from man; but at the exact same time, God was molding a man.

Look for Failures— Just like the victories, there is not enough time to go through each and every failure that exists in both volumes of Samuel. It would be better just to read it for yourself. But while you do,

Don't Run Ahead of God: When the children of Israel wanted a king, they wanted a king at that moment. We'll speak about this to give a little more insight in a moment, but for now, what is important to see is that God already had a king in mind and would establish His king in His own time. However, God's people ran ahead of God and chose a king that they had no business choosing.

Don't Run Around God: When king Saul was well established, we find that there were two occasions where he completely went around God. The first occurred in 1 Samuel 15 when Saul was instructed to destroy the Amalekites and everything they owned. However, instead, Saul decided that he would keep the livestock and keep the king of the Amalekites alive. It was for this sin that Saul lost his kingship. The second occasion happened when Saul went to a psychic so that he could speak to Samue, who had died. He said that he did this because God wasn't listening to him and he needed a word from the Lord (1 Samuel 28). This was a form of witchcraft and strictly prohibited in terms of God's law, labeled as a capital punishment.

Don't Run Away from God: In David's terrible sin with Bathsheba, and the infinitely worse sin of having her husband killed, a careful study of the narrative will reveal that David ignored his sin for about a year. He just pretended like nothing had

ever happened. Also, it is important to take note about how David got to this spiritual drought in his life. This didn't happen overnight. This came during peace in David's life. He was the king and was now extremely successful. But this success caused David to slip in his spiritual life. Suddenly he was adrift from God and by the time these sins occurred he was in a full-stride run (spiritually speaking) from God.

Look for Promises—

God Promised Israel a Special Kind of King: It was always God's plan to give Israel a king. However, what they experienced with Saul was the result of God's people failing to wait on God. They not only wanted to have a king as other nations had, but to choose their king as other nations did. But when God's king took the throne, though he was not perfect, he led Israel into a true golden age.

God Promised David Special Kind of Rule: No doubt the most significant promise that occurs in this section in the Bible is known as the "Davidic Covenant." This is found in 2 Samuel 7:11-13 when God made a promise to David:

"And as since the time that I commanded judges to be over my people Israel, and have caused thee to rest from all thine enemies. Also the LORD telleth thee that he will make thee an house. And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build an house for my name and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever."

God told David that He would not only give David a dynasty, but that his dynasty would last forever. This will be covered in greater detail in a moment, but God did exactly what He said He would do.

What to Gain from 1 & 2 Samuel

Examples for the Cause of Christ: When we look at the four main characters who consume the whole of 1 and 2 Samuel, we are brought to some sobering lessons regarding leadership. We learn that a leader has the ability to cause people to rise, or cause people to fall. In terms of our life, we have to understand that we all have some sphere of influence in the lives of eternal souls. It could be that you have employees. It could be that you are a parent, a Christian employee surrounded by unsaved co-workers, a teacher, an older brother or sister, or friend. No matter what, you exhibit some form of leadership with someone. And as we read the accounts of these men, we find that their godliness, or lack of godliness, affected people for better or worse.

As God's people we have to strive to be His representatives in all that we say and do.

Exclusivity of Christ: As we move through Messianic prophecy in the Bible, we find this progression:

- 1) **Genesis 3:15** *"And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; and it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel."* This is the first Messianic prophecy. In this conversation between God and Satan, God said that He would send a Savior by way of the Human Race.
- 2) **Genesis 22:18** *"And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice."* In this Messianic prophecy, God moves from telling us that the Messiah would not only be part of the human race, but part of a specific race of people that He, Himself, would create to be a nation.
- 3) **Genesis 49:10** *"The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet until Shiloh come..."* A third step in Messianic Prophecy is that the Messiah would be from the tribe of Judah.
- 4) **2 Samuel 7:13** *"He shall build an house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever."* In this prophecy in the Davidic Covenant, God promised David that his throne would last forever. Well, where is David now? He is passed from the scene and done with his earthly reign; but Christ isn't. God said that the Messiah He would send would be a member of the human race, from the people of the Jews, from the tribe of Judah, and from the family of David— and that once He began ruling, His throne would never pass away.

Excellency of Christ: In a final thought for 1 & 2 Samuel, we see four flawed men who in some way or form, corrupted their office. Eli failed the priesthood. Samuel had failings in his prophetic office. Saul failed as king, as did David.

However, in contrast to these failed offices of men, Jesus the Christ fulfills each of them perfectly.

16. THE KING PARADE

1 & 2 KINGS

In approaching these two books, you are really going to have to pay very close attention to whom the author is writing about in certain chapters. In the beginning of our journey, a snapshot was given of Israel's history and there was a brief mention of the split of the kingdom. Well, this is where that happens. And once again, this is what makes this section so challenging. In these two books, you are covering a period of 400 years of history in a very condensed form, and having to toggle between two different nations.

However, in searching for the simplest way to introduce these two books, it would be that 1 Kings provides the reader with details about how the kingdoms become divided, and 2 kings gives details about how both kingdoms become destroyed.

How to Think About 1 & 2 Kings

The best way to approach the books of 1 and 2 Kings, is to follow the major events that led to the split and captivity of the nation of Israel. Doing this will allow you to navigate through these books with far greater ease.

Disruption (1 Kings 1-11): You first hear the rumblings of disruption within the reign of Solomon. However, you wouldn't know that right away by reading the beginning of Solomon's life— Solomon actually begins with a very promising rule. In 1 Kings 3, you see God actually approached Solomon for the first of two times, and asked Solomon to express what he wanted from God. This is when you learn something extremely valuable about God— He loves when you ask for wisdom. And the reason we know that is because when God asked Solomon to tell Him what he wanted, Solomon told God that he wanted a way to judge and discern so that he could be an effective ruler. This delighted God immensely and 1 Kings 2:12 says, "Behold, I have done according to thy words: lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee."

This led to Solomon to be able to accomplish great things during his reign. With this God-given wisdom, God's temple was built, great feats of architecture were accomplished, great prosperity was experienced, and great amounts of land were acquired.

However, in Solomon's wisdom, for political reasons, he took to himself several pagan wives who began to lead his heart astray and caused him to get into idol worship.

Furthermore, because of all of his projects, it placed an undue stress on all of his people as he began treating people more like slaves than subjects.

Eruption (1 Kings 12): Once Solomon passes away, we begin reading about his son, Rehoboam. And like his father before him, he starts out quite promising. He convenes a meeting of the older counselors and asks for guidelines of success. And when he did this, it actually sounds like a very wise and reasonable thing to do. In fact, as you continue reading in this chapter, the advice Rehoboam gets is very good information. These older men bring up the fact that his father was actually resented a bit for the way he treated the people in getting all of his building projects done. They told him that if he would just make their burden lighter, all the people would serve him with no problem.

However, Rehoboam calls a second meeting with several young men. Now, this may sound reasonable at first, but what was really happening is that he really didn't like the advice that he received. If you are looking for specific advice, and keep looking hard enough, you'll eventually find someone who agrees with you. And this is exactly what Rehoboam did. These young men told him to make the burden even greater and by the time you reach 1 Kings 12:11 you read these words, "And now whereas my father did lade you with a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke: my father hath chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions."

This response led to a set policy, and the set policy led to a complete civil disruption. The 10 tribes to the north remained loyal to Rehoboam and were called Israel, and the remaining two tribes to the south (Judah and Benjamin), were ruled by Rehoboam's brother Jeroboam, and were called Judah. Judah was noted to have remained loyal to the Davidic line of rule; although as we will see in a moment, neither kingdom ultimately remained faithful to God.

Corruption (1 Kings 12:25- 22:53): The introduction of idol worship really becomes prominent in these chapters— especially for the northern kingdom, Israel. Israel has wicked king after wicked king that occupies the throne, sending the people further and further down the road to absolute moral depravity and chaos.

The southern Kingdom, Judah, fared a little better and every once in a while you will read of a good king, but mostly, a wicked king occupied the throne, leading the people into idolatry.

It is in this section that you see the great opposition of God's prophet, Elijah against the worshippers of Baal (1 Kings 17:1-22:53).

Destruction (2 Kings 1:1-25:21): In the opening pages of 2 Kings, what you are reading is a continuation of a battle for the soul of God's people. There is drama between the northern and southern kingdoms, and drama between God's prophets, as they continue to push for righteousness, and God's people, as they continue to push for Baal.

The first 13 chapters are riddled with pagan strife and struggle as God continues to show mercy to both of these kingdoms but eventually, both of them fall.

Israel to the north went through 19 kings, over a period of about 250 years before God finally gave them over to the Assyrians in 721 B.C., and Judah went through 20 kings, over a period of 350 years, before God gave them over to the Babylonians in 587 B.C.

In these books you've got front row seats watching a parade of kings into their royal throne rooms and you get to watch what ultimately led to the complete destruction of the entire nation and the complete captivity of all of God's people because of their rebellion.

What to Look for in 1 & 2 Kings

There are several powerful narratives that take place in these books; and just like 1 and 2 Samuel, it makes this section a very interesting read.

Typology: There is typology all over 1 & 2 Kings and the reason for this is because every time you read of an evil king, you're reading about a type of the Antichrist. In these instances you see absolutely no blessing. Instead, the reigns of these wicked kings were marked with enemies, famine, drought, stress, and oppression. This is unfortunately what the northern kingdom experienced. They had nothing but wicked kings.

On the other hand, there was Judah. Judah had a few good kings which included David, Solomon, Hezekiah, Joash, and Jehoshaphat. The good kings that you read of were always types of Christ. And under their rule, you always see that enemies were defeated, agriculture flourished, plentiful amounts of rain at the right season, and all around prosperity. These rulers were a picture of the perfect rule that Christ will bring about at His return.

Prophets: It is in the book of Kings where you begin to see the prophets take a more prominent role. The two prominent prophets you will run into in Kings are the prophets Elijah and Elisha. God uses each of these men in a powerful way to speak to God's people; but what you find is that they each had separate roles. For instance, if you study the life of Elijah, you will notice that he had the task of acting as a hammer on behalf of God's law. He used God's law to speak against immorality and paganism and combated both of these things at the highest levels of government. In a study of Elisha, you will find that his ministry was one of grace. It was his job to tell people of God's glory and call people back to experience God's greatness and forgiveness.

Prayer: It is easy to get caught up in the misery and brokenness of many of these kings. And because much of Kings is placed in a narrative format, it is easy to identify the various events happening during any given section. However, what will really bless you is to look for the various reasons God's kings came to Him in supplication.

Solomon used this word 'supplication' several times in his dedication of the temple. You find this word often when reading of impending trouble in different situations, or simply in times when a person needed God's favor or mercy.

It is in these prayers where we can not only gain a little more insight as to the thoughts and attitudes of those offering the prayers, but also to help to see how they approached God and finding out what they knew to be true about God. Knowing these things can significantly enhance your personal prayer life.

What to Gain from 1 & 2 Kings

If you take the whole of these two books, you'll see the kingdom rise a bit under the rule of Solomon, and then take a sharp turn downward before the split and certainly after. But as we watch this development, there are definitely a few valuable lessons we can take away from this parade of kings:

Great Wisdom is Still No Match for Compromise: Once we begin to watch Solomon's decline near the middle of 1 Kings, we find that this occurs because he was compromising key values in order to gain a political and economic legacy. He compromised the integrity of his people by treating them like slaves, and he compromised his relationship with God by creating alliances with pagan cultures through marriage. And even with all of his wisdom, he still lost respect from his people, and he still found himself engaging in paganism through those political alliances. Even as great as God allowed him to be, he was still no match for these compromises. It doesn't matter how wise you are. If you compromise truth, you will fall.

Great Prosperity is Still No Match for God Judgment: There were several occasions where God's people were in a tremendous position financially. More than this, they were in a tremendous position spiritually. But all of their prosperity could not save them once God's judgment came into the picture. And the same is still true for us. Prosperity is deceptive in that it makes us feel powerful, accomplished, and valuable. It makes a person or a people feel superior and self-sufficient. But once God's judgment comes to rectify the situation, all of the prosperity in the world can't stop God from doing what he will to any person or any people.

Great Sin is Still No Match for God's Promises: Israel experienced a tremendous amount of failure. This despite the fact that God had showed a great amount of patience and had given a great amount of warning by way of His prophets. But they still fell and were still carried away. But God never forgot His promise. He still was going to use these people and He still would bring about salvation through these people though they were worthy of abandonment and death because of their sin.

In this study we have highlighted many times the importance of God's promises throughout Scripture. No doubt, this subject will be brought to light many more times before this study is complete. But the reason it is continually mentioned is because God's promises are the basis of our entire hope. Our very salvation rests on God's promises. Our sin is great. There is no way to repay it. There is no way to dismiss it on our own. It is inseparably bound to us. But God gave us hope in Christ. And it is that very promise that we cling to... we know that great sin is still no match for God's promise of eternal salvation.

17. A PRIESTLY VIEW OF HISTORY

1 & 2 CHRONICLES

A fascinating fact about 1 and 2 Chronicles is that in the Hebrew Bible, Chronicles is at the very end of the book instead of near the beginning, as it is positioned in our Bible. So, instead of the book of Malachi being the very last book in the Hebrew Bible, 2 Chronicles is the very last book.

It is intriguing to think about scripture in those terms. As far as a catalog of Israel's history is concerned, the point which links the Old Testament and the New Testament is technically 2 Chronicles. Even more interesting is the fact that the first words you become acquainted with in Chronicles is a list of genealogies, and the first words you become acquainted with in the New Testament in Matthew is a list of genealogies.

Additionally, we need to keep in mind that the doublet books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles are synoptic portions of Israel's history. Therefore, much of what you read in Chronicles, you have already read in the previous two doublet books. The reason for this is that Chronicles presents you with the same material, but with a different perspective.

If you can get a hold of this, something fun to think about while reading through Chronicles is that it has been said that the books of Samuel and Kings are books written from a prophet's view of Israel's history. In other words, it was written just like a history book from a human standpoint and lists out certain historical facts regarding different people.

However, in contrast to the prophet's point of view, when you read the book of Chronicles, it is said to be written from a priestly point of view. This is a perspective of history given after the captivity of God's people, and from this view, it is believed that Chronicles is said to highlight Israel's history from a divine standpoint.

The reason for this belief is because in Chronicles it appears to be written in such a way to underscore the fact that even though Israel had completely failed God, God never failed Israel. And that is certainly true. In this book, God puts His power on display and allows it to be known to all who read it that He was not hindered at all by the operation of man; that it is God and God alone who turns and orders history in such a way that every single portion always bends to His sovereign will.

How to Think About 1 & 2 Chronicles

Sifting through these books can be a bit of a challenge, especially at first, since you are immediately confronted with nine chapters of genealogies. But, if like our other books, we can section off different portions it will make for a far greater experience.

The Rule of the Royal Line (1 Chronicles 1-9): In these chapters what you have cataloged is a selective history that shows the reader how the human race has progressed to this point.

1 Chronicles 1-2— You will read the names of the generations from Adam all the way to the line of David.

1 Chronicles 3— Information is given about the sons of David and of Solomon.

1 Chronicles 4-8— In these chapters, you read the related lines from the 12 tribes of Israel.

1 Chronicles 9— In this last chapter of genealogies you find out a bit more information regarding the remaining line of King Saul.

Note: If you are like me, you have a tendency to read or even skim over this information very rapidly, but in this case, if you slow down a bit, you'll find something that will really bless your heart. In the middle of all of these names, in **1 Chronicles 4:9-10** the flow is interrupted and you're suddenly introduced to a man named Jabez. And what you learn about Jabez is that he was an honorable man and a praying man, and the reason we know that is that this is what we read about him:

And Jabez was more honorable than his brethren: and his mother called his name Jabez saying, Because I bare him with sorrow. And Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, "Oh that thou wouldest bless me indeed, and enlarge my coast, and that thine hand might be with me, and that thou wouldest keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me! And God granted him that which he requested."

When God does something like this, we need to pay attention. This means that there is something here that we really need to stop and consider. And in this case, we learn that even in the midst of trouble and sorrow, God can work through your life in a powerful way. What we learn from these verses is that you are not at all bound by your circumstances. You're only bound by what you allow yourself to be chained to.

Jabez was born in sorrow and named after that sorrow by his own mother (Jabez means sorrow). But he decided not to stay chained to any of that and instead be chained to God. And while in fellowship with God, he asked for God's blessings; and do you know what happened? God blessed him.

This truly is a jewel of the genealogies. But if you read it too fast, you'll never catch it.

The Rule of the Davidic Line (1 Chronicles 10-29): In these chapters, you find a highlighted narrative about the life of King David. In chapter 10, you'll read an account of the death of Saul, and then the remaining chapters are as follows:

- 1 Chronicles 11-12— David is made king and is able to conquer Jerusalem.
- 1 Chronicles 13-17— Through David's leadership the Ark of God is recovered and given its rightful resting place.
- 1 Chronicles 18-20— A catalog of the different victories of David.
- 1 Chronicles 21-27— The denial of God allowing David to build God a temple, but allowing him to gather the supplies.
- 1 Chronicles 28-29— A description of the final days of David and the anointing of his son Solomon as king.

This then moves us on to 2 Chronicles. This section moves much faster, especially after Solomon moves off the scene.

There are two major divisions you need to be able to identify in 2 Chronicles, and those are the kingly reign of Solomon, and then the reign of kings after Solomon, all inside the Davidic line (the kings of Judah). Let's briefly highlight these chapter divisions.

The Rule of Solomon (2 Chronicles 1-9):

- 2 Chronicles 1— Solomon begins to rule.
- 2 Chronicles 2-7— The building of the temple.
- 2 Chronicles 8-9— The accomplishments of Solomon's reign.

The Rule of Kings After Solomon (2 Chronicles 10-36):

- 2 Chronicles 10-12— The reign of Rehoboam.
- 2 Chronicles 13— The reign of Abijah.
- 2 Chronicles 14-16— The reign of Asa.
- 2 Chronicles 17-20— The reign of Jehoshaphat.
- 2 Chronicles 21— The reign of Jehoram.
- 2 Chronicles 22-24— The reign of Ahaziah, Athaliah, and Joash.
- 2 Chronicles 25— The reign of Amaziah.
- 2 Chronicles 26— The reign of Uzziah.

What to Look for in 1 & 2 Chronicles

As stated before, much of what you will read in 1 & 2 Chronicles has been covered in 1 & 2 Samuel and Kings. And, who knows, this may tempt you to not read this book as carefully as you should. "Why would I be given the same information?" you ask. Well, understand, it's not repetition simply for repetition's sake. God knows what He is doing. He wasn't confused and accidentally gave you the same information twice.

Have you ever heard the saying, "Hindsight is 20/20?" Well, 1 and 2 Samuel and Kings were written before, and up to, the captivity of God's people. But 1 & 2 Chronicles seems to have been written after the captivity (as mentioned in the introduction). And what you get here is a historical narrative from a completely different perspective that makes the picture all the more clear and the spiritual truth all the more weighty.

You see, a portion of the people who were led into captivity were able to come back to God's promised land. God had a remnant of people that were able to continue on. That's where we get the books of Ezra and Nehemiah (which will be examined in the next couple of chapters). And when God's people do come back, they come back to destruction, burned cities, wasted towns, and rubble everywhere. And these books were written to show the people what had happened from God's perspective and why it is important to have a moral foundation under God.

Major Warnings:

Carrying the Ark of God— In 1 Chronicles 13 we are introduced to a very exciting narrative. The Ark of God was recovered and David ordered that it be brought to Jerusalem. Now, what David should have done was abide by the laws regarding the Ark that God had put in place and allowed the Levites to take care of this task. However, in his enthusiasm, David decides that he could have the Ark brought to Jerusalem on his own. He opted for ease and speed rather than respect and honor. And because of this, a young man named Uzzah, walking next to the Ark, watches an ox stumble, causing the Ark to fall toward the ground. In a split-second reaction, Uzzah decides that his hands are cleaner than the ground the Ark would fall onto, and God strikes him down right there.

The whole project was halted and David, in his sorrow, learned a valuable lesson: God desires obedience to His word, not our good intentions.

Numbering the People— Interestingly enough, David's sin with Bathsheba and against Uriah is not listed in Chronicles. Many believe this is because David's sexual and murderous sins were sins committed in his capacity as a man, but his sin in numbering the people was committed in his official capacity as a king. And because Chronicles is focused on the nation as a whole, only this sin in 1 Chronicles 21 was recorded.

Whether this is the case, I cannot tell for certain. But I do know this sin was a great one. It is a tremendous warning to all of those who know God, but choose to live their life as if there is no God, and who like to evaluate their success by their own might. David chose to see how strong he was by counting his battle resources. But God chose to show David how weak he was by cutting down the nation.

The Decline of Kings— After King Solomon, we are met by nine good kings of Judah and eleven wicked kings of Judah. And with every wicked king, the moral compass of the people just went further and further down. You can see why, can't you? If justice cannot be found in leadership, what is the purpose or benefit of doing justice? If unrighteousness is rewarded by your government, then the most tempting thing to do is just follow the path of least resistance. With each wicked king, we watch the nation move further down the path of destruction all the way to its eventual captivity.

This information was Chronicled for the people so that they could always have a record of what happened to them and how to stay away from that kind of danger. The warning of the decline of kings shows us how important the moral integrity of a leader really is.

Major Accomplishments:

Military Victories and Times of Peace— 1 Chronicles 18, 19, and 20 are all about David's military victories. In chapter 18, the ark is brought back and you read conquest after conquest. Just as we saw in the book of Joshua, these victories are symbolic of the victories that we as believers can experience in Christ.

Further, once David is ushered to heaven, Solomon takes the throne and during his reign, the kingdom experiences great peace and prosperity. Starting in 2 Chronicles 9, the beauty and splendor of the kingdom starts to be made known all over the world. It is here where we read of the story of the Queen of Sheba and her amazement at the nation's prosperity and Solomon's wisdom.

Gathering Supplies for the Temple— In 1 Chronicles 22, we see the last major mark of King David's life. He wants to build God a permanent temple. At first, Nathan the prophet tells him to start and that God is with him. But soon God speaks to Nathan and tells him to tell David that his hands are too bloody and that he will not be allowed to build the temple. This had to be incredibly disappointing to David, but what he is allowed to do is gather all of the supplies.

Building the Temple— This is an absolutely awesome portion of Scripture. 2 Chronicles 2 is where we see that Solomon picks up where his father leaves off. He gets to have the honor of building the temple of God. Once you arrive at 2 Chronicles 6, Solomon offers great sacrifices and a compelling prayer. And once the prayer was concluded, in front of everyone, fire came from heaven and consumed the altar's sacrifice, and the entire temple filled with a cloud of glory so thick that the priest could not enter. What an accomplishment!

What to Gain from 1 & 2 Chronicles

The Supreme Authority of God— In these writings, we are ultimately confronted with God's authority. Once again, it is God who is bending this nation's history, and really, all of human history, to His divine purpose. God is absolutely unhindered by the actions of man.

The Importance of the Eternal— Because God is the supreme authority over all, and He reigns from everlasting to everlasting, it only makes sense to be guided by His eternal standard. If you remember, that is why this book was written. It was written to be both an encouragement and a warning to all of those people who would come after this generation. God created and preserved this very word so that His people would always know what works and what doesn't work; that it is only by God's eternal purposes that can bring eternal salvation to individuals, and through individuals, salvation to entire nations.

The Value of Not Romanticizing the Past— We have to understand that when God's people were done with their captivity, it had to have been both an incredibly happy time, and an incredibly sad time. Happy because they were once again free to be God's people on God's promised land, but sad because of all of the destruction that surrounded them. No doubt they looked around them and thought about what all had been lost and what years had been wasted. In many ways, they were starting over and were merely a shell of their former glory from the time of David and Solomon. It would have been easy for them to sit and weep about what they used to be. But Chronicles was to be their book of hope. A history that would forever stand as a testament to God's graciousness and that no matter what, God will see His promises through to the end. They didn't have to stay bound to their past failure and continually dwell on how good things used to be. They could look to their God and know that He was not finished with them.

We can get caught up in the same things. Past failures can be haunting, but God is not hindered at all by your past. There's no use in staying weighed down and romanticizing the past and thinking about what used to be or what could have been. God can meet you right where you are. Since you're still here, He's not done with you.

18. REBUILDING THE TEMPLE

EZRA

Jeremiah 25:11-12 says this: “And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. And it shall come to pass, when seventy years are accomplished, that I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, saith the LORD, for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans, and will make it perpetual desolations.”

Jeremiah 29:10-11 says this: “For thus saith the LORD, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.”

These verses just quoted are where we are fast-forwarded to from where we ended off in 2 Chronicles. God finally instituted judgment on His people and they were carried away into Babylonian captivity for seventy years just as God had told them they would be.

However, in Jeremiah's prophecy, God tells them that after their seventy years were completed, He would bring their captivity to an end, judge Babylon for their sin against God's people, and then return them back to the land from which they were taken.

This is the portion of the nation's history in which we find ourselves when entering into the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.

At this point, it is important to remember that the Old Testament is not in chronological order. When we look at the last of the historical books, time has sped up. Now, when we get to prophetic books, we will have to back track a bit inside the time of kings and Chronicles.

But, once we broach into the last three historical books, the people are done with their captivity and once we move into Ezra we read these words in **chapter 1, verses 1-2**, “Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.”

Around 538 BC, Cyrus allowed God's people to return to their homeland; and around 535 BC, God commissioned this same king who was used by God to rebuild the temple. That's incredible!

So this is the purpose behind this book. It is named for its human author, Ezra, who cataloged the return back to Jerusalem with God's people and the rebuilding of the temple.

Furthermore, by way of introduction, we also need to know about Ezra himself. To find this out, we can go to Ezra 7 where the names of his heritage are given to us and we ultimately find out that Ezra was a son of Aaron the chief priest. In other words he was from the tribe of Levi, the priestly line of the twelve tribes of Israel. We also learn from verse 6 of chapter 7 that he was “...a ready scribe in the law of Moses...” He was God's preacher during this time and he was the spiritual leader during this time who helped the spiritual transition of God's people once they were back home.

How to Think About Ezra

Ezra is one of those books in the Bible that is not studied too often, and that really is a shame! It is a tremendous book about the fulfilling of God's promises and the spiritual revival and restoration of God's people.

However, before we get into the layout of the book and how to approach it, what needs to be discussed is the fact that this book is broken up into two different sections. The first section occurs in the first six chapters when the people were originally guided by a political leader by the name of Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel was the individual that led about 50,000 Jews back to Jerusalem to start their new lives there and helped start and complete the temple rebuilding project.

The second section occurs after chapter 6, where there is a 60 year gap before you get to chapter 7 and Ezra comes on the scene. Knowing this we are able to better understand the flow of the book.

The Story of Cyrus (Chapter 1): Chapter 1 is dedicated to explaining how God's people were released in the first place. As quoted earlier, Ezra 1:2 says that it was king Cyrus' understanding that God had spoken to him and charged him to build the temple in Jerusalem.

The glory of chapter 1 is that it was God who moved the king's heart to both release God's people and fund the temple building project! What an amazing chapter!

The Names of the People (Chapter 2): Here you can read the list of names of the individuals who were carried away into Babylon, but came back to Jerusalem after they were released. This is the first wave of those who returned with Zerubbabel in 538 BC.

The Reconstruction Project (Chapter 3): In this chapter, corporate services for worship were conducted, sacrifices were offered, and the foundations for the temple were laid.

The Resistance to the Project (Chapters 4-5): These chapters tell us about how the "enemies" of Benjamin and Judah want to help build the temple because they in fact worship the same God as the Jewish people.

Now, what might not be readily obvious here is the fact that the people you are reading about in these chapters are a people you are very familiar with in the New Testament, a people known as the Samaritans. They open their hand and ask to be involved in the building project. However, their help was denied and they became very bitter. In fact, because they were not allowed to be involved, they made it their mission to attempt to make sure the project was halted, and in some ways, they were successful. The hand of friendship extended out before the Jews quickly turned to one of hatred, and the reverberations from this one instance were felt for hundreds of years afterward.

The Revival Project (Chapter 6): Wouldn't you know, even after the people were hindered, hurt, and halted from completing the temple project—even when they were beaten down and discouraged, thinking they would never finish the job, God gave them exactly what they needed... encouragement!

The way God sent this encouragement was by way of a couple of prophets named Haggai and Zechariah.

Chapter 6:14 says, *"And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they builded, and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia."*

God sent a revival so that His people would be encouraged and His work would be completed.

This whole process took about 20 years to complete, and then there is a 60 year break between this time and the time of Ezra (as mentioned previously). What is also important to know is that once Ezra steps onto the scene, the events that took place from chapter 7 to the end of the book (chapter 10) happen in about 1 year.

The Story of Ezra (Chapters 7-8): Ezra came in with the second wave of people in about 458 BC. In this instance, Ezra was not in charge and whatever he asked for the king gave him.

The Confession of Sins (Chapter 9): Here you read of the people committing the same sins that had led them into captivity in the first place. Seventy years in captivity had apparently taught them nothing and Ezra became so upset that he tore his clothes and pulled out his hair. He then must confess the sins of the people.

The Repentance of the People (Chapter 10): Israel repents and puts themselves back in a covenant with God according to His law.

What to Look for in Ezra

It is not often in life when you get a fresh start. More than this, it's not very often in life where this fresh start comes financed by a third-party in order to help you along, but this is exactly what happened to God's people. And as great a blessing as God gave in this regard, there was still a heavy amount of work to be done and a tremendous amount of struggle to overcome. It is inside the context of these experiences that we find some interesting themes that surface.

Key People—

Zerubbabel: As mentioned before, this man was a political leader and the man who took care of the leadership responsibilities of God's people for 20 years until Ezra came on the scene. It is important to note this man's leadership.

Ezra: The scribe and Bible teacher who lead a continual spiritual renewal of God's people once Zerubbabel stepped off the scene.

Cyrus: The Persian king who conquered Babylon and allowed God's people to move back to Jerusalem from captivity. He also financed the temple project and provided letters of compliance to all who would be a hindrance to the project.

Haggai: The main prophet whom God used to encourage the people so that the temple project would be completed.

Key Themes—

God's Supreme Sovereignty— This is what stands out among all other spiritual truths in this book. Every step of the way God uses laymen, politicians, prophets, and kings to bring to pass exactly what He said He would.

Man's Supreme Depravity— You stare in bewilderment as you read of Israel's sin in chapter 9. The same thing that led them away from God in the first place, and the same thing they had been judged for over and over again, is the same thing they were doing right after they returned.

They were taking foreign wives and being polluted in such a way that would lead them back into idolatry. It was clear, they had learned absolutely nothing from their captivity at this point.

What to Gain from Ezra

The Resiliency of Evil Against God's People— This is a theme we will run into in the book of Nehemiah as well: As long as we are living for God, we will be fighting for His purposes. After the help from the Samaritans was denied, these people were a relentless hindrance to God's people in their quest to rebuild the temple. This was to the point of almost giving up. If you've ever felt like giving up because of relentless spiritual badgering, you are in good company.

The Refreshing Nature of God's Word— God's word is the only spiritual balm we have to persevere and make it through this life. Once again, God's people were so beaten down by delay, insults, and jeering from the Samaritan people that they wanted to give up. But as soon as God gave His word from the prophets, all of the negative clamoring in the world could not stop them.

This is an important lesson for the believer. We fight Satan with Scripture, not with willpower. This is also a warning for us to always make Scripture a priority in our lives.

The Richness and Depth of God's Forgiveness— Here we learn an important lesson about repentance. We learn that it takes more than confessing with our mouths, it takes turning with our feet. These marital relationships with pagan women had to be abandoned. Understand, these are real emotions experienced by real people. Turning from this kind of sin wasn't as simple as turning off the television. Sometimes real repentance really hurts and is really hard depending on how long we let it go and how far down the road we've gone. God doesn't call us to the easy way, He calls us to a better way.

What we find in this book is that God does forgive them and restoration is given. This is an obvious tie to the unconditional forgiveness that we experience now in Christ Jesus.

19. REBUILDING THE WALL

NEHEMIAH

About thirteen years later from the time of Ezra, the third wave of God's people come along with Nehemiah to the city of Jerusalem.

Originally, Nehemiah was an official in the king's court. He served the king Artaxerxes as a cupbearer, and during this time it was a very important position. While in this position, Nehemiah had heard of the sad condition of the city wall and gates and began to grieve so much that he gave himself to continual prayer.

God then finally led him to take on the task of rebuilding the wall and he was given leave by the king to do this very job. So Nehemiah takes a third group of exiles back to Jerusalem and heads up this building project.

God's people had occupied their former homeland for about ninety years and this would continue for many more years to come. As Israel continually became more habitable, more and more Jewish people found themselves making the long journey home.

How to think About Nehemiah

In outlining this book, much of what you encounter in the beginning is an overlapping narrative about what is happening while the wall is being repaired.

Repairing the Wall (Chapters 1-6): The whole of these chapters are dedicated to the actual rebuilding of the wall. It ranges from the conception of the plan all the way to the completion of the plan.

Defending the Wall (Chapters 4-6): Enemies of this project were out in full force and actually threatened death on all who were involved in this project (including women and children).

Completing the Wall (Chapter 6): It is here where we read that the entire wall was completed in the breath-taking timeframe of 52 days.

Reviving the People (Chapters 7-13): This describes the spiritual renewal taking place among God's people and the celebration that took place upon the completion of the wall project. Also in this chapter is a narrative about a spiritual compromise that took place among God's people and how Nehemiah dealt with this problem.

Further, we learn that many of God's own people had to be convinced to actually come back and live inside the city walls once they were completed.

What to Look for in Nehemiah

Key People—

Nehemiah: A great leader and the main character of this book. What you are reading is believed to be personal journal recordings of Nehemiah that were copied and transcribed by Ezra the priest.

Ezra: The spiritual leader of Israel at the time who played a key role in the revival of God's people by way of his preaching.

Sanballat: The ruler of Samaria who attempted to discourage God's people and keep the wall from going up.

Tobiah: An Ammonite ruler who mocked and discouraged the rebuilding of the wall. He was able to con his way into having his own room in the temple and for a time, reasserted power over God's people.

Key Themes—

The Importance of Prayer: Before Nehemiah did anything, he prayed when he heard about the condition of the city. In fact, if you look closely at the timeline, you'll find that Nehemiah spent a significant amount of time in prayer.

The Importance of Preparation: Once Nehemiah was led by God to rebuild the wall, and once he was given permission by the king, he began a meticulous plan to make sure God's work was completed in the way it was intended to be completed. God's work requires a special amount of time and thought before any physical work can be started.

The Importance of Serving God: The entire book is about serving God by participating in His work. When reading about this service, you'll notice that once the job was completed, the celebration was massive. It is always a time of rejoicing when service is rendered to God.

The Importance of Godly Leadership: This comes to the forefront as we see all of the repairs that needed to be made, the empowering of God's people, and the protection from danger that the people experienced.

It wasn't that God's people did not have leadership during this time, it was that they did not have enough godly leadership during this time. Ezra could only do so much.

What we learn from this is that leadership does not exist in a vacuum. If there is a position that needs to be filled, then there will always be someone there who will try to fill it. If the godly do not step in, the ungodly will. This is what caused such struggle during Nehemiah's arrival. There were enemies who were threatened by godly leadership because they did not want to let go of their influence.

What to Gain from Nehemiah

When the Going Gets Tough, You Get Tougher— In the Christian life, if you want to win, then you're going to have to fight.

In chapters 4-6, when God's enemies started to threaten the lives of those who were attempting to build the wall, instead of running and hiding, and instead of trying to compromise, Nehemiah solicited more volunteers to work as soldiers who would protect the progress of the wall and the people who worked there day and night.

This wasn't an easy solution; we can be sure that this caused more strain and stress on both manpower and emotion. This was by far the harder decision to make, but it was the right one.

Whenever sin hits your life and makes you want to give up, by God's grace, you can grit your teeth and keep moving forward.

It's Easier to Fight Sin Together— You'll notice that the completion of the project and the protection of the people was only made possible because they banded together as one people under God and refused to let the enemy win.

That is the way it is in the Christian life, and more specifically, in church life. When we are unified and we are all on the same page about completing God's work, then we accomplish more and have far more victory than when we fight alone.

Don't Flirt with Danger— This proposition statement comes from a passage in Nehemiah found in chapter 13. In this chapter a priest named Eliashib made an alliance with the enemy. He allied with a man named Tobiah (who is mentioned in the key persons section). In fact, Eliashib prepared a nice, huge room in the temple for this person to stay.

Now, this all happened while Nehemiah was away for a time, and when he came back, this is what he came back to. Not only this, but none of the ministers of God were doing what they were supposed to do, the people were not honoring the Sabbath, and some of God's people were taking pagan wives again.

In every instance, the people were compromising key portions of the law that had ultimately brought devastation in the first place.

We need to understand that every area of compromise in our lives puts us in great danger.

It's Okay to be Angry with Sin— As we follow Nehemiah around again in this same passage in chapter 13, you'll find that he took extreme measures in correcting every single thing. With Tobiah, he physically threw him (along with all of his things) out of the temple. With the ministers not doing their job, he gathered them up and forced them to sit where they were supposed to sit and do what they were supposed to do. With those violators of the Sabbath, he shut the doors to the gates and forced all of the businesses to close for the day. When it came to those who were taking foreign wives, he plucked out their hair from some of them and made them re-promise their oath to God.

Now, obviously, we are not to imitate these actions in our day. This was a different time, a different setting, and a different rule of law. For Nehemiah, some of these offenses were literally a matter of life and death.

However, what we can take away from this passage is that it is, in fact, okay to be angry about sin. We can be angry about it in our own lives, in the lives of those we care about (family and church), and we can be so angry that we confront it when it has the potential of affecting us personally.

20. GOD, SAVE THE QUEEN

ESTHER

There are two books in the entire Bible named after women. The first is one we've covered recently, and that is the book of Ruth. And the second is right where we are— the book of Esther.

That said, their stories are very different. In Ruth, you have the story of a woman who was a gentile who captured the heart of a Jewish man. In Esther, you read the story of Jewish woman who captured the heart of a gentile man— a king, no less.

Esther's story is a fascinating one. This book was written about those Jews who decided to stay in Babylon, instead of leaving to go back to Jerusalem, as those we read about in Ezra and Nehemiah had. Actually, the majority of God's people stayed in Babylon. They had made a nice life for themselves. They were prospering, comfortable, and apparently, they loved the culture.

It probably came down to comfort though. It's hard to leave a comfort zone. But as we will see in a moment, comfort turned to distress very quickly.

And this distress started with a seemingly insignificant action as far as danger to God's people was concerned. It started with a six month long feast thrown by king Xerxes so that everyone could see how great, powerful, and wealthy the king had become.

One night, when the king was "...merry with wine..." he called his queen, Queen Vashti, to come before all of the princes of the kingdom so that they could see how beautiful she was. However, queen Vashti snubbed the king and refused to be put on a pedestal. This then caused the king great embarrassment and ultimately ended with a divorce from his wife.

Once the divorce happened, the search was on for a new wife for the king, which was conducted by a nationwide beauty contest. Out of all women in the kingdom, from both Jew and Gentile, Esther, the Jewish woman, was selected to be the next queen.

This position ultimately aided her in saving all of God's people who were still living in Babylon.

How to Think About Esther

This book can be easily broken down into three sections which correspond with the major events of the narrative:

The Search for a Wife (Chapters 1-2): As mentioned in our introduction, the celebration was to tell the world how Babylon was at the top of the food-chain when it came to power, riches, and beauty. No doubt the food was extravagant, the service was excellent, and every portion of the celebration signified the glory of the empire. Even the queen was a reflection of all that the nation was believed to be— glorious and beautiful.

The Loss of Queen Vashti (chapter 1)—Queen Vashti was no prize to be touted before a bunch of drunk men. Though it cost her dearly, Queen Vashti made the right decision. What she was asked to do was a huge blow to her dignity as a woman and should be looked upon as a role model for all women.

The Gaining of Queen Esther (chapter 2)— Since Queen Vashti had to be put away, her standard of beauty had to be replaced. Once again, the queen was an essential standard bearer for what this empire attempted to exemplify— superiority. Therefore, after a nation-wide search for the most beautiful woman, Esther is chosen and quickly rises to the very top.

Also in this chapter you are introduced to a relative of Esther named Mordecai. Early on a plot was uncovered to execute the king, but because of Mordecai and Esther the king's life was spared and those involved punished.

The Secret Plan of evil (chapters 3-7)— In these chapters you are introduced to a man named Haman. This individual was able to weasel his way to position of power and began to demand that the king's servants bow down to him. All did except for one— Mordecai. This infuriated Haman, and at first Haman, toyed with the idea of taking care of Mordecai at that very moment, but suddenly is shown the people group that Mordecai is descended from and chooses instead to take his revenge on a far grander scale. Haman decides to exterminate every single Jew from the nation.

The Protection of God's People (chapters 8-10)— Esther is finally able to appeal on behalf of her people and Haman's plot is discovered. By God's grace and justice, Haman is executed on the very same gallows that he had prepared for God's people.

You also read here of a great victory celebration and the increased fame of both Esther and Mordecai because of their faithfulness.

What to Look for in Esther

Key People— There are five key people that you need to pay attention to if you want to unlock the book of Esther:

Xerxes: This is the king of Persia who had conquered the Babylonian empire.

Vashti: We've discussed this brave lady at length, but this is how the drama unfolded as it did. It was because of Vashti's bravery and being expelled from royalty that Esther was placed in a position of prominence so that she could intercede on behalf of her people.

Haman: Once again, this was the Jew-hating individual who had determined in his heart and mind that the Jews no longer deserved to have a seat at the table of life.

Mordecai: A great leader of the Jews at this time and is famed for his encouragement of righteousness towards others and his great integrity to do what is right no matter the cost.

Esther: The beautiful young lady God used to win the heart of a king and save her people.

Key Feasts— It is interesting to think about how most of the significant events that occur in this book, occur at a feast or celebration.

Feast for a Kingdom's Glory: This is where we find ourselves in chapter 1. Not too much time will be spent here because of what we have previously discussed, but it was at this feast where the story of Esther began to unravel.

Feast for a King's Heart: In this portion we find ourselves in chapter 7 when a plan was put in place by Esther in which she would hold a multi-day banquet for the king. This plan was to give credibility to Esther in the eyes of the king and capture his heart so that he would be willing to listen to her when the time came. During the course of events, this is exactly what God caused to happen. The king was willing to listen to Esther and as she made her appeal, this is where Haman's plan was discovered and judgment brought against him.

Feast for the King of king's Provision: This comes to the forefront when we get to Chapter 9:26-29,

"Wherefore they called these days Purim after the name of Pur. Therefore for all the words of this letter, and of that which they had seen concerning this matter, and which had come unto them, the Jews ordained, and took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them, so as it should not fail, that they would keep these two days according to their writing and according to their appointed time every year; And that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city; and that these days of Purim should not fail from among the Jews, nor the memorial of them perish from their seed. Then Esther the queen, the daughter of Abigail, and Mordecai the Jew, wrote with all authority, to confirm this second letter of Purim."

This is now called the "Feast of Purim" and is still celebrated to this day. On the 14th and 15th day of last month of the Jewish calendar, the people gather in the evening at the Synagog and the book of Esther is read aloud. Every time the name of Haman is mentioned, all the people hiss and say together, "Let his name be blotted out!" The next morning they meet again for prayer and reading of the law, and the rest of the day is reserved for rejoicing, feasting, and giving of gifts.

This feast is a reminder to God's people that God is the One who preserves His people.

What to Gain from Esther

This book really is a treasure of spiritual truth that can encourage and give peace to all those who would listen to its message.

The Importance of Godly Influences: We see this in Mordecai's relationship with Esther. Mordecai was the uncle of Esther, but more than this, he was a spiritual encourager. He had the respect of those closest to him because of the godly life he led and he used that influence to help shape and mold God's people— namely, Esther.

It was Mordecai's effort and influence that gave Esther the perspective she needed to choose what was right, not what was convenient.

Godly influences have that effect. Just like you can look into a mirror and see your reflection, you can also do that with the people with whom you associate. Esther had godly influences in her life, and because of it, godly choices were made.

The Importance of Courage: It has been said that courage happens when we are afraid to do what is right, but we do it anyway. That is the book of Esther. To see the king in an official capacity without being invited, even for the queen, could mean death. This is something that weighed heavily on Esther's mind as Uncle Mordecai asked Esther to intervene on behalf of her people. Esther protested and explained that her life would be in danger if she attempted to do this, but Mordecai explained that the lives of her people were in danger if she did nothing.

After this was explained, you read these great words from Esther in Chapter 6:16, "Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish."

There are some things worth dying for in the life of the follower of Jesus Christ. Notice what happened first: first prayer and fasting, and then the plan was put into motion. There came a time when everything had to go into the Lord's hand solely and what He decided is what would be. What an encouraging message of courage for our time!

The Importance of Remembrance: A fascinating observation to take note of in this book is that the name of God is not mentioned one time. I like what the preacher Jerry Vines said in relation to this, "The name of God is nowhere seen, but the hand of God is nowhere missing."

Oftentimes, this is the way it is in our life. God does not show up in mighty revelation of tangible power and strength, rather He is working in the background causing us to take every step by faith. Oh, but when we look back on those events we thought were devastating at the time, we see that God's hand was never missing from our lives.

And it is in those times when we need to remember to praise Him continually. That is what these people did. They finally saw that God was with them and they set aside a day to remember it always.

That is exactly what we should do.

21. AN INTRODUCTION TO HEBREW POETRY

Welcome to the first of the poetical books! We have made it to the second major section of the Old Testament. Because we are entering into an entirely new section, we'll begin our introduction in a different format so that we can dig a little deeper into what it means to be in the poetical section of the Bible.

What you first need to know is that just because we are in a poetical section, it does not mean that you will not find poetry in other places. It just means that this is the literary form that most dominates the five books that make up this section. If you remember, the literary style is like listening to different inflections in a conversation. If you are warning an individual of danger and you call out their name, you'll use a tone that is consistent with the situation. If you are using that same person's name in a regular conversation, then your tone of voice is going to be completely different.

This is the best way to think about the different literary forms. The literary form we just moved from are the historical books and they are written in the 'prose' form. In other words, they are written in just everyday speech and narrative. As we move into the form of poetry, we'll see something different.

The form of poetry is rooted in experience. That is to say, what you are reading is the experience of the heart. Therefore, some of what you see in poetry is extreme or exaggerated in order to get the reader's attention to what the heart is doing or what someone is going through.

Another difference when attempting to sift through the difference of poetry and prose in relation to the Bible, is the fact that in the Bible you are dealing with Hebrew poetry. Hebrew poetry is completely different from English poetry. English poetry has to do with rhythm and rhyme more than anything else. However, Hebrew poetry has to do with parallelism or construction and doesn't rhyme at all. This is the bedrock of this style of poetry. That said, Hebrew poetry is much easier to translate than English poetry. If a certain person wanted to translate English poetry properly, they would have to try to make the sounds similar in order for it to make sense. But because poetry in Hebrew has to do with parallels and not rhyme, it can be understood immediately after translation.

However, there is a catch. There are different forms of Hebrew poetry for which you need to be on the lookout. The reason it is important to know these forms is because they can determine how one interprets the Bible. Let's go through these forms, and for each an example will be provided:

1) **Comprehensive**- This is the most common form of Hebrew Poetry and offers a balanced repetition. A good example of this is found in Psalm 46:1, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

In line one, you see the words, "God is our refuge and strength..." This is a starting statement, but the Psalmist wanted to give an additional or more comprehensive thought to go along with this, and so you read, "... a very present help in trouble." The second phrase balances the first and provides the reader with a more comprehensive understanding by way of parallelism.

2) **Elaborative**- This type of parallelism takes a phrase and elaborates on the thought exponentially in order to make the most powerful statement possible. An example of elaborative poetry can be found in Proverbs 30:17, "The eye that mocketh his father, and despiseth to obey his mother, the ravens of the valley shall pick it out, and the young eagles shall eat it."

Notice how there is no question as to what is being discussed here. A child who dishonors his parents is the subject, and strong, elaborating information is given for clarity as to what the result will be in terms of this lifestyle.

3) **Contrastive**- In this form of poetry, the first line or passage will contrast with the parallel portion. Psalm 1 can be used as an example for this form. In the first 3 verses you see the characteristics of the righteous, and then in the latter 3 verses, you see the contrasting truth of the ungodly. Here are verses 3 and 4 that speak to this contrasting disposition, "And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither, and whatsoever he doth shall prosper. The ungodly are not so: but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away."

It is easy to see the parallel contrast. The righteous do one thing, while the unrighteous do another.

22. A STORY OF SUFFERING

JOB

Now that we have a better grasp on Hebrew poetry, let's take a look at our first poetical book: Job.

Aside from being believed to be the oldest book of the Bible, many believe this book to be the oldest book written in the world. Whether this is definitively the case or not, we'll never know on this side of eternity, but what we do know is that for as old as this book is, it will never be out of date.

The matters spoken of in this book could not speak any more clearly about the confusion and heartbreak that sometimes exists among God's people.

However, while the message is clear, some of the teachings in the book of Job are not always easy to understand. There are a couple of things that should be a warning to us as we sift through the pages of Job.

First, there is a danger of taking all of poetry literally. The Bible is the inspired word of God, and such as it is, God also catalogs the failures and thoughts of error possessed by some of His people. Job is no exception. Some of Job's reasoning at first is not to be applied to our life because Job is in error in some of his explanations. Furthermore, some of Job's friends are in error in their advice given to him. Therefore, especially in poetry where there is exaggeration (due to the nature of poetry), it is important to remember when attempting to make theological conclusions.

A second danger people run into is attempting to apply western, modern thinking to Job's ancient eastern thinking. These schools of thought are very different which makes this book particularly hard to understand if it is not approached with the correct mindset.

With this introduction, let's dig into the book a bit and see what we can find out about this man named Job.

How to Think About Job

If you don't need Job's message right now, just wait a while and be patient... because sooner or later, you will.

Job is the literal narrative of a man who struggled with the age-old question, "Why do bad things happen to people who love God?" Job can't understand why God allowed certain suffering in his life, and then didn't answer him when he prayed. Job wanted to know why he had to suffer in silence and in this book you find him wrestling with these kinds of issues. The style expressed to highlight and bolden this question is in a dramatic, poetic form of literature.

This is still a question that we hear today quite often. Because evil is seen or even experienced, the question is posed in a false dichotomy of thought that either God is all powerful, but He is not all loving because He allows evil into the world, or God is all loving but He is not all powerful because He doesn't stop the evil in the world.

However, Job explains that God is both, as we see his story unfold to the end. By the time Job gets an answer, he finds that God is all powerful and all loving and that it is by God's sovereignty over all things that point to our answers to all questions.

As for the breakdown of the book, Job can be easily be seen in three main divisions:

The Background (Chapters 1-3): In these chapters you are let in on a very rare and ancient conversation in the cosmos. This is the kind of conversation that scares you because of how high above us that it is, but one that you still want to listen to.

In this narrative portion, you are introduced to God and Satan speaking to each other about the condition of mankind and Satan mentions how corrupt we are. Suddenly, God causes Job's name to come up in conversation. Before you know it, Job becomes the test case for righteousness as God allows Satan to afflict Job.

Now, we have a supreme advantage over Job at this point. We are immediately made aware of this conversation, but Job has no idea that it exists. At this point, Job was just living life, completely unaware of what was taking place.

The Trouble (Chapters 4-41): This is where the poetry enters the literature and the extreme evil enters Job's life. Satan begins his assault on Job on every front, except where God had instructed Satan not to.

Also in this section, you're introduced to a few friends of Job. We'll speak more about them in a moment, but Job calls these friends, "miserable comforters" and it is extremely important that you pay attention to what is going on in these conversations.

Then, in the latter part of the book (chapters 38-41) God finally speaks up and tells Job to take a look around and look a little more closely at the power of God that was constantly surrounding him.

The Submission (Chapter 42): Job is finally brought to a place of repentance in his life, and also prays for the life of those friends who had made an accusation against him.

What to Look for in Job

You can spend years in the book of Job and not dig out the full meaning contained in this book. But in its most basic message, 'what to look for' becomes fairly obvious in reading this story because the important features that begin to take shape correspond with the three major sections of the book.

Job's Confusion: Once again, after the 'cosmic conversation' between God and Satan took place, and then action was taken by Satan against him, Job felt his world ripping apart as he began to lose his family (every member except his wife), his wealth, his prominence, and his health. In a short amount of time these disasters were levied against Job. He held on for a time, but eventually to his astonishment, not only was he experiencing loss, but also silence as he began to petition God for answers to all that was happening to him.

Obviously, this caused Job a tremendous amount of confusion as he sat suffering, and eventually wishing that he had never been born. The combination of tragedy and silence was nearly driving him insane and feeling like his suffering was unreasonable and was without purpose.

Job's Conversation: Aside from his wife telling Job just to 'curse God and die' we are introduced to a few more conversations. Starting in chapter 4, we're introduced to a few 'friends' Job had in his life that at first seemed to help, but eventually turned to gross error in their quest to help him.

What you are eventually reading in these conversations is how all of Job's friends are trying to find the 'secret sin' that Job committed in order to bring this kind of evil (because after all, evil only visits us because of sin— or so they think). And this is all while Job is in intense agony.

You'll notice the arguments appear in rounds during this section. One friend will speak up, and Job will answer, then another will speak, then Job will answer. And on and on this goes with these men.

Eliphaz— You meet this fellow in 4:1, and he represents the 'voice of experience.' If you have ever experienced something, this fellow can explain why. It has been said that he is a religious moralist. This man is always comfortable with having an answer and always says "I know..."

Bildad— By the time you get to 8:1, you learn about this man. Bildad is the 'voice of tradition.' He knows all of the wise things that have been said and is well versed in the art of moral legalism.

Zophar—Zophar is the friend that takes a 'dogmatic' approach and is always sure that this is how it is" in all that he answers. You first get to meet him in verse 11:1, and he represents the 'voice of assumption.' He assumes he is right and will not have it any other way.

Elihu— You will read quite a while before you get to this individual. You don't see Elihu until chapter 32, but when you do see him, you'll notice that while much of what he says is correct, he is still very suspicious of Job's situation and you can find hints of judgment all throughout his conversation. He is the 'voice of arrogance.' Evidently, this is a younger man and he along with the others are telling Job, "Why don't you just admit what you did wrong, repent, and get right with God."

God— At the end of the book, God finally gets involved in the conversation. Starting in chapter 38 all the way to chapter 42, the conversation involves just God and Job, and you'll immediately notice that it is God who does all the talking. In God's response to Job, you should also notice that every speech God gives to Job involves creation. God's majesty, might, and design in creation was all God gave Job in response to his questions, and not one time did God ever tell Job why He allowed all of the trouble in his life.

In Chapter 38 God told Job, "I am the One who created the universe..."

In Chapter 39 God told Job, "I am the One who controls the universe..."

In Chapters 40-41 God told Job, "I am the One who comprehends the universe..."

Job's Confession: By the time God is done with Job, all he had to say was, "Who is he that hideth counsel without knowledge? Therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not" (42:3). And then, "Wherefore, I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." (42:6)

Job told God, "I'm not worthy to answer..." and "I have sinned in my thinking and response to You, God..."

Then you have a great passage on Job being instructed to pray for His friends because of their error, and God blessing Job in a way that Job had never been blessed before.

What to Gain from Job

Just Because You Can't See God's Plan, Doesn't Mean God is Not Working— Once again, you and I know the conversation that took place outside of Job's presence between Satan and God, but Job had no idea. Neither did Job know of the glory God would get through this experience nor the countless number of people helped by this message. Job could not see anything. But there God was— working on Job and at the same time, God received every shred of glory as Satan was put to shame, Job increased in faith, and God's people praised His name!

Just Because You Can See Suffering, Doesn't Mean There is Sin Attached— Jesus said that "...rain falls on the just and the unjust" and to point our finger where there is no evidence to support such a claim or an attitude is sinful, misguided nonsense. In those moments, we need to give

encouragement when we can give it, but mostly just keep our mouths shut and mourn with a brother and sister who is hurting. Job's friends did a significant amount of unnecessary wounding all because they associated suffering with wrongdoing.

Just Because You Hear People Mention God, Doesn't Mean that They Speak for God— This is important to remember if you're ever in a place of suffering or spiritual confusion. People say all kinds of foolish things in an attempt to speak for God, and if we're not on guard, those kinds of voices can start diluting the truth and causing a serious amount of doubt. Oh, they may name God in their talk, but they do not speak for God. Make sure to know God's truth and find those who display real spiritual wisdom if you need additional advice.

Just Because You Don't Get an Answer, Doesn't Mean that God is not Enough— This is a truth that Job came to realize. Once again, Job never got an answer, but instead gained fuller revelation of the One who had all the answers. You see, it's okay not to know as long as you know that God knows.

What the last part of this book teaches us is that you can look at creation— you can look and see God's awesome display of power, precision, prominence, and permanence and know that if God can handle the vastness of the universe and all that it contains down to the tiniest molecule, then God can handle anything that happens in our life.

In fact, from this passage, we learn that it is God who orchestrates and controls all that enters our lives. He is the one who allows our lives to be afflicted and He is the One who sets the boundaries in that affliction.

23. THE SOUNDS OF THE HEART

PSALMS

If you are at church and sitting in the pew or the chair, chances are, directly in front of you, or in a rack below you, rests a Hymnal book of some kind with a collection of songs that the congregation has learned to know and love. Well that's what you have with the book of Psalms. The book of Psalms is the Hebrew song book, and is still in use by the Jewish people today for this purpose. So not only is the book of Psalms inspired Scripture, these Psalms were written to be physically and audibly sung by God's people.

The name 'Psalms' comes from the Greek word 'Psalmos' and means "A poem to be sung to a stringed instrument." In the Hebrew language there are two words that describe the book of Psalms and the first is "Tehillim" which means praise, and the second is "Tephiloth" which means prayer. So you get even a little more insight into the book of Psalms that tells us that these writings exist to help God's people praise God and pray to God. In other words the book of Psalms is a worship book.

And this worship book covers how to praise God in every situation that you face in life. This collection of Psalms that God has for us covers every conceivable human emotion and mood that you will experience. It covers anxiety, sin, failure, disappointment, victory, heart-ache, betrayal, joys, excitement, and pain. It's been said that the Psalms do for our emotions what other books of the Bible do for our intellect and will. It has also been said that the Psalms are like medicine for the soul.

The use of the Psalms can be found all throughout the Old Testament. Jonah used the Psalms when praying in the belly of the fish. However, you also see the use of Psalms all throughout the New Testament. If you remember, Jesus used the Psalms quite a bit during his ministry. On the cross, Jesus quoted Psalms on two occasions. The first was the cry to His Father, "My God my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" out of Psalm 22. The second was the prayer "Father into your hands I commend my spirit" (Psalm 31:5).

Further, the Psalms were still vital in the life and worship of the early church. In **Colossians 3:16** Paul tells us to "*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.*" In **James 5:13** we read, "*Is there any among you afflicted? Let him pray. Is any merry? Let him sing psalms.*"

We have incorporated Psalms in many songs that we sing to this day all apart from physically reading or listening to the preaching of this Bible Hymnal. The point is, the book of Psalms has always been a very special book for God's people, and will continue to be so.

How to Think About the Psalms

The book of Psalms is actually broken up into five groups of Psalms and because of this, Psalms has been known as the 'Pentateuch' of the poetical books. Further than this, it is also believed by some that each grouping of Psalms actually corresponds to the actual Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible). Whether or not this is the case, no one can say for sure, but it certainly makes for some interesting thought. For instance:

The Structure—

Psalm Group 1 (Psalms 1-41): This group is thought to complement the book of Genesis. The main themes in Genesis consist of creation, the fall of man, and God's mercy and redemption and this is what you see in Psalms 1-41. **Psalm 8** the question is raised, "*What is man that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him.*" **Psalm 19** is the famous 'creation' song "*The heaven declare the glory of God and the firmament sheweth his handywork.*"

Psalm Group 2 (Psalms 42-72): Here you find a correlation with the book of Exodus. If you remember, the book of Exodus literally means, "The Way Out" meaning that Israel was being led out of Egypt by God. Also in the book of Exodus you find the construction of the tabernacle.

Well in this group of Psalms you find that there is a lot of history being provided about these very instances. These Psalms speak about God's people crying out to God for help during affliction, God's ability to rescue His people, and the building of the temple. Psalm 42 starts with being dry and

thirsty, and Psalm 72 is a Psalm for Solomon and building the temple.

Psalm Group 3 (Psalms 73-89): Leviticus is thought to be the focus for this group of Psalms where God taught His people how to worship Him. In these Psalms it appears that the same thing is being accomplished. We see God's holiness put on display, the fact that His covenants are never broken, and therefore, He should be praised and worshipped at all times, especially in His house.

Psalm Group 4 (Psalms 90-106): In this section you find apparent ties to the book of Numbers. Once again, the theme that comes to surface is the fact that despite the sin of the people, God keeps His promises, and that He is their protector.

Psalm Group 5 (Psalms 107-150): The last portion consists of praise and blessing. If you remember, in Deuteronomy there was a second reciting of the law, an explanation of that law, and praise for who God is and what He had done. There is also reference to the return and 'new beginning' into the promised land after their time in bondage, much like the first beginning into the land in the pre-canaan experience in Deuteronomy.

The Psalmists—

Before you read an actual Psalm, in your Bible, there is usually a little bit of information provided there to help you by giving you the author of the Psalm and sometimes even why the Psalm was written. This is important information because knowing this will make the Psalm come to life you you can put an individual and an actual circumstance with it.

David: 73 Psalms are attributed to David, the second king of Israel. In these Psalms you get to follow this king around from valleys and caves, to battles and palaces— from walking to the temple with God's people to crying alone because of betrayal.

Asaph: 12 Psalms are written by this Choir director. David appointed Asaph as the worship leader of the temple and when you run across Psalms that bear his name, know that that particular song was most likely sung as worship by God's people in a professional setting.

Sons of Korah: The name of Korah was not necessarily celebrated early on by those who knew this name during the times of Moses. Korah attempted to start an uprising and force his way into leadership. However, God put a stop to this and took their lives. But what is interesting is that not all of them were consumed. Obviously there were some who, for one reason or another, refused to stand with the leader of their family and therefore survived the rebellion. This is what we find with these individuals. If you read their Psalms, they express a deep devotion and thankfulness to God and their desire to know Him more. 12 Psalms have bear the name of the Sons of Korah.

For instance, in Psalm 42:1 we read, "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so my soul after thee, God." or Psalm 84:1 "How amiable are thy tabernacles, O LORD of hosts!"

Heman: 1 Psalm was written by this fellow.

Ethan: 1 Psalm was written by Ethan.

Moses: 1 Psalm was written by the beloved Old Testament leader, Moses.

Anonymous: 50 Psalms do not have a name attached; although most of these are thought to be written by David.

What to Look for In Psalms

As you have probably noticed by now, the Psalms were not merely a mixture of random songs smushed together in no particular order. They all had a purpose. That said, there are several things to look for when you find yourself sifting through the Psalms.

Songs of Degrees In the Psalms: Now, there are different opinions about what the meaning of this term really means. Some think it means. There are fifteen "Songs of Degree" and some believe it has to do with a particular sun dial. Then there are some who believe that it has to do with fifteen steps leading up to the temple, and that well may be.

However, what is clear is that the word "degrees" has to do with ascension— an upward motion. And what is really interesting to think about is the fact that the temple was set on a mountain area whenever you traveled to this location, you always had to make an ascent to get to the temple. So many believe that the Songs of Degrees were designated stopping points where God's people would stop and sing a song. Then, they would go a little higher, stop and sing another song in this section. And they would do this all the way until they got to the temple.

Prophecy in the Psalms: There are several Psalms that point to the Messiah, that is, to who we now know to be our Lord, Jesus Christ. Psalm 16, 22, 23, 24, 40, 68, 69, and 118 are all Messianic Psalms. There are other places, but these in specific reference very precise detail about Christ. In fact, Psalm 22 is probable the best example. Hundreds of years before crucifixion was even invented you read words like, "For dogs have compassed me: The assembly of the wicked have inclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet. I may tell all my bones: they look and stare upon me. They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture" (verses 16-18).

Imprecatory Language in the Psalms: These are psalms written that express desire for God to deal harshly with the enemies of God. When reading the Psalms, you need to remember the discussion given regarding the exaggeration of poetry and the honesty presented from the human heart. Every word of the is inspired by God, but not every word reflects who God is. Sometimes what is recorded is poor human understanding and does not reflect the attitude of God.

Therefore, you might look at some of the Psalms and see something that seems hard to explain as far was what is expressed by the writer. Well you then need to understand that while they were being honest in their emotions in their heart, it does not necessarily reflect God's emotions or God's heart.

A good example of this can be found **Psalm 137:9** “Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones.” In context the children of Israel were in bondage by the Babylonians, and out of all the cruel overlords that had held them over their history, none compared to the domination of these people. They were unspeakably cruel to the people of God. And so what you are reading here are the real emotions of God’s people wanting to do real violence to the offspring of their captives.

Is this inspired Scripture? Yes. Did it reflect God’s will? No. It was a prayer for judgment against God’s enemies by God’s people. It was an honest record of how God’s people really felt at the time. What all have you wished upon your enemies? Did that reflect God’s heart or His will?

What to Gain from Psalms

If you use the Psalms correctly, they are an incredible wealth of blessing. You need to learn to make the Psalms a regular part of your Bible diet and they can really change your worship and outlook no matter what situation you face.

Learn the Pattern of the Psalms: If you are paying attention, you’ll find that most of the time, the psalms begin with a problem. They will talk about an enemy a position, an affliction, a confession, or a state of confusion, but then, after the problem is given, a declaration is made as the psalmist reminds himself of God’s promises and character. And once this declaration is made there is a phrase that will amount to this, “I don’t care what is happening in my life, I’m going to praise God anyway.”

Learning this pattern for your life is extremely important. Often times, our focus is far too narrow when things don’t go our way. The problem is all we see and therefore, all we express to God. What we learn in the pattern of the Psalms is that we need to praise no matter what and widen our scope a bit as we understand that God is in control of everything.

Learn the Purpose of the Psalms: Understanding that this collection of Scripture is a collection of songs is vital for us to understand. This means that these were sung over and over again. This truth was constantly repeated in the form of song for God’s people.

What that amounts to is you are a theme that begins to surface and that theme is this: Constant praise, through constant prayer. Most of the psalms are small and are written specifically for repetition. They were so God’s people could always carry around truth with everywhere they went.

They would encourage themselves with history, God’s faithfulness, and God’s mercy and grace no matter what emotion they were experiencing. No wonder the psalms are described as ‘medicine for the soul’.

In my estimation, if there is a book that you need to be consistently consuming, it should be the Psalms. You need to learn to consume often and think deeply about the psalms you too can learn the art of praise through prayer no matter what God allows into your life.

24. THE MIND OF GOD

PROVERBS

The name Proverbs comes from two words: ‘**Pro**’ meaning, ‘Instead of...’ and ‘**Verb**’ meaning, ‘a word’. If you put the two together you have a definition “Instead of words.” That’s what it means to read a proverb. It is an abbreviated saying, instead of using an abundance of words. If you were trying to write a proverb, you would write it in a way that was the most direct and understandable way that you could. A Proverb is direct and to the point. It was the “Twitter” of the ancient world!

The primary reason for this is fairly obvious. There were not hard drives, zip drives, external hard drives, or virtual drives to store and maintain God’s Word and important teachings as we have now. During this time, in large part, God’s people relied on their memory in order to keep God’s Word with them. That said, it is much easier to memorize a small truth that can be expounded upon, rather than large volumes of truth that are harder to recite.

Also, in introducing this work, it would serve us well to take note of the author before going any further. The author of this book, along with Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon, is believed to be none other than King Solomon himself, the third king of Israel. In several portions of Proverbs you will find Solomon’s name looming about that give evidence for this. If you remember the wealth of the wisdom continued in these works came directly from God Himself after God came to him in a dream and told him to ask for whatever he wanted. As we had previously discussed, Solomon asked for wisdom and this overjoyed God’s heart and God told Solomon that he would be unmatched for wisdom. In **1 Kings 4:29-32** we read, *“And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart, even as the sand that is on the sea shore. And Solomon’s wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all men...”* “... and his fame was in all nations round about. And he spake three thousand proverbs: and his songs were a thousand and five.”

It is believed that Solomon wrote the book of Proverbs while a middle-aged man trying to encapsulate important lessons that his sons would need to know once they were ruling after his reign had come to an end. You can see evidence of this by the continual use of “My Son...” written all throughout the book. For instance, in **chapter 1:8** we see, *“My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother:”*

However, it is important to pay attention to other names you will encounter as you make your journey through Proverbs. For example, in **Proverbs 25:1** we find, *“These are the proverbs of Solomon, which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied out.”* Evidently, there were other writings found that were added later to this work. And then, if you look at **Proverbs 31:1**, *“The words of king Lemuel, the prophecy that his mother taught him.”* You might look at that and think, “Well who in the world is Lemuel?” Well, many believe that it is another name for Solomon and that it was a tribute to his mother, Bathsheba, for a life of godliness after she turned back to God in repentance after her sin with king David.

Lastly, by way of introduction, it is incredibly important that we remember that the book of Proverbs is exactly that— Proverbs. And it is crucial not to make the mistake of confusing a ‘proverb’ with a ‘promise.’ If you try to make proverbs into a bunch of promises, you’ll grow crazy wondering what is happening and why certain ‘promises’ were not being realized in your life. Well, it’s because they are not promises, they are proverbs. Adrian Rogers said it best when he described a Proverb as, “A general principle that when generally applied will bring a general result.” A promise is a promise. A parable is a parable. A prophecy is a prophecy. And a proverb is a proverb.

How to Think About Proverbs

This is a little unfair for the reader. The book of Proverbs, being written like it is, is really not intended to be restricted to an outline. It doesn’t really cooperate with an outline format, and any chosen method to divide the book really has to be imposed. However, for the sake of what we are trying to accomplish, an attempt will be made to provide a clear way to navigate through this book.

The Prominence of Wisdom (Proverbs 1-9): In these chapters what you’re reading is Solomon making the case for wisdom. He is telling you how important it is and why you should seek for it and have it. Wisdom is God’s treasure chest of riches. You’ll find a call to salvation. You’ll find that you can actually have happiness by staying away from sin. You’ll find out that there is a correct way to think about the goal of your life. And then in chapter 8 you actually get to hear wisdom for yourself. You get to have a little sit-down talk with wisdom, and it’s almost like you asked wisdom, “Wisdom, tell me a little bit about yourself... why should I choose you over me?” And then Wisdom answers with things like, *“The Lord possessed me*

in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was. When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water" (8:22-4). And as you continue reading, you find that "Wisdom" specifically outlines why she is better than any other form of knowledge.

The Prudence of Wisdom (Proverbs 10-15): This section of chapters really focuses on comparisons. You see, what God's wisdom does is it helps you to clear up choices and paths that would otherwise be compromised. For example, in **Proverbs 10:32** we read, "*The lips of the righteous know what is acceptable: but the mouth of the wicked speaketh frowardness.*" Or **11:29-30**, "*He that troubleth his own house shall inherit the wind: and the fool shall be servant to the heart. The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; and he that winneth souls is wise.*"

Do you see how these proverbs give prudence in the kinds of situations and inward struggles that we all have trying to live this life? What this section allows you to do is peer inside yourself a little bit and make corrections to line yourself up with God's perspective instead of your own. Further, you will also be able to identify the kinds of individuals to stay away from as you walk through this life.

The Practicality of Wisdom (Chapters 16-31): These chapters really put feet to your learning. It places little doses of practical knowledge that you can begin using immediately. For instance, **Proverbs 18:13** says, "*He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him.*" Here we have some very practical instruction from God. Make sure that you don't just react when you hear something or see something, or are relayed information. You need to investigate first and find out as much as you can so that you can make the right decision. It sounds very obvious after hearing this verse, but it is something that many of us struggle with inside our lives.

What to Look for in Proverbs

Once again the book of Proverbs was made to be consumed in small doses and so to sift through these pages to find some pattern or thought that will unlock this book is not the intent. Most of the information contained in Proverbs really stands alone in a sense. However, if you are looking for a way to give a little more clarity to what is being consumed, you can look for the following:

Character Descriptions: What is meant by 'looking for character descriptions' is that if you are reading through the Proverbs, look for descriptions of the types of individuals. For example, the writer tells you about the character of the talebearer, the fool, the prating fool, the lazy, the joker, and the strange woman as individuals to be weary of and from whom to keep your distance. What the writer is doing is giving you a character portfolio for you to store in your mind so that you can identify who these people are and what they do.

You see the same thing with the just, the righteous, the wise, and the good. You can match these up with individuals in your life that will be beneficial to you. And then, you should use these character descriptions like a mirror of the soul for your own life.

It is also fun and profitable while reading through the Proverbs to match these character descriptions up with Biblical characters. Ask yourself, "Who could be described as foolish?" or, "What Bible character could be viewed as lazy?" This type of exercise will reinforce your learning and provide depth to your understanding.

Physical Descriptions: This means that you need to be looking for all the different kinds of pictures that God has for you in the Proverbs. There are several good examples of this. In **Proverbs 17:22**, for example says, "*A merry heart doth good like a medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones.*" That's a powerful picture. It is a physical description of what a person's personal emotions can do. Or what about this one: **Proverbs 15:25**, "*The LORD will destroy the house of the proud: but he will establish the border of the widow.*" Another powerful picture. You most likely know what a destroyed house looks like just from different construction sites you have passed, and you also know what a great and established fenced property looks like from perhaps passing a ranch as you were traveling down the road. Every time you see these things now, you can think of Scripture! And the Proverbs is replete with images just like this for you to be constantly reminded of God's ways.

Thematic Descriptions: This is where the power in the Proverbs exists. Throughout your reading of Proverbs you'll find reoccurring themes. You'll think to yourself, "I've read that before..." and you'll be right... you did. But a point is being driven home that you don't want to miss. Themes such as hard work, wisdom, the importance of sexual purity, finance, honesty, finding good counsel, and many others are continually repeated all throughout the book of Proverbs. Don't let this weary you; learn from it. Remember: There is a reason God repeats Himself.

What to Gain from Proverbs

Perfecting Your Life: If you look at **Proverbs 4:18**, you'll read these words, "*The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.*" These words give a great synopsis to the book of Proverbs. The fact that you don't have to live your day from moment to moment and from day to day without any real goal except for an ultimate end to draw your last breath is a glorious truth! No, your life is like a juggernaut of glory provided by God that is supposed to grow continually brighter and brighter, moving to that ultimate glorious end when Christ returns and brings all unto His subjugation!

Well to that end, you have the book of Proverbs showing you how to practically live God's way to do exactly that.

Arguably there is more than one division to speak of in learning what to gain from this book, but its ultimate purpose rests right here. The intended purpose of this book is for you to know the mind of God and by knowing this, you'll also know how to continue growing in this Christian life.

25. UNDER THE SUN

ECCLESIASTES

Now this is an interesting book. The book of Ecclesiastes is the only book of philosophy in the Bible. Throughout history and to our present, this book has been and continues to be, the intrigue of many thinkers and philosophers from all over as they attempt to understand this message.

The naming of the book of Ecclesiastes takes a Latin root word 'Ecclesia' which means, "To call out." This is the actual definition of what it means to be a New Testament Church. If you attend a local New Testament congregation, you are "called out" to that location; you are part of that church. Well, since "ecclesia" means church, then we deal with the last part of the word "stes." This ending of the word changes the meaning a bit and it can be literally translated to, "One who speaks before an assembly."

Now, the Hebrew name is different. The name of this book in the Hebrew language is the word "Koheleth" and it is a word taken from Chapter 1 of verse 1, "The words of the "Preacher..." That's the word Koheleth— The Preacher.

As previously discussed, it is believed that Solomon was the author of this book, and we find that also in verse 1 of chapter 1 when the Bible says, "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king of Jerusalem." That's Solomon. And it is believed that Solomon wrote this book when he was an old man and reflecting on the waste of his life.

What Solomon is doing here is he is delivering a sermon to the people. The preacher, Jerry Vines, says that it was almost as if Solomon had been dabbling in the old songbooks his father had written and came across Psalm 39. Then while reading there he came across these words in verses 4-5, "LORD, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know how frail I am. Behold, thou hast made my days as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before thee: verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity. Selah." And then, he made it to verse 11 of this same Psalm, "When thou with rebukes dost correct man for iniquity, thou makes his beauty to consume away like a moth: surely every man is vanity."

Then, Solomon reading this said, "That's my life! I've got to keep people away from making the same mistake I have. I know, I'll write a sermon and deliver it to the people."

And as you read this, you are reading the cries of a man that takes you to the glories of his wisdom, to the folly of its abuse. So let's see what the Preacher has to say.

How to Think About Ecclesiastes

The Introduction (Ecclesiastes 1:1-11): The overall purpose, to state it another way, is to get people to move away from life in the world. Solomon is seriously crying out for us to listen to him when it comes to the way we live our lives. Solomon said that he had literally tried everything there is to do apart from God, and by the end of his life, he had nothing to show for it and now would soon stand before God.

Just like any good preacher would write a sermon, Solomon's sermon is broken up into three main points. That is said in a little bit of jest, but there is truth in that statement. You see, in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 1, you see Solomon picking his text, starting in verse 3 and moving into verse 11, Solomon launches into his subject, and then, by the time you reach verse 12, Solomon starts making his main points for his sermon.

The Search is On (Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26): In this section, Solomon begins to describe his search for meaning in life apart from God. It is important to remember that at this point in history, Solomon's wealth was beyond compare, and he had made up his mind that he would conduct a series of tests, or experiments, in order to see if the wisdom of man would ever amount to anything. What is interesting is that he knew what God said. He knew full well God's law, His standards, and His ways. Solomon knew what God required and what God had said about living life apart from Him. But it was as if Solomon told God, "I know what you said, but I want to actually experience all of this for myself."

So the whole of this part of the sermon is Solomon trying out a "party life", a life centered around building great structures and wealth, a life of learning, and then a life of madness and folly. He tried everything.

The Scenes of Life (Ecclesiastes 3-6:12): Solomon begins to recall all of the different kinds of change that inevitably happen in life. If it has a start

date, you should just as well have an end date that goes along with it as well. Solomon says at the beginning of chapter 3, “To everything there is a season...” The present continually passes. This section is written to cause us to really look deeper than the surface of life.

As Solomon looks around he tells us that everywhere he has ever looked, he has found the world full of people who just do not get life. He says in chapter 4 that he looked at the injustice found in the business world. In chapter 5 Solomon looked at those religious people who were just trying to live a good life. In chapter 6 Solomon once again starts talking about those who work for riches. And on every single occasion, because in all of these things, the end was not considered. The fact that in every instance people were just going about their lives toiling and not giving serious thought to the fact that one day, all of this would change; the season of this life would be over, and says, “It is all meaningless in the end.”

The Somber Explanation (Ecclesiastes 7-10): In this third point of the sermon, Solomon appears to get very serious and sad. With every passing day he is realizing that as he gets older, the more real the reality of his death is becoming. Everywhere he looks, he still finds that “nothing” is the ultimate end. There is just busyness but no substance; people trying to live a virtuous life, but with no gain.

The Conclusion (Ecclesiastes 11-12): In chapter 11 the sky still looks cloudy. If you can imagine the audience listening to all of this, Solomon literally covers every portion of life and virtually every pursuit in it. We can see these people with tears filling their eyes, using their garments to wipe their noses, occasionally making short whelping sounds as they realize “That’s me! He’s talking to me! God is talking to me! What do I do about this? How do I fix it?”

Then, as chapter 12 opens, we find one solid and overarching theme: “Once you find God, don’t stop in your pursuit of Him.”

What to Look for in Ecclesiastes

The outline given in this chapter is very simplified, but remember when you are reading this book, it is very challenging even for the most knowledgeable. Further, just as we have spoken about before regarding the erroneous thoughts of God’s people contained in Scripture. Well, Solomon is a perfect example of this. Some of the thoughts he has are not of God but are accurately recorded in Scripture, and so when you read Ecclesiastes, some of what Solomon says makes you turn your head a little bit and think, “That doesn’t sound right.” And that’s because some of it isn’t. However, there are a few areas you should look at a little more closely to help you understand the book a little better.

Key Words— This is of vital importance. This book being a sermon, it should be understood as such. And in a sermon, a singular thought is made known, and there are keywords to drive the point home. That said, this is primarily what you need to be looking at when taking in the meaning of the book.

Man: You will find this word mentioned 47 times during your reading of Ecclesiastes. This is a reference to the life lived in the normal, everyday courses of mankind. When you go to an event, how do people normally act? In a court of law, what do you see among the people there? When you go to the market, what do you observe about those around you? That’s where Solomon is drawing your attention with this word “man”.

Labor: The word labor occurs 46 times during Solomon’s Sermon. This word usually has reference to a type of toil, or work for material gain. However, this word can also mean a type of “trouble” or “sorrow” experienced. And in the context of this book, an individual is solely working for some sort of gain from a human perspective, that is exactly what it becomes. But this word is used as a type of good that can happen when we are working, or laboring, for God.

Vanity: You’ll see this word 37 times. Clarence Sexton says that vanity is the substance left after you pop a soap bubble. The Biblically definition has to do with a “vapor” or a “breath” taken on a cool day. This is a very prominent word in the book and has to do with the end results of every life pursuit of this world.

Under the Sun: This phrase occurs 30 times and it is really the key to the book. The reason there are courses of man, the reason there is ungodly labor, the reason every life pursuit of the world ultimately ends in vanity is that it is a life lived “under the sun.” That is to say, God has a plan for man, and a way to live, but anything less than that becomes a life lived “under the sun” meaning that it is a life lived apart from God.

What to Gain from Ecclesiastes

The Lost Would be Saved: This sermon was written so that a lost person would not have to go through life and live exactly like Solomon did just to find out exactly what Solomon found out. This is an evangelistic book. Its message is that there is nothing in this life that can satisfy the deepest needs of the heart except for God.

The Saved Would Wake Up: For some reason, God’s people hear God, they see the poor examples of others, they know the ultimate outcome of the world but still think, “I believe I would still like to try living apart from God.” Well, for the believer, the book of Ecclesiastes says, “Think again.” Solomon says, “I tried and it seriously cannot be done.” Instead, he says that you have a duty as a follower of Christ... and that is this, “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

26. A PLAY ON LOVE

SONG OF SOLOMON

This is probably a book you have heard of, but have never learned about. The Song of Solomon is probably one of the more neglected books in the Bible in both the preaching world and in the realm of personal Bible study. There are probably a few reasons for this: First, it is hard to understand. There is so much poetic language and the book moves so fast without hard clarification that it is just hard for the mind to process. The confusion even carries over into the understanding of Theologians. For instance, there are several schools of thought regarding the interpretation of this book. Let's look at the main Views:

The Allegorical Method of Interpretation (Old Testament Emphasis): This view holds that the whole of this book is a dedicated allegory of God's love for His people Israel, and His peoples' love for their God. Now, this is a beautiful picture to be sure, but there is a little bit of a problem. The children of Israel have had a very long history of being an unfaithful spouse to God. This allegory would be untrue.

The Allegorical Method of Interpretation (New Testament Emphasis): This view holds that the entire book is an allegory picturing Christ and His Church. Once again, a beautiful picture, but we run into a problem. The picture of Christ and His church was a mystery not revealed until the New Testament. God gave fragments of pictures in the Old Testament, but never the full picture. The full plan of redemption was a secret until the appointed time.

The Literal Method of Interpretation (Solomon Emphasis): This view holds that the Song of Solomon is a love story about king Solomon attempting to steal away a "shepherd lover." In other words, the view holds that this book becomes a "How To" manual about stealing the wife of someone else.

The Literal Method of Interpretation (Marriage Emphasis): Here we have a view that the whole of this book is given to the ebb and flow of the marital relationship, including the sexual aspects of that relationship for God's people. At the same time, it is also believed that as well that this book is a picture of the love that grows hotter and colder from God's people toward Him.

This last view is the one that I personally hold to because I think it makes the most sense.

A second reason this book is avoided is because it is a little embarrassing to talk about. As stated before, because this book involves marital relations, it also the sexual nature of that relationship. But we need to understand that what is described here is the spiritual nature of that sexual gift God has given and that is absolutely not anything to be ashamed of in regard to that context.

Now, what the world has done in dismantling the spiritual nature of sex and reducing it down to a base animal instinct, that is something to be ashamed of in the context of sex. This opinion that sex cannot be helped, it must be given into at all costs and we should just accept that as fact is every reason to be ashamed of this topic.

All sex is a choice. And we should choose God's way. That the spiritual covenant relationship between a man and a woman in the confines of marriage is the only place sex should exist.

The Song of Solomon, at its most fundamental level, is a Marital Help Book that will guide you through relationship ups and downs, how a man should approach his wife, and how a wife should approach her husband.

How to Think About Song of Solomon

It is believed that king Solomon wrote this book when he was a young king and in love. And what you will see is the entire process of Genesis 2:26 come to life as this man and this woman are joined together, cleave together, and become one flesh together. This book comes at the end of the poetical books. The previous four have to do with the deep needs and desires of the soul, and this last book describes the deep need and desires of the physical, love and intimacy. What we are doing when we are reading the Song of Solomon is we are following a storyline of a couple, but entrenched below the surface is a great deal of symbolism to sift through as well.

Understand also, that this book is written like a musical play. In this story there are obviously points of drama in this plot and different characters you read of, namely that of the man and woman who find each other.

As we have seen, Solomon had written over a thousand songs because of the wisdom that God had given him, but this was his greatest hit. This is the one that topped the charts. Let's find out why.

I Think I Love You (Song of Solomon 1:2-3:5): This is the beginning stages of the relationship. It's actually a bit of fun reading for those that are married and can look back and see the same kinds of similarities on how their relationship came together.

The main woman of the story had just moved into Jerusalem after her family was able to gain a piece of land there. Some have called this young lady, the "Shulamite Woman" in the story, a Cinderella of sorts. Though she was very beautiful, she was sent outside daily to work the fields and keep the flocks.

She continues on watching all of the pomp and fanfare of the palace, wishing somehow she could be a part of that life, but quietly willing to work where she is.

However, one day, she finds a young, good looking man just staring at her. He appears to her to be a young shepherd. From here a tug and pull relationship begins to take place and they grow more fond of one another as the shepherd pursues this beautiful woman.

Then, the decision is made, they love each other.

Let's Get Married (Song of Solomon 3:6-5:1): As the story progresses, there is a large bit of commotion in the area because the king will be visiting. The woman is a little excited but she really is just love smitten and continues to tell her friends about this boy she loves. However, all of the sudden, she realizes that she has been called for by the king.

The Surprise Wedding (3:6-11)—Once the king arrives, she notices something strangely familiar about him! He is the shepherd whom she loves! He takes her to the palace and they will be married and joined together for life.

The Wedding Night (4:1-5:1a)— Here there is a long discourse of the pleasure experienced that very night.

The Honor of Intimacy (5:1b)— The end of this verse details the honor and fullness of satisfaction gained by this intimate union.

Note: If this sounds a little out there for you, remember that in Ecclesiastes Solomon, by his own report, stated that he would go out in disguise to see what the world was like around him. Apparently, that is how he found this young lady.

Let's Get Through This (Song of Solomon 5:2-8:14): They were married now, the king and his bride experienced very good times together as they enjoyed each other. But wouldn't you know... marriage is difficult sometimes.

The Spat (5:2-6:3)— In this section there was a dream that the young bride had about her husband leaving her. She moves through a suspicious discourse toward her husband. The husband obviously does not like this and he begins to question the commitment of his wife. Eventually he then reassures her of his love for her and tells her that he would never leave.

The Rekindling (6:4-8:4)—They then together work through their relationship problem and bear their soul to one another.

The Growth (8:5-14)— The wife asks her husband to take a trip back to her home country with her. The husband agrees, and on this trip they grow in a deeper relationship with each other.

What to Look for in Song of Solomon

Love Metaphors— I am quite sure that you would never want to use any of these compliments made by either the bride or the groom of this story. For instance you will find compliments paid such as:

- 1) "How beautiful are thy feet with shoes, O prince's daughter!"
- 2) "Thy neck is as a tower of ivory;"
- 3) "Thin eyes like the fish pools in Heshbon..."

But the point is, especially from the husband to the wife, compliments of honesty are flying left and right all throughout this book. It's advice from God that says, "If you feel it, speak it, don't just assume the other person knows it."

Characters— Since this is written as a historical musical, there are obviously several characters involved, and if you do not know who is talking, you will have a hard time understanding what is happening in this book.

King Solomon: Known in the story as the Shepherd, he is called by his bride "My Beloved".

Shulamite Woman: She eventually becomes Solomon's bride and she always is referred to by Solomon as "My Love".

Daughters of Jerusalem: These are unidentified virgin women who encouraged the Shulamite woman. It was these women she was speaking with when she wanted to do a little "guy talk."

Solomon's Friends: You find these fellows in chapter 3 as you witness a brief outside perspective of what is happening

The Shulamite's Brothers: Here again for an outward perspective, you see these individuals in chapter 8.

What to Gain from Song of Solomon

The High Place of Marriage: If it was not already obvious before, God holds marriage in very high esteem. There are some things that we have questions about in certain portions of the Bible, but what is amazing is that the things that God really wanted us to know— the things that really expand our quality of life and help us to understand those things that are essential to our faith— God gave us direct revelation so there would be no confusion. Marriage is one of those subjects God has given us great detail about. However, many get into marriage and just make it up as they move

along through life. This book tells us that we should hold a higher place for marriage than this. God honors it, and so should we. And the way we honor it is by conducting ourselves in marriage the way he designed it so that we can gain the greatest blessing and satisfaction that we can from it.

The High Calling of Marriage: In just a brief read, here we have a book from God that shows exactly what a Biblical marriage should look like. There are so many fine points of interest in this book that it is incredible. For instance, you only see dialog with other persons when there is a struggle in the marriage. You see this couple working out their problems, being completely honest with each other between themselves. They don't bring anyone else into the fray; it's just between the couple. However, when there is praise, they make it known.

You'll follow this kind of honor throughout all the book. You'll notice that they become old together, but the husband still comments on the beauty of his love. That's the high calling of marriage... a marriage that stays vibrant all the way to the end.

The High Example of Marriage: Once again, though you read of the husband and wife of the story, this book is also an expression of God's love for us. The marital relationship is made to reflect God's unity in the Trinity and is ultimately a picture of the Gospel.

27. TOMORROW IS SPOKEN FOR

AN INTRODUCTION TO OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY

What an accomplishment! We've moved through the Historical Books, then through the Poetical Books, and now we have made it to the Prophetical Books. In this chapter, we will grapple with the Book of Isaiah, but for the moment, we need to deal with what it meant to be an Old Testament Prophet.

To be an Old Testament prophet meant that you were selected by God to preach His Word before the people. That is actually what the word "prophet" means— it means "One who speaks in place of another." That's what we see when we read the New Testament texts such as **2 Peter 1:21** "For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." Or **Hebrews 1:1** "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets..." God used these men to speak God's Word to God's people.

This is quite a different picture than many people have in their minds when they hear this word. Many only think of an individual who tells the future. And while that is included in part of their task at times, their primary function was to speak on behalf of God. That said, their job was both forth-telling (explaining God's will and ways to the people) and foretelling (explaining the future to the people).

This is actually the distinguishing characteristic of the office of Priest and the office of Prophet. In the office of the Priest, it was his job to bring the people before God. In the office of Prophet, it was His job to bring God before the people. It is this fact that usually caused those who served in this capacity to be wildly unpopular. The people were fine coming to God on their own terms and being brought before Him, but what they did not like was to be told that they were wrong.

As for the origin of this office, we touched on this fact briefly that it began with the prophet Samuel and then rapidly increased as he instituted a "School of the Prophets" as it were, whose job it was to train up and send out those men who would speak to God's people. (1 Samuel 19)

Now, obviously not all of these individuals were those who gave writings to God's people. For example, we know that Elijah was a prophet but we don't see the "Book of Elijah" and so forth. This then causes us to categorize these prophets as the "Writing Prophets" and the "Verbal Prophets" when we are attempting to discuss the prophetical books.

Another distinction to be considered in this regard is the classification of the Prophetical Books. These books are commonly identified as the Major and the Minor Prophets. We briefly went through this in the introductory material in this work, but just to clarify once again, this was not to say that one group of prophets was more important than the other. This is simply a reference to the length of the books. The Books of Isaiah through Daniel are commonly referred to as the Major Prophets, and the books Hosea through Malachi are known as the minor prophets.

Further, it is also important to note the order in which these books are placed. The Major Prophetical Books are those that were written to God's people before going into exile (Pre-Exilic Books), and the Minor Prophetical Books are those written after God's people experienced exile (Post-Exilic Books).

Lastly, by way of introduction we need to talk about the significance of prophecy. When God's prophets were inspired of Him to write the future, understand that this is what gives the greatest and best evidence for the validity and veracity of the Bible.

John MacArthur, in his book, "Why Believe The Bible?" cites an individual by the name of "Peter W. Stoner" and this is what he wrote:

Peter W. Stoner, a scientist and mathematician, utilized what he called "the principle of probability." This principle holds that if the chance of one thing happening is one in M and the chance of another thing happening is one in N, the chance that they both shall happen is one in M x N. This equation is used in fixing insurance rates. Stoner asked 600 of his students to apply the principle of probability to the biblical prophecy of the destruction of Tyre (see Ezek. 26:3-16), which claims seven definite events:

1. Nebuchadnezzar would take the city.

2. Other nations would help fulfill the prophecy.
3. Tyre would be flattened like the top of a rock.
4. The city would become a place where fishermen spread their nets.
5. Tyre's stones and timbers would be laid in the sea.
6. Other cities would have great fear because of Tyre's fall.
7. The old city of Tyre would never be rebuilt.

Using the principle of probability in a conservative manner, the students estimated the chances of all seven events occurring as described at one in 400 million, yet all seven did occur. Stoner's students did a similar study on the prophecy that predicted the fall of Babylon (see Isa. 13:19). They estimated the chances of the Babylon prophecies occurring at one in 100 billion, but everything stated did come to pass."

And there are literally hundreds of other prophecies just like these mentioned that are fulfilled to complete perfection. Much of the future written from these prophets of Old was the writing of the Messiah. What is even more incredible to think about is the fact that some of these prophets had no idea what they were even writing. This is what adds so greatly to our assurance of Jesus' second coming; because of all of the fulfilled prophecies that revealed themselves to be true and accurate for His first coming.

ISAIAH

Now, since we've covered in large part the purpose of the prophets, let's get into the history and message of Isaiah.

Isaiah was a prophet, and very bold, who served God during the 8th century B.C. (written around 700 to 681 B.C.) and was a diplomat of sorts. He was a highly educated statesman and came from a very prominent Jewish family which explains his ease in entering into certain circles of the Higher Jewish aristocratic atmospheres. He even displayed ease in entering into the courts of the kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah under whom he served during his ministry.

The name of Isaiah means the Salvation of Jehovah. God used this man to speak to God's people regarding the impending judgment on God's people, but by the end of Isaiah's ministry a new message was heralded—the message of how God would in fact save His people.

Another interesting fact about the book of Isaiah is that the prophecies were so specific, and the writing style so dramatic in terms of its presentation in different portions of the book, that in the past this work has been called the "Deutero" book. In other words, those attempting to critically analyze the book found certain portions so drastic that they said the only way to reconcile this was to attribute the authorship of this book to two different authors. It has been said that Isaiah wrote the first half of the book and an unknown author wrote the second half.

Now, this has been very much discredited in more recent times, however, this information is given simply to illustrate once again the veracity of God's Word and the lengths critics go to in order to discredit the Bible from being anything other than a supernatural work.

How to Think About Isaiah

As was mentioned previously, the book of Isaiah can easily be broken up into two different sections.

The Cry of Condemnation (Chapters 1-35): This section consists of the first 39 chapters and tells us why Isaiah began to be hated. The people, especially those in power, began to hold an extreme dislike for Isaiah and the message he carried. This is why:

The Cry Against Judah (Chapters 1-12)— In this section Isaiah talks about "The Day of the LORD" which was a term of the wrath that God would eventually pour out on His people. Then, Isaiah begins this explanation of why God would cause judgment upon his people with the parable of the Vineyard that produced wild grapes even though only the best provisions were made for their growth. And lastly, in this section Isaiah explains his commission as a prophet and gives the specific prophecies regarding the downfall of the kingdom.

The Cry Against the Nations (Chapters 13-23): Here we see that the enemies of Israel are spoken against. The nations of Babylon, Assyria, Philistine, Moab, Damascus, Samaria, Ethiopia, Egypt, Edom, Arabia, Tyre are directly warned in this section. Further, Jerusalem is specifically mentioned and warned along with these other nations, and yet another reference to the "Day of the LORD" is given here as well.

The Cry Against the World (Chapters 24-35): It is in these chapters you find several "woe" oracles against the nations of the world. A "woe" oracle is that phrase that always indicates death. And for this phrase to be repeated to the nations of the world is an indication that death would be upon them.

History Break (Chapters 36-39): After the above prophecies, there is a brief interlude that occurs which details King Hezekiah having to deal with the Assyrian army. Here you learn about this godly king, but also his foolish mistakes in dealing with this threat. Eventually you read of the Assyrian army being decimated by God and at this point in history, God preserving His people.

The Coming of Consolation (Chapters 40-66): The entire tone of Isaiah's message begins to change right here. Just as previously discussed, this section is why some have tried to push the idea that there was a second author. However, as with all polarized subjects, the tone of a message is certainly going to be drastically different when the content and subject matter are drastically different. Such is the case here when first speaking about judgment, and then moving to the subject of salvation.

The Plan of God (Chapters 40-48): Here we have a detail that God will ultimately deliver His people after their captivity and inside of this explanation, we begin to see a revelation regarding God's Servant, who will bring about an ultimate restoration.

The Provision of God (Chapters 49-57): God then explains a little bit more to Isaiah about this One whom God would send to bring about salvation. Here we read of the very purpose and job task of the Messiah when He came.

The Preeminence of God (Chapters 58-66): These chapters all have to do with the glory of God and how God would ultimately restore Israel.

What to Look for in Isaiah

The book of Isaiah has been called the Grand Canyon of the Bible, a miniature Bible, and the greatest of all the prophetic writings. Out of all of the Old Testament references and quotes found in the New Testament, the book of Isaiah is referred to the most. That said, this fact actually leads us to what we should be looking for in this book. True enough, there are phrases and words that will begin to surface. However, what you really should notice is the continual push towards the Messiah, which then leads us directly to the New Testament. Here are a few.

New Testament References—

The Virgin Birth: In Isaiah 7 you can read a detailed account of the virgin birth and exactly how the Anointed One would be brought into the world.

Cries from the Wilderness: If you remember a situation in the New Testament that sounds similar to this, “The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Isaiah 40:3). That was exactly the job of John the Baptist. He was the one crying out in the wilderness to point out the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Unfinished Business: In Luke 4:17-20 we find an interesting situation. It was custom for Rabbis to be invited to speak at the different Synagogues when they were in town, and as Jesus was back in His hometown, evidently He was invited to speak. Once He was delivered a text, Jesus read these words, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath appointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.”

Those words are taken directly out of Isaiah 61 and Jesus stopped mid-sentence in verse 2. Why? Because the first part of what was preached had to do with his first coming— and this had been fulfilled. The second part of the verse had to do with His second coming.

Specifics of the Crucifixion: In Isaiah 52 and 53 you find a very detailed account of Jesus’ death and suffering and why it was necessary.

Salvation of the Savior: Further, in the above chapters we find that God is sending Christ to save us all from condemnation.

What to Gain from Isaiah

Remarkable Preaching: To restate what has been mentioned, Isaiah was a particularly bold preacher. If God wanted Isaiah to speak it, there was no running, there was no hesitation, there was only action.

Actually, tradition holds that Isaiah was actually one who died for his faith. It is said that his death was sentenced by the order of an evil king by the name of Manasseh and that Isaiah, knowing of this order, attempted to hide in the hollow of a tree. However, the story continues that the king’s men discovered this location and cut the tree down with Isaiah still inside. Some scholars believe that when Hebrews 11:37 speaks about some of God’s people being “sawn asunder” it was this situation to which the author was referring.

Whether or not this is the case, it is certainly a fact that Isaiah never hid from his calling.

This is the high calling of all of God’s people. To be bold in our faith no matter the political atmosphere.

Remarkable Predictions: The mention of every prediction contained in the book of Isaiah is beyond the scope of this work, but if you dig in a little deeper, you will find rich and full prophecies throughout this book. Once again, this provides hope and assurance as we look forward to the return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Remarkable Presentation: It is intensely amazing when we compare Jesus’ life and death with the explanation found in Isaiah. There is more written on the crucifixion here than in the actual Gospel Records. It is here where you find that Jesus will be virgin-born. It is here where you find His mission as the Suffering Servant. It is here where you find His rule as the Conquering King. And it is here where you find our response to the hope of the Messiah, “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool” (Isaiah 1:18).

28. THE WEEPING PROPHET

JEREMIAH AND LAMINATIONS

As stated in the title, God's man Jeremiah has often been called the "Weeping Prophet" or the "Prophet of Midnight." The reason is because his message was one of extreme heartache. The job that God gave him was one that none of us would want, and in fact, Jeremiah didn't want it.

Jeremiah wrote his book in the 7th century, about 80 to 100 years after the book of Isaiah. What was terrible about what he had to do was that all of the predictions made by both he and Isaiah before him regarding all of the judgment God would bring about on His people, Jeremiah actually witnessed happen. Can you imagine predicting that your own countrymen would be brought down to their knees militarily and then watch that actual event take place?

Not only this, but God had told Jeremiah that while he preached, that no one would listen to him. Jeremiah prophesied for 40 years and to end off his ministry it is held that Jeremiah was stoned to death.

We learn also that Jeremiah was the son of a priest and that God called him to preach while he was relatively young in age. In Jeremiah 1 we find an account where God commissions this man and once this happens, Jeremiah answered God back in verse 6, "Then said I, Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child." but we all know who won that little discussion.

We know also that Jeremiah was commissioned to preach to the kingdom Judah. If you remember, the northern kingdom (Israel) had already fallen, and now it was Judah's turn.

While watching all of these events unfold, Jeremiah was captured by Nebuchadnezzar during the initial siege, eventually released, and then taken away from his home once again and brought to Egypt.

From the time Jeremiah was very young, to the time of his death, we find that he had a life that would match the message he was called to preach.

Now let's take a closer look at this prophetic writing, and the corresponding book following it— Lamentation.

How to Think About Jeremiah

Because this book is so focused on the death cry of Judah and surrounding nations, the way to break up this book is extremely easy to do.

The Commission of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1): This is where you learn a great deal of personal information about this prophet. As discussed in our introduction, this is where we discover information about Jeremiah's father being a priest, that he was young when he was called, and that he would be used as an instrument of God to announce God's judgment on God's people as well as other nations. God also tells Jeremiah to be bold as he spoke because there was not a force on the planet that would be able to stop him.

The Condemnation of Judah (Jeremiah 2-45): Here you have an extremely long pronouncement of judgment. You find Jeremiah's first sermon given, along with several other major headings— for instance, you'll find conflicts that Jeremiah has with leaders of the nation and false prophets, a specific telling of the fate of Israel, Judah, and Jerusalem, and a reiteration of the eminency of the fall of Jerusalem.

The Coming Judgment Against the Gentiles (46-51): In this section you will read of prophecies against the nations of Egypt, Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Edom, Damascus, Kedar, Hazor, Elam, and Babylon.

The Collapse of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 52): It is here where you read of God's judgment finally being poured out on his people. In this chapter Jerusalem is captured and destroyed, and all of the people are taken captive and led away to Babylon.

What to Look for in Jeremiah

An interesting feature to this work is that Jeremiah was obviously a very compelling preacher. He wasn't successful, but there was no doubt that he was understood. If you remember, Isaiah was the intellectual preacher. Well, in this book we learn that Jeremiah was the animated preacher. God used Jeremiah to speak vividly and graphically to His people.

Illustrations—

The Broken Cisterns: In Jeremiah 2:13 Jeremiah says, “For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.” Here Jeremiah uses an image that was essential for doing business. You would not get through the day in this culture without either using a cistern or seeing one used. If you wanted to carry wine, many times you would use a cistern. If you wanted to transport water from the well, you would use a cistern. A cistern is a pot or a vase that can hold a liquid. And Jeremiah uses this imagery to tell the people that they were using a broken pot to try and hold God’s living water. What do you think they would think about every time they had a cistern in their hand, or looked at one in their house?

The Harvest is Past: Here is another term these people would be very familiar with, found in Jeremiah 8:20, “The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.” If you didn’t have your crops at the right time, there was absolutely nothing that could be done as far as having food is concerned. What this illustration suggests is that the time for repentance is now officially over.

The Marred Girdle: Sometimes God had Jeremiah use visual pictures. In this case, God had Jeremiah take a “linen girdle”, put it on, and then take it to the Euphrates and hide it in the dirt. Then, after a long time, God told Jeremiah, “Hey Jeremiah, do you remember that old belt I had you hide in the dirt? I want you to get it.” And so Jeremiah does just that and he notices that it was gross and stained, and absolutely good for nothing. Then, God told Jeremiah, “Thus saith the LORD, after this manner will I mar the pride of Judah, and the great pride of Jerusalem” (13:9).

Yokes and Bonds: In chapter 27 God told Jeremiah to make bonds and yokes and put them on his neck. Then he had Jeremiah show them to different kings and tell them that he had given their kingdoms into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar.

Predictions—

The test for one of God’s prophets was not that His man be mostly right, but absolutely right. Otherwise, under penalty of law, death was to be carried out on that individual who claimed to speak for God but whose prediction was not 100% accurate. That said, Jeremiah made some stunning predictions. We will not take time to mention them all, but as you are reading, have this in mind when Jeremiah is speaking for God.

For example, in 25:11 we read, “And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.” Or 31:31 “Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah.”

What to Gain from Jeremiah

The book of Jeremiah is a dark tapestry of despair. You’ll find the same is true in just a moment with a brief synopsis of Lamentation. These are really not the books you want to turn to to find a story of hope or encouragement. These are books to reverently look upon and heed the warnings of a people who could not be persuaded to follow God. However, as with every book that we have covered and every book we will yet cover, there are certainly teachings in this book that are worthy of our attention.

God Has A Success Formula for His Servants: Jeremiah’s story looked like a loss on every front. He never married, he was rejected by the government and the people, he ended up under Babylonian rule, and he was thought to be a traitor. But during the time of Jesus, and as we see him now, we find a servant who was absolutely dedicated to the end. This tells us something very important: Don’t look to success for a confirmation of God’s mercy and blessing; look for faithfulness and integrity to God’s Word instead.

If you think about it, Jeremiah’s story actually has striking similarities to Jesus’ story. If you remember, Jesus’ ministry looked like it was going to be a failure. He never married, was rejected by the government and ultimately the people, He lived under Roman rule and died under the same. In fact, when Jesus asked His apostles “Whom do men say I the Son of Man am?” One of the answers given was the prophet Jeremiah (Matthew 16:13-14). There was a reason for that. God has a formula for success for His servants, but it never works the way the world works.

God Has a Success Formula for the Nations: This book is very much a warning to any nation who would decide to stand against God. As much as we want to believe it in America, God is no respecter of nations. He honors those who honor Him, and brings down those who dishonor Him. Everything in this book has to do with the national deterioration and disaster that comes from disobedience to God.

Lamentations

What follows in the book of Lamentations is a book of mourning. That is what Lamentation means— it is a book of Lament— of crying. It has been called the “Wailing Wall” book. Here Jeremiah is writing the official eulogy for the entire nation of Israel, but more specifically Jerusalem. The northern kingdom had been taken, and now the southern kingdom follows in the footsteps of death. If you were going to place the final words on a tombstone for a nation whose destruction came about because they would not listen to their God, this is what you would write.

The event actually takes place in Jeremiah 52. So what you have is that Jeremiah 52 records the history of the event, and Lamentation records the heart. To mention the heart here is to cause the resurfacing of how the heart is expressed in writing. In converting the poetical books, that is exactly what was explained— that the best way to express the emotion of the human heart was to write in poetry, and this is exactly what we find. Lamentation is a book of poetry.

It consists of five poems written by Jeremiah and the purpose here is to express in the greatest and most grim detail how God’s heart is broken over the fact that He had to finally judge His people.

This is an important truth to grasp. When one of God’s people is in sin (or a group of people, or an entire nation), and is warned over and over again, God is not in heaven sitting there saying, “Just one more time! Disobey Me one more time, I dare you! I cannot wait to judge you!” No, He sends warnings to lovingly call to us. And the book of Lamentations is a book that tells us that when God does have to judge sin, He is not happy about it, it breaks His heart.

But even in the midst of destruction, by the time you make it to the middle of this book, in 3:18 you see these words, “And I said, My strength and my hope perished from the LORD:” then, you get to verse 21 which reads, “This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope.” And finally you get to verses 22-23, “It is of the LORD’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions they fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness.”

Right in the middle of chaos and judgment, there is a declaration of hope. My friend, God can always bring hope in the dark night of judgment.

How to Think About Lamentations

As for the layout of the book, our format will be a little different and the other two headings will not be covered here. However, a basic synopsis of each chapter will be given to help you navigate a reading of this text.

Lament Number 1: Jerusalem is Destroyed— In this section the city’s greatness is remembered and there is a cry from Jeremiah knowing what God must do.

Lament Number 2: God Cites His Explanation— Here God explains His anger but also expresses that He is not excited in the least about this punishment.

Lament Number 3: Jeremiah’s Heart is Broken— Once again we are brought to Jeremiah’s sorrow, but the ultimate goodness of God is appealed to as Jeremiah cries out to the Lord.

Lament Number 4: God Provides the Specifics— In chapter 4 there rests the horrors of the now empty, silent city because of the sin and punishment suffered.

Lament Number 5: A Faithful Few Offer Prayer— God always has a remnant, and in this chapter there is a prayer for God to remember them and one of the final cries listed here is found in verse 21, “Turn thou us unto thee, O LORD, and we shall be turned; renew our days as of old.”

29. GLORY REVEALED

EZEKIEL

To delve into this book is to enter into a mysterious intrigue to both Bible scholars and laypeople alike. There is so much interest in this book because it contains lessons, stories, pronouncements, pictures, and predictions that cover a wide range of topics. Further, some of the information contained in this book is very cryptic in nature to even the most clever of minds and there is debate to this day as to what some of the subjects are ultimately describing.

Before we begin to speak about the content rich environment that is this prophecy, let's talk a little bit about the man, his name and his background. The name Ezekiel means "God Strengthens" and when we look at the kind of ministry God had called this man to, we find that Ezekiel needed all the strength he could get.

When Ezekiel was about 25 years old, it appears that he was serving in a priestly capacity before being carried away into Babylonian captivity. In the beginning chapters of this book we are given several pieces of background information that help us figure out some key portions of history.

Once the nation of Judah was captured, the Babylonians started to carry away important members of society in waves. According to 2 Kings 24, Nebuchadnezzar started with the kings and leaders, then the treasurers, then the men of war, after that the intellectuals and craftsmen. Nebuchadnezzar, in other words, took those whom he deemed important for their society to work well, and then left everyone else to fend for themselves. This occurred in three stages and in this stage, the city of Jerusalem was left completely destroyed.

As we follow the timeline here, it appears that Daniel was taken during the first wave of those imprisoned and carried away, and Ezekiel was taken during the second wave. When we talk about being carried away, we mean far away. We see from Ezekiel 3 that he was taken about 600 miles away from Jerusalem. We don't consider this as extremely far in our day, but in a caravan of prison lines on foot, this journey was one of the worst kinds imaginable.

Ezekiel was called when he was about 30 years old and it was at a time when Jerusalem had been defeated, but was not decimated. Because of this, there were those Jews who were still living in a fantasy world where Jerusalem could not be touched and everything would be ultimately restored in just a little bit of time. But God called Ezekiel in the midst of this 'positive thinking' and commissioned him to prophesy against this type of thinking as well as several other things.

It all started with a vision. That's what you see in chapter 1. It is that famous vision of the "Wheel in the middle of the wheel." This is where the mystery of this book begins, right up front.

So with this information, let's see if we can unravel a thought or two and hopefully make a little more sense of the book of Ezekiel.

How to Think About Ezekiel

This book was written approximately between 533 to 570 B.C. and his ministry lasted about twenty-two years. As was briefly mentioned before, Ezekiel was born in Judah, but he died in Babylon. Another interesting fact to consider is that Ezekiel or any portion of the Scripture contained in this book are not specifically mentioned anywhere else in Scripture.

As for the message of Ezekiel, his first task was to preach to the nation and once again combat the false prophets who were trying to tell God's people that Jerusalem would never fall, and to not worry because they would soon be returned to the land of Judah. Then Ezekiel was instructed to turn to other nations and prophesy against them. And finally, Ezekiel was given some grand visions about the future.

Let's see how this works:

Judah Will Eventually Fall (Chapters 4-24): After Ezekiel's prophetic commission in chapters 1-3, Ezekiel starts on a case-building mission as to why God would ultimately bring down Judah on a grand scale, instead of what was experienced up until this point.

In this section, Ezekiel gives a series of prophecies that deal with the human race and Israel specifically. What is really sad is that with each passing chapter you get flashing glimpses of God's glory moving further and further away from His people. First, God's glory was in the temple, then in chapter 10, God's glory moves from the Holy of Holies into the outer court. After this, in chapter 11, you find that God's glory moves from the outer court to the Mount of Olives and up toward the sky.

There is no favor, there is no comfort here— only judgment. What a sad picture.

Judah's Enemies Will Follow (Chapters 25-32): After the pronouncement against God's people, Ezekiel turns to their enemies. These people were not only evil themselves, but were taking pleasure in the punishment of God's people. They were actually rejoicing over it.

Ammon (25:1-7)

Moab (25:8-11)

Edom (25:12-14)

Philistia (25:15-17)

Tyre (26:1-28:19)

Sidon (28:20-24)

Egypt (29:20-24)

Judah Still Has A Future (Chapters 33-48): The story changes right here. Where once there was only a boneyard of death left in the wake of God's judgment, God once again pieces together his people and gives them a new breath of life and vitality. In this section you see a special temple construction project written in extreme detail and a redistribution of a special land God would give.

What to look for in Ezekiel

There are several areas in this book that need special attention if you want to understand this message a little better.

Key Words and Phrases—

The Word of the LORD Came: This phrase occurs almost fifty times throughout the course of your reading of this book. It is a continual reminder of the authority in what was spoken and why the words spoken should be listened to and obeyed.

They Shall Know that I am the LORD: This is another important phrase that bears mentioning. This phrase is repeated nearly seventy times throughout the book. God does not want there to be any confusion about who exactly is conducting and ordering the courses of human history.

Son of Man: This you see used over one hundred times as God is speaking directly to Ezekiel. What is significant about this phrase is the fact that we see a certain and clear distinction between the Creator and the created, and that Ezekiel is acting as a representative of mankind at this point. It has been said that Ezekiel's life was a living parable of sorts. He was a living sign to the house of Israel. If you remember, Jesus also accepted this title because He too became a representative of mankind. He was the "last Adam" according to Romans 5.

Glory: This word, "Kabod" in Hebrew, has to do with being ascribed weight or worthiness. When God reveals Himself, His glory is the outward manifestation or outward description of what is known about Him. He reveals Himself in Glory; in the weight of all authority. This is the key to the book. In Ezekiel, God reveals His glory.

Idols: It was for this reason that God's people were in trouble. This word means a "shapeless thing" and has to do with the way these objects were made. They were made out of rock or tree logs... shapeless things. Ezekiel uses this word nearly forty times to describe what God's people were actually worshipping rather than ascribing glory to the One true God.

Sermons—

Ezekiel was another one of those creative preachers. We spoke about Jeremiah being an interesting communicator, well Ezekiel was down right shocking. He used every form of device to bring God's Word. He used proverbs, parables, illustrations, and even preached full sermons without words. Let's look at just a few.

Mime Preaching: In chapter 3, God told Ezekiel that He was going to strike him dumb so he would not be able to reprove the people. This left Ezekiel having to act out in order to communicate until the appointed time when God would open his mouth once more.

Figurine Preaching: In Chapter 4, Ezekiel was told to take a piece of tile and make a little model city of Jerusalem, and then build a fort against it, and then lay siege on it. He was supposed to act out with small action figures what would ultimately happen to Jerusalem in front of all the people (4:1-3).

Lazy Preaching: This title is given in a little bit of jest as we come to a style of preaching in chapter 4 that was also quite strange. In this chapter God has Ezekiel lay on his left side only, bound with bands so that he could not turn for 350 days, and then do the same for the right side for 40 days. This would have been a terrible sermon to preach. If you can imagine the people observing this live illustration, what questions might have arisen!

Some believe that many of these preaching techniques were to also capture the mind and imagination of the children who would have seen these kinds of things. Perhaps where an adult may have been hardened and callused, a child would have watched in wonder, asked their parents, and then, as they lived out their days in Babylon, they would remember that old crazy prophet Ezekiel and realize that he wasn't so crazy after all!

Visions—

Some of the greatest visions are recorded for us right here in the book of Ezekiel. Sometimes, when we are presented with individuals in the Bible who had a vision from God, the information is very much guarded and general. But there are other occasions (such as in Ezekiel and the Book of the Revelation) when we are given vivid detail. Sometimes we wish we knew more, and sometimes we wish we simply understood. Such is the case here in Ezekiel. Yes the image is grand, but it is perplexing.

Ezekiel's Call: This is probably one of the most well known visions, but also one of the most confusing. In Chapter 1:4 God calls Ezekiel with a dramatic vision. It started with a “whirlwind” from the North. This is usually believed to be the sign of God's coming judgment. It is followed by a great cloud of fire rolling forward and that is symbolic of the destruction that would soon take place. Okay, this is easy enough as you're reading along, but all of the sudden you are introduced to four living creatures that came out of the fire called Seraphim. Each one had four faces: The face of the man, the face of a lion, the face of an ox, and the face of an eagle. This along with other descriptors as well as information given regarding the “wheel in the wheel” leave you good and confused right at the beginning.

Therefore, just to answer a few of these questions in the simplest form possible, it is commonly held that the face of the man represented intelligence, the face of the lion represented strength, the face of the ox represented service, and the eagle represented the realm of heaven.

As for the ‘wheel in the wheel’ instead of focusing on design, we need to focus instead on what it is able to accomplish. The way it could move and turn in any direction. Its function suggests that there was nothing that could escape it. So when we place this in the context of the book and in the context of symbolism (where it belongs), we understand that this has to do with the absolute sovereignty of God. We have seen this before, but here we have it in a vivid and dramatic picture lighted in the most breathtaking way imaginable. This is evidenced by the fact that when Ezekiel saw all of this, he immediately hit the ground on his face.

Other visions include the “Dry bones” passage in chapter 37, the telling of Gog and Magog (which you find once again in the book of Revelation) in chapter 38, and a detailed description building of the millennial temple. This whole book is filled with compelling visions.

What to Gain from Ezekiel

God's Glory Is Never to be Traded: We mentioned briefly that this was the theme of the book. You cannot move through this book accurately without being confronted with a heightened sense of God's glory revealed here. In chapters 8-10 you see the manifestation of God's glory leaving His people. It has to do with God's known and perceivable presence and the fact that God will remove this from the life of a rebellious people.

It is important to note here that while God's glory was departing, He brought His people to the place that they thought that they wanted more. He removed Himself from them while at the same time moving them to what they had set their heart to have— idols. It was God saying, “Alright, you want idols? Let me lead you to the place where they are the epicenter of humanity and see how you like it. I'll leave, and you can have what you want in the place where idol worship is greatest.”

What a punishment! We have seen this before in Scripture, how God's people are determined to do a certain thing against God and God gives them exactly what they want. But to do this means that His perceivable presence is moved further and further away.

God Glory Can Never be Extinguished: By the time you reach chapter 37, the tone of the book changes. Ezekiel is brought before a valley that acted as a graveyard and which was full of dried old bones. With one command after another, these bones became full human skeletons, then full fleshly bodies who were still dead, then, God told Ezekiel to command the wind to bring them breath, and once this was done, there was a living, breathing army of individuals.

What we learn here is God's inexhaustible commitment to His people and that He will bring revival and breathe new life in His people. This has to do with Israel directly, but it cannot be overlooked that God will do the same for us for His glory's sake. This outward manifestation of God's work can never be stopped.

30. UNCHANGING FAITH IN EVER-CHANGING TIMES

DANIEL

The book of Daniel is probably the most well-known of the Major Prophets, but it is also the most contested. Daniel was about 20 years old when he was taken to Babylon and was probably 23 when he was called of God to serve in the high office of prophet. This means that Daniel still had vivid memories of the devastation and horror of being conquered and ripped from his homeland, and there is evidence in this book that he never forgot his home and he continually longed to go back.

This book comes from the final humiliations of the city of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 605 B.C., as he began to empty the treasury and take from the best families individuals who would serve his court well; and Daniel was one of those individuals. If you remember, this humiliation and exile occurred in waves, and Daniel was part of the first wave taken.

His name means “God is my Judge” and points to the unwavering commitment that he had toward God, even in the midst of extreme opposition. However, it was this unwavering commitment to God’s commands that upheld Daniel and caused him to prosper while those rulers whom he served under continually changed. Daniel served under four different rulers. While these powerful men were brought down and removed, God kept Daniel safe and continuing to work in a place of authority. This only happened because God was Daniel’s judge instead of those leaders over him. This is not to say he was disrespectful, but that Daniel honored those placed over him where he could. However, once they crossed the line of God’s law, that was a place where Daniel would not follow.

Another interesting fact about the Book of Daniel is that it is the only book written in two languages. Daniel 2 through Daniel 7 are written in Aramaic, and the rest of the book is written in Hebrew.

As far as those who would contest this book, several reasons are given. The first and foremost point to the breathtakingly accurate account of this book and state that this work could not have possibly been written during the date proposed and that it most likely had been written later and an unknown author must have simply placed Daniel’s name on it. However, the imperial writing of the Aramaic points to an early date as well as the more recent discovery of the famed Dead Sea Scrolls.

Not only this, the Prophet Ezekiel, who was a contemporary of Daniel, makes mention of him in **Ezekiel 14:14, 20; 28:3**. There is further evidence believed to exist in **Hebrews 11:33** as we see what appears to be a direct reference to an individual who “...stopped the mouth of lions” referencing that great account of God rescuing Daniel from the lion’s den. But the most compelling evidence of all for the authenticity of Daniel occurs in **Matthew 24:15**, when Jesus weighs in on the matter and says, “When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whoso readeth, let him understand:).”

Another matter of heavy contention are the miracles listed in this book. But for those of us who believe God’s Word, if we know that God can create from nothing, believing the miracles contained in this book is hardly significant.

A final thought in introducing this book comes by way of the apocalyptic nature of the book. What is meant by “apocalyptic” is that it is a writing that predicts a coming destruction. John MacArthur, describing the book of Daniel says, “What Revelation is to the New Testament prophetically and apocalyptically, Daniel is to the Old Testament.” And while this is true, it actually goes a little further than this. The book of Daniel and the book of Revelation are tied together. One cannot understand the book of Daniel fully without understanding Revelation, and conversely, one cannot understand the book of Revelation correctly without understanding the book of Daniel. More will be discussed regarding this, but for now, let’s see if we can outline this book in a way that makes sense.

How to Think About Daniel

Daniel is a unique mixture of history and prophecy. In the beginning chapters, you will immediately notice that Daniel speaks of himself in the third person (“Daniel did this...” “Daniel did that...”), but once you get to the later chapters in the book, you will notice that Daniel starts referring to himself in the first person where it will be observed that Daniel narrates with the words, “I, Daniel...”

If you understand this, you can easily identify that the book of Daniel is broken up into these two different sections— History and Prophecy.

The Personal History of Daniel (Chapters 1-6)— This section is riddled with exciting narrative and harrowing faith. If we are placing ourselves in these dangerous situations of which we read, all we are really left with is a hope that perhaps we would respond in the same way Daniel and his companions did in these situations. Daniel's personal history is a stunning testimony to any who might be tempted to give in to the society around them.

A Confronted Testimony (Chapters 1-2): It is here that we are introduced to the great character of Daniel. This is where we find him confronted with a choice— Honor God, or honor man. Daniel also understood that it was not just a decision that would affect him, it was a decision that would affect three young men who were watching. This is the nature of faith in God. It never simply affects you. It carries over into the lives of the younger generation who is watching. So as the command was given to eat what was not lawful to eat under the command of God, Daniel politely requested to be placed under a different diet which was ultimately granted. And because Daniel chose to honor God, God began to honor Daniel and the three young men he had taken under his care.

In chapter 2 you find the account of Nebuchadnezzar's troubling dream, which God answered through Daniel and caused Daniel to be a huge name among all of Nebuchadnezzar's advisors. Each time Daniel's life was on the line, he trusted God to make a way.

A Continuing Testimony (Chapters 3-6): Starting in chapter 3, the testimony of God's people was under attack again. However, in chapter 3, it was not Daniel whose faith was tried, it was the lives and faith of those three Hebrew boys, Shadrach (also called Hananiah), Meshach (also called Mishael), and Abed-Nego (also called Azariah). At this point, Daniel was not on the scene, and so it was up to these young men to make a decision: Would they bow down and worship the image of king Nebuchadnezzar to save their lives? Or would they refuse and be thrown into a fiery furnace? Would the taught testimony of Daniel be continued, or would it fail in the lives of these young men? Was their faith only determined by Daniel's, or was it something that was their own?

Well, as we see in the narrative, their faith was their own now. They had taken responsibility to only worship God, just as Daniel had.

Lastly, in chapters 4-6, you find that even at the end of Daniel's life, he continued to honor God. The most famed example of this is when Daniel was placed into the den of lions because of his prayer life. He would not pray to king Darius as was required by law during a specific time-frame, but instead continued to only pray to God. God once again provided the victory here and we see that we can truly honor God at every stage of our lives. Our testimony for God can and should continue.

The Prophetic Highlights of Daniel (Chapters 7-12)— What we find in these chapters are some very specific and very intriguing prophecies. There has been some mention of double fulfillment prophecies in earlier chapters, and here we run into this once more as Daniel deals with not only forth-telling for the more immediate future, but the ultimate fulfillment of some of these prophecies that will not arrive until the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Vision of the Future (Chapters 7-8): In this section we read of a vision that Daniel has regarding the four great beasts. In chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar had a troubling dream. In this dream he saw a vision of an image that had a head of gold (symbolizing the Babylonian king), shoulders of silver (symbolizing the Medo-Persian empire), a trunk of bronze (symbolizing the Grecian empire), two legs of iron (symbolizing the Roman empire), and all of these empires resting on feet of clay and iron mingled together.

This vision reaches from Daniel's day, all the way to the second coming of Jesus Christ. But what was particularly troubling for king Nebuchadnezzar was the fact that there was a stone that was seen. This stone was striking the image on its feet and was utterly demolishing it. The image blew away in the wind, but the stone grew into a great mountain that began to fill the entire earth. This stone is Jesus and points to His eventual reign over the whole earth.

However, in this vision of Nebuchadnezzar, it was to be interpreted from man's point of view. When we arrive here in Daniel 7, it is to be understood from God's point of view. Man loves their images, but when God is telling the story, he views nations as beasts. Instead of mighty memorials, they are just mindless beasts that fight with one another now and again.

By the time you reach chapter 8, Daniel has had a second vision about a battle that takes place between a country identified as a ram, and a country identified as the he-goat, which are later identified in chapter 11.

The Volatility of the Future (Chapters 9-10): It is here where you reach the seventy years of desolation. This is where you learn of the transgression of God's people and once Daniel hears this, he offers a prayer, and by the end of this prayer, Daniel provides one of the most astounding prophecies in all of the Bible. This is the prophecy of the seventy weeks, which we will address in a moment.

In chapter 10, we get a little look behind the scenes as God reveals His sovereign work inside the workings of humanity.

The Venture of the Future (Chapter 11): A venture is a risky course of action, and that is exactly what we see in chapter 11. Most of this chapter is fulfilled prophecy and details the conflict between Syria and Egypt, with the little nation of Israel caught in the middle. We also have information of things yet to come as the time of tribulation is recorded.

The Victory of the Future (Chapter 12): This chapter has to do with the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. What you are reading when you take in Daniel 12 is God drawing the time of sin and rebellion to a close forever.

What to Look for in Daniel

This book is rich with all kinds of information that is both instructional and compelling. Its instruction causes us to be encouraged to remain steadfast in the culture around us, and compelling, because we realize that we have something to look forward to— the Second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Prophecy—

As you already gathered, the book of Daniel contains some of the most exciting prophecies in all of the Bible. This is not to say that other prophetic writings are insignificant. But it is to say that these prophecies are so specific and describe so perfectly what to expect, they have the ability to continually ignite our hearts to the wonder of God's word. Let's look at a few.

The Growing Stone: You read of this in Daniel 2 and as mentioned previously, it is Jesus who became the great mountain that filled the whole earth (2:35). He consumes all other kingdoms and powers.

The Image and the Beasts: Once again, this was covered in Nebuchadnezzar's dream in chapter 2 regarding the image of Gold, Silver, Bronze, and Clay, which represented different kingdoms as man perceived them, and then again in chapter 7 when the same kingdoms were dealt with from God's perspective. We learned in chapter 7 that God does not look at these kingdoms as a "grand image" but as roaming beasts.

Actually, the kingdoms in total that Daniel ultimately deals with, describes six different kingdoms instead of four. Added into these prophecies, Daniel reaches far beyond the Roman Empire (which would not come to power until several hundred years after this book was written), but to the kingdom of the Anti-Christ, and eventually, to the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

The Seventy Weeks: This is perhaps the most astonishing prophecy found in this book as we look closely at chapter 9. Now, I will caution and say that there are different interpretations of this section of Scripture which could potentially be accurate as well, but as far as what seems most reasonable to me at this time, it appears we can understand this passage in the following way:

In this chapter Daniel uses the term "seventy weeks" but it is clear from the passage that each day represents a year's time. Since there are 7 days in a week, what we have then is the simple math equation of 70×7 , which comes out to be 490 (years). Then, Daniel breaks this number down a bit, and gives a more precise number of 483 years. After this, in verse 25, Daniel talks about the beginning of the 69th week and 1 week. He said that this will occur when Jerusalem would be rebuilt. We have a definite date for this because it is recorded for us in Nehemiah 2 where we see the wall and the city began to be rebuilt in 445 B.C. This is significant because from this time, Daniel said that we should be looking for the "Messiah the Prince". That said, if I can simplify this a bit, Daniel was saying that from the time that the city would be rebuilt, to the time when the Messiah would come would be 483 years.

Well, a man named Sir Robert Anderson conducted a calculation from this time, to the day that Jesus died on the cross and found that it happened 483 years later to the day just as Daniel predicted.

Miracles—

A Godly Health Plan: This comes from Daniel 1, when Daniel and his three young disciples were given food to eat that was unlawful for them to eat. Daniel sought a compromise from his caretaker that he be given ten days to try a diet of 'pulse' instead of the king's meat and wine to keep them nourished. This was agreed to and after ten days, the Bible says that their skin was fairer and fatter than those that ate of the king's meat and drank from the king's wine. This miracle was God's way of blessing those men who took a stand for God's law.

A Walk To Remember: This account occurs in chapter 3. Once again a stand was taken against the king's orders because it directly conflicted with the command of God. Three young men were taken and cast into a furnace, but there were four walking in the midst of the flames. God was there to save His own.

A Night at Lion's Den Inn: In chapter 6, king Darius was now on the throne and was tricked into making a foolish law that was aimed at Daniel. Those leaders who ruled with Daniel were threatened by his authority and decided to try to eliminate him. Their plan worked, but not as they intended. They did not intend for the One true God to come to Daniel's aid and shut the mouths of the lions, causing his life to be spared. Once again, aside from the miracle of the dreams, the miracles performed in this book all had to do with God's people taking a stand for their God.

What to Gain from Daniel

As in our previous studies, there is so much to unpack and present as far as what this book means for our day. However, if we were to condense Daniel down to one predominate truth that would cover the entire book, I think it would this:

It is Better to Live in Light of God's Sovereignty than to be forced to Experience It—

In every single instance the unseen hand of God is made known in this book. In those instances where God's people were challenged, we find them living in light of God's sovereignty, casting themselves on God's ultimate goodness and grace, choosing to obey God and His plan rather than trying to obey men.

On the other hand, leader after leader learned an important lesson far too late. They were forced to experience God's Sovereignty. They couldn't stand and fight God's plan. They were mere instruments in the hand of an Almighty God.

And as we peer into the future, let us do the same as Daniel and his companions— let us live in light of God's sovereignty knowing that He will fulfill what He has said, rather than be forced to experience it because of our unbelief.

31. THE STRANGEST MINISTRY

HOSEA

In making it to Hosea, we have moved past the section of the prophetic books known as the minor prophets. Our entrance here has the potential of being extremely interesting because the messages of these books are not as well known. This is not an indictment, but only to say that because these books are not carefully considered, the content could provide you with lessons and stories that you may find particularly compelling because their messages have been forgotten or maybe never experienced.

Take this book of Hosea for example. Hosea had one of the strangest ministries among all of the prophets because of what God had called him to do. The name Hosea means “Salvation” but during a portion of his ministry, his life looked like a contradiction of sorts. Instead of salvation, it seemed that God had doomed Hosea to bleak despair as he was instructed to take a woman, whom he knew would betray him in her marital vows, but to resolve to marry her anyway.

Now, this is easy enough to say, but you need to remember that because of the institution of marriage, because of everything that it is, there were real emotions involved. There was real pain, there was real betrayal, there was real confusion, there was real shame, and, to top it all off, there were real children caught in the middle.

However, this was all to bring a real illustration of what was ultimately coming. Hosea was a prophet to the Northern Kingdom, which if you remember is called Israel. At this point, the kingdom had split and Jeroboam now ruled over the ten northern tribes of Israel but realized that his people would continually travel south to go and worship at Jerusalem. Fearing that his people and power would be lost, he made two golden calves, setting one in Bethel and the other in Dan, and told the people “It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem: behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt” (1 Kings 12:28).

This was the start of the rapid decline of the Northern Kingdom and Jeroboam would forever be known as the king who ‘...taught Israel to sin...’ And because of this continued idolatry, God was about to use the Assyrian Empire to completely decimate this land.

This is where the main ministry of Hosea rests. He is the sounding alarm that Israel’s final hour is upon them. But even with all of what will befall God’s people, God’s ultimate message through Hosea is in fact one of salvation. Let’s look at it.

How to Think About Hosea

The book of Hosea follows a direct line of thought and covers his ministry from the standpoint of his personal life, and then moves to a series of sermons preached before God’s people were finally taken over by the Assyrians.

A Life Used to Speak to a Nation (Chapters 1-3)— In these chapters, there is the detailed account of God’s instruction to Hosea to take “... a wife of whoredoms and children of whoredoms: for the land hath committed great whoredoms...” (1:2)

I don’t think we should understand this as a situation where Hosea went into a brothel of some kind and took a wife from this place. However, I do believe that the wife selection process would be one in which Hosea would understand that there would be a day when his wife would stay by his side no longer. How exactly this was accomplished, I have no idea. However, did it happen? Yes.

This would be an odd command to go to sleep with at night. No sane person would willingly get into a marriage fully understanding that you will give this person everything you have, be determined to provide love, and raise a family with knowing full well that this marriage would come crashing to a halt because of the grossest infidelity. That is simply not the picture people have when they truly are committed to a marriage. Yet this is what God required of Hosea.

The purpose of this assignment was to show all of God’s people what they had done as a nation and why judgment was soon to follow.

A Message Used to Preach to a Nation (4-14)— Here are a series of messages delivered by Hosea that would detail exactly what their sin was, what would happen as a result, and what God would do with His people for the future.

The Crime (Chapters 4-6): In this section, God outlines that He had been entirely faithful to Israel by way of His promise, but despite His care and provision, Israel played the harlot by taking other gods and abandoning their covenant with God.

The Punishment (Chapters 6:4-10:15): It is here when God tells these people that according to the law, He would put them away for their spiritual adultery. From here we can see Hosea's story. According to Old Testament law, the offender in a covenant vow could be put away, and even put to death for this offense. And here we have God bringing a warning against His people detailing this very situation applies between Himself and His people.

The Forgiveness (Chapters 10:16-14): After long rolling indictments God has a final word for His people, "O Israel, return unto the LORD thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity" (14:1). It's true. Once again it wasn't God who abandoned His people, it was His people that abandoned God. God is attempting to cause His people to understand their error and His truth. And by this, God calls back His people once more.

What to Look for in Hosea

Names— When God calls Hosea to take a wife of whoredoms, God instructs Hosea of the names of the children that are born by Gomer were to be called. These names tell a story of God's indictment on His people.

Jezeel: This name was given to Hosea's firstborn son, and was to serve as a warning to God's people. It is a name derived from the name Jezebel, that wicked queen who was eventually throne from an upper story window and died from the impact. As the story is recorded for us in 2 Kings 9:30-37, we see that dogs came to eat her body. Because of this, the courtyard in which Jezebel fell was called Jezeel and would serve as a place in which everyone would know of the judgment that happened in that place. It is a place of disgrace and abandonment. Therefore, God is telling these people that their name would no longer be the covenant name of Israel, but hold a new name of disgrace— Jezeel.

Lo-Ruhamah: This name was given to Hosea's second born and the name means "not loved." This name pointed to the fact that God's love for His people would be over and because there was no love, they would no longer experience mercy if they continued on the path they had chosen.

Lo-Ammi: A third child was born by Gomer, but it is clear that this child coincided with the experience of God. If Hosea was left questioning whether or not the second child was his, he was quite sure now that this child did not belong to him after witnessing Gomer's indiscretions. Therefore, the name of this child was called, "not my people." Probably an awkward event to take place in a public marketplace when a passerby would stop for a moment, bend down, and ask for the name of this little fellow. And this is what God was saying now. He looked down and saw a people that were no longer His own.

Words—Aside from the obvious spiritual harlotry taking place in this message, another word God uses to describe the situation with his people:

Stumble: Hosea describes those false prophets and those who followed them as individuals who were stumbling in the dark. In this case, it was due to the ramped idolatry that was taking place in the nation of Israel. Over and over again these idols would come up and then God's people would trip over them, but no one thought to turn on the lights so they could see. They were insistent on fumbling around and refusing to walk without being thrown to the ground.

What to Gain from Hosea

Most of what we have spoken about in this book has been fairly depressing. Hosea, his wife, their children, the nation, and the dynamic with their God all swirling around in drama, disappointment, and pain. However, the ending result of Hosea's ministry is anything but tragic. If anything, how God ends Hosea's story is nothing short of stunning and there is so much to gain from this incredible book.

Unfaithfulness to God of Any Kind Really Is Spiritual Adultery— This is a bold statement, but a true statement. Any time a person gets into a covenant relationship with the God of all, they enter into a sacred union where God's faithfulness falls to us, and our faithfulness rises to Him. God never creates another being like you in order to replace you in His love relationship. There will never be a time, nor has there ever been a time when God looked to another creation and decided to break His covenant or order that His relationship with you might be abandoned and He would come to you whenever it was convenient to Him. No, when God covenants with a person to be their God, He never breaks it. However, on the other hand, we routinely replace God and dishonor our covenant.

Unfaithfulness to God Really Does Cause Him to Suffer Because of Spiritual Adultery— Because the spiritual realm is hard to perceive sometimes, we have to be shown in the physical realm what is happening. Therefore, if you have a spouse you poured all of your love and emotion toward (as you are supposed to) only to have them engage in the most intimate of marital actions with multiple partners insomuch that they literally become enslaved by it, what would that do toward your emotional disposition? Furthermore, what we have in God is not only ultimate love that is betrayed, but ultimate justice that must condemn, and therefore there is the added factor of God having to judge for such offenses.

This is further what we see when Hosea's wife is captured and being sold into slavery. She had a home, a family, and a husband who loved her, and she ran away from it all, got entrenched in a life she could not escape, and as far as the law was concerned, she truly deserved death.

In just a small microcosm, Hosea was able to experience what God experiences because of the unfaithfulness of His people.

Unfaithfulness to God Can Really End in Complete Forgiveness— What would Hosea do? What would his response be? Would he abandon the relationship? Would he condemn her to justice according to the law? Would he watch as Gomer was sold into a life of servitude because of her sin? No. None of these things. To complete the ultimate picture of God and of us, God had Hosea purchase Gomer, take her to the wilderness where they could learn to be together again, and then Hosea renewed himself to Gomer and Gomer would learn to renew herself to her husband, and they would be together forever.

Here is the picture that God wanted us to understand. That as Christ came to this earth, he ultimately entered into the slave market of sin by going to Calvary. And then, as justice called out its price of death for the sin debt we accumulated, Jesus paid for it with His life so that we could be with Him forever.

32. JEHOVAH IS GOD

JOEL

The prophecy of Joel is a small book, but it is surrounded and initiated by great tragedy. Its message contains a devastating plague of locust and a famine that results, leaving the people in a terrible amount of desperation.

A plague of locusts was one of the most feared occurrences during this time period. Without modern pesticides, these insects would multiply in unimaginable numbers, so much that their presence would literally blot out the sun and cover the ground like water. After this, they would march around and if there was anything green, or any vegetation, it was quickly and completely consumed without a trace of its previous existence.

Obviously, because of this kind of destruction, we are looking at families with absolutely no means of physical sustenance. Men, women, children all struggling to survive because of the resulting famine. Livelihoods destroyed. Entire lives have to start over from nothing. You can understand, then, why these creatures would be so feared and hated by those who fell under their wrath.

Then there is the prophet Joel who spoke to God's people during this time. Aside from his message, even the name of Joel was used to speak to God's people. The name Joel is a fusion of names meaning "Jehovah is God." In the first portion of his name we see the letters "J" and "O" which gives us the "Jehovah" portion. And then there is "El" which also means God. And if you put these two names of God together, you have the name, "Joel."

Aside from his name and his message, there is not much else known about this prophet of God. He is not mentioned anywhere else, and there is nothing in the book which provides a way to accurately date the book. Because of this, many scholars believe that Joel is an early prophet whom God used to speak to His people.

How to think About Joel

Because Joel is only three chapters long, and because the message of judgment is so direct, it is not difficult to navigate through the chapters. Joel's message can be broken up into three different scenes.

The Scene of Historical Judgment (1:1-1:20)— These verses provide the message, context, and request to those who were experiencing judgment.

A Message for the Masses (1:1): Here we find the name of Joel and the authority behind what was about to be spoken. Joel was God's prophet, and his message was directly from God.

An Answer for the Questioning (1:2-12): Joel asks the people to think about why judgment had fallen on them and asked for the message to be carried on to their children, and their children's children. This will be covered to a greater degree in this chapter, but a remark needs to be made here that judgment (or any experience from God, for that matter) should not exist in a vacuum. Our learning should always be for the benefit of those around us— especially our children. In this case, Joel was used to explain why the locust had fallen on them, and they, in turn, were to teach the following generations.

A Call to Repentance (1:13-1:20): Despite the devastation, God was not done. Though fire broke out, though the livestock was suffering for lack of grass, and would soon be lost to hunger, a call goes up to God in verse 19, "O LORD, to thee will I cry..." Even in judgment we can call out to God's mercy.

The Scene of Illustrated Judgment (2:1-17)— An alarm is sounded here because of a day coming filled with "darkness" and "gloominess" but it isn't a reference to the insects any longer. Now these hoards of locusts are used to illustrate an army of horsemen. The invasion of these insects are used to describe an invasion of an opposing military force against God's people. This is an indication that there will be a judgment coming that is far more devastating than that of the locust who strip the bark of trees or devour vines and vegetation, but the judgment would, in fact, be turned toward the people of the nation.

The Scene of Future Judgment (2:18-3:21)— In the last section of the book we actually find a very exciting prophecy regarding the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, all the way through the church age to the end times.

What to Look for in Joel

Phrases—

Day of the LORD: You will encounter this phrase five times in the reading of this book. This is a phrase used by other prophets, but it is used in a specific way in this book. In Joel, these words are to identify a period of time when God will pour out His wrath on the gentile nations because of their sins against the Jewish nation.

The counterpart to this narrative exists in Revelation 6-19, when we read of the time of the Great Tribulation after the rapture of the saints on earth. In other words, it is a term that signifies ultimate judgment for the wicked, and ultimate salvation for the righteous.

Words—

Spirit: The word here can mean breath, wind, or air, and when we see it in 2:28, once again, there is reference to the future and continued outpouring of the Holy Spirit from the time the church was empowered, until Christ returns.

What to Gain from Joel

What is incredibly interesting about Joel is the fact that when we compare his prophecy to that of the New Testament, we find that he is one of the few prophets whom God allowed to see all the way to the end of human history.

Hardships Are A Great Time to Look for God's Hand— If you look at any of the prophetic writings, whenever some hardship happened, they took it as a message from God. That's what we see from Joel. We see an instruction of warning so that the people could correct their course and avoid further danger.

Now, in terms of the prophetic office, God did in fact instruct these men in what was to be said and how to interpret certain disasters, but it is not out of the question to realize that God still uses tragedy to capture the attention of His people. In our personal life, is God trying to tell us more than we realize? In our churches, does God instruct by way of hardships? As a nation, does God speak through the various rumblings of national disasters? I am persuaded that He does. Does this take caution and Spirit-guided prudence? Absolutely. Just because tragedy strikes does not mean that there is only judgment attached. However, as we understand God's sovereignty in all things, we can certainly trace God's hand in order to seek His purpose.

The Present is A Great Time to Reflect on God's Victory— We are brought to this fact over and over again in the prophetic writings, and even in the historical books. God's command of the future is absolute. God continually has His prophets point to the future toward the end of their prophecies. This is a pattern worth noting as we understand where God ultimately wants our focus.

33. JUST A COUNTRY PREACHER

AMOS

God used all kinds of individuals to preach to God's people. We've learned that He used men who were groomed for ministry, He has used men who were from wealthy aristocratic backgrounds, he has used intellectuals, and in this case, God used an old country farmer to preach to God's people. Amos was a man who was a farmer and a shepherd and lived just South of Bethlehem, in a land called "Tekoa", but was called to move up North to preach to the nation of Israel.

The name Amos means "Burden" and that describes the task of his ministry perfectly. When God called him to preach to the northern kingdom, it is obvious that he made it his business to be involved with current affairs, the state of the nation, and the state of the surrounding nations.

As his message amplified and became more and more personal, he began to be abused and discredited by those leaders who heard him, to which Amos kindly reminded them that he had no agenda to the message he presented. He told the leaders basically that he was minding his own business, and was happy to do so, until God called him to preach the messages he was presenting.

However, this wasn't always the case when he first started preaching. He begins this prophecy by calling out the surrounding nations. He starts by denouncing the problems of the surrounding nations; and when God's people who heard his message, especially Judah, loved it. Then Amos moved to the northern kingdom itself. Once again, praise came from Judah. And then Amos' message turned toward Judah, and suddenly, this was too much to bear. The message was now too personal. The message was too offensive for God's people and their sensitive ears and this left Amos as a lone preacher.

His message was one of detailing the social and moral evils of the world's nations— including Israel and Judah. And if there is one thing that remains true about humanity, they hate to be told they are wrong. Further, this hatred is only compounded when they are told that judgment will follow because of moral ineptness.

How to Think About Amos

The book of Amos is nine chapters long and consists of three major sections. What you are first reading when taking in this prophecy is the announcement of the eight burdens. This occurs in chapters 1 and 2, and there is a phrase that continues to surface as God has Amos detail the national indictments, and that is the phrase, "For three transgressions... and for four..." This is a figure of speech that you are reading. This is God saying to each group of people, "You've gone too far."

The second major section occurs in chapters 3 through 6, which consists of a series of sermons delivered by Amos. Each one is fairly easy to identify because as a sermon introduction, Amos uses the words "Hear this word..." as you sift through these chapters.

The third major section is found in the remaining chapters of 7 through 9 and in these verses, you find five visions. Let's see if we can learn a bit more from each of these sections.

Eight Burdens (Chapters 1-2)— Once again, these are a list of indictments that God cites against the different nations.

Burden 1— Damascus (1:5): The judgment falls against this nation as God tells these people that they would soon be in the captivity of Kir.

Burden 2— Gaza (1:7): This judgment has to do with the way they treated their captives. It was a moral crime against their treatment of other people.

Burden 3— Tyre (1:9): Once again a moral indictment against their treatment of the people of other nations.

Burden 4— Edom (1:11): Apparently, these people refused to forgive others and allowed their un-forgiveness to turn to hatred. As a result, this led to immoral violent behavior.

Burden 5— Ammon (1:13): This judgment came because of crimes against humanity because of greed. It is clear that they were merciless and the evidence of this is cited as even killing the woman with child.

Burden 6— Moab (2:1): Another immoral charge handed down because of the way these people treated their captives.

Burden 7— Judah (2:4): This judgment comes by way of unfaithfulness to God's law.

Burden 8— Israel (2:6): Here we find the devaluing of human life. The way they bought and sold people was deplorable. The end of verse 6 read, "... because they sold the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of shoes."

Three Sermons (Chapters 3-6)— In these chapters, you find not only the problems of God's people but as always, God mingles His messages with an admonition to respond in repentance.

Sermon 1 (3:1-15): The first sermon given is against the entire house of Israel. Here God reminds the people of the history of their birth as a nation. Therefore, God holds them to an extreme measure of accountability and is now looking at them as an opposing force, and telling everyone to get ready for judgment.

Sermon 2 (4:1-1-13): This sermon starts off with the accusation that there were certain rich women that were causing a tremendous amount of oppression. They are called the "kine of Bashan" or in other words, he calls them cows.

On the surface, it may sound as if this is an insult, but it is actually a compliment. These were the best cows and were treated in the best way. What Amos is explaining is that women were rising to the heights of power and influence, but were using this gift to oppress the needy, and support their drinking problem.

The sermon continues with a citation of other blessings God has given and how these gifts were abused. Therefore, God tells them that He would strip everything from them that made them successful.

Sermon 3 (Chapters 5-6): This is a cry for the loss of the greatness of Israel. God provides a glimpse into the future and it is full of tears as He tells them it will never be the same again.

Five Pictures (Chapters 7-9)— The conclusion of Amos' prophecy is a series of illustrations that are used so that God's people not only hear the message but are able to use their minds and see exactly what God is talking about.

Picture 1— The Grasshoppers (7:1-3): God showed Amos that He would soon be raising up grasshoppers to eat the grass of the land and leave it destitute. Amos then calls out for mercy to God, and God grants it.

Picture 2— The Plague of Fire (7:4-6): Amos is then shown an immensely large fire that consumes everything. Amos sees the destruction this will cause and pleads for mercy, and God stays His hand for this outcome as well.

Picture 3— The Plumb-line (7:7-9): God shows Amos a plumb-line that would be set to show the off-set nature of Israel. And because they did not measure up, God told Amos that He would cause the land to be desolate.

Picture 4— The Basket of Summer Fruit (8:1-3): This is a picture indicating that Israel's sins were ripe and ready to be consumed.

Picture 5— The Shaken Pillars (9:1-10): God shows Amos the posts of the doors of the nation being stricken and causing them to fall on the occupants and that no one will be able to escape was is to come.

What to Look for in Amos

Themes

God's Standard of Holiness— The entire reason this prophecy exists is because God expects holiness from His people. Therefore, this is a prominent theme throughout the message of Amos. God's people do not like it. God's people do not want to hear it and try to silence the message, but no matter how they try to ignore this fact God still holds people accountable according to His Holiness. This is made abundantly clear in 4:2 where we read, "The Lord GOD hath sworn by his holiness, that, lo, the days shall come upon you, that he will take you away with hooks, and your posterity with fishhooks."

God's Requirement of Justice— God's holiness and justice cannot be separated. These divine attributes do not operate independently of one another. In relation to the above text in Amos 4:2, it is chilling to note that this was the means of terror used by the Assyrian Empire when they conquered a people. When leading them away, hooks would be placed through the nose of their victims, and they would lead the people away in a chain line drawn by the nose. And this is the very empire that took captive the northern kingdom.

God's Hope of Restoration— At the conclusion of the prophecy, we find an amazing end that is directed for Israel. Some attempt to apply this prophecy to all of God's people, but this is simply not the case as it relates to this particular prophecy. There will be a time when Israel will be restored to the land.

What to Gain from Amos

There is a Limit to God's Patients with Sin— God will only allow so much from our rebellion before ultimately pouring out His judgment. You'll notice that sown in these verses are calls to God's people from God to change course, but there eventually came a time when God removed that option from them.

There Is No One Who Can Withstand God's Judgment— One of the calls of Amos for God to relent His judgment came from Amos witnessing the 'consuming fire' mentioned in Chapter 7:4. The picture here is more than just fire, but appears to be nearly atomic in nature. Horrified at the sheer power of God, Amos makes a plea to God realizing that there was no person or nation who could withstand this kind of force, and says, in verse 5, "Then said I, O Lord GOD, cease, I beseech thee: by whom shall Jacob arise? for he is small." The nation thought they could stand on their own without God, but what Amos saw, he realized that there would be nothing left of anyone if this was the judgment selected.

And this is the way it ultimately is for all of us. There is none who can stand before God. We become really good convincing ourselves otherwise, but if we saw the reality of what Amos did, we would come to the same conclusion. That were are small compared to God and there would be no saving us if God determined in His mind to turn His hand against us. None can withstand His judgment.

There Is Hope in Knowing that to Choose God Is to Choose Life— Much of this book is filled with horrible signs of warning, but once again, there are calls in this book to choose God. For instance, in Chapter 5:6 we read, “Seek the LORD, and ye shall live;” Come back to God! Straighten out your life! Start walking on the paths He has laid out before you! Live! God’s message still brings life.

34. THE JUDGMENT OF ANOTHER

OBADIAH

Obadiah is an interesting little book, and when we say ‘little’ that is exactly what we mean. It is a tiny book. With only 21 verses total, Obadiah is one of the shortest books in the Bible. However, the history surrounding this prophecy is very large by comparison. Without understanding this, you are likely to breeze through this book in your reading and feel incredibly accomplished because you have read an entire book of the Bible with relative ease instead of plumbing the depths of Obadiah’s message.

The man Obadiah is hard to trace other than the information contained in this prophecy. There are thirteen other individuals in Scripture who we find that have the name of Obadiah, but none of these other men seem to be this man. If this is the case, this prophetic book is all the information that exists in discovering information about him. From the looks of things, scholars believe that he was probably a contemporary of Elijah and Elisha and was most likely a prophet to the southern kingdom.

His name means “Servant of the LORD” and in this particular book, the way this service was accomplished was by speaking out against the people of Edom. This nation is spoken against many times throughout the readings of the prophets, however, Obadiah’s prophecy is the most direct and the most confrontational out of them all.

Obadiah was one of those men who were able to see the city of Jerusalem completely intact and watched as Jerusalem was completely destroyed by the Babylonian Empire in 586 B.C. And while all of this destruction was occurring, there were the Edomites— sitting on the Southeast border of Israel and just watching as God’s people were being run down, tortured, and killed by the terrible opposing force of the Babylonians. Standing by and watching seems morbid, and we can further be absolutely horrified that these people were cheering and clapping as this destructive war was taking place.

This is actually the setting for Psalm 137. While God’s people were in captivity in Babylon, this was the account of their sorrow and their desire for justice to be done. But in the Psalm, not only the Babylonians were mentioned, but in verse 7 we see, “Remember, O LORD, the children of Edom in the day of Jerusalem; who said, Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation thereof.”

God’s people had not forgotten the fact that in their time of desperation, the Edomite nation was calling for the complete destruction of Jerusalem while Israel was experiencing one of the most desperate times in their nation’s history.

And if you’re beginning to wonder why exactly the Edomites were so happy that God’s people would be destroyed, then we have to go all the way back to the story of the Patriarch, Isaac, and the birth of his twin boys, Esau and Jacob. Why here? Well because the tension from birth, into adulthood carried over to each of their successive generations. As God began to work in this life of Jacob, changing his name to Israel, and began creating a nation from his offspring, Esau began a family of his own which eventually became a nation. In a continued reading of the Genesis account, after Esau and Jacob reconciled, you find in chapter 36:1, these words, “Now these are the generations of Esau, who is Edom.” But as we make our way through the Pentateuch, we see that even though Esau and Jacob reconciled, those born to them did not, leading to an inevitable national rivalry. In fact, we see a major confrontation that occurs between these two nations once Israel is brought out of the land of Egypt. While Israel is in their forty years of wilderness journeyings, Moses sends word to the king of Edom asking if they could merely pass through a portion of their land, and in **Numbers 20:14**, we read these words, “And Moses sent messengers from Kadesh unto the king of Edom, Thus saith thy brother Israel, Thou knows all the travail that hath befallen us;” The passage continues with Moses making the request to move through these lands, but in verse 18, we see the response, “And Edom said unto him, Thou shalt not pass by me, lest I come out against thee with the sword.”

This hostility obviously carried over several hundred years later to the Babylonian invitation. Furthermore, this hostility is carried on even to this day by way of the surrounding countries of Israel.

Therefore, Obadiah is a book of judgment— but a judgment of another; not against Israel this time, but Edom.

How to Think About Obadiah

Because this prophecy is so small, it is fairly easy to see the outline divisions in Obadiah's message. The whole of this prophecy can be summed up in two sections: 1) A Prophecy toward Edom and 2) A Prophecy toward Israel

A Prophecy Toward Edom (verses 1-16): The vision given to Obadiah had some very sobering things to say. It was a message of defeat for this kingdom.

You Cling to a False Security (vs. 3-9)— The kingdom of Edom was boastful and prideful because they felt emboldened by their location. They lived in the rocks and the caves and felt as though no enemy could take their kingdom because it was difficult terrain and naturally fortified. But God makes it clear that neither their location nor their mighty men would be able to deliver them from the judgment that will come against them.

You Caused Part of the Problem (verses 10-13)— In these verses, God specifically cites the wrongdoing that they engaged in while Israel was suffering. While the people of Israel were being led away into captivity, these people came in afterward and started pillaging Jerusalem. In a very literal way, they added to the grief of their own relatives and were happy to do it.

You Aided the Enemy (verse 14)— “Neither shouldst thou have stood in the crossway, to cut off those of his that did escape; neither shouldst thou have delivered up those of his that did remain in the day of distress.” While families were attempting to run and protect themselves from the threat of invasion, the Edomites made it their mission to make sure that this did not happen. They went on little ‘bounty hunting missions’ in order to help the Babylonians capture as many people as they could.

You Will be Destroyed (verses 15-16)— God tells these people that they will be repaid for their cruelty and that their kingdom would be so devastated that it would be like they had never existed.

A Prophecy Toward Israel (verses 17-21): Eventually, just like Israel, Edom would be judged. However, unlike Edom, Israel still had a future. Here God gives a great prophecy of the eventual restoration of Israel and establishes their inheritance forever.

What to Look for in Obadiah

Themes— What will cause this small prophecy to leave you with a large impression is by looking that the themes that can be found in its verses.

Pride: Pride seems to be the cause of the Edomites’ action against Israel. Yes, there was resentment, but pride was the sin that became the result of the outward actions that caused them to act. They had no problem moving outside their city to occupy Israel and aid the Babylonians because not only did they feel superior, but they felt protected in that showing their presence could never be retaliated against because of their location in the mountains.

Justice: God demands that these sins caused by sin to be paid for by war. There would be no place to run, and no place to hide, and their name would be forever lost just as they desired for their kin nation of Israel.

Restoration: As all of the prophets, Obadiah points to a future time of restoration for His people. We should never become weary of God’s repetition of the promise of redemption, but completely encouraged by it. God does not do anything by accident or oversight, and the fact that this theme happens so often should always cause us to stop and reflect for a moment on God’s promises.

What to Gain from Obadiah

God Teaches that He Repays Evil for Evil— In verse 15, we read these words, “For the day of the LORD is near upon all the heathen: as thou hast done, it shall be done unto thee: thy reward shall return upon thine own head.” There are so many people that live in a constant state of danger and never realize it. Just like these people, they look at their life and their faux superiority as a license to do whatever it is that they want. They feel that they are only accountable to themselves and they are quite satisfied with performing all kinds of evil— even at the expense of others. But God never lets their evil escape from their ledger. This is a sowing and reaping principle that you can never outrun.

God Teaches that We Should Never Become Indifferent Toward the Suffering of Others— Because of pride and hostility, the Edomites could look at Israel with cold and unresponsive eyes. They could see images, and be unmoved. They could hear screams, and smile. They could see abandoned property, and exploit it. They could witness escape and hinder movement. They were wholly indifferent to the suffering of others. That said, it is easy for us to become the same way. Perhaps in a different way, but the fact is the overstimulation of streaming violence occurring all over the world, and unnecessary stigma of certain people groups can be a real danger in looking at others with eyes of indifference. Truly, there are other causes for this, and truly this example is painted with a very large brush, however, the temptation exists to develop an indifferent attitude toward people in their hurt, and this is completely contrary to how God feels about the world.

God Teaches the Principle of Blessing and Cursing Israel— All the back in Genesis 12, you find this promise from God to Abraham in verses 2-3, “And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: and I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.” God has never forgotten that promise, and God has never ignored that promise. It stands to this day and will continue to until He establishes His kingdom forever. This is why we need to stand with Israel. We don’t have to agree with everything they do, but we should stand with them.

35. A PROPHET ON THE RUN

JONAH

Jonah is one of the most fun, exciting, sorrowful, and convicting stories in all of the Bible. People of all ages are fascinated with the story of Jonah and the great fish. If you talk to a child who has grown up in church, they love to hear the story of Jonah being swallowed up by a great fish. If you talk to an adult skeptic, they love to hear whether or not you believe in the story of Jonah and the great fish.

And sadly, that is usually where the message of Jonah stays— in the realm of children or in the realm of skeptics because many Christians simply do not know what to do with it. Are we to take this book as literal or figurative? Is it history or allegory? These are the questions that roll around in the minds of well-intending Bible students, but because they don't know how to answer, sometimes these questions are ignored and never answered.

However, if it is the authenticity of the book that we need, we should look no further than the confirming message of the Bible itself. In 2 Kings 14:25 says, "He restored the coast of Israel from the entering of Hamath unto the sea of the plain, according to the word of the LORD God of Israel, which he spake by the hand of his servant Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet, which was of Gathhepher." And if we look to the book of Jonah itself, in the first verse of chapter 1 we read, "Now the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the son of Amittai..."

Further, if we dive into the book of Jonah itself, we find that there is absolutely nothing in this message which would indicate to us that it is anything other than historical narrative.

Although, the greatest evidence that exists for the confirmation of the book rests in the words of Christ, Himself. If we make our way to Matthew 12:39-40, we read the words, "But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas; For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." We also find a passage in Luke that records the same thing (Luke 11:30).

For Christians to be ashamed of this message because of the use of the supernatural is really quite a shame. If we can believe that God spoke creation into existence, then we can believe also that He could prepare fish that could house a man for three days and three nights.

Additionally, we miss the point of Jonah's message when we make it only about a man versus a great fish. The story is not about a great fish that swallowed a man. It is about a great God who saved a nation.

The name Jonah means "Dove" which is bird symbolizing peace, but it has been said that Jonah acted more like a buzzard most of the time.

From the time we are really introduced to Jonah, we notice a few little character flaws as we track this narrative message that bears his name. Let's see how this book works.

How to Think About Jonah

The book of Jonah really is an interesting read. It is easily broken up into four different sections that can be identified by each of the four chapters provided in the book.

Jonah on the Run (Chapter 1): Here is where you find the initial call of Jonah to go preach to the people of Nineveh because of their wickedness. Now, when we see these words about the wickedness of the people of Nineveh, that is exactly what God means. It has been said that these people were known for ripping off the lips and the hands of those people whom they conquered. It has been said that these people were known to bury their victims alive in the hot sands of the desert. It has been said that the people of Nineveh were known for skinning and impaling people. These people were not the friendliest people you would ever come against. And hearing God's message that He would bring judgment against them was music to Jonah's ears.

I'll Skip Town (Jonah 1:3a): Jonah decides to go the complete opposite direction into a place called Tarshish. Now, if you are simply reading this quickly, you'll miss out on the fact that if you want to run away from God, Satan would be more than happy to help you do it.

I'll Go As Far As I Can (Jonah 1:3b): It was an easy decision for Jonah, he would cash in his finances and make the journey. Once again, there is

more here than meets the eye. When we read that Jonah was headed to Tarshish, we're reading the account of Jonah trying to get as far away from Nineveh as he possibly could. Tarshish was the furthest place on the map that hosted civilization of any kind. What we are reading is Jonah trying to get to the edges of the earth so that there would be no way he could be compelled to go to a nation and a people whom he hated.

I'll Commit Suicide (Jonah 4-17): The worst position you can find yourself as a child of God, is to be on the run because you have become a fugitive from God. God hurled a storm in the way of the ship that was so terrible, that the experienced seamen started to get real religious all of the sudden. They all were quite sure that they were going to die at sea and so that attempted to try any means possible to save themselves. So, in desperation, they come to Jonah, and astonishingly, they find him asleep during this behemoth of a storm.

As the narrative moves along, Jonah is finally outed as the reason the ship and its occupants were in so much danger. And in a cowardice and hard-hearted move, Jonah tells them to just cast him over-board. Understand that there was nothing noble about what Jonah was trying to accomplish. He still was attempting to be completely defiant to God's will; and if he needed to kill himself to escape what God wanted him to do so that the people of Nineveh received the justice they deserved, then so be it.

Eventually, this is exactly what happened. The sailors threw Jonah overboard and Jonah was going to end it all right then and there. However, what Jonah did not anticipate was a God who was relentless in using Jonah as a herald of grace. God had prepared a great fish for Jonah who swallowed him whole like a bitter pill.

Jonah in the Fish (2:1-10): Here, for all of the wrong we are able to observe in the life of Jonah, in this chapter what good spills over that we can readily see from his life is the fact that this man was one who knew and understood how to apply Scripture. No less than six times we see Jonah using portions of Scripture to pray and cry out to God after he is captured and confined to the inside of a massive fish.

Jonah's Realization (2:1-9): There was something Jonah immediately noticed as he rested inside the fish— he was not being consumed. He had his thoughts, and if his thoughts, he had his life. And what does he decide to do with this time? Well, in the darkness, jostling about with every quick jerk of this mighty sea creature, he prays. You can listen that he is obviously afraid, confused, and humbled by this situation. We have to understand that Jonah didn't know what God would do with him. As far as he knew, this is where he would meet his end. And what Jonah chooses to do is pray one of the most beautiful prayers in all of Scripture.

Jonah's Deliverance (2:10): Most likely, to Jonah's surprise, God delivers Jonah from the fish and suddenly, he finds himself on dry land.

Jonah on the Road (3:1-10): In these verses receives the same instruction as he did before, and this time, Jonah only did one thing— he did exactly what God wanted him to do— he preached.

Jonah's Message (3:1-4): Jonah's message was a simple one— Repent! The message was that these people had forty days to repent, or they would simply be destroyed.

Nineveh's Response (3:5-9): What happens with Jonah's preaching is what every preacher dreams about— there is a full-blown, nationwide revival. It started with the king, and worked its way down to the animals.

God's Relief (3:10): When this verse tells us that God repeated, it has confused many people. They ask, "From what did God repent? Did He make a mistake in desiring this nation to be destroyed?" The word repent here has to do with a 'sigh.' In essence, it was a sigh of relief that Nineveh decided to listen to God's message.

Jonah in the Sun (4:1-11): To close out this message, it ends with Jonah in an extremely bad mood. He leaves the city. You would think that he would stay for a bit and help disciple some of these people and establish them in the faith, but instead he moves out to the East side of the city and just waits to see if God will come to His senses and destroy the people regardless.

Jonah's Anger (4:1-4): Jonah was seething with anger all because of witnessing the salvation of this nation. There are many emotions that can result from seeing a life redeemed, but anger should never be one of them.

Jonah's Hope (4:5): Jonah builds a little shelter and just begins watching and hoping that God would rain down fire on the city despite their repentance. Obviously Jonah did not feel like the sins of these people were forgivable.

Jonah's Broken Heart (4:6-8): God teaches Jonah a lesson by way of a large plant that provided shelter from the sun, while he awaited Nineveh's deserved destruction. What was sad is that Jonah fell in love with this plant. But to show Jonah his misplaced affection, God prepared a worm to eat the plant, and then prepared an east wind to oppress Jonah along with the plant. And heart-broken about the plant, Jonah desires for God to kill him.

Jonah's Silence (4:10-11): God brings out the fact that it was ridiculous for Jonah to develop a relationship with a plant that was raised and destroyed in a 24 hour period, but that he did not care for the eternal souls of an entire people group. In this story, God has the last word and ends with a question. We never get to hear Jonah's response. And this really is the point. It was left for consideration. Are we lifting up our righteousness over against others, and have we grown in inordinate affection toward things that really do not matter at all?

What to Look for in Jonah

Unique Characteristics: Because this book is written in narrative format, we are given the unique opportunity to analyze the different characteristics of those listed in the plot line.

The Characteristics of Man: From Jonah we learn that we can become self-righteous and hard-hearted toward other people or nations. Even if we are serving God, going to church, and any other combination of religious things to go along with it, we can still be completely off base with God in other areas of our lives.

When we look at the people of Nineveh, we find just what humankind is capable of in regard to spiritual decline. An entire nation had God's wrath

hovering over them because of the deplorable acts that began to characterize them as a people.

The Characteristics of God: In complete contrast to man, there is God. When His prophet tried to run, God was relentless in His pursuit to not only cause Jonah to deliver the message God desired Jonah preach, but to teach Jonah a lesson about mercy.

On the side of Nineveh, we find that despite their wickedness, God was willing to give them a message of warning in order to see them saved. God is not required to give this kind of mercy, but that's just the kind of God He is.

We may identify Jonah's story as 'Jonah and the Whale' but make no mistake, it is God who is on the center stage the entire time.

What to Gain from Jonah

God is the God of the Second Chance: A well used phrase, but an awesome truth. Jonah ran and God pursued. And when Jonah came to a place of repentance and thanksgiving, God delivered him from the fish and in chapter 3:1 we read, "And the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the second time..." We should be so incredibly thankful that God deals with us in this way. Failure is the only action we can truly count on as far as consistency is concerned. But God on the other hand, He consistently forgives and restores. Another try is given— another opportunity to serve Him.

God Wants to Give Mercy: As discussed previously, when Nineveh repented, God sighed and sigh of relief that He no longer would need to judge this kingdom for their sin. There are many who have a false view of God thinking that God is just ready to strike them at any moment, but here we learn that this is not the case whatsoever. God will judge sin and bring punishment, but He yearns for us to make the right decision and just repent. There is a sense where we can see God saying, "Please don't make me do this!" And when a change is made, God feels relief when judgment is no longer on the table.

God Pursues His Own: Jonah was able to experience first hand just how far God would go in order to have him back in relationship. The entire time in this narrative you see the phrase "God prepared..." and it has reference to all the things God prepared for Jonah in order to teach him a lesson. God prepared a storm, a fish, a gourd, a worm, and a vehement east wind all for Jonah so that he would come to a place of repentance and greater fellowship with God. And we should absolutely love this about our Lord— He pursues His own!

36. WHO IS LIKE JEHOVAH

MICAH

It has been said that the book of Micah reads like a court document. Imagine you are on trial. You sit there, you have no defense except yourself, and though you had convinced yourself that you were innocent, though you convinced yourself that what you were doing was fine, that it was the law that unreasonable, and that you were fully justified in all of your actions, as you finally hear all of the mounting evidence against you, your hands start to get clammy, your mouth dry, and your muscles start to tremble as you realize you were dead wrong and the judge would soon demand a response from you.

That is a lot like the book of Micah. His book is all judgment and so it is not filled with anything joyful or exciting as far as the main message is concerned. As in the case with some of the other prophets, the message that Micah carried was not to any other nation except God's people.

Micah was a prophet who was in one of those unique positions where he was able to see Jerusalem in its good times, and then was brought down with sorrow as he witnessed her destruction.

Aside from his name and where he was from, not much is known about this man of God. His name means "Who is Like Jehovah" and the whole of this book is bound up in the meaning of this name. Who else would be able to bind up an entire nation, set them in the courtroom, and then bring the entire earth to bear witness of their terrible offenses? None but God; there is none like Him.

Another piece of information we are given is that Micah was from a place called Moresheth-Gath, which was about twenty-five miles southwest of Jerusalem. It appears that, like the prophet Amos, Micah was a prophet who was far removed from the moral filth and sludge that was prominent in Jerusalem and Samaria.

Although Micah's message was at times directed both to the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, it would appear that his central focus was on the Southern Kingdom of Judah and was commissioned by God to attack their social injustices and religious indifferences in that day.

How to Think About Micah

The book of Micah is made up of three sermons that can help you determine what is occurring in this book. Each sermon is easily identified because each of these sermons begin with the word "Hear."

Hear of My Judgments to Come (Micah 1-3): These chapters show God handing down the specific indictments of the people for their sins, and then the leaders and false prophets who were perpetuating this evil and oppression. Once again, we see that God tells these people that there would be no place to hide once this judgment comes.

The Judge is Coming Against the Nation (1-2)— Verses 3-4 of chapter 1 hold a particularly chilling picture of what was about to happen to this nation, "For, behold, the LORD cometh forth out of his place, and will come down, and tread upon the high places of the earth. And the mountain shall be molten under him, and the valleys shall be cleft, as wax before the fire, and as the waters that are poured down a steep place." The Almighty was on His way to judge the people. The same God whom the lands and mountains cannot stand before, the same God who melts the very terrain of the earth with His footsteps, was about to come down and take up His seat of judgment against the nation for their sins. **The Judge is Coming Against the Leaders (3)**—The heads of the families and the princes of Israel are specifically named here. God reveals the whole of their character and when His divine light shines down on them, there is only a black ugliness that exists. They were abusing and exploiting all of the people that were under their charge. Their main character trait, God said, was that they hated good and loved evil. They became so depraved and so abusive that the analogy God gave to describe their behavior was that these leaders were skinning their people like an animal, field stripping them, and putting them in a stewpot.

The second group of leaders spoken against were the false prophets. These individuals were the ones teaching error and perpetuating the injustices. It appears that this was a top down corruption operation. The leaders would act against the people and justify it all along the way, and this made its way down to the behavior of the people in how they treated each other. For this crime of false teaching, God told them He was going to silence His message completely, and that every single one of these individuals would be brought down to such shame, that they would be silenced completely.

Hear of My Restoration to Come (Micah 4-5): This prophecy of Micah is not for the immediate nation, but instead spans across the ages and provides one of the most shockingly beautiful Messianic prophecies about the second coming of the Messiah in the entire Bible, and ends with how we might identify Him.

Behold the Kingdom (4)— In verses 1-4 we are confronted with that grand kingdom to come that will be ruled by the Messiah to come. Unlike every other ruler the world has ever known, this ruler will know how to rule in absolute godliness, and because of His reign, the people of earth will forget how to war against each other and will turn their weapons into instruments of agriculture. A perfect kingdom maintained by a Perfect Ruler.

Behold the King (5)— Chapter 5 answers the question, “Well, how will we be able to tell who this king is? How will we find Him?” And that is answered in verse 2, “But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been told from of old, from everlasting.”

If you remember, 700 years later when King Herod asked his priests where this king would be born, they knew exactly what to say; they quoted from this passage. And just as the prophecy stated, Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Behold the King.

Hear of My Call to Come (Micah 6-7): These chapters highlight the fact that God wants His people to be restored back to Him. He gives correction that needs to take place, and says that judgment would follow, but His heart’s desire is that they would repent and come back to fellowship.

God’s First Call to Repentance (6)— God is leading His people to once again understand what it means to be godly. He calls on His people to testify against Him and see if they can bring any accusation against Him. Of course, they cannot. So in a passionate plea God reminds them what He required for a right relationship with Him.

God’s Second Call to Repentance (7:1-6)— God causes them to look at themselves for a moment. If you have children, perhaps they say something or do something that is obviously wrong, and as a parent, you stop them and have them reflect a little on what it was that they had done. Well, this was God to His people here. They treated each other so poorly. You couldn’t trust your wife, husband, brother, daughter, sister, or friends— it was a terrible time to live; a time when you couldn’t even trust your own family. So God just wanted them to look for a moment and tell Him if they thought this was normal.

God’s Promise of Protection (7:7-20): God will continue to sustain His people and keep His promise to the shock of all other nations. Toward the end of this section, Micah praises God for His mercy in this way.

What to Look for in Micah

Prophecy—

Unfulfilled Prophecy: As stated previously, Micah 4 is a great section on the coming of peace to the world. This is something that is spoken about frequently, and throughout human history. This is because a longing for peace, although ruined by sin, is continually in the heart of men. However, this will never be accomplished until Christ comes to rule and reign upon His second return. But when He does institute His rule, peace will be the natural and complete result of His reign.

Fulfilled Prophecy: There are two occasions in the New Testament where Micah is quoted and confirmed as completely accurate, and the first once again is in chapter 3 where the birthplace of the Messiah is stunningly named. Like his contemporary Isaiah, who was given the striking information that Christ would be born by a virgin, Micah was given information that explained exactly where this virgin would give birth.

The second time Micah is quoted in the New Testament is in Matthew 10:35-36. Jesus was quoting from Micah 7:6 describing what would happen to those disciples who chose Him over their family. He was describing relational divides that would occur and that to follow Christ would mean to create enemies that, at one time, did not exist.

Key Words—

Controversy: This sums up the book of Micah. It is God’s controversy with His people. This was often used as a technical legal term, and God employs it here as He is describing that His people are being placed on trial, and the entire world will stand witness to this event.

What to Gain from Micah

Listen to God’s Plea Before Experiencing God’s Punishment— Before real trouble came, God emotionally appealed to His people to come back and serve Him. Once again, instruction was given, once again, He pleaded for their heart, once again He promised to restore them. Sadly, we know the choice that was ultimately made, but for our lives, we can learn from their mistake. If God provides a measure of mercy and saves you from what could potentially be a hazardous experience, it is far better to listen to that and learn, rather than come against God’s full punishment.

Leadership Sets the Tone for the People— The People were primarily in trouble because they were simply copying what they were watching their leaders do. Godly leadership is indispensable for health and vitality and it is incumbent upon the people to hold their leaders accountable to God’s standards instead of following them down the same dark road they are traveling.

Christ’s Rule Will be the Only Righteous Rule— Looking forward to the cross, out of all of the leaders we have discussed, out of all the great men and women of the faith witnessed so far, and out of all those prophets mentioned and still to come, we find that they were either lacking morally, or lacking in their ability to bring about the kind of change needed to turn people toward God. However, in Micah’s message we find that there is One hero of the Bible that will accomplish this. He will not only speak law, but will establish peace by it, permanently.

37. NINEVEH NO MORE

NAHUM

Here we run into a situation that we have seen before, and that is that much of the information we would like to know about this prophet of God remains hidden from us. We know his name; Nahum. We know that his name means “Comforter.” We know that he describes himself as an “Elkoshite.” We know what he discloses in his prophecy and that it is anything but “comforting” to those to whom he is writing. Aside from this, we know nothing else of this man and when specifically this message was given.

However, what we do know is that back in the book of Jonah, this prophet was placed in a tremendous amount of trouble with God because of his refusal to preach to the people of Nineveh because he was afraid that God would show them mercy if they repented— and that is exactly what happened. These people repented, came to God, and this absolutely infuriated Jonah. But in Nahum, we find that he was given the job Jonah wanted. Judgment was coming to this nation, and this time, there was nothing that would keep it from happening.

Needless to say, the message of Nahum is not one you would probably like to read right before you go to bed at night; its tones are serious, its message is clear, and its pronouncement is final.

In Jonah, we spoke about the ruthlessness of these Assyrian people towards other nations, and specifically towards the people of Israel. Although there was genuine repentance at one time from these people, it appears they went into a relapse and sunk back into their old ways. It also appears that they suffered from a great deal of pride. They were proud of the size of their city. They were proud of the self-sufficiency of their agricultural production. They were proud of the 12,000 towers they built which were scattered all over the city. They were proud of their one hundred foot walls that were so wide, three chariots could ride side by side together. And apparently, this pride problem had gone on for quite some time, because in the beginning of this prophecy much attention is given, not to the patience of God, but the terrible power and judgment He possesses.

Though these people felt like they were untouchable, and though from the outside looking in by the surrounding nations they looked untouchable, God assured them that this was not the case and that He would bring them down so low that they would experience a defeat so great that they would never recover. These people have experienced the mercy of God, but now, they are doomed to experience the wrath of God.

How to Think About Nahum

Once again, what to have in your mind when you read this book is God’s judgment on the people of Nineveh.

This is What I Will Do... Cause Destruction (Chapter 1): This chapter details the continual patience of God while this nation took a turn for the worst. It was not simply that they had become complacent in their sin, it was that they continued to get worse and worse, despite the grace that He had shown them.

My Power Exceeds Your Own (Chapter 1:2-8)— When God is explaining to these people exactly who He is, we are met with some of the most terrible descriptions of His power in all of the Bible. Verses 3-6 read like this, “The LORD is slow to anger, and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked: the LORD hath his way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebuketh the sea, and maketh it dry, and drieth up all the rivers: Bashan languisheth, and Carmel, and the flower of Lebanon languisheth. The mountains quake at him, and the hills melt, and the earth is burned at his presence yea, the world, and all that dwell therein. Who can stand before his indignation? and who can abide in the fierceness of his anger? his fury is poured out like fire, and the rocks are thrown down by him.”

These are words that cannot be ascribed to anyone except for God. The challenge was thrown down by Nineveh by way of their disobedience, and this is God telling them that He accepts.

My Punishment Is Absolute (Chapter 1:9-15)— Here God explains that there would be no way these people would be able to recover from the destruction He would pour out upon them.

This is How I Will Do It... By Dismantling (Chapter 2): This section is all about God detailing exactly how He would take this nation apart. God would not only dismantle this people by way of their forces and government, but also by their reputation.

Their Siege is Described (2:1-10): An interesting fact can be observed here. Remember once more, that in this writing we are dealing with prophecy, and therefore, in this case, with foretelling. These events have not yet happened, and with this in mind, pay attention to the description God gives regarding their impending invasion in verse 3, “The shield of his mighty men is made red, the valiant men are in scarlet:” God was telling this nation that they would fall, and He further signaled who it was that would be invading. History tells us that the Medes wore red uniforms and carried red shields. These individuals, along with the Babylonians were the ones to bring Nineveh to its knees. And everything happened exactly how God said that it would.

Their Reputation is Destroyed (2:11-13): There was an apparent love of lions as the official symbol for these people; we might call this animal their mascot. That is why in these verses you will see the reference made to lions several times. They no doubt believed that they protected their own like lions, were bold and fearsome like a lion, and that it was they who were at the top of the food chain and not to be taunted. However, the question is asked in verse 11, “Where is the dwelling of the lions, and the feeding place of the young lions, where the lion, even the old lion walked, and the lion’s whelp, and none made them afraid?” They had lost their courage. They were, in all respects, “cowardly lions” now.

This is What Others Will Say... Well Done (Chapter 3): Because of the violence, idolatry, arrogance, and complete disregard for God’s mercy and assumption that God would bless regardless, there would be none who would stand up and mourn their fall. In fact, the opposite would be true. Verse 19 says, “There is no healing of thy bruise; thy wound is grievous: all that hear the bruit of thee shall clap the hands over thee: for upon whom hath not thy wickedness passed continually?” Everyone will look and see what God has brought against this nation and they will all say, “Well done.”

What to Look for in Nahum

Promises—

The Promise of God’s Goodness: Chapter 1 and verse 7 has this to say, “The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; and he knoweth them that trust in him.” Right there, in the middle of God’s pronouncement of judgment, God reminds all of this truth: “I Am good.” We will cover this in greater detail in a moment, but God’s judgment against evil is part of the way He is good. So let us cause this to enter our minds: All of God’s judgments are good.

The Promise of Peace: This truth we find in verse 12 of the same chapter “Thus saith the LORD; Though they be quiet, and likewise many, yet thus shall they be cut down, when he shall pass through. Though I have afflicted thee, I will afflict thee no more.” Here is a promise to His people Israel that there will be a day when they will not be put under judgment any longer. There will be a day of continual triumph because of the Messiah to come.

It is also important here to remember that there are promises specifically ascribed to Israel as a nation and to those of us in the church age, and here is one of those promises. This is a distinct promise to Israel.

What to Gain from Nahum

Your Blessings of Yesterday Do Not Cover Your Tomorrow— Much of the arrogance can no doubt be traced back right here— the assumption that God’s past blessings will continue despite what kind of life is chosen. Sometimes this opinion is bolstered because as this person moves further and further away from that line God has specifically drawn and nothing happens, it is believed that ‘nothing’ will continue to happen. This can even turn into believing that their ability to continue, and sometimes even prosper, is evidence that God is not against them, he is actually for them.

When God gave them the prophet Jonah, and repentance was experienced, they began to believe that once was enough. But God’s blessings do not work this way. There are new mercies, there is new grace to be had, and there is new direction and power to be provided, but this newness comes with the newness of each day. That each new day given is an opportunity to receive new blessing by living in the presence of God, not apart from it.

A Lack of Repentance Bring About the Other Side of God’s Goodness— What is meant by this is that all of the positive experiences we can enjoy with God because of His goodness through repentance truly is wonderful, but the other side of God’s goodness that exists because of His judgment against a lack of repentance is truly terrible.

When we look at God’s true holiness, we have to come to grips with the fact that because of this, He must judge sin. God is love, yes. That is part of His goodness. But God is also holy and cannot allow sin to ultimately continue, and therefore, it must be judged. This is also part of God’s goodness. His love and justice are two sides of the same coin as far as His goodness is concerned. If God allowed murder, pedophilia, theft, lying, and the host of other sins against His character to go unpunished, He would not be good.

So we rejoice in God’s goodness that provides mercy to those who will turn toward Him, and we tremble at God’s goodness as it brings ultimate justice against those who refuse.

38. SOME QUESTIONS FOR GOD

HABAKKUK

Now the book of Habakkuk is very interesting. We've spoken before about the creativity of God in terms of how the prophetic writings differed from one another and all the different methods God used to grab the attention of the original audience. This writing certainly is to be given extra attention for creativity.

This book is one where there is no real specific audience except for the author himself.

In reading this book, you are taken on a journey with the prophet to figure out some truth. Has that ever been you? Were there ever any questions that you had regarding the plans and courses of God? Perhaps you say something like, "Well, I wonder why God brought me this way?" Or maybe it was, "Well, if this was destined to turn out so poorly, why did God allow me to go down this path in the first place? Why didn't He just stop me?" Or maybe your curiosity of your current situation took the form of a question closer to our prophet here, "O LORD, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear?"

This entire book is questions Habakkuk has for God. This is not in a disrespectful way at all; it is simply in an inquisitive way. He simply wants to hear from God regarding certain things in his life.

Because of this, some writers have called Habakkuk the "doubting Thomas" of the Old Testament", others have said that he must have had a question mark for a brain. But the reality was that he was simply trying to work some things out by talking to himself a bit and bringing us along with him on this little spiritual trip. He just wanted to understand, and I think that we can both identify and appreciate this from our dear prophet. He was just being himself.

Once again, just like we learned with Job, it isn't wrong to ask questions. It's wrong to ask questions in the wrong spirit. It is wrong to ask questions that are an accusation because we don't agree with something that was done, rather than an acceptance of the holy courses of God. But it is not wrong to ask God questions.

Right here in the Old Testament, you have an answer to how the believer in Christ can respond to the situations in life that just do not seem to make sense.

It is interesting to observe that the name Habakkuk means "Embrace" (a hug) and that is exactly what happens when you understand this book. If there is some struggle that you have and cannot seem to get worked out, come and get a spiritual hug from this prophet of God. You have a book that you can come to again and again to seek help in times of confusion.

How to Think About Habakkuk

As in our previous book, this writing only consists of three chapters and is a relatively easy read. Its major sections can easily be discovered with each dividing chapter. We also need to understand the purpose of this book. Habakkuk's questions to God had to do with those who held God's people captive at the time, the Babylonians.

As far as Israel's history is concerned in the Old Testament, God's people had conflict with three main enemies: 1) The Edomites, who were written about by the prophet Obadiah, 2) The Assyrians, who were written about Nahum, and 3) The Babylonians, who were written of here by our prophet Habakkuk.

Habakkuk had watched the atrocities of the Babylonians and stood in astonishment as God continued to allow this nation to oppress God's people without reprisal.

Faith Is Confusing (Chapter 1)— In this chapter, Habakkuk uses a series of questions in an attempt to understand what God was doing with His people.

When Are You Going to Do Something? (1:1-2): This is Habakkuk's frustration. He is a man of God. Therefore, he knows God's power, he knows right and wrong, and yet he sees everything falling apart around him. He looks up to God with what he sees and utters a single word to God, "Violence!" But as he is listening back, he hears nothing from heaven and is simply wondering how long he has to wait before he does.

Why Did You Do That? (1:3-11): Here we see God's answer to Habakkuk telling him that the Babylonians would be raised up to deal with His unruly people. Verse 6 reads, "For, lo, I raise up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, which shall march through the breadth of the land, to possess the dwelling places that are not theirs."

How Can They Help? (1:12-17): Habakkuk can't understand at first how God would correct the evil and violence of His people by way of another nation who was more evil and violent than Israel had become.

Faith is Frustrating (Chapter 2)— Chapter 2 provides another question and another answer given by God.

Habakkuk and His Determination (2:1): The verse is short, but we must stop here and consider the significance. Habakkuk said, "I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will watch to see what he will say unto me, and what I shall answer when I am reproved."

This is Habakkuk saying that he will simply bring this matter before the Lord, and then he will wait confidently for an answer. Now, the reason we must stop here is because if we read this too quickly, we will not understand the gravity. We may finish in seconds what Habakkuk learned over a significant period of time while in his pain of confusion. Habakkuk decided He would bring the matter before the Lord and would linger there until he had peace about it.

God and His Answer (2:2-20): After an unknown period of time, God told Habakkuk, "Hey, write this down." God then began to give Habakkuk an answer by a series of "woe" oracles against the Chaldeans. It was an indication that though they would be used to judge His people, these Chaldeans would ultimately be judged because of their sin as well. It was God's way of telling His people that ultimately, evil never wins, and will always be judged.

Faith is Unwavering (Chapter 3): Despite what can be seen immediately, God's faith calls us to move beyond the observable and simply take Him at His Word. This chapter of the book is actually a prayer of Habakkuk, but is written like a song, as he not only begins petitioning God on behalf of His mercy but also singing praise to God for all he has done.

The Prayer for God's Mercy (3:1-2): Habakkuk now knows what must come to pass, but only asks that in the middle of God pouring out His wrath, would He please remember His mercy as well.

The Praise for God's Power (3:3-15): Here Habakkuk gives God the recognition due only to Him. He is the Master of all creation, and all nature knows what to do at God's presence and command.

The Promise of God's Sufficiency (3:16-19): After all the trouble and after all the confusion, Habakkuk had this to say about what the Lord would do as he ends this prophecy in verse 19, "The LORD God is my strength, and he will make my feet like the hinds' feet, and he will make me to walk upon mine high places. To the chief singer on my stringed instruments."

It was Habakkuk's understanding that though there was trouble ahead, it would be God who would continue to sustain His people and continue to preserve them through all of their trouble.

What to Look for in Habakkuk

Promises— Like our other prophets bearing bad news, there are promises that are sown in to give rays of hope along the way.

The Promise of God's Knowledge to All— Habakkuk 2:14 reads like this, "For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea."

God desires, and has always desired to be known among all the peoples of the earth. Though this truth will be covered in greater detail in a moment, God works in the world and through His people that He might be made known.

The Promise of God's Permanence— This promise we find in just a few verses down from the previous. In Habakkuk 2:20 our prophet records these words, "But the LORD is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him."

In Scripture, we are reminded over and over again that what appears to be a world spinning out of control and burning away to its destruction, God is still there ruling and presiding over every instant of human history. Therefore, instead of throwing up our hands in hysteria like everyone else, we can rest calmly and silently in the fact that God is in His holy temple, and there he will remain forever.

The Solution for Confusion— Once again, Habakkuk was sincerely confused about how to think about what was happening around him. It wasn't causing him to question his faith or the goodness of God, he just simply was trying to find an answer. In his search, we see a fantastic pattern to follow that we can use when we come against a spiritual problem we can't readily explain.

Acknowledge the Problem: That is what Habakkuk was doing with his series of questions. He recognized that things were not right in the world. Just honestly acknowledge whatever the problem is.

Tell God About It: Express your problem plainly to the One who is able to give you an answer. It won't do you any good to stay in a state of worry, fear, and confusion. There are so many answers outside of our control, so let's get used to telling God about our needs.

Wait On God: It's okay to keep praying for guidance over and over again. Don't stop praying and lose faith because you didn't receive an answer in your timeframe. Keep praying and keep waiting. Also, make sure that while you're asking God to answer you about what you don't know, that you preach to yourself those things about God that you can know. This is the example that we see from Habakkuk. It was as if he were praying to God, "Lord, I know that you are good, but I can't seem to work this out." This is the attitude you're looking for when you're waiting.

Listen and Follow: When God finally does answer (even if a specific answer is not known), we need to accept what God gives us peace about. If there is a direct answer, perfect! However, if we sense that we won't know until we get to heaven, we must also accept this as an answer.

What to Gain from Habakkuk

Everything God Does, He Does for His Glory— In the midst of Habakkuk’s confusion, God helps his dear prophet put everything into perspective. God was working toward an end that would amplify His glory to the world, and that the world would come to know Him. Everything God does in our lives is also to this end. That we would know Him, and once we know Him, that we would be able to point others to Him. God wants all people to have a knowledge of Him, and He has allowed us to partner with Him to make that happen.

Sometimes Faith Has Problems— Habakkuk is a book to remind us that even though we don’t have all of the answers, we can still trust God. So often we judge our lives by outward appearance only and forget that God is His holy temple ruling by His divine providence.

William Cowper said it best in his Hymn “God Moves in a Mysterious Way” when he wrote, “Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him for His grace. Behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face.”

39. THE DAY OF THE LORD

ZEPHANIAH

It's no secret that in our day, people hate the idea of other people being judgmental. In fact, they hate judgment so much that they begin to judge the person they believe is judging them!

However, we can't get away from judgment; we have to judge. Judgment is how decisions are made, friendships are forged, safety is sought, and life is lived. But still, people are completely against the idea of judgment, and as a consequence, they are completely against the God of the Bible.

Out of the many things we know about God and how He reveals Himself, one of the ways God reveals Himself is that He is Judge. In other words, God is very judgmental. He has righteous standards that are perfectly in step with His righteous character, and by this, He judges all of mankind.

It is with this acknowledgment that we come to the book of Zephaniah. In this prophecy, God is Judge and as He compares His standard against His people, we find that they have fallen desperately short. Needless to say, this prophecy is not a very happy prophecy.

Zephaniah was written at the time of Jeremiah, and it was his task to join Jeremiah and speak against Judah to inform them of the impending judgment coming by way of the Babylonians.

We're not told an incredible amount about Zephaniah, but what is known captures the imagination. His name means "He Whom Jehovah Hides" and he is the only prophet who was of royal blood. He claims in his introduction to be of a royal lineage. This was a man with a name that would allow him to rule, but who had a heart that caused him to proclaim.

The world was in near chaos. Two huge forces were at odds with each other. The Assyrians were done with their ascent of power, and the Babylonians were the empire that was taking center stage on the world's scene.

Because of this, Judah was able to experience a large amount of freedom for the first time in about fifty years however, what was done with this relief was the truly tragic part. King Josiah, one of the few godly kings of Israel made little impact on this nation in terms of driving them away from their sin. If you remember, they even found the book of the law that had once been lost, and though there was a little bit of excitement, on the whole, it was very shallow because the people still did not respond.

So they had a godly leader, and they had God's book, and then God sent a godly man to warn them. It would seem they had every resource imaginable to turn back to God but still their time was wasted and still they were left unmoved. And so Zephaniah's message comes down like a hammer against these people who refuse to change.

How to Think About Zephaniah

You'll notice very straightforward tones in this book. Zephaniah is a very 'matter of fact' style prophet and his message was written very simply and plainly.

Judgment Will Come (1:1-3:8): This places a bull's eye on every single nation of the earth. This is how it operates:

Judgment Will Come Against the Entire Earth (1:2-3): "I will utterly consume all things from off the land, saith the LORD. I will consume man and beast; I will consume the fowls of heaven, and the fishes of the sea, and the stumbling blocks with the wicked: and I will cut off man from off the land, saith the LORD."

As we see from this passage, no specific nation is mentioned here. It is, once again, a 'matter of fact' statement. Worldwide judgment will come.

Judgment Will Come Against Judah (1:4-2:3): Throughout this passage you see God explaining what He will do: "I will punish..." "I will bring distress..." "I will search [to bring judgment]..." All of this against the nation of Judah.

Judgment Will Come Against the Surrounding Nations of Judah (2:4-15): Several nations and cities are mentioned here that we have seen in the past. Assyria, Nineveh, Ethiopia, and others all find themselves on the wrong side of God's judgment.

Judgment Will Come Against Jerusalem (3:1-7): Jerusalem, what was to be God's holy city, appears to be the very source of all of the oppression experienced by and perpetuated by the rest of the nation. God speaks against the princes, the false prophets, and the priests. God tells

them that they lost their ability to feel shame. These offenses are what will cause God to come against Jerusalem.

Judgment Will Come Against the Entire Earth (3:8): “Therefore wait ye upon the me, saith the LORD, until the day that I rise up to the prey: for my determination is to gather the nations, that I may assemble the kingdoms, to pour upon them mine indignation, even all my fierce anger: for all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of my jealousy.”

Once again we see God grouping all of those who would stand against Him, and instead of them being allowed to continue in their rebellion one moment more, He brings swift and complete judgment against them.

Blessing Will Come (3:9-20): As we can see, the entire earth will be in complete disarray and upheaval as God brings judgment against the world. However, it is Zephaniah’s name that becomes a beacon of hope. This prophet who was named “He Whom Jehovah Hides” becomes an indication that God always has a remnant. We have seen this word before in our journey through the prophets. This word speaks to the fact that no matter the evil, chaos, and judgment, no matter how many fall away from God, He always has a small remnant of people whom He calls His own and whom He hides in the midst of trouble.

A Blessing for the World (3:9-10): “For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to serve him with one consent. From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia my suppliants, even the daughter of my dispersed shall bring mine offering.” Once the hammer of judgment has fallen, God’s glory will then be known to all the world and all people, even those rebellious people of the nation of Israel, will all serve God together.

A Blessing for Judah (3:11-20): A further explanation of how God’s people would respond. What once was filled with judgment and sorrow, ends with peace and rejoicing as God’s blessings cause God’s people to sing. “Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all the heart, O daughter of Jerusalem.” (vs.14)

What to Look for in Zephaniah

Phrases—

The Day of the LORD: You’ll find this phrase twenty times during your reading of this prophecy. If someone was unfamiliar with this phrase, and they only heard it by itself, they might believe that this phrase is used to describe the day when God would like to be worshipped or honored. “Why are you praying?” Says one. “Haven’t you heard?” The other answers, “It’s the day of the LORD!”

However, if you’re reading this phrase in context and you see this phrase attached to the calamity surrounding it, you might look and be tempted to look at a singular point in time that has already occurred. And yes, the scope of this phrase included the impending invasion of the Babylonians, but it also had a much wider scope.

The Day of the LORD is a phrase that encompasses God’s final judgment on every affair of man. Jesus speaks of this time in Matthew 24.

What to Gain from Zephaniah

Faithfulness Is the Test of Real Change: We touched on this briefly, but during this time, one of the reasons no one thought that judgment would come was because not only were these people experiencing a new peace, but it would appear there was what would consider a brief little revival among the people. Of course, it wasn’t a real revival. Sure there was a renewed sense of God, there was a new pleasure and fascination with God’s Word, but Zephaniah could see the underpinning foundation in this spiritual resurgence and saw that it was cracked, and flawed, and shallow.

This happens to many of God’s people today. They hear a sermon, they look at their Bible on their coffee table and decide it has been sitting there too long and that they really should grab it and pick it up, they decide that their prayer life isn’t what it should be, and suddenly they are re-inspired for a moment, but if you were to examine the foundation, you would see that it was rooted in emotion and not because of revival.

The real test of real change in a person’s life is this: Are they continuing in faithfulness?

Judgment Is the Result of All Sin: We may have been wearied in speaking about this in our study of the entire prophetic section of the Old Testament. But we should be warned; those hearing these messages for the first time wearied of them and ignored them also. When the Bible repeats itself, it is not by accident. If we see judgment as a continued theme, then not only should we pay attention, but we should give our lives to continually have it on our minds and in our hearts. As it relates to God’s justice, we need to peer out and do all we can now for the cause of Christ because judgment will come.

Hope Is the Future of God’s Own: The most glorious facet of this prophecy is the fact that God has a remnant of people whom He calls His own. And as God’s own we are able to experience firsthand the hope God brings in the eternal ages to come. We will experience the hope of salvation. We will rejoice over the hope of God’s preservation. And we will watch as God brings hope to His created nation, by way of restoration. Being one of God’s own brings brings endless joy because of the future of His hope.

40. SNAP OUT OF IT

HAGGAI

Now here is an exciting story! The name Haggai means, “My Feasts” and he certainly lived up to his name. By his message, God used this man to give God’s people a feast of encouragement during very discouraging times.

The time of Haggai occurred after that time when the priest Ezra, along with 50,000 people were released from Babylonian captivity in 536 B.C. When we touched on this subject in the Historical Portion of the Old Testament, the people were excited, a wall was built, and then, they had it in their mind to rebuild the temple that had been destroyed. Well, if there is one thing you should know, it is that if you start a work for God, you need to expect a fight. And that is exactly what happened to these people. They were going to do a great work for God, but they ended up with the greatest fight in their life so, they just stopped. In fact, what was so sad about the whole event was that they only got as far as the foundation and never touched it again. For fifteen to sixteen years that foundation lay there collecting dirt, becoming overrun with weeds, and a continual scourge every time someone walked by it. What once was looked upon as a symbol of a new beginning was now a reminder of failure.

Because of this, there was a spirit of indifference and pessimism that could be felt and sensed in the cultural atmosphere. Furthermore, there was some poor end-time interpretation going on because of this seemingly defeated project. Some of those looking at the destruction pointed to a teaching that said there would be no reason to continue the work because they were destined to continue living the “Desolation of Jerusalem.” And sadly, this is what comes naturally for us during some of the failures we face. It is an excuse masked in righteous explanation. That is what these ‘critics of failure’ were doing.

But thank God for giving us the right kind of leaders for the right kind of times! There were four main leaders God used that helped God’s people transition from Babylonian captivity to a life independent from that lifestyle once again. These men were: the Priest named Ezra, the Governor named Zerubbabel, the High Priest named Joshua, and our prophet here named Haggai.

As it relates to Haggai, God used this man to rally His people to complete a glorious work for God that would otherwise have gone undone. What is really incredible is that the ministry of Haggai only lasts for four months as it is recorded in this book. God lit a fire under this man to light a fire for His people. And when it was lit, the people began to move for God once again.

How to Think About Haggai

Haggai can be thought about by looking at the sermons he preaches to the people. Haggai consists of four main sermons in the brief two chapters of the book. These sermons are arranged by date and for our contemporary ease, the dates listed in this work will be translated into our modern calendar to give you a better idea of when they were given.

A Change in the Seasons (Chapter 1): This sermon, according to our calendar, occurred September 1 and was a call for the people to stop the long delay of the project, and once again begin to build the temple.

A Motivating Exclamation (1:1-2)— Here we find the beginning of the first message and it starts off by beating the people to the punch of their explanation of why God’s work wasn’t done. After Haggai introduces himself and the timeframe in which he spoke, he immediately starts in on the people about their indifference regarding the temple— that no time was a good time. “Thus speaks the LORD of hosts, saying This people say, The time is not come, the time that the LORD’s house should be built.”

A Miserable Excuse (1:3-11)— This passage speaks to the peoples’ inconsistent argument. They were arguing about time, “We don’t have time.” But God says, “Well, you’ve had time to do the things that you wanted to do.” Verse 4 says, Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your cieled houses, and this house lie waste?” In other words, “You had time to build your houses, but you suddenly have no time to build mine?” The rest of this passage is given to the fact that God wanted His people to have a burden for His work.

A Marvelous Experience (1:12-15)— This is the blessing attached to doing what God wants you to do. And as God’s word was spoken, the heart of Zerubbabel was stirred up along with Joshua the High Priest and everyone got to work right then and there.

A Call in the Fall (Chapter 2:1-9): It wasn’t long before God once again put a message in the heart of His servant Haggai. This message occurred

October 21, and it was a sermon on greatness and prospective. There was a sad scene of the older ones who saw the glory of the former temple, and when they had seen this one, their hearts were breaking because in their minds, it wasn't the same. Therefore, this section deals with the past, present, and future as God assures His people that though the temple was smaller, the glory would be greater.

A Winter Sermon for Winter Hearts (2:10-19): This is a call to cleanness, or holiness and was delivered December 24 (but it has nothing to do with Christmas Eve).

Blessings Withheld (verses 10-17): These are all the reasons God's people were not experiencing blessing. Even if you're doing all the right things, and your heart isn't right, God will not bless. He never blesses uncleanness.

Blessings Waiting (verses 18-19): However, on the other side is God's blessing for those who would do things God's way. They were asked to mark the day and make it a day when God's blessing would come upon them. God had blessings just waiting for His people.

A Winter Sermon to Set a Heart on Fire (2:20-23): This was a sermon specifically for the governor Zerubbabel on the same day Haggai spoke to the people. This sermon was also delivered on December 24, and was solely intended to encourage God's leader.

Any time a godly work is being conducted, ungodly work makes its mission to stop it. And because God's leaders set the tone for progress, they are the most obvious target to hinder progress. So here is a message from God's man to stay the course and stay faithful.

What to Look for in Haggai

Promises— There are a few really important promises mentioned in this book that we would do well to remember for our lives. All of these promises have to do with God's faithfulness.

A Promise of Faithfulness While We Commence His Work: In 1:13, we find written "Then spake Haggai the LORD's messenger in the LORD's message unto the people, saying, I am with you, saith the LORD." Once again the temple was not completed and a call went out to once again commence the work that God had called them to do. And for their motivation, God tells His people not to worry about the job itself because He would be with them every step of the way.

A Promise of Faithfulness While We Complete His Work: In 2:4, we read, "Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, saith the LORD; and be strong, O Joshua, son of Josedech, the high priest; and be strong, all ye people of the land, saith the LORD, and work; for I am with you, saith the LORD of hosts;" During our reading of this prophecy, we quickly discover that the temple project was completed, but what sometimes happens is that once a project is completed, there is a sense of loss and stagnancy once the excitement wears off. But God's promise here says that He will be with us to help us through another time of transition.

A Promise of Faithfulness While We Continue His Work: Then in 2:5 we see God continue and say, "According to the word that I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt, so my spirit remaineth among your: fear ye not."

This God saying, "I have been with you in the past, and I'll be with you now. Don't be afraid to move forward." And understand, this is God's continued promise for us as well.

What to Gain from Haggai

If You Receive a Work from God, Don't Stop Until It's Done: The problem came for these people when they only did God's work in part. However, after they disengaged from service, that's when the work stopped, and then, that's when God's work, or just the idea of God's work, became a scourge to them instead of a blessing. They became pessimistic about service. Their passion for God quenched, and the idea to continue was dismissed.

What is important for us to learn here, is that if we have a job to do, it's best that we see it through. Some are projects we engage in together that have a limited timeline, and others are lifelong jobs (witnessing, continued spiritual growth, etc.) that are only to be ceased with God taking us home. Let's finish strong.

If You Do Stop, Allow God's Word to Rekindle Your Heart: The absolute worst thing you can do, if you find yourself being pulled away from God, is to harden your heart to a call to come back and start working again. You'll notice in this book, God's message stirred the heart of the leaders, and the leaders stirred and directed the hearts of the people so that the work would continue. However, this could have gone the other way. The people could have hardened their hearts and stayed right where they were. From this prophecy, we have an example to follow of how to respond to God's word if we find ourselves off course.

If You Continue God's Work, Expect Constant Opposition: The entire reason the work was stopped in the first place is because there was opposition to the project. Let's not be surprised when the work we do for God is challenged.

If You Are Doing God's Work, You Can Expect Strength to Overcome: If our work is truly a work from God, there is absolutely no way God will be defeated. We have seen God having to calm His people down several times saying, "I have with you... I am with you." God's work comes with God's advantages... His power.

If You Value God's Work, Keep Your Leaders Encouraged: If you remember, Governor Zerubbabel received his very own message. God's leaders need encouragement too. Once again, Satan attacks leadership; and the reason he does this is because it is the fastest way to stop God's work from continuing. So if we want God's work to continue, remember to keep your leaders encouraged.

41. THE LORD REMEMBERS

ZECHARIAH

This is a man who had a dual job from God. Zechariah was both a prophet and a priest and provides one of the most exciting images of the future we have in the Bible. The only rival probably, in terms of future imagery, is probably the book of Revelation given to us in the New Testament.

The name Zechariah means “The LORD Remembers” and in this name, we see the great promise of God to bring ultimate healing, love, and satisfaction to the world and to His nation Israel. As far as other history revealed to us about this prophet, we can see that Zechariah was a contemporary of Haggai, and his grandfather (Iddo) came back with Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest.

In terms of the structure of this prophecy, it is broken up into two major sections, and separated by a significant amount of time between each of these sections. It appears that Zechariah wrote the first chapters (1-8) when he was a relatively young man, and the remaining chapters (9-14) were written when he was a very old man.

And if we consider how Haggai and Zechariah were contemporaries of one another, we can also put their job tasks together and imagine that their messages combined would have been a great help to the people whom God called them to speak to. You should remember that Haggai was sent to encourage the people to do a work for God. And then, if we add in the writings of Zechariah, we find that while they were to continue to work, God gave grand visions of the future to help them along their way.

The prospect of the future is extremely exciting as long as there is a future to look forward to. The future can motivate to excellence, and keep a vibrant hope alive in terms of the work that is done. And this is certainly what makes God’s work so compelling for those who keep the end in mind as they work in the present. Sure, if once this life was over, oblivion was all we had to look forward to, by all means, get discouraged and pessimistic. However, if your mind is on what ultimately awaits, then as the hymn writer says, “It will be worth it all when we see Jesus.”

How to Think About Zechariah

The book of Zechariah is a series of sermons given by Zechariah and embedded in these sermons are a series of visions that serve as a warning and stunning predictions of the future kingdom age. The underlying message in these visions is to get God’s people to return to Him.

Really Good Bad News (1:1-6): Oftentimes (as we have observed over and over again) God gives people the bad news first. And really, it isn’t bad news if we think about it reasonably; it’s only bad news if we don’t hear it. In this case, Zechariah gives a call to repent. And the reason it is good news is because God warns and gives us an opportunity to leave our sin behind.

Really Wonderful Wild Visions (1:7-6:8): Here we find a series of eight visions given to Zechariah by God.

A Man by Some Myrtles (1:7-17)— Zechariah sees the ‘angel of the LORD’ sitting on a red horse with other red horses around him. You’ll also notice that they are speckled because they are in the shadow of the myrtle trees. They are red because the picture to be understood is one of war. God is angry with the nations who were at peace while Jerusalem was suffering. We are reminded here that God is not just the God of the Jews, but is in fact the ruler of the world and cares for their affairs as well.

The Four Horns and Four Smiths (1:18-21)— A ‘horn’ in this passage has to do with a gentile ruler. And because there are four horns, this passage is referencing four world powers (Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome). The smiths possibly represent judgment that would come and dismantle these powers.

The Measuring Man (2:1-13)— God is measuring and it is an indication that He will once again resume His work in Jerusalem and the Temple. This ultimately leads up to the reign of Christ at this place in person. All nations will come and worship there.

The Branch (3:1-10)— At the beginning of this passage there is a bit of bad news that had to be endured by Joshua the high priest as he seeks to lead the nation. God tells him that he would not be sufficient to fight Satan and that a new righteousness was needed. The scene then switches to the imagery of the Branch. The Branch is a figure of Christ, and represents Him as the Servant who would be rejected at His first coming, but once you arrive in verse 10, we have a reference to the kingdom age.

The Golden Lamp Stand and Two Olive Trees (4:1-14): This imagery is identical to the lampstand found in the temple. The fact that there are

two olive trees is an indication that something new has been added. As it relates to the immediate, it seems that Zerubbabel and Joshua are in view here, but for the future, it is very obvious that the ultimate revelation in this vision requires Christ to be the focus. The oil represents the Holy Spirit, and the olive trees speak of witnessing. The work of God continues not by the cleverness of people, but because of the Holy Spirit.

The Flying Scroll (5:1-4): The scroll here is the Word of God, and specifically the Ten Commandments. This is a passage explain that God would judge according to His Word.

Woman in a Basket (5:5-11): This vision is filled with imagery of significance. If we are quickly making our way through the meaning here, we find that the basket is full, and in this case, it is full of sin as indicated by the ephah. However, the woman in the basket indicates a specific kind of sin. The lead weight means that iniquity is sealed in the measure of the ephah. Then the two-winged woman carries this measure (with the woman inside) to Babylon. It is important to remember that Israel's great sin was idolatry and that Babylon is the land of Idolatry. The sin then is to be forsaken and returned back to Babylon.

Four Chariots (6:1-15): In this passage, there are four multicolored chariots that represent the four angels who will bring judgment upon the gentile nations. Here we also read of Christ setting up His kingdom and another mention of the "Branch" where Christ reveals His glory. This is an obvious reference to His second coming. Further, in the latter part of the chapter, we see the crowning of the high priest. But there exists also, another reference to the "BRANCH" who will build the temple of the Lord. This section is absolutely rich with references to Christ.

Really Great Question and Answers (7:1-8:23): This particular passage presents a problem the people had been struggling with in regard to fasting, and in the first three verses we have the set up for the answer to the question, "Should we continue to fast?"

In the following verses after the question, we see that Zechariah responds with four sermons and tells them in essence, that God's rituals have gone unchanged, but warned them, that if the heart is wrong, the worship is wrong as well.

Really Powerful Pictures (9:1-14:21): These verses can be broken up into two categories. The first section has to do with the rejection of the Messiah during His first coming, and the second has to do with His acceptance at His second coming.

What to Look for in Zechariah

Though this book of prophecy was written hundreds of years before Christ, it provides some of the most stunning claims regarding His person and ministry with breathtaking accuracy. Therefore, you would do well to focus here on your study of this book, because this is where the book focuses.

Pictures of Christ—

Christ is Pictured as the King: Zechariah 14:9 says, "And the LORD shall be king over all the earth: in that day shall there be one LORD, and his name one."

Here we are in the millennial reign of Christ and this is when His rule will be established. There will be no questioning, arguing, or calling for another. He is the One True King of all and forevermore.

Christ is Pictured as the Stone: Zechariah 3:9 tells us, "For behold the stone that I have laid before Joshua; upon one stone shall be seven eyes: behold, I will engrave the graving thereof, saith the LORD of hosts, and I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day."

Christ would one day serve as the cornerstone of the Church He would found and build. It is apparent that the redemptive work of the cross is in view here.

Christ is Pictured as the Betrayed: Zechariah 11:12 "And I said unto them, If ye think good, give me my price: and if not, forbear. So they weighed for my price thirty pieces of silver."

This is a clear reference to the betrayal of Jesus by Judas. (Matthew 26:15; 27:3-10; Acts 1:17-20)

Christ is Pictured as the Smitten Shepherd: Zechariah 13:7, "Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, saith the LORD of hosts: smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered: and I will turn mine hand upon the little ones."

Here, Messiah is called the Shepherd because He was called to feed and provide for the sheep, as well as to protect and save the sheep. This is exactly what Christ has done for us. He feeds and provides, and by His death, by this sword coming down upon Him, He has saved us.

Christ is Pictured as the BRANCH: Zechariah 3:8; 6:12 Let's look at both of these passages. First we have Zechariah 3:8 "Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, thou, and thy fellows that sit before thee: for they are men wondered at: for, behold, I will bring forth my servant the BRANCH."

Next, we see 6:12-13, "And speak unto him, saying, Thus speaks the LORD of hosts, saying, Behold the man whose name is The BRANCH; and he shall grow upon out of his place, and he shall build the temple of the LORD. Even he shall build the temple of the LORD; and he shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon his throne; and he shall be a priest upon his throne; and the counsel of peace shall be between them both."

The word branch means, "shoot" or "twig," and is the title for the Messiah who would shoot up from the royal line of David. This line had been interrupted with the Babylonian exile, but God's prophets assured God's people that one day this line would be reestablished and would forever reign in righteousness by a priest who would rule. Looking back, we know this BRANCH is who we call Jesus our Savior— who is both Priest and King.

What to Gain from Zechariah

If you endeavor to venture through this book in detail, no doubt you will find many themes and teachings that will be beneficial as you move along; far more than what will be presented here. But given the purpose of this work, and given this message and its partnership with the message of Haggai, it appears that one predominate theme emerges, in terms of a timeless truth for God's people to use and cherish, and that is this:

You Have to Look Forward to Move Forward: What is meant by this is the fact that God never leaves us alone wondering about the future and

what awaits us. Now, we may experience confusion in the moment. We may experience pain, suffering, tragedy, and shock that may cause us to be spiritually perplexed in the moment, and in the future. However, we never have to come to a place of despair where all of this is ultimately meaningless. We can look to the future and keep moving forward because that is where our temporary trouble will vanish in the endlessness of God's glory.

Additionally, this is the same truth that should compel us to faithfulness. Our work is not in vain. Our service for God doesn't just evaporate like your breath on a cold day. Even if all forget, God doesn't. Your work goes somewhere; it has a purpose. Your faithfulness and endurance against sin goes somewhere; it has a purpose.

However, if you stop looking forward, moving forward will altogether cease. Biblically speaking, God always has us looking forward to move us forward.

42. BUT HOW?

MALACHI

This is the last prophet to speak to God's people for more than four hundred years! With all that we have discussed and all of the trouble from which God's people had been led through, you would think perhaps this message would end somewhat on a positive note as far as God's people were concerned; but such is not the case.

This is a message filled with sarcastic and disrespectful overtones. These are the words of a people who have heard it all and simply didn't care. If you read this and think "Disrespectful Teenager" then you have a fairly accurate picture in your mind.

The name Malachi means "My Messenger" and is the Hebrew word for angel. Malachi was God's messenger to God's unresponsive people. Once again, you would think that because this was the last prophet before Christ, the people would be filled with anticipation and excitement because the Messiah had been predicted and everything about Him described, but culturally what we find is that God's with people legalism had taken root under the foundation of the religious commands. Any time this happens, indifference, and unfaithfulness in heart is not far behind. If rules are all that are required for a relationship, then the steps that follow are coldness and corruption.

Needless to say, Malachi was yet another prophet with a hard mission from God because he was tasked with talking to a hard-hearted people who didn't like being reproved. When you read this book you'll be met with a series of accusations given to the people by Malachi and the people callously respond with "Wherein?" In other words, they were saying, "But how?" after their sin was brought before them.

However, toward the end of this prophecy, God once again, as He always does, tells His people that there is hope.

How to Think About Malachi

God's Love Is Unquestionable (1:1-5): The first words God says to His people are, "I have loved you..." Would they be able to honestly look back and literally think of nothing that God had done for them? Our answer; absolutely not. But Israel simply sighs and asks, "Wherein hast thou loved us?" In other words, "Oh really? Please explain." And in His answer, God explains how they became a nation in the first place.

God's Love Is Confrontational (1:6-3:15): In this portion of the prophecy, God denounces, once again, the priests and then the people. But this is the nature of love. Real love (God's Love), always confronts error, and this is what we have here.

God's Love Confronts the Priests (1:6-2:9)— There was a tremendous amount of hypocrisy that made its way through the ranks of the priesthood. They claimed a love for God and a concern for holiness, but their lives displayed quite the opposite. They had begun to take foreign wives once again (which was one of the main reasons they had slid into the pit of idolatry in the first place). Understand this law wasn't created because God is a 'respector of persons', it was a matter of being unequally yoked.

Further, their view of marriage became lower and lower, and as a consequence, divorce was on the rise. Understand also that because we are sinful, divorce happens. However, when the institution of marriage is seen as insignificant and negotiable instead of a covenant to an individual and before God, it becomes nothing more than a mutual agreement. How we treat marriage becomes a reflection of what we think of God.

God's Love Confronts the People (2:10-3:18)— If God's laws don't match what you want to do, well, you change what God likes to match what you're doing, and then you're set. That is what these people did. As we have seen in the past, these people believed themselves to be clean because of their rituals. This is a petty view of God, and God tells the people that He's tired of it.

God's Love Is Final (4): When we look at the whole of everything we know about God's love, there is one characteristic that stands above the rest, and that is that His love is final. We never have to worry about God's love. God will never look at His people and say, "I've fallen out of love with you." No, God's love is final. And how God explains this is with the coming of Messiah and the coming of Elijah.

The Coming of Messiah (4:1-3)— This is Malachi being given a vision of Christ that spans far beyond His first coming. As Malachi looks out, he sees that glorious second coming of Christ, and that when He comes, He will come with "...healing in His wings..."

The Coming of Elijah (4:4-6)— There is speculation on this point however, it would appear that this prophecy was fulfilled by the ministry of John the Baptist. The angel said of his birth that John would "Go before him (The Messiah) in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17). But he

was rejected. It seems clear that since the Jews, as a whole, refused the announcement of the King, Jesus would send another Elijah-like prophet in the future and many believe this to be one of the two witnesses mentioned in Revelation 11:1-19.

Whether or not this is the case, what we need to know is that this will be accomplished because of the finality of the love of God. God wants people to know His truth. He is not obligated to reveal His truth, but because of love, He speaks, and in this case, will speak more powerfully than ever before to proclaim His glory before the earth.

What to Look for in Malachi

Attitudes to Avoid— What mainly stands out in this short message are the responses given by God's people. Yes, we see a different culture and yes we see a different time, but sown in the words of this prophecy is the shared human nature we all know too well. So let's see if we can summarize a few of these attitudes in one word, and then be on the lookout so that we can avoid them.

Indifference— This is the word that describes the continued "wherein" response that we see all over this book. There was no sorrow contained in these words. There was no hint of repentance, remorse, sorrow, or even attentiveness. God, in His approach to these people, is only met with indifference.

This is the same attitude that can be characteristic of us at times. We can find ourselves not caring about things that we really should care about. We can find ourselves shrugging at truth that would have been unfathomable had it not been for God's revelation. When this happens, this is a time to grab yourself by the shoulders and shake out of it. Avoid the attitude of indifference.

Assumption— Once again, there was a feeling that if they just did the ritual, they would be fine with God. This is a terrible assumption. We, as a people, are absolutely fantastic at creating a 'god' in our own image. Many of the things we do, we do assuming God is just going to go along with our plan. However, it's not very long before we become bored with God because He's not really the God of the Bible. Because we impose our assumptions upon God, His requirements become a burden instead of a help because we assume the wrong things about God. Unless your feelings about God can be confirmed by Scripture, stay away from the attitude of assumption.

Defiance— We see this attitude being played out by the famous "robbery" passage. These people were keeping their tithes and offerings to themselves. We see this in the taking on of foreign wives. We see this in their treatment of divorce. We see this in their treatment of each other. There was a spirit of defiance that was running wild among God's people. Everything God had instructed, they defied. This is a huge attitude to avoid. Humility is the agent that cures defiance.

Attributes to Adore— In contrast to the attitudes we should avoid, we see a few attributes of God that we should absolutely and consistently adore about Him.

Love— God said, "I have loved you..." This is the premier attribute of God— He is love. And it is by His love that we can even understand the concept and action of love. And it is by His example, expression, and explanation of love that we love Him and love like Him in response. This is written all over the pages of the Bible— it is this attribute of God saying loudly and consistently, "I love you."

Unchangeable— Malachi 3:6 says so plainly, "For I am the LORD, I change not..." What a great truth! It is so incredible that God deals absolutely consistently with mankind and that when it comes to His love and blessing, or any of His attributes, we receive them in full force holding back nothing from our lives. There is never a generation who received less or more of God in any capacity. Adore God now because He never changes! He won't love you one day and leave you the next. As the Hebrew writer says, "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever."

Faithfulness— This obviously compliments the previous point. Because God is unchangeable, He is faithful. He will do what He says He will do. He will see us through to the other side. Praise Him for His faithfulness. Adore Him for His faithfulness.

What to Gain from Malachi

Always Look to God's Provision to See God's Love: Becoming distracted is a second nature reaction for us. And the more distracted we become, the less we see God's hand of provision, and the less we see God's provision, the less we experience God's love.

That's where these people were. Their sarcastic questions to God said it all— "Wherein." They stopped looking. God didn't get them to where they were, they did. God didn't give them their income, they did. And because they thought they were the masters of their own lives, and provided for themselves, they came to a point in their lives as a people where they were unable to see God's love for them.

This is a giant lesson for us. Every time we wake, that is God suffering us another day. Our ability to work, the freedom we experience, the richness of relationships, everything comes from God. The Bible says "Every good and perfect gift comes from above..." and by this, and by His provision of salvation, we see God's stamp of love and affirmation on our lives. Don't stop looking. Keep your eyes on God and all He has done and will continue to do. What a way to end.