

RAY C. STEDMAN

Adventuring Through the Bible

A Comprehensive Guide to the Entire Bible

New Enhanced Edition



Adventuring Through the Bible

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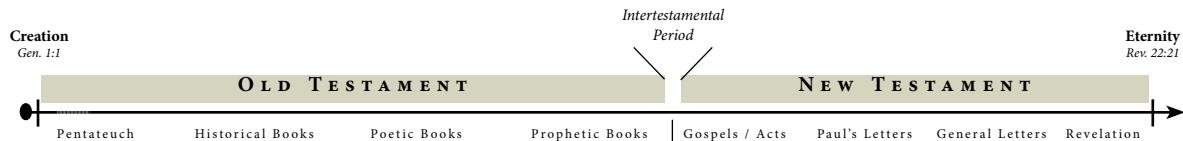
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The Goal of God's Word



A nonbeliever once asked a Christian, “Will your God give me a hundred dollars?”

The Christian’s reply, “He will if you know Him well enough.”

The riches that God has made available to us are the riches of His kingdom, the riches of His Word, the riches of His eternal life in a never-ending relationship with Him. But God will indeed give anyone hundreds, thousands, and even millions of dollars—if it serves His purpose and if that person knows Him well enough.

Take George Müller, for example. He was a man of prayer and the founder of the Bristol Orphanages in England that operated five orphan houses. During his lifetime, his organization cared for more than ten thousand homeless children. Before Müller founded the Bristol Orphanages, such children were routinely housed in prisons.

George Müller was not only a social reformer but a preacher who pastored a church until age seventy, then began a second career as a missionary, traveling to forty-two countries, preaching the gospel wherever he went. He retired from missionary work at age eighty-seven, but

continued to teach and preach in his church until his death at age ninety-two. He read his Bible from cover to cover almost two hundred times—no wonder he knew God so well!

The morning after Müller led his last prayer meeting, he was found on the floor beside his bed. He had passed away while on his knees in prayer.

During his lifetime, George Müller asked God for the money to fund his orphanages and other ministries, and God supplied millions of dollars. But Müller never asked anyone for donations. He never appealed for money from the pulpit, never made a private appeal to a wealthy donor, never wrote a letter asking for funds. He never took a salary, never borrowed a penny, and never lacked for money throughout his life. He simply prayed, and he trusted God to move in human hearts. George Müller knew God—and God gave millions of dollars to George Müller.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter answers such questions as: Why do I need to understand the entire Bible? Isn’t the New Testament all I need to know as a Christian? How did the Bible come into existence? How can I know that the Bible is God’s Word? What was God’s purpose in giving us the Bible?

Knowing God is the key. He wants to be your friend. He wants to pour out the riches of heaven upon your life—“good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over,” as Jesus tells us (Luke 6:38).

Why did Jesus come to earth? “I have come that they may have life,” He said, “and have it to the full” (John 10:10). And what is that “life . . . to the full,” the abundant life Jesus describes? “Now this is eternal life,” He said, “that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3). The abundant life, eternal life, comes from knowing God, and from knowing Jesus Christ.

So in order to know the blessings of abundant and eternal life, we *must* get to know Him. And the way you get to know Him is through the pages of Scripture, as they are revealed and interpreted for us by the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures and the Spirit—you can’t separate the two. The Bible without the Spirit leads to dullness, boredom, and dead, institutional Christianity. The Spirit without the Bible leads to fanaticism and wildfire. We need both the Spirit and the Word.

Moreover, we need the *entire* Bible.

We need to understand the story of humanity before the fall so that we might know what God originally made the human race to be—and so that we might understand the kind of relationship God had in mind when He created us. The pure, pristine relationship that existed before sin entered the world is the relationship He wants to restore to us now.

We also need to know the lives of the men and women of faith throughout the Bible in order to see how God works in specific situations. As we read these stories, we see

that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Ruth, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Peter, Stephen, Paul, and all the other saints of history went through the same experiences we do. They drew upon the same supernatural strength and power that is available to us. As we study their lives, the Bible becomes not merely a “religious book,” but a practical, relevant guidebook for daily living.

The lives of the prophets show us how God works through human history, from beginning to end. As we study what Paul calls “God’s secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began” (1 Cor. 2:7), we begin to know His thoughts, which are not our thoughts, and His ways, which are far higher than our ways. As Jesus said to God the Father, “You have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children” (Matt. 11:25).

The Gospels reveal the perfect life of Jesus Christ—His unique wisdom, His divine power, His human pain, His extraordinary personality, His unparalleled character, and His extravagant love for people. In the Scriptures, we discover the many-faceted richness and depth of the One who was uniquely the Son of God and the Son of Man.

The Epistles—the letters written by Paul, Peter, John, James, and Jude to the first century churches—show us how to apply the great truths of the Gospels to our everyday lives. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the writers of the New Testament letters translated God’s truth into practical principles to guide our daily actions and decisions.

Finally, the book of Revelation gives us wisdom, hope, and assurance as the world

approaches the hour of ultimate crisis. As individuals and as a believing community, we need the assurance that this present darkness shall pass, that the futility and horrors of this age will end, that our bondage will cease, and that Jesus Christ will be manifested in the universe—and He shall reign.

God's Eternal Purpose in Our Lives

The story of how the Bible came into being is the fascinating story of a miracle of God. In 2 Peter 1:21, the apostle Peter tells us that the Bible was written by men who were moved by the Holy Spirit. Prophecy did not originate in the will of human beings. Instead, men wrote God's message as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

The Bible transcends all human documents. It is far greater than any document human beings alone could produce. Despite the tremendous diversity of human authorship and the vast span of time over which it was written, the Bible has one message, tells one story, moves toward one conclusion, and directs our attention to one Person.

As Paul wrote, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16–17). It would simply be impossible to take at random any collection of books from literature, put them together under one cover, and have any consistent and cohesive theme develop. Such a collection is possible only if there is one transcendent Author behind its many human authors.

The Bible is not only the story of God and His Son Jesus Christ. It is also the story

of your life and mine, as well as the story of the human race. The Bible explains what we are and how we came to be this way. It illuminates the human condition. It instructs us, exhorts us, admonishes us, corrects us, strengthens us, and teaches us. In this book, God has incorporated all the truths we need to know about ourselves.

How did ordinary human beings—some from the most common callings of life—capture the thoughts and purposes of God? How did the Holy Spirit lead them in recording the Word of God rather than the mere opinions of human beings? It's a miracle beyond our understanding.

But this we know: The more we study the truth of the Bible, the more thrilling and compelling it becomes. Like a scientist with a passion for uncovering the secrets of the universe, I'm captivated by an intense drive to unfold the wonders of God's Word. After decades of study, I have found that increasing familiarity with this book has only caused it to grow more fascinating, more profound, and more marvelous in its implications for my life.

This book has survived countless attempts to suppress it and destroy it. It has been preserved and defended for us through the centuries in ways that can only be called providential. Again and again its pages have been stained by the blood, sweat, and tears of martyrs who have spent their very lives to save this book for later generations.

Why has this book been so important to God and His people? What is the Bible's ultimate purpose? The Bible itself gives us the answer. The apostle Paul writes:

He made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory (Eph. 1:9–12).

Astounding! The Creator of the universe, the great *starsmith* who fashioned a billion galaxies each containing millions of stars, has a purpose for your life and mine—and He has unveiled that purpose in His Word, the Bible. The apostle Paul extends this stirring thought:

Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence (Eph. 3:8–12).

Paul says that God is using the church—ordinary believers like you and me—to make His wisdom known to “the rulers and authorities” in the spiritual realms. He is proving His wisdom to the rebellious spirits, to Satan and the other fallen angels who revolted against Him—and He is using your

life and mine to make that case. When you and I live in obedience to God through our faith in Christ, we prove that His judgment against Satan and the fallen angels is just and righteous. Satan lived in God’s visible presence—and he revolted against God. You and I can’t see God, yet we love and obey Him. Thus Satan stands condemned, and the wisdom of God is vindicated.

Paul goes on to state that the Lord Jesus, having finished His work on earth through the cross and the resurrection, ascended to heaven and gave gifts to you and me and to everyone in His church:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:11–13).

God’s purpose is to bring us to maturity. He wants us to become mature by becoming *like Christ*. His purpose for the human race is not some vague, impersonal goal; it is here, it is now, it is definite, and it is profoundly intertwined with our everyday lives. Everything that exists has been brought into being so that you and I might fulfill God’s amazing plan for our lives. And His plan for you and me is that we attain the fullness of becoming like Jesus Christ.

The Human Ideal

I used to meet regularly with five young men of high school age. On one occasion I

asked them, “What is your image of a truly masculine man?”

“A guy who’s really pumped up,” said one. “A guy with six-pack abs, who can bench-press two-hundred fifty or three-hundred pounds.”

I knew of one athlete at this young man’s school. He had rippling muscles on his body—but also a lot of muscle between his ears! “Oh,” I said, “you mean like So-and-so?”

Startled, the young man said, “No, not like him! He spends a lot of time on the weight machine, and he has arms and legs like tree trunks—but doesn’t have much character and he’s not all that bright.”

“Okay,” I said, “then I guess muscles aren’t a very reliable standard of manhood. So what is it? What do the rest of you think it takes to be a man? Let’s make a list of real masculine qualities.”

They all thought some more. “Well,” one young man ventured, “I think it would have to be a guy with guts. Courage, I mean.”

So we wrote “courage” on our list. The young men thought some more and added some more qualities to the list: consideration, kindness, integrity, a sense of purpose, and so on. Soon, we had quite a long list.

Finally, I said, “You know, this is amazing! Think of it! You could go anywhere in the world and ask any man, and it wouldn’t matter whether he was rich or poor, high or low, black or white or any shade in between. Ask him, ‘What does it mean to be a man?’ and you would get the same answers you’ve given on this list! Because men everywhere want to be men. All women want to be women. There may be small variations in detail, but the virtues you’ve listed are admired everywhere.”

The young men nodded thoughtfully.

“Now,” I said, “how are you doing at fulfilling these ideals?”

“I think I make it about thirty percent of the time,” said one.

“No way!” said another. “You don’t make it even five percent—and neither do I!”

I asked, “Is there anyone who exemplifies these qualities all the time?”

Their faces lit up. “Of course!” they said. “Jesus!”

It’s true. Jesus is God’s perfect man, the most complete expression of manhood ever to walk the earth. He is God’s ideal for our lives. That is what Paul tells us: God is equipping us and building us up “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13). The steps toward this goal are twofold.

The *first step* that brings us to this goal is found in the phrase “until we all reach unity in the faith.” Clearly, *faith* is the operative word. Faith is always the way by which we experience all that God makes available to us.

The *second step* that brings us to this goal is “the knowledge of the Son of God”—the *accurate and full knowledge* of Jesus the Son. We cannot achieve maturity in Christ as God intended if we don’t know His Son. By knowledge, God does not mean merely biblical information; rather, He is talking about a *personal experience* with Jesus Christ. *Faith*, the first step, leads to *knowledge*, the second step.

The apostle Paul is careful to make clear that it isn’t just my faith or your faith but *our* faith—what he calls “unity in the faith”—that brings us to this knowledge. In Ephesians 3,

Paul prays that we may come to know with all the saints how high and broad and long and deep is the love of Christ. This means that unless you are in touch with other saints you can't possibly develop as you ought to as a Christian. We need each other in the body of Christ, and as we fellowship, worship, and study God's Word together, we grow together in maturity and in the experiential knowledge of Christ.

We will investigate the Bible together to learn what it means to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. In the process, we'll see that the Bible is not merely a collection of sixty-six books written by more than forty human authors over a span of fifteen centuries. It is a single book with a unified theme, a coherent message, and an astonishing relevance to our everyday lives.

This one-volume "divine library" is a book of wonderful variety. Its beautiful love stories reflect the tenderest of human passions. Its stories of political intrigue rival anything we might read in today's headlines. Its stories of violence and battle are filled with the heroism and horrors of war. Its poetic passages soar to the very heights of artistic expression. It contains narratives of intense human drama. Its strange and cryptic passages are as intriguing to penetrate as any mystery story.

However, one subject dominates and permeates this book: Jesus Christ—Creator, Redeemer, and Lord. We first meet Him as one of the voices at creation who says, "Let us make man in our image" (Gen. 1:26). His coming in human form is foretold throughout the Old Testament. His life is detailed in quadruplicate through the Gospels, and His character saturates the New Testament

epistles. Finally, His return and His kingdom are described in the book of Revelation: "Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20).

From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible is a book about Jesus Christ. In symbol, in story, in prophetic vision, in simple narrative account, in history, in poetry, in every aspect and dimension of the book, the focus is always on God's Son. He is the unifying thread of the book. In learning about Him, we learn God's plan and pattern for our own lives. We understand our problems and find the solutions reflected in Him. We understand our needs and find the satisfaction of our needs in Him.

The Good News

When Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full," He wanted us to know that eternal life means *so much more* than living forever with Him in heaven (as wonderful as that is). Eternal life is truly the abundant life here on earth. It's the daily experience of fulfillment, joy, and peace right here and now. We don't have to just "muddle through" life, making the best of a bad situation. Through Him, we have *life*—and have it to the full.

As Ian Thomas once said, "We must have what He is in order to be what He was." When we become mature in Christlikeness, then God's purpose for our lives will be fulfilled.

Think of it: Who was this man Jesus? He was God's ideal for humanity. For thirty-three years He lived among us on this pain-wracked, sin-drenched planet, enduring the same pressures we face every day. The opposition he faced revealed the godly perfection of His character with brilliance and power.

GOOD NEWS!



There is nothing complicated about the good news. It is not a lofty theological principle that requires years of study to understand. The good news is the cross and the empty tomb. That's all. That's enough.

The good news transforms lives, restores broken families, and is the solution to human evil. The good news rescues us from sin and despair, and makes us alive forever!

Some people think that the good news is that heaven awaits us after we die, or that God is love, or some other wonderful thing. While these are all true and good, none of them are the good news Jesus commissioned us to preach, because they are not the good news of the cross and the resurrection. Heaven is not the good news; it is merely a result of the good news.

The good news is that the cross has shattered the power of evil and sin, and the empty tomb has broken the power of death. The Lord is alive, and He lives in us and through us, giving us the power to truly live. This is the good news that we should be preaching as we go.

Ray C. Stedman

The Ruler Who Serves: Exploring the Gospel of Mark, Vol. II
(Discovery House Publishers, 2002)

"But," you may say, "I can't become what He was! I can't live a perfect life."

Of course not. But our Christlikeness doesn't depend on us. We'll become like Christ when we allow Him to live His life through us. If we dare to believe Him, moment-by-moment and day-by-day, we can allow Him to *live through us*. This is good news!

But to do this, we need God's revelation, the Bible. We don't come to the knowledge of the Son of God without a learning process, without a conscious commitment to an ever-increasing understanding of His truth. That's why we are adventuring together through this amazing book.

The View from Orbit

What is the "right" way to look at the world?

Most of the time, we see the world with the naked eye. Physicists, however, use powerful particle accelerators to see the world one

atom or one electron at a time. Astronauts go out into orbit and look down on the world from a distance, seeing the entire world with its continents, seas, and swirling weather patterns. Who has the "correct" view of the world: the physicist, the astronaut, or the naked-eye observer?

Answer: They all do. Each sees the world at a different scale, from a different perspective; and each view is valid in its own way.

Now consider this: What is the "right" way to look at the Bible? Should it be examined minutely, phrase by phrase and verse by verse? Or should we study the Bible book by book? Or should we step back and take a more panoramic view, the astronaut's view, seeing the great themes and historical sweep of the Bible as if from orbit?

Answer: Each method is equally valid, each offers a different perspective, and each serves a different purpose. Our purpose in *Adventuring Through the Bible* is to take the

wide-angle perspective, the aerial view of the Scriptures.

An Overview

Our survey of the Bible is divided into nine parts:

Part One: A Panorama of the Scriptures

An Overview of the Bible, Genesis through Revelation

Part Two: Five Steps to Maturity

The Books of Moses, Genesis through Deuteronomy

Part Three: The Message of History

Applying the Historical Books, Joshua through Esther

Part Four: Music to Live By

Old Testament Poetry, Job through Song of Songs

Part Five: The Promises of God

The Prophetic Books, Isaiah through Malachi

Part Six: Jesus: The Focus of Both Testaments

Jesus and His Church, Matthew through Acts

Part Seven: Letters from the Lord

Letters to the Church, Romans through Philemon

Part Eight: Keeping the Faith

All about Faith, Hebrews through Jude

Part Nine: Signs of the Times

The End—and a New Beginning, Revelation

threads of those themes from their beginnings in Genesis to their triumphant conclusion in Revelation. We'll probe the grand design of God's revealed Word and discover how each part of the Bible fits together with every other part. We'll see the dynamic flow of God's revelation to humanity and discover God's divine authorship behind each book and each human writer.

I encourage you to read through these books of the Bible as we go along. This book is not a substitute for Bible study. In fact, I would rather that you dispose of this book than use it as a substitute for reading and studying God's Word. This book is intended to be opened alongside, not in place of, the Scriptures.

So join me in the adventure of a lifetime, an adventure of grand discoveries and exciting breakthroughs. Join me as we adventure together through the greatest book ever written.



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Emmaus Road, Lelio Orsi Camino de Emaús

With this as our outline, we will journey through all sixty-six books of the Bible, examining its great themes and following the

THE OLD TESTAMENT

CHAPTER 2

God Spoke in Times Past



Do you remember where you were and what you were doing on September 11, 2001? Virtually every American who was alive that day can recall with clarity, horror, and sadness the moment of hearing about the 9/11 attacks. We can close our eyes and still see the burning towers in lower Manhattan, the terrified people who leaped to their deaths to escape the flames, the gaping, blackened wound in the side of the Pentagon building, and the scar at the edge of the woods in Shanksville, Pennsylvania where Flight 93 went down.

The emotional aftermath of that event is one of shock, dismay, and depression. It's as if the sun were suddenly blotted out, and the entire landscape went dark. Magnify those emotions many times over, and you might begin to understand how the disciples of Jesus felt in the aftermath of the crucifixion.

Luke 24 contains the story of two of His disciples as they walked along the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Whenever I read the story of the Emmaus Road, I feel an emotional tug inside, a wish that I could have witnessed that event with my own eyes. I believe that, since the coming

of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the life of Jesus is more real and available to believers now than when He physically walked the earth. Yet I still would love to have been there to watch that incredible event in the lives of those two downhearted disciples.

It was the day of the resurrection of our Lord. The countryside was already exploding with the incredible news that Jesus had risen—but few would believe it. These two disciples were full of sorrow and despair. They saw no future ahead. As they walked, they talked about their grief—and that's when a stranger drew near and walked with them.

The stranger asked, “What are you discussing?”

The disciples looked at him in amazement. “Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter provides a “thumbnail” overview of the entire twenty-eight Old Testament books, and answers such questions as: What is the central theme of the Old Testament? Why are there so many blood sacrifices in the Old Testament? Why do so many Old Testament passages deal with unsatisfied longings, pain, anguish, and injustice? How is Jesus prophetically and symbolically depicted throughout the Old Testament?

in these days? . . . Jesus of Nazareth . . . was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see."

The stranger said, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" Then, Luke tells us, "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets," the stranger—the risen Lord Jesus Himself—"explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."

Later on, as they were thinking back over the events of that wonderful incident, they said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

What caused this wonderful, awe-inspiring sensation of "holy heartburn," this divine glow of anticipation in their hearts? And don't you just wish that you could have an experience like that? I certainly do!

Well, the source of that strangely warmed experience on the Emmaus Road was nothing less than the exposition of the Old Testament in the power and clarity of the Holy Spirit: "Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." This is what

the Old Testament does: It points to Christ! The Old Testament prepares our hearts to receive the One who truly satisfies. Jesus is not just the object of the New Testament but of the Old Testament as well.

As He once told the Jewish leaders who opposed Him, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me" (John 5:39).

In the previous chapter we found that God's purpose in revealing His truth to us through the Bible is to bring us all to Christlike maturity. It takes the entire Bible, Old and New Testaments, to accomplish this, and it takes the work of the Holy Spirit to open our understanding of Scripture.

In this chapter we'll examine the contribution the Old Testament makes to our maturity in Christ—not in detail, but in an "orbital view" survey. We'll gain a panoramic view of the Old Testament so that we can clearly see the part it plays in producing Christlike maturity within us.

An Incomplete Book

The Old Testament is an incomplete book—and that is by God's intention. He never intended the Old Testament to be His last word to the human race.

Dr. W. H. Griffith Thomas has suggested that if we would approach the Old Testament as though we had never read it before, we would see that it is a series of predictions about a Person. These predictions begin in the early chapters of Genesis. As the text moves along, the predictions about this Person grow increasingly more detailed. A sense of anticipation grows. Finally, in the books of

the Prophets—Isaiah through Malachi—they break out in brilliant colors, describing in breathtaking terms the One who is to come.

Yet, after completing the last Old Testament book, we would still not know who this Person is. So the Old Testament is a book of *unfulfilled* prophecy.

But the mystery of the Old Testament doesn't end there. Read through the first thirty-nine books of the Bible and you will notice that a strange, disturbing stream of blood springs forth in Genesis and flows in increasing volume throughout the remainder of this Testament. The blood of thousands of animal sacrifices is poured out in a surging tide across the history of Israel. The sacrifices hammer home a message that without sacrifice, without blood, there is no forgiveness, no reconciliation. The animal sacrifices seem to point toward something—but what? The ultimate meaning of the sacrifices is left unexplained at the end of the Old Testament.

And there is a third dimension to the Old Testament: Again and again, the great men and women of Old Testament faith seem to express a longing for something more than life offers them, something transcendent, something eternal. For example, Abraham sets out to find the city whose builder and maker is God. The people of Israel were on a pilgrimage throughout the books of the Old Testament. In Job, in the Psalms, and in the books of Solomon, there is the continual cry of thirsty souls longing for something that has not yet been realized. So the Old Testament is not only a book of unfulfilled prophecies and unexplained sacrifices, but also of unsatisfied longings.

But something wonderful takes place the moment you cross from the Old to the New Testament. As you open the pages of Matthew, the first words you read are, “A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ.” This is the Person the entire Old Testament was pointing to. Jesus alone fulfills the prophecies, explains the sacrifices, and satisfies the longings. The New Testament fulfills the promise of the Old—and we can't fully appreciate the profound meaning of the New Testament until we have first been awakened by the message of the Old Testament.

The Old Testament was intended to prepare us for something. The New Testament letter to the Hebrews ties in closely with Old Testament themes, and the first two verses of Hebrews capture this idea:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son (Heb. 1:1–2).

There you have the two testaments side by side: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers . . . at many times and in various ways” (the Old Testament), and “In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (the New Testament). The New Testament completes the Old Testament.

Just think of the many times and various ways in which God spoke in the Old Testament. Beginning with Genesis, we have the simple, majestic account of creation, the fall of humanity, and the flood—an account never equaled in all of literature for power and simplicity of expression. Next comes the straightforward narrative of the lives of the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Then

we encounter the thunderings of the law in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy; the true drama of the historical books; the sweet hymns and sorrowful laments of the Psalms; the practical wisdom of Proverbs; the exalted language of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah; the touching human tenderness of Ruth, Esther, and the Song of Songs; the vivid, visionary mysteries of Daniel and Ezekiel; and on and on—many books and various ways of expressing God's truth.

And still it is not complete! Nothing in the Old Testament can stand complete in and of itself. It is all intended as preparation.

Many Syllables, Many Phrases, One Voice

As a first year college student, I was inducted into an organization called The Ancient Order of Siam. Looking as ridiculous as possible in our little green skullcaps, a group of us were led into a room where we were subjected to an assortment of indignities. A number of sophomores stood around with paddles in their hands, ready to enforce their commands. We were lined up in a row, and one fellow stood before us and ordered us to follow him in repeating this chant: "Oh wah! . . . Tah goo! . . . Siam!"

We dutifully repeated the chant.

"Again!" he barked, so we all said it again.

"Faster!" he commanded. So we said it faster. Then again, still faster.

Suddenly, we realized what we were chanting: "Oh, what a goose I am!"

Then we were members of the Order of Siam.

Sometimes, the meaning of a thing doesn't emerge until you put it all together. In a far more serious sense, a similar experience

takes place as we gain the big picture of the Old Testament. Each book of the Old Testament might be likened to a phrase or a syllable. Each book makes its own sound, but it is an incomplete sound. Only by merging all the phrases and syllables together does the overall meaning become clear. A marvelous expression comes into view—an expression of the fullness of God's Son.

And where do all the phrases and syllables of the Old Testament come together? In the New Testament. That's where all the Old Testament voices merge into one voice, the voice of the Son of God. At the very end of the New Testament, in Revelation, the apostle John writes that he saw the Lamb and he heard a voice like the voice of many waters. That voice booms forth, gathering itself out of all the thousands of rivers flowing together in one great symphony of sound: the voice of the Son!

In its incompleteness, the Old Testament is like a collection of syllables and phrases spoken to us by God—wonderful phrases, rich syllables, yet never quite connected and complete. But in the New Testament, these syllables and phrases join into a single, unified expression of the reality of the Son of God.

You may ask, "Why should I spend time on the preparatory material? Why not skip the Old Testament and go straight to the New Testament, the final voice of the Son?" That would be a big mistake! You can't appreciate the fullness and richness of the New Testament without being prepared by the Old. While much of the New Testament is easy to grasp, there is much that is built on the foundation of the Old Testament. We can

never understand all God has for us in the New Testament until we are prepared by an understanding of the Old.

Why does a farmer take time and trouble to plow his field for planting? Why doesn't he just take the seed out and sprinkle it over the ground? Some of that seed is bound to find a place in which to take root and thrive. Does the farmer really need to spend all that extra time preparing the soil? Yes! Every farmer knows that though the seed is the most important single item in raising a crop, most of it will never take root unless the soil has been adequately prepared.

Why do schoolteachers start with the ABCs instead of charging right in and teaching Shakespeare? Wouldn't it save a lot of time, money, and effort to simply send our five-year-olds straight to college? Obviously, we can't educate students this way. Why? Because that's not the way human beings learn. Without adequate preparation, all the knowledge in the world, dispensed by the greatest teachers in the world, would wash uselessly over them, leaving them unchanged.

As Paul says in Galatians 3:24, "The law [of the Old Testament] was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith." Something is lacking in our lives if we try to grasp the reality of Christ without grasping the reality of the Ten Commandments. We can't grasp all that Christ has done for us unless, like Paul, we have wrestled with the demands of a rigid, unyielding law—the law that makes us cry out, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24).

For many years I taught the book of Romans, including the great liberating themes

of chapters 6 through 8, without grasping the core truths of the book. I failed to experience the mighty power of Romans in my own heart until I had spent some time with the children of Israel in the Old Testament, living in the wilderness with them, feeling the burning desert heat beating down on me and the pain of a barren, defeated existence throbbing in my soul. After seeing what God accomplished in the lives of the Old Testament people by delivering them, I was able to understand what God is saying to us in Romans 6, 7, and 8. The "soil" of my heart needed the preparation of the Old Testament in order to receive the "seed" of the New Testament Word.

The Book of Human Experience

Dr. Harry A. Ironside told me a story from his early years of ministry when he was an officer in the Salvation Army. He was holding evangelistic meetings in a large hall in a major city, and a great number of people came every night to hear him. One night, he noticed an alert young man sitting in the back, leaning forward and listening attentively. The young man returned night after night, and Dr. Ironside wanted to meet him. He tried to catch him before he left the building, but each night, the young man melted into the crowd and disappeared.

One night the young man came in late, and the only two seats left in the auditorium were in the front row. He came down the aisle rather self-consciously and slipped into a chair. Dr. Ironside thought to himself, *Ha! You won't escape tonight, my young friend.*

Sure enough, when the meeting was over, the young man turned to go, but the aisle was full. Ironside stepped forward, tapped him on

the shoulder and said, "Would you mind if we just sit here and talk?"

They sat down and Dr. Ironside said, "Are you a Christian?"

"No," said the young man, "I don't think I could call myself a Christian."

"Well, what are you?"

"I really couldn't say. There was a time when I would have called myself an atheist. But of late, I just don't think I could say with assurance that God doesn't exist. I guess you could call me an agnostic."

"Well," said Dr. Ironside, "what has produced this change in your thinking?"

The young man pointed to an older man sitting a few seats away. "It's the change in that man right over there."

Dr. Ironside looked and recognized the older man as Al Oakley, who had co-owned a popular saloon in that city—that is, before he became his own best customer, ending up a skid-row drunk. But Al had experienced an amazing conversion in a Salvation Army jail service, and his life had completely turned around.

"I've known Al Oakley for years," said the young man, "and I know he hasn't any more backbone than a jellyfish. He tried to quit drinking many times but was never able to. Whatever turned his life around must be the real thing. So I've been reading the Bible lately. I can't get anything at all out of the New Testament. But recently I've been reading the book of Isaiah. I've always admired great oratory, and Isaiah slings the language better than anyone! If I could become a Christian by believing Isaiah, I would."

So Dr. Ironside opened his Bible and said, "I'd like to read you a short chapter from

Isaiah. It's about someone who is unnamed in the passage—but when I finish reading, I believe you'll be able to fill in the name."

"I don't know the Bible that well," said the young man.

"I don't think you'll have any problem," said Dr. Ironside. He turned to Isaiah 53 and read:

*Who has believed our message
and to whom has the arm of the LORD
been revealed?*

*He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of dry ground.*

*He had no beauty or majesty to attract us
to him,
nothing in his appearance that we
should desire him.*

*He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows, and familiar with
suffering.*

*Like one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him
not.*

*Surely he took up our infirmities
and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered him stricken by God,
smitten by him, and afflicted.*

*But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was
upon him,*

and by his wounds we are healed.

*We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.*

*He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,*

*and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
And who can speak of his descendants?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was stricken.
He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,
though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth
(Isa. 53:1-9).*

Dr. Ironside continued reading to the end of the chapter, then turned to the young man and said, “Tell me—who was I reading about?”

The young man said, “Let me read it myself.” He took the book and read through the whole chapter. Then he dropped the Bible in Dr. Ironside’s hands and dashed down the aisle and out the door without a word. Not knowing what else to do for the young man, Dr. Ironside prayed for him.

The young man didn’t return for two nights. Then, on the third night, he was back. This time there was a different expression on the young man’s face as he came up the aisle. He took a seat in the front row, and when a time of sharing testimonies was announced, the young man stood and told his story.

“I was raised in an atheistic family,” he said. “In my school years, I read all the critics and was convinced there was nothing to this ‘Christian’ business. But while I was in Palestine, working for the British government, I was exposed to a number of influences that

suggested to me that the Bible might be true.

“In Jerusalem, I joined a tourist group that went to visit ‘Gordon’s Calvary,’ the site outside the Damascus Gate where General Charles Gordon believed he had found Golgotha, the skull-shaped hill with the garden tomb nearby. I went with the group to the top of the hill. There, the guide explained that this was the place where the Christian faith began. In my mind, it was the spot where the Christian deception began. I became so angry I began to curse and blaspheme. The people around me ran in terror, afraid that God would strike me dead for my blasphemy at that sacred place.”

At this point, the young man broke down in tears. “These last few nights,” he continued, “I’ve learned that the one I cursed on Calvary was the one who was wounded for my transgressions and by whose wounds I am healed.”

It took an Old Testament prophecy to prepare this young man’s heart for the good news of the New Testament. His experience demonstrates the purpose and power of the Old Testament. The Old Testament was written to set our hearts aflame, to cause our hearts to burn within us in longing for the Christ of the New Testament. Truly, the Lord Jesus Christ supplies all our needs, but the Old Testament awakens our hearts to the reality of our need of Him.

No book in all the New Testament asks the kind of deep, soul-searching questions you find in the Old Testament—questions that continue to plague the hearts of men and women today. No place in the New Testament will you find the earnest searchings of the human heart all gathered in one place. In the Old Testament we find expressed all the

pain, anguish, and confusion that afflicts the modern soul: Why is there injustice? Why do the wicked prosper? What is our place in the cosmic scheme? How can we find meaning and purpose? Are we loved? Are we valuable? Or is everything ultimately futile? Do we just live, laugh, suffer, then die and return to dust?

The Old Testament is designed to articulate our deep spiritual hunger, to put life into terms we can see and express, to define the thirst of the soul, so that we can put a finger on our pain, our need, and our desire. How can we recognize the One who satisfies if we haven't identified the sources of our dissatisfaction?

For thousands of years, right up to the present moment, people of all cultures and backgrounds have turned to the Old Testament and have read its precious, powerful words, and said, "That's exactly how I feel!" They have gone on to find the answer for their pain and problems in those pages. The Old Testament is the book of human experience. It's designed to portray us as we are. In the mirror of the Old Testament we see ourselves clearly, and this reflection of

ourselves prepares us to listen to the Holy Spirit as He speaks to us through the New Testament.

How poverty-stricken we would be without the Old Testament—yet many Christians choose to be poor. They ignore the preparatory revelation God has given in the Old Testament, so that the rich truths of the New Testament might come alive in their hearts. As we move from the Old to the New Testament, I hope you'll be challenged and changed in your approach to this great book, and that the pages of the first thirty-nine books of your Bible will become as worn, underlined, and treasured as the pages of your favorite New Testament books.

The Divisions of the Old Testament

There are four divisions of the Old Testament, and each is especially designed to prepare us for a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. From the story of humanity's origins to the history of Israel to the great Old Testament poetry to the thundering books of prophecy, each section of the Old Testament lays its own foundation of truth. Each division

touches our hearts in a subtly different way and presents the approaching ministry and person of Jesus the Messiah in a subtly different light. When He is finally revealed at the critical moment in history, we see Him and say, "Yes! This is the One we have always heard read about in the Old Testament!"

Here is a thumbnail

DIVISIONS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Genesis–Deuteronomy

Five Steps to Maturity *Origin of the universe and humanity*

Joshua–Esther

The Message of History *Perils that confront the walk of faith*

Job–Song of Songs

Music to Live By *Praise & protest of the human heart*

Isaiah–Malachi

The Promises of God *Truths for living*

guide to the four divisions of the Old Testament:

FIVE STEPS TO MATURITY—THE BOOKS OF MOSES. These five books take us from the origin of the universe and of humanity, and lead us toward maturity through the introduction of sin (and the first gleaming of the plan of salvation), the first judgment of humankind through the Great Flood, the heroes of faith (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph), the beginnings of the nation of Israel, the captivity in (and exodus from) Egypt, the leadership of Moses, the introduction of the law, the wandering in the desert, and right up to the very borders of the Land of Promise.

Genesis means “beginnings,” and the book of Genesis opens with the greatest mystery of our existence: our relationship to the universe and to its Creator. In Genesis, we see reflection after reflection of our own human need. Adam and Eve needed a covering for their sins. Noah needed a boat to save him from the waters of judgment. Abraham continually needed God to intervene, deliver him, and supply him with things he lacked. Isaac needed God to prod him to action. Jacob needed a Savior to get him out of the messes he made in his life. Joseph needed a deliverer from the pit, from prison, and from life’s unfairness. The message of Genesis is the message of God’s answer to our human need.

Exodus is the story of God’s response to our human need. It’s the lesson of His redemptive power in our lives—the story of the first Passover, the parting of the Red Sea, and the giving of the law at Sinai. It’s the story of human oppression in the land of Pharaoh—

and the story of miraculous redemption and deliverance from bondage. The Israelites did nothing to bring about their own salvation. God did it all. That’s still how He works in our lives today.

Leviticus is a book of detailed instruction. It’s designed to make God accessible to us so that we will be available to God. It begins with the story of the tabernacle, the dwelling place of God. The tabernacle is a symbol of our lives, the place in which God chooses to dwell.

Numbers is the book of the wilderness of failure. The book begins at Kadesh-barnea, at the very edge of the Land of Promise. The people of Israel wander away from that place, losing sight of God’s promise for forty years. After wandering in barrenness, loneliness, and blistering sand, haunted mile after mile by defeat, they finally arrive at the same place where Numbers began—Kadesh-barnea. Numbers is a record of failure—and a warning for our own lives.

Deuteronomy means “second law.” It’s the story of the regiving of the law—and the people’s recommitment to follow it. The book closes with the disclosure of the blessings that await those who pattern their lives after the revealed will of God.

So the thread that winds through these five books, from Genesis through Deuteronomy, is that we are advancing, step-by-step, book-by-book, toward maturity, toward a relationship with the living God of the universe.

THE MESSAGE OF HISTORY—JOSHUA THROUGH ESTHER. The historical books make a unique contribution to the preparatory work of the Old Testament. While

the first five books of the Old Testament gave us the pattern of God's working in the human race, the next twelve books of history present us with the perils that confront us in our daily walk of faith. These books trace the history of one nation with a special ministry—the ministry of representing God to the world and perpetuating the lineage of the One who will be born the Messiah, the Son of God. In the perils and failures of Israel we see the perils and failures that beset us today as believers. And in God's loving discipline and redemption of Israel, we see His work of sanctifying and saving us from our sin and failure.

The books of history lead us into the battlefield as Joshua obediently seeks to take the Land of Promise. We see the intimidating forces of Jericho, followed by God's miraculous victory. We see the failure of the flesh at Ai and the deception of the Gibeonites. Through it all, we see Joshua steadily marching onward, fighting the battle of faith, never turning aside from the mission God had given him.

In Judges we see the cycles of spiritual success and spiritual defeat—and we see God's use of seven special people, the judges of Israel, to bring deliverance to Israel. In Ruth we have a wonderful story of faithfulness, set against the backdrop of the failures of Judges. Ruth, an alien woman in Israel, hears the voice of God and joins herself to His people, Israel. It's a beautiful story of romance and faith.

The books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles tell of the glory years of Israel as a mighty kingdom—and of the tragedies that result when human kings disobey the King of Kings. These books tell us the stories of King Saul, King David, King Solomon, and on and

on—kings who were strong, kings who were weak, wise kings and foolish, righteous kings and evil, great kings and small. And whenever a bad king has led Israel into disgrace, the Lord lifts up a man like Hezekiah or Josiah to cleanse the temple, rediscover the book of the Law, and turn Israel back to God.

The books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther deal with Israel's captivity and restoration. God is always at work in our lives—even in our bondage and pain. He lifts us out of defeat and discouragement and helps us to rebuild the walls of our lives, even as Nehemiah led the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. God enables us to shout in triumph, even amid seemingly hopeless circumstances, just as Queen Esther was able to triumph over her impossible odds. In these twelve books of history, we see how God prepares our hearts for the long-awaited arrival of the Messiah.

MUSIC TO LIVE BY—JOB THROUGH SONG OF SONGS. These are the poetical books that express both the praise and protest of the human heart. Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs expose our hearts to God, honestly expressing our pain and longing for God. There is not a single emotion we experience in life that is not expressed in these books. If you want to understand your own experience in life and find a reflection of your own soul in the Scriptures, then turn to these beautiful Old Testament books.

THE PROMISES OF GOD—ISAIAH THROUGH MALACHI. These are the books where God says what He will do. There are seventeen of these books, commonly divided

between the “major” prophets and “minor” prophets. They are not major or minor in importance—only in length. Whether long or short, all of these books contain major truths for our lives.

Isaiah is a book of glory and majesty. It predicts in startling detail the life, ministry, and sacrificial death of our Lord Jesus. It is also a book of grace. It tells the story of how we have destroyed ourselves through sin—and how God has intervened and given us the promise of a new beginning. Jeremiah and Lamentations, by contrast, warn of the absence of God from our lives if we turn our backs on Him. Ezekiel begins with a cascading, transcendent vision of God and leads us on a tour of future history, revealing God’s promise of intervention in worldwide human events. Daniel shows us God’s power to give us boldness, even in a hostile, rapidly changing world; Daniel goes on to reveal what God is planning to do through the nations of the world down through the course of history, even beyond our own day.

Hosea is one of the most beautiful books in the Bible, a picture of God’s unconditional love toward erring, sinful human beings; it’s the promise of God’s persistent pursuit to bring us redemption. Joel is the promise that God can weave our tragedies into His eternal plan. Amos is the promise that God never relaxes His standards, but continually seeks to bring us to perfection in Him. Obadiah is a promise of spiritual victory, as seen in the

contrast between Jacob and Esau, the spirit and the flesh. Jonah is the promise of God’s patience, and His gracious second chance, as revealed in the life of Jonah and the repentance of Nineveh.

Micah is the promise of God’s pardon, echoing the themes of Isaiah. Nahum promises the destruction of Nineveh; it comes after the story of Jonah and the repentance of Nineveh by a hundred years and demonstrates that God does not change. If we repent once, then lapse back into disobedience, we can expect the disciplining judgment of God. Habakkuk promises that God will ultimately answer our cries for justice in an unjust world. Zephaniah is a dark book that promises judgment in “the day of the Lord.”

Haggai promises material restoration if we turn our hearts to God. Zechariah is “the Apocalypse of the Old Testament,” promising God’s management of future events and His preservation of His people through times of judgment. Malachi promises that God will respond to our need and send us a Savior; it predicts the first coming of Jesus (preceded by John the Baptist), then skips over to the second coming of Jesus, the dawning of the Sun of Righteousness.

In these few paragraphs, we have sketched the outline of the Old Testament. In the pages that follow, we’ll look at some of the subtler shadings of God’s grand book of preparation for our lives.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

CHAPTER 3

God Has Spoken in These Last Days



There are two ways of learning truth: reason and revelation. Which is more important? That's like asking which blade of a pair of scissors is more important. It takes both. It's impossible to gather a complete and balanced understanding of biblical truth without using both reason and revelation.

Some people would throw out reason and rely on revelation alone. The result is fanaticism. If we decide that our God-given faculty of reason has no value at all, then we will behave irrationally.

I once read of a man who decided that the solution to every problem could be found in the Bible. When gophers began eating the vegetables in his garden, he took his Bible out in the yard and read the gospel of John in the four corners of his property. Somehow, he figured this would solve his gopher problem. It didn't. Reason would suggest that the best way to rid one's garden of gophers would be to set out gopher traps. By relying solely on revelation without applying reason and common sense, this man ended up behaving irrationally.

But what if we throw out revelation and rely on reason alone? The result would be

LEFT: Mount Arbel

equally disastrous. Reason has given us many scientific insights and technological advances, but reason alone has never shown us how to change the human heart; how to end war; or how to eliminate crime, poverty, drug abuse, or racism. In fact, our technological advances have actually rendered the future more dark and frightening. We can never begin to solve our social and human problems as long as we set aside God's revelation and rely on human reason alone.

The Word and the Spirit Together

What is revelation? It is simply the truth that cannot be known by reason. It's what Paul called "God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden . . . none of the rulers

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter provides a "thumbnail" overview of the entire New Testament, the channel by which God makes the living Lord Jesus real to our hearts. The New Testament answers all the questions raised by the Old Testament. This chapter deals with such crucial issues as: Who is Jesus, according to the Gospels? How did the church begin? What is the purpose of the Epistles (the letters of Paul and other apostles)? What is the purpose of the book of Revelation?

of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor. 2:7–8). When Paul spoke of the rulers of this age, he was not necessarily talking about kings and princes. He was talking about leaders of human thought in every realm. And he said there is a body of knowledge—a secret, hidden wisdom—that is imparted by God to human beings, which none of the rulers with all their cleverness and wisdom could understand. Had they known this, they never would have crucified the Lord of glory.

The religious rulers who demanded the crucifixion of our Lord were a body of learned men who boasted that they, more than anyone else, could recognize truth when they saw it. But when the incarnate Truth stood before them, they neither recognized Him nor received His word. They crucified Him because they had thrown out revelation and were clinging only to the power of their own reasoning.

Revelation, in the fullest sense, is Scripture interpreted by the Holy Spirit. We have the Bible, given to us by God, as Paul told Timothy: “All Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16). Scripture did not originate with human beings. Rather, certain chosen human beings became channels through whom God delivered His Word.

As Peter wrote, “Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21). The writers of the New Testament wrote letters just as we would write them today, expressing their feelings, their attitudes, and their ideas in the most natural and uncomplicated manner. But in the process, a strange mystery took place: The Holy Spirit worked through the New Testament writers

to guide, direct, and inspire. The Spirit chose the very words that would express God’s thoughts to human beings.

The hidden wisdom of God cannot be discovered in a laboratory experiment, yet His wisdom is essential to the kind of life God intends us to live. This wisdom is revealed in the Bible—yet it is worthless to us if we are not instructed by the Holy Spirit. It’s possible to know the Bible from cover to cover and get absolutely nothing from it. You can go to any bookstore and find dozens of books filled with extensive information about the historical, archaeological, and literary content of the Bible; yet the authors of these books are hardened atheists.

So revelation is not found merely by reading the Bible. The Bible must be illuminated, interpreted, and authenticated in our lives by the Holy Spirit. The Word and the Spirit must act together to bring us to a saving knowledge of God.

A Book of Fulfillment

Did you ever wonder why Jesus came to the Jews? Why didn’t He come to the Aztecs? or the Chinese? or the Eskimos? There’s a simple, commonsense answer to this question: He came to the Jews because they were the nation that had the Old Testament. The Jews, for this reason, were uniquely prepared to receive what God offered in Christ.

Certainly, not all Jews received Him. But for the first few years of its existence, the early church was overwhelmingly a Jewish church. The Jewish nation was qualified to receive the Messiah because it had been prepared by the Old Testament to receive Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life.

This is why many people today who read only the New Testament can go only so far in grasping the fullness of Jesus Christ. Their hearts are not adequately prepared. Our lives are always shallow and limited if we try to grasp something we are not ready to receive. That's why we need the ministry of the Old Testament in our lives.

If the Old Testament prepares, then the New Testament fulfills. God designed the New Testament to meet the needs stirred up and expressed by the Old Testament. How does the New Testament meet these needs? By revealing to us the One who is the answer to all our needs. Jesus said, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink" (John 7:37). "If anyone eats of this bread [referring to Himself], he will live forever" (John 6:51). "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). All the needs of the human heart are met in Him.

The New Testament is a channel by which the Holy Spirit makes the living Jesus Christ real to our hearts. The New Testament letter to the Hebrews tells us, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways" (Heb. 1:1). In other words, the Old Testament has given us an incomplete message, not the final word. "But in these last days," the passage continues, "he [God] has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb. 1:2). The New Testament is the answer to the yearning the Old Testament stirs within us.

When the corrupt religious leaders tried to trap Jesus and destroy Him, He replied, "You diligently study the Scriptures"—that is,

the Old Testament—"because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me" (John 5:39). It's true. The Old Testament testifies about the coming Messiah, and the New Testament testifies of the Messiah who has come.

The New Testament answers the questions of the Old Testament because the New Testament makes plain what the Old Testament speaks of in symbols, prophecies, and veiled references. Once we have met the Christ of the New Testament, we are able to see Him plainly throughout the Old Testament as well.

In both the Old Testament and the New, Jesus stands out on every page.

The Divisions of the New Testament

Every division of the New Testament is particularly designed to set forth the Lord Jesus Christ as the answer to the needs of our lives.

The **Gospels** are the biographical section of the New Testament. There we learn about Jesus, who He is and what He did. Who is Jesus, according to the Gospels? He's the Son of God born in human form for us. What did He do? He submitted to being sacrificed upon the cross. He burst forth from the tomb in resurrection power. He saved us from the penalty for our sins.

There was a time when, in the fullness of my ignorance after graduating from seminary, I thought the Gospels were hardly worth reading! I had heard that the Gospels were "merely" the story of the life of Jesus. There was certainly *some* value in them, but I believed the most important parts of the New Testament were Paul's epistles. A few of my seminary instructors unwisely reinforced this

DIVISIONS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Gospels

Matthew to John *The life of Jesus*

Acts

Book of Acts *The life of the church*

Epistles

Romans to Jude *Letters to the church*

Revelation

Book of Revelation *Future events*

notion, encouraging me to give my attention almost exclusively to the Epistles. They promised that if I would grasp the Epistles, my biblical knowledge would be complete.

In time, I discovered that I couldn't understand the Epistles apart from the Gospels. As I read the life of Christ and saw Him portrayed in the four dimensions of the four Gospels, I discovered the secret that transformed my own life and ministry. The most radical, revolutionary statement ever presented to the human mind is revealed in the words of Jesus Christ, and is recorded in various ways in the Gospels: "I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me" (John 6:57). This statement explains the life of Christ—the miracles He performed, the sermons He preached, the parables He told, the work He accomplished, and even His death and resurrection.

Acts gives us the account of the beginning of the church. And the church is nothing more, nor less, than the body of Jesus Christ today through which He intends to keep on

being who He is and doing what He did. He poured out His physical life in order that He might pour it into a body of people who would express that life throughout the world. The book of Acts is but the simple, straightforward account of how this body began, how it was filled with the Holy Spirit, and how it began to launch out from Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria, and far beyond to the uttermost parts of the earth.

The ministry that belonged to Jesus during His earthly life now belongs to His body, the body of believers. Our task as His followers is to open the eyes of the blind, to set at liberty those who are held captive, to comfort those who need comfort, to be conduits for God's transforming, life-changing power in the lives of men and women everywhere.

The **Epistles** are a series of letters written to individuals and churches in straightforward, uncomplicated language, conveying practical truths for Christian living. These letters are revealing, because nothing is as revealing as a personal letter. If I wanted to know what a group of people were like (short of sitting down and talking to them face-to-face), I would read their letters. The Epistles are letters written by human beings, under the direct inspiration of God. In them, we find revealed the personality of their human writers and the personality of their divine Author.

The Epistles represent a varied array of viewpoints. We find God's truth expressed through the personalities of the writers of these letters. There is Peter the fisherman, always casting his net for the human soul. There is Paul the tentmaker and church builder, always laying foundations and constructing.

There is John the net mender (that's what he was doing when Christ first found him), and his ministry is one of repairing, restoring, and bringing us back to God's original pattern.

In the letters of the New Testament, we discover the nuts and bolts of the Christian life, and we learn how to allow Jesus Christ to live His life through us. These letters are almost all composed in the same simple pattern. The first part is doctrinal, the second part is practical. The first part sets forth truth, the second part applies that truth to real life.

Truth must be applied. As the Lord Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31a-32). Until we begin to learn who He is and what He does and then apply it in the specific activities of our own lives and hearts, we can read our Bibles for years, yet be totally untouched by His magnificent truth.

Many people think that if anybody exemplifies what the Christian life should be, it is a pastor. It would seem to follow that if you could gather several pastors together, it would practically be heaven on earth! Let me tell you, it isn't that way at all.

At one pastors' conference I attended, there were ministers who were discouraged, confused, and soul-sick. In fact, some were so wounded and defeated that their very faith hung by a thread. Our speaker gave an excellent message on 1 Corinthians 2:16, where Paul says, "We have the mind of Christ." After the sermon, we had a prayer meeting. To my amazement, pastor after pastor prayed: "Oh Lord, give us the mind of Christ! Oh, if we could just have the mind of Christ!"

Now, what does the passage say? "We

have the mind of Christ." If that is what God's Word tells us, what kind of faith would pray, "Give me the mind of Christ"? Even many pastors, I'm sad to say, routinely ignore and misapprehend the promises of Scripture. We ask God for the things He has already granted us. He says to us, "Here! Take! All this is yours!" And in response, we stand and moan, "Oh, if I only had the mind of Christ, what I could do!"

As we adventure through the Epistles together, I pray you will open your heart to the straightforward truths presented there. I pray you will lay hold of all that God has given you, and that you will take these truths and apply them in your everyday life.

Finally, the book of **Revelation**. This is the only book in the New Testament that deals completely with prophecy. Here, in the form of a vision, God reveals to us not only a slate of future events, but the reality of who He is now and throughout all ages to come. Here we read the story of how the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, how He shall reign forever and ever, and how God's people shall become His dwelling place, so that a multitude from every tribe and nation will triumph over sin, death, and hell.

Peace, Perfect Peace

The message of the New Testament is fundamentally simple. It's the same message Paul states so eloquently in Colossians 1:27: "Christ in you, the hope of glory." We do not have any hope if we do not have that. If Christ is not active in you, and you have not already begun to experience the mystery of His life being lived in you, then you are not a

Christian and you have no hope—no hope of glory, no hope of fulfillment, no hope eternal life and eternal love.

But if you have placed your trust in Him, then you have every reason for hope. Thanks to God and His Son Jesus Christ, you have the greatest hope imaginable!

Hymn writer Edward H. Bickersteth puts it beautifully: “Peace, perfect peace.” But we cannot grasp the message of this hymn unless we notice its punctuation, because it has a rather peculiar structure. There are two lines in every verse. The first line ends with a question mark. The second line answers the question. The questions all concern life right now, and the answers are aspects of “Christ in you.”

Question: “Peace, perfect peace, in this dark world of sin?” Answer: “The blood of Jesus whispers peace within.”

Question: “Peace, perfect peace, by stronging duties pressed?” Answer: “To do the will of Jesus, this is rest.”

Question: “Peace, perfect peace, with sorrows surging round?” Answer: “On Jesus’ bosom naught but calm is found.”

Question: “Peace, perfect peace, our future all unknown?” Answer: “Jesus we know, and He is on the throne.”

Question: “Peace, perfect peace, death shadowing us and ours?” Answer: “Jesus has vanquished death and all its powers.”

These are the questions desperately asked by the sin-sick, pain-wracked human race. And these are the answers found in the New Testament. Notice that each answer focuses on the name of Jesus! He is the focus of the New Testament. He is the answer to all our needs.

The purpose of the Bible is to point us to the living person of Christ. He is the One whose image is embedded in every page of the Bible. The New Testament was written in order that we may see Him—“Christ in you, the hope of glory.” In the pages of the New Testament, we see Jesus.

Five Steps to Maturity

The Jews call the first five books of the Bible “the Law” or (in Hebrew) the Torah. In Greek it is called the Pentateuch, from *penta* (five) and *teuchos* (scrolls). Despite the theories of so-called “higher critics” that the Pentateuch is a patchwork composed by different writers and editors over centuries, there is strong evidence for the traditional belief that the author of these books was Moses. These five books demonstrate a unity of theme, content, and style that suggests they come from a single hand.

The opening chapters of Genesis may have been delivered to Moses in a vision or handed down to him through oral traditions. The last chapter of Deuteronomy, which records the death and burial of Moses, is probably the work of Moses’ successor, Joshua, for it flows seamlessly into the book of Joshua, establishing a stylistic and thematic continuity with the rest of the Old Testament. The grand scope of the Pentateuch, coupled with its simple, dignified telling of the history of humankind and the early Jewish people, make a compelling case for belief in Moses’ authorship of all five books.

The books of the Pentateuch and their principle themes are:

Genesis. The word *genesis* means “the beginning,” and this book provides the foundation for all that follows in the Old and New Testaments. Chapters 1 and 2 lay down the origins of the world. Chapters 3 through 5 lay down the origins of the

LEFT: Eastern Gate in Jerusalem

human race and the human condition. Here we see that we are made in the image and likeness of God, yet that image is marred by sin. The tragedy of sin entered the world through human free will—our ability to choose rebellion against God. The first six chapters of Genesis focus on three events that shape, then shake, the foundations of the world:

- The Creation
- The Fall of Man
- The Flood

In Genesis 6, the focus shifts from these three major events to five major people: Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. These five people are presented not as vague historical figures of the past, but as real flesh-and-blood personalities with whom we can all relate. This account preserves for us not only the facts of their lives but the color, depth, and tone of life in their days.

Exodus. In Genesis 32:28, God told Jacob, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter introduces the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. It provides a “thumbnail” sketch of each of the five books of Moses, Genesis through Deuteronomy, and it answers such questions as: Who was the human writer of these books and how did they come to be written? Where did the creation account come from? What was God’s purpose in giving us these books of history and law? How should we apply the truths of these ancient books to our lives today?



Mount Nebo

and with men and have overcome.” At the end of Genesis, the family of Jacob/Israel moved to Egypt, where Jacob’s son, Joseph, has risen to a position of prominence and power. But now, as Exodus opens, four centuries have passed since the closing events of Genesis. The children of Israel groan under bondage to a new and cruel Egyptian pharaoh. With this book, the focus shifts to Moses.

Exodus recounts the story of Moses, his contest of wills with the Egyptian pharaoh, the redemption of Israel in the first Passover, the escape of Israel through the parted waters of the Red Sea, and the journey to Mount Sinai, where God gives the Jewish people their covenant law. The story of Exodus is the story of Israel’s deliverance from bondage in Egypt.

Leviticus. Now that the people of Israel have been delivered, they must be taught to live as God’s chosen people. In Leviticus, God gives Israel a body of instructions about ritual cleansings and sacrificial atonements to set His people apart to live holy lives. The focus

of Leviticus is on worship, sanctification, and obedience.

Numbers. Having been sanctified, the people of Israel are ready to cross over into the Promised Land—or are they? Just as they are brought to the very brink of their inheritance, their faith falters and their obedience fails. Even God’s servant Moses fails and sins. So God disciplines His people, sentencing them to wander in the desert for forty years until that unbelieving, disobedient generation had passed away and a new generation arose—a generation of people who have learned from the error of their parents. This generation reaches Moab, the gateway to the Promised Land. There God gives His people instructions for the way they should live as inheritors of this new land.

Deuteronomy. Moses, at the end of his life, passes the baton to his disciple and successor, Joshua. Moses then delivers a farewell message to the people. It is, in essence, a sermon in which he reminds the people of God’s righteousness and faithfulness in the

past and points them toward the challenges of the future. He has led and loved the children of Israel, yet they have also been a source of great disappointment, grief, and anger to him. But they are God's chosen people, so he blesses them. Then, from the summit of Mount Nebo, he views the horizon of Canaan, the Promised Land. Finally, he dies and is buried in the land of Moab. It is at this time that Joshua assumes command of the nation of Israel.

Reading with Vision

The purpose of God's revelation is to stimulate our growth, to make us more mature and complete in Christ. If the Bible is not producing maturity in our lives, it is being wasted, as far as we are concerned. Its whole purpose is to make us effective instruments of God's grace and His will, so "we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching" (Eph. 4:14).

Clearly, if these books are to have a maturing effect on our lives, we must read them and immerse ourselves in them. But how many of us have actually sat down to study these books? Oh, we frequently start off well in Genesis, with its majestic creation story and its dramatic narratives of the fascinating lives of the patriarchs. And we move on into Exodus and get caught up in the tense drama played out between Moses and Pharaoh. But then we get to Leviticus, with its strange legal requirements, and we bog down. We never quite get through Leviticus and on into Numbers and Deuteronomy, much less Joshua.

I'm reminded of a cartoon I once saw

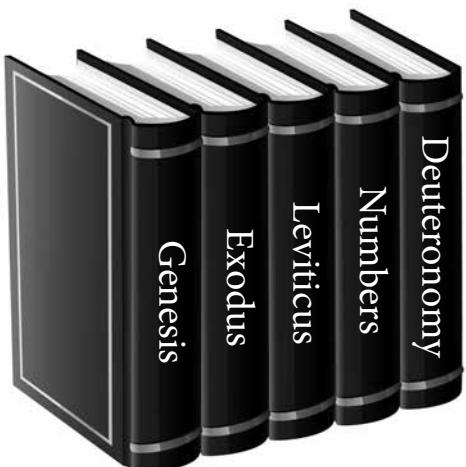
after the release of the motion picture *The Ten Commandments*. Two women walk past a theater where the marquee reads, "The Ten Commandments." One woman says to the other, "Oh, yes, I've seen the movie, but I haven't read the book." Most of us fall into that category. We've seen the Hollywood



versions of Scripture, but we never get around to reading the books.

I think the reason so many of us bog down in these books is because we read them without vision. We don't know *why* we are reading them. We don't know what to expect from them. We don't know what to look for. We read the text as a simple narrative that sometimes is interesting and sometimes complicated, and we fail to probe the text to find out how God wants to apply its truths in our lives.

Some staggering secrets are embedded in these books. That's why, in this study, we're taking the mountaintop view, scanning the landscape of the Pentateuch. Though it is rewarding to study these books in close detail, it's easy to miss the thrust of the passage in a verse-by-verse approach. As we read these books with vision, gaining a panoramic perspective, we'll be able to see the full scope and stunning impact of God's message to us in the Pentateuch, so that His Word can produce its maturing work in our lives.



The Book of Beginnings

We begin with Genesis. Compare the word *genesis* with the word *gene*. A gene is a tiny, yet complex, chemical component within a chromosome. It determines the physical unfolding of an individual life.

The book of *Genesis* is much like that *gene*. It is only one-sixty-sixth of the entire Bible, it is simple and even humble in its style, yet it is rich and complex in truth and insight into the human condition. It initiates and sets the tone for the entire Bible story. It explains why human beings need a Savior. As early as Genesis 3:15, it suggests that the line of Adam and Eve will one day produce a Savior who will crush the head of Satan. Genesis is our biblical foundation; without it we cannot fully understand the rest of the Bible.

Genesis is the story of the beginning of our universe, the beginning of the human race, the beginning of sin, and the beginning of civilization. It's a fascinating record of the origin of the physical world that surrounds us. The Bible opens with that majestic, awesome insight: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1).

Thus the Bible begins by confronting one of the greatest questions of our existence: the mystery of the universe. Not surprisingly, this is the very theme of science and philosophy today: Who are we and what is our place in the universe? It is here, at the heart of one of the most fascinating questions of human experience, where the Bible begins. And it begins with those exalted words, "In the beginning."

Genesis goes on to tell us about ourselves. We human beings, it says, are remarkable creatures who were made to be a reflection of

God's mind, an expression of God's love, the instrument of God's plan. The human race is seen in the opening chapters of Genesis in a marvelous relationship with God. Human beings love God and have fellowship with Him. Adam, the first man, walks in communion with God, as Genesis 3:8 tells us, in the garden, "in the cool of the day." Rightly translated, this verse should say that God walked in the garden "in the spirit of the day"—that is, in a spirit of understanding and fellowship with Adam. This is God's intention for humanity.

But this sweet communion was shattered by the fall. Beginning in Genesis 3, we see the tragedy of disobedience and unbelief. God's Word confronts us immediately with a case of misdirected faith—the terrible destruction that comes into our lives when, in blindness and self-willed ignorance, we place our faith in error. It shows us that we are made to be creatures of faith.

The story of human failure and fall is followed immediately by the story of the failure of the first creation and its destruction in the flood. This is followed by stories of God's people—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph—experiencing great failures, deep hurts, and great successes. Their lives are lessons to us, and we can all identify with at least one of these four personality types.

Abraham's story illustrates our need for a supplier. Here was a man who always needed somebody to come and deliver something to him that he lacked. He was always coming up short, always in need. It's the story of a man whose need was continually being supplied by God.

Isaac was a man who had another kind of

need. He never ran short. There is no record of a famine in Isaac's life. But he was in need of a motivator. He loved to just sit. Again and again, Isaac needed somebody to prod him into action, to get him moving to the place God wanted him to be. Most of us need this kind of motivation from time to time (if not all the time).

Jacob was in continual need of a bodyguard, a protector. He was always getting into trouble. Throughout his life, he needed somebody to rescue him from the latest mess he had made of his life.

Then we have the marvelous story of Joseph. How different he was from Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob! Here is Joseph—so human, so real, yet so admirable. But Joseph's life is also a story of need—the need of a deliverer. Joseph didn't bring trouble on himself through his own fault or sin. In fact, many of his problems resulted from his integrity and his commitment to righteous living before God. But his story reminds us of the delivering power of God.

The story of Joseph ends with the words, "in a coffin in Egypt." Even in death, Joseph needed one last act of deliverance from God. His bones lay in a coffin in Egypt, and he needed to have his mortal remains delivered out of Egypt and taken up to the Promised Land. Joseph's need symbolized the need of his people—and our need as believers in Christ. Our final hope is to have our own mortality rescued from corruption and taken up to the eternal land God has promised us.

So it is clear, from this panoramic view of Genesis, that the whole story of Genesis is a message about the deep need of the human race. It is the story of your need and mine.

The Book of Redemption

Exodus is the story of God's redemptive response to human need. The book revolves around four major incidents: the first Passover, the crossing of the Red Sea, the giving of the law at Mount Sinai, and the construction of the tabernacle. The first two—the Passover and the crossing of the sea—signify the forgiveness and freedom God gives. Here we learn that freedom and forgiveness are gifts from God. We have no power to generate freedom or forgiveness by our own efforts.

The first part of the book tells how God acted to set His people free. He arranged the encounters between Moses and Pharaoh. He performed the great miracles that culminated in the passing over of the angel of death through the land; God protected His people from judgment—a divine protection that is celebrated in the Passover Feast. Here is a picture of God at work, setting His people free. They were powerless to liberate themselves. They could only accept their freedom as a gift of God's grace.

The crossing of the Red Sea is the story of God's miraculous intervention in setting His people free from bondage. Like a believer passing through the waters of baptism, the people of Israel were brought into a new relationship as they passed through the waters of the Red Sea, walking in the very shadow of death, a valley between two walls of water poised to bring down a flood of destruction the moment the restraining hand of God was removed. When the Israelites emerged on the far shore, they were no longer merely a crowd of refugees; now, for the first time, they were a nation under God.

What did they encounter on the other side

of the Red Sea? Mount Sinai and the giving of the law. The point is clear: When we as human beings are delivered from bondage (whether bondage to an oppressive government or bondage to the oppression of sin), we come under the control of another. The giving of the law is an expression of God's lordship. The message of Exodus is that a new relationship had begun; a new ownership was entered into. In the New Testament, Paul expresses the message of Exodus in concise form: "You are not your own; you were bought at a price" (1 Cor. 6:19–20).

Just as Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea go together in the life of God's people, so too the giving of the law and the construction of the tabernacle are inseparable. The pattern of the tabernacle was given to Moses at the same time the law was given on Mount Sinai.

God designed the tabernacle to be at the center of the camp of Israel. And over the whole camp was the great cloud by day and the fiery pillar by night. This pillar gave evidence that God's presence was dwelling among His people. But they could only experience His presence through an intricate system of sacrifices and rituals designed to focus their faith and cleanse their lives.

The construction of the tabernacle was accompanied by an elaborate set of symbols and rules for their use. The symbols teach us that God is holy and changeless. The tabernacle is a picture of God's abiding desire to dwell with His people.

The Book of Instruction

Next we come to Leviticus. This is the book of the Pentateuch where people often bog down. Leviticus is a book of instruction

designed to make God's holiness available so that people can be available to God. The theme of Leviticus is access to God.

Leviticus begins with the story of the tabernacle, where the presence of God dwelt among the people of Israel. If we could have climbed to a mountaintop and looked out over the wilderness area where the twelve tribes of Israel were encamped, it would have been a strange and wonderful sight to see this vast assemblage spread out on the plains in perfect order and symmetry, each of the twelve tribes in its own assigned place. Walking down the mountain, passing into the camp, we would come through thousands of Israelites until we came to the outer court of the tabernacle.

Entering the great open gate of the tabernacle, we would pass the altar of sacrifice and the brazen laver (bronze washing basin). Then we would come to the door of the tabernacle itself. Moving through the mysterious outer veil, we would come to the Holy Place, where the shewbread, the altar of incense, and the great golden candelabra were kept. Beyond stood the inner veil. Behind that—if we dared to enter—we would find the Holy of Holies. The only article in that room was the ark of the covenant.

The mysterious, ominous ark was the dwelling place of God, with the mercy seat above it and the two cherubim with their wings covering it. There shone the Shekinah light of God's glory. It was a place of profound holiness—and a place of terror for anyone whose heart was not one hundred percent pure and righteous. The only one who dared to enter the Holy of Holies and approach the ark was the high priest—and then only once a year with the blood of the goat of

atonement. It was the high priest's task to make atonement for the sins of the people. This is a picture of God's dwelling in the midst of His people, demonstrating how they could have fellowship with Him.

Embedded in the book of Leviticus are three major principles: (1) our need for representation before God, (2) God's adequacy to deliver us from our sins, and (3) our faith in God demonstrated by our obedience to Him. Let's examine each principle in turn.

1. *Representation.* The average Israelite had no right to enter the Holy of Holies. Only the priest could go in, and when he did, he represented the whole nation. By that representation, the nation began to learn the principle of appropriating the value of another's work. After all, this is exactly what we are asked to do today, isn't it? We are asked to believe that Christ—our representative—died for us and that we died with Him. Here we see the preparatory value of the Old Testament. Here, in the middle of the Pentateuch, God instructs the people of Israel in their need to have a representative so they can be forgiven and acceptable to God.

2. *God's adequacy.* Leviticus opens with the institution of five offerings, each speaking of Jesus in His death for us, each showing how a basic need of human life is fully met in what Christ would later do in the New Testament. All of these five offerings, taken together, show us that we will never encounter anything that God hasn't already resolved. He is adequate for all our needs, including our need for deliverance from sin and death.

3. *Our obedience.* Jesus' representation of us before God and God's adequacy for our every need are expressed in our lives

through our obedience. Obedience is faith in action, faith in motion, faith acting upon the premise that God's promises are true and His commandments are good and just.

Leviticus is the Old Testament book of instruction, and in many ways it parallels the New Testament book of instruction, Hebrews. If you would like to engage in an illuminating Scripture study, read Leviticus and Hebrews side by side and compare the teachings of these two instructive books.

The Book of the Wilderness Experience

In Numbers we arrive in the wilderness of failure. The tragic and circular story of Numbers begins at Kadesh-barnea, at the edge of the Promised Land. At the end of the book, we are back at Kadesh-barnea again. No progress takes place in this book.

Between the two scenes at Kadesh-barnea are forty years of wandering in the desert. God's original intention for the Hebrews was that they spend forty days between the edge of Egypt and the border of the land. But, because of the unbelief of the people, they were sentenced to forty years of trial, despair, murmuring, barrenness, and regret. Throughout those forty years, the Israelites repeatedly thought back to their captivity in Egypt and talked of their bondage as if it were "the good old days." If slavery looked good to them, you can only imagine how defeated they felt in the desert.

The people of Israel were miraculously delivered in Exodus. They received the instruction of God in Leviticus. Why, then, did they fail so miserably in Numbers? I confess that I don't understand it. Yet I continually encounter this phenomenon in my own life,

and I hear of it in the lives of others. How can people read the Bible for years, go to a Bible school, attend a Bible church, attend a weekly Bible study—then act as if they hadn't learned anything at all? Yet it happens.

I recall one woman who had a great knowledge of biblical truth. She had studied the Word for years and could answer questions that would stump many theologians and Bible scholars. But she lived in defeat. Her faith was gone. Her family was falling apart. Her behavior was inconsistent with all the biblical truth she had absorbed over the years.

So it was with the Israelites in Numbers. This book is a record of failure, and it serves as a warning to you and me. Yet it is also a testament to God's love and patience. Yes, His people grieved Him, and yes, He disciplined them, but not because He hated them, not because He wanted to destroy them. He still wanted to bring this race of people into the beautiful land He had promised them. So He disciplined them. Even in their wanderings, their ingratitude, and their complaining, He provided for them with fatherly love and care.

We should take heart and heed the lessons of the Pentateuch. God disciplines those He loves, but He also forgives and restores. Though Numbers is a book of failures, we know that the success of Israel lies ahead. The book ends with the Israelite nation once more at Kadesh-barnea, at the doorstep of Canaan. Their wilderness is behind them now. The Promised Land lies ahead.

The Book of the "Second Law"

Finally we come to Deuteronomy. The name of the book means "second law," from the Greek *deuter* (second) and *nomas* (law).

Deuteronomy begins with a farewell message by Moses. It is, first, a retrospective message, reviewing all of God's blessings to the people. It is, second, a recounting of the law that Moses had delivered to the people in Exodus. It is, third, a revelation of the rich blessings God has in store for those who keep the law.

Why is the law given a second time in this book? In the New Testament, Paul tells us that the law serves a crucial purpose in our lives: it was, he says, "put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith" (Gal. 3:24). It is when the law says, "thou shalt not" (covet, steal, kill, commit adultery) that we realize our inner hunger to do these very things. We discover our rebelliousness toward any authority that says, "No, you can't." We discover the war within us: we want to do right, but we are powerless against temptation. We are unrighteous in God's sight. We cannot save ourselves; we need a Savior. If the law did not shine the light of truth on our sin, we would not recognize our lost condition. The law is our strict, uncompromising teacher, without compassion, without mercy. It drives us into the arms of our loving Savior.

The Law was given to Israel the first time to say, "You are sinful." It was given the second time, after the failure in the wilderness, to say, "You are helpless." God wanted the people of Israel to recognize their complete dependency and helplessness.

When the law was given the first time on Mount Sinai, the people responded confidently, even smugly, "Everything the Lord has said we will do." But when it was given the second time in Kadesh-barnea, the response of the people was more humble, more subdued, even more fearful: "We don't

have, of ourselves, what it takes to do this." That was what God wanted to hear: humility and a willingness to live in dependence upon a higher strength than their own. They were then ready to be led into the land.

And who was to lead them? It is significant that the one who would lead the people of Israel into the Land of Promise was a man named Joshua. "Joshua" is the Hebrew form of a name that you know quite well in its Greek form: "Jesus." That's right—Joshua in the Old Testament had the same name as Jesus in the New Testament. The symbolism is too obvious to misunderstand.

When we come to the end of Deuteronomy, we find that God has prepared His people for the purpose He had all along. The five books of Moses were written to bring the people to the edge of the Land of Promise. Moses could not take them in. Moses represents the law. As Paul says in Romans 8:3, "What the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son."

It was Joshua who led the people into the physical Land of Promise. And it is the new Joshua, Jesus, who leads us into the eternal Land of Promise.

God's Fivefold Pattern

This, then, is the Pentateuch in panoramic perspective. These five books give us the pattern of God's program, which He follows in our lives:

1. An awareness of our need (*Genesis*);
2. God's activity in moving to meet that need, His response in redemption (*Exodus*);

3. Instruction in how to live, how to worship, how to approach God (*Leviticus*);
4. The consequences of our failure and unbelief (*Numbers*); and
5. An arrival at a place where self-effort ends, where the law again crushes our self-sufficiency and drives us humbly back to the Lord (*Deuteronomy*).

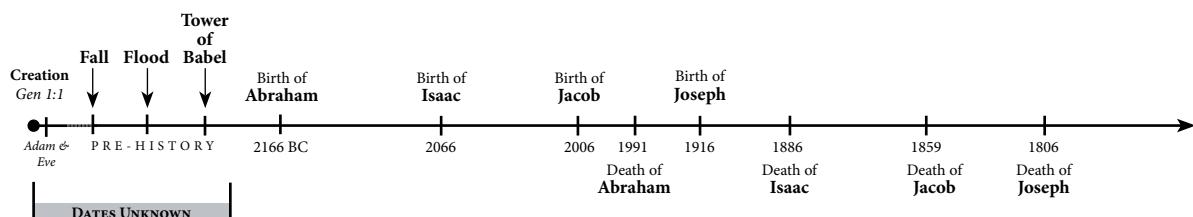
You'll find this pattern stamped on almost every page of the Bible: five steps, five divisions, or a fivefold order.

The book of Psalms contains five divisions that coincide exactly with this pattern. So do the five offerings given in Leviticus, the five great feasts that Israel celebrates, and the five sections into which both the Old and the New Testaments are divided. The number five is stamped throughout the Scriptures, and each

time it is a repetition of this pattern that God will follow. Someone has even suggested that perhaps God, wanting us to remember this, gave us five fingers on each hand and five toes on each foot.

It is at this fifth stage where God can truly work, because we say, "Lord, on my own I can do nothing." And God says, "Good, that's right where I want you. Now I can use you. Now I can work through you. Now I can accomplish My purpose through you."

This is the Pentateuch. Without it, the great themes of the rest of the Bible are incomprehensible. With it, we have the key to unlock the deep secrets of the Scriptures. Now that we have gained our orbital view of the Pentateuch, let's move in a little closer and adventure through each of these five amazing books, one by one.

The Story of Faith Begins

Henry Ward Beecher was a prominent U.S. minister in the 1800s who was once visited by a friend, attorney Robert Ingersoll. The friendship between Beecher and Ingersoll was an odd one, since the attorney was a famous agnostic and critic of the Bible. But Beecher never gave up trying to convert his unbelieving friend.

Ingersoll once told Beecher all about a new book he had read by Charles Darwin. The book, he said, explained how everything came into being without God.

"Well, where did people come from, according to Mr. Darwin?" asked Beecher.

"From apes," Ingersoll replied.

"Ah," said Beecher, "and the apes came from—?"

"Lower animals," Ingersoll replied. "And the lower animals arose from still lower forms, and on and on, until you go all the way down the chain of life to the one-celled creatures that first formed in the seas."

"And where did the seas come from?" asked Beecher. "And the world itself? And the sun, the moon, and the stars?"

Ingersoll spread his hands. "They just happened. We don't need some mythical

deity to explain such things."

Later that evening, Beecher took Ingersoll into his library to show him some new books he had just purchased. Ingersoll's attention was captured by a globe on Beecher's desk that depicted the stars and constellations of the night sky. "This is a wonderful globe," he said. "Who made it?"

"Why, nobody made it," said Beecher, grinning. "It just happened."

The book of Genesis, as we shall see, is not very much concerned with how things happened, but with *who* made them happen. The first four words of Genesis make it clear that everything has a divine Author:

"In the beginning God . . ."

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter surveys the great sweep of the first book of the Bible, from the story of creation and fall through the time of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), through the life of Joseph, an unmistakable symbol of the coming Servant-Messiah, Jesus. Here we discover the theme that runs throughout Genesis: Humanity is inadequate without God. Yet Genesis also reveals the secret to a complete life: friendship with God.

An Ancient Book . . . A Timeless Message

In the previous chapter, we took an “orbital” look at the first five books of the Bible. Now we zoom in for a closer, more detailed perspective.

How old is Genesis? The Greek historian Herodotus, who lived three centuries before Christ, is called “the Father of History.” He is the earliest secular historian whose writings have been preserved for us. Yet Moses, who wrote the first five books of our Bible, was in his grave over a thousand years before Herodotus was born. That’s how ancient Genesis is—yet its insights are as fresh as this morning’s news.

What other ancient writings are comparable to Genesis? If you’re familiar with the findings of archaeology, then you know that the ancient columns, slabs, and shards of pottery that have been unearthed in recent centuries give us some insight into life in ancient civilizations. From these sources, we can find no ancient writings of other early cultures that come close to Genesis in the liveliness of its human drama, the reality of its human characters, or the richness of its language and description. It is a real book about real people who lived in a real place and time.

But Genesis is not only a book of history. It’s a book with a profound message—and that message can be summed up in a single statement: *Human beings are inadequate without God.* That is the essence of the book. It’s a deeply personal message, for we see our own stories reflected in its story line. You and I can never be complete without God, nor can we ever fulfill our true purpose in life without a genuine personal relationship

with an indwelling God.

Our inadequacy apart from God is revealed to us by Genesis in three realms:

1. *The realm of natural science:* The creation story touches on cosmology—the study of the universe, its origin, and makeup. The vastness of our universe leaves us feeling small and insignificant—apart from God. The story of the flood touches on geology—the study of the earth’s features and forces. The geological forces demonstrated in Genesis make us feel tiny and powerless—apart from God. The creation of life touches on biology—the study of life in all its manifestations. We feel weak and puny next to the predators of land and sea; we are also vulnerable to bacteria and other life-forms that are invisible to the naked eye. In the realm of natural science, we stand humbled and inadequate—apart from God.

2. *The realm of human relationships:* In the dramatic stories of Genesis, we see the principles of sociology, anthropology, psychology, and psychiatry acted out in real human relationships. There are complex relational dynamics in the story of Adam and Eve and the fall. There are realistic sociological dynamics in the stories of Noah and his neighbors before the flood, or the story of Abraham, Lot, and the city of Sodom. The self-sabotaging behavior of Jacob is a fascinating psychological study. The lesson of these stories, again and again, is that humanity is hopelessly dysfunctional—apart from God.

3. *The realm of spiritual relationships:* In the opening chapters of Genesis, we are plunged into the deepest questions of theology (the study of God), soteriology (the study of salvation), angelology (the study of angels and demons), and philosophy (the



Starry Sky

study of existence, reason, and values). In all of these vital areas, the book of Genesis reveals that you and I are totally inadequate apart from God.

The World of Nature

The first two chapters of Genesis are primarily concerned with the world of nature. Genesis opens with the great truth that we live in a universe. We exist on a specific set of coordinates in space and time. If we know anything at all about science, we are aware that our planet is part of a solar system, which is part of a hundred-billion-star galaxy, which is one among billions of galaxies in a universe that is vast beyond our comprehension.

The Bible opens with the majestic recognition of this fact: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (1:1).

What a strange conjunction—to put all the vast heavens on one side and our tiny planet Earth on the other. But the book moves right on to tell us that humankind—what modern science pictures as “man the insignificant,” a tiny speck of life clinging to a minor planet at the outskirts of an ordinary galaxy in an unthinkably vast universe—is in fact the *major* object of God’s attention and concern.

Verse two tells us that the earth began as a planet completely covered by an ocean, which was itself wrapped in darkness. It was “formless and empty,” featureless and without life. There was no land, no mountain range, no coastline to catch the eye; simply a great world of water. With this picture of the beginnings of the world, science fully agrees.

But the revelation of God’s Word adds a key factor that many secular scientists do

not acknowledge: the fact that “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” God was at work in His universe, interacting with it. Something comes out of nothing because God is moving. The Spirit of God brings light out of darkness, shape out of shapelessness, form out of formlessness, life out of lifelessness.

The first step God took, according to the record, was to create light: “‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” Light is essential to life. With the advent of light, we are now ready for the record of the six days of creation. Each day, except the seventh, includes an evening and a morning. Each, except the seventh, records a progressive order of creation.

Controversy has raged over whether these are literal twenty-four-hour days or geological ages. This controversy completely misses the point of the Genesis account. It should be clear to anyone reading the passage that Genesis does not focus on the question of time. Important as this may seem to us, it is not God’s focus. He wants to show that, in creation, He was moving toward a goal through a progression of successive steps that logically succeed one another. Creation does not happen all at once with a snap of His fingers. God chose to accomplish the creation in stages, and these stages are evident throughout this passage.

Despite the knowledge we continue to acquire through space probes, radio telescopes, and the Hubble Space Telescope, the universe is still a mystery to us. We know very little about it. A nuclear physicist once described to me the complexity of the nucleus of an atom, what was once thought to be the most simple and basic building block of matter. Discoveries of new “species” in the

“particle zoo” has made the once-simple atom a thing of incomprehensible complexity.

Here, where the outer limits of human knowledge meet the frontiers of human ignorance, the Bible begins to answer the perplexing questions of the scientists: What set the universe in motion? What keeps the universe going? Where did we come from? What is its purpose? Why are we here?

Genesis reveals that the mysteries of human existence and the material universe are bound to the spiritual realm. Without understanding God, we cannot understand our universe, ourselves, or our relationship to the world around us. Microscopes and telescopes can give us only a partial view. The spiritual scope of the Bible enables us to complete the picture that science has begun to sketch for us.

Albert Einstein put his finger squarely on the inadequacies of science when he said, “Science is like reading a mystery novel.” You can buy what used to be called a “dime novel” (it would cost \$29.95 today!), and you can take it home, prop yourself on your pillows, and read it in a darkened room with only a reading lamp for company. At least one murder (and maybe a few more) would occur in the first chapter or two. The story soon focuses on one theme: whodunit? Clues appear as you read on.

By the third chapter you’ve decided the butler did it. You read further, and the evidence mounts against the butler. But in the last chapter, all your previous assumptions are upset. It wasn’t the butler after all—it was the little old lady in tennis shoes! Einstein says science is like that. It struggles along from clue to clue, and never

seems to get close to the ultimate answer.

Genesis begins where science leaves off. This is not a criticism of science, because science was never designed to answer the question “Why does the universe exist?” The scope of science is deliberately limited to certain avenues of inquiry. Genesis answers the “why” question and the “who” question. Genesis gives answers addressed to faith—not an irrational “leap of faith” but a reasoned faith. The more science learns about the fundamental nature of the universe, the more science seems to agree with the Bible.

So the Bible remains true to the most complex discoveries of science while at the same time retaining a simplicity that even the least educated among us can understand. The Bible was never intended by God to be a textbook on science. God has deliberately structured the physical universe to manifest an inner spiritual reality. Since the world is made for man, it reflects God’s truth to him. That’s why Jesus found the world of nature to be an apt instrument with which to teach spiritual truths, as His parables reveal.

Genesis 1:26 shows us that God held a divine consultation about man, saying, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness.” This conversation is the first hint that God consists of more than one person. The key phrase about man in this verse is that he was created in the “image” and “likeness” of God. That image is found not in man’s body or his soul, but in his spirit. As Jesus told the woman at the well in Samaria, “God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24).

What is godlike about our spirit? If our spirit is made in the image of God, then it

can do things that God can do, but which no animal can. Three things are suggested throughout the first chapter of Genesis that God alone does: first, God creates; second, God communicates; and third, God evaluates, pronouncing some things good and others not good. It is here that the image of God in man appears. Man can create. Man communicates as no animal can do. And man is the only creature who has a moral sense, recognizing some things as good and others as bad. Thus, the spirit of humanity is stamped with the image of God.

Chapter two finds Adam walking in the garden in communion with God, functioning as a spirit living within a physical body and manifesting the personality characteristics of the soul. At this point, God gives Adam a research project, to investigate the animal world in search of a possible counterpart to himself. God knew that Adam would not find what he was looking for, but in the process, Adam discovered at least three marvelous truths.

First, he learned that a woman was not to be a mere beast of burden as the animals are, because that would not fulfill his need for a helper and companion. Second, he realized that a woman was not to be merely a biological laboratory for producing children. This is what the animals use sex for, but that was not sufficient for Adam’s needs. Sex in humankind, therefore, is different from sex among the animals. Third, Adam learned that a woman was not a thing outside himself, to be used at the whim of the man and then disposed of. She was made to be his helper, fit for him, corresponding to him, complementing and completing him.

So, in a remarkable passage, we are told that Adam fell into a deep sleep and God took a rib from him, made a woman from that rib, and brought her to him. This period of Adam's unconsciousness suggests what modern psychology confirms, that the relationship of marriage is far deeper than mere surface affection. It touches not only the conscious life, but the subconscious and the unconscious as well.

The Human Race Enters the Picture

In chapters three through five of Genesis the human race enters the picture. These chapters trace the story of humanity from Adam through Noah and reveal that the basic unit of society is the family. That pattern has remained unchanged for ten to twenty thousand years of human history. The family is still the basis of human society. When people ignore that fact and begin to destroy family life, the foundations of a society disintegrate. Why? A nation is an extension of the families that it contains. The nations of the world are simply large complex family groups.

When a president dies, when a hurricane devastates a city, when hundreds die in a collapsed building, when a space shuttle explodes, what happens? An entire nation mourns. We, as Americans, have a common bond, a common connection. The more we lose sight of our connectedness as a family-society, the more fragmented and dysfunctional our nation becomes.

These chapters also reveal the failure of human beings in their most basic relationships. People tried to be human without God, and the result was the introduction of the sin principle. Sin is the monkey wrench tossed

into the human machinery. It's the reason we behave in ways that are destructive to ourselves and others—even when we know better and want better for ourselves and others. Keith Miller has called sin “the ultimate addiction,” because no matter how much we want to be free of it, the destructive habit of sin is impossible to break in our own power.

Here in Genesis, we see how Adam rejected God's plan and lost Paradise. We see how Cain rejected God and became a murderer, and then went out and founded a civilization that ended in apostasy and drowned in the flood. We see how wise and godly Noah, after seeing his family spared from the flood, fell into the sin of alcohol abuse, bringing shame on his family. Later in Genesis, we'll see how men like Jacob and Lot brought enormous hurt on themselves and their families. We hear a lot these days about “dysfunctional families,” but God already wrote the book on that subject.

Genesis three explains over one hundred centuries of human heartache, misery, torture, and bloodshed. Remove this chapter from Genesis, and the entire Bible becomes incomprehensible. More importantly, Genesis three explains our own heartache and failure. We find ourselves in these pages. The temptation and the fall are reproduced in our lives many times a day. We all have heard the voice of the tempter and felt the attraction of sin—and we all know the pangs of guilt that follow.

Many biblical scholars feel that the tempter in the garden was not a snake but a “shining one,” which is what the Hebrew word for snake means. Snakes were undoubtedly created to represent the punishment that fell

upon this being when he brought about the fall of man by his cunning and deceit. The snake in the garden is clearly the devil in his disguise as an angel of light. He confronts the woman in the Garden of Eden, and his tactic is to arouse a desire for what God has forbidden.

First he implants in her heart a distrust of God's love—"Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" (Gen. 3:1). Next, he dares to deny openly the results that God warned of—"You will not surely die" (3:4). Then he clinches his attack with a distorted truth—"God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). So Eve stands before the fruit that hangs within reach in all its luscious fascination. It offers her an experience she never dreamed possible: "you will be like God."

The devil has aroused Eve's emotions. She longs for the tantalizing fruit. Now, when her mind tries to make a rational choice, it can no longer do so. Her thinking is already clouded by her emotions. In fact, her emotions have already made their choice—and her mind can only rationalize the choice her emotions have made. Her mind must twist the facts to fit her desire. Once she has rationalized her desire, Eve takes the fruit and eats.

Even so, all is not lost. There is still hope for the human race. Adam has not yet fallen, only Eve. A battle has been lost, but not the war. In the innocent but ominous words, "She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it" (3:6), we face the beginning of the darkness of a fallen humanity. What the Bible calls "death" follows immediately.

This is followed by the couple's banishment

from the garden—not, as we so often imagine, to keep them from coming to the tree of life, but as the text specifically states, "to guard the way to the tree of life" (3:24). There is a way to the tree of life, but it is no longer a physical way. In the book of Revelation, we are told that the tree of life is for the healing of the nations (see Rev. 22:2). It is surely to this that Jesus refers when He says, "I am the way." We are to live in the presence of God because a way has been opened back to the tree of life. That way is Jesus alone.

The tragic sin of Adam leads directly to the criminal sin of Adam's son Cain, who kills his brother Abel. Cain is motivated by bitterness and jealousy when Abel's blood offering is accepted over Cain's grain offering to God. From Cain, we trace the beginnings of civilization and especially the part that urban life plays in shaping human society.

Cain is the father of Enoch, who builds his city on ground that is yet stained with the blood of Abel. The city Enoch builds contains all the ingredients of modern life: travel, music and the arts, the use of metals, organized political life, and the domestication of animals. It is impressive but built on shaky ground. Violence, murder, and immorality abound as the state rises to replace the family as the focus of human interest. The trend toward urban life over rural life becomes evident. The human race becomes increasingly tolerant of sexual excess and immorality.

But in the midst of this corruption and deterioration, God has another plan ready. After the murder of Abel and the banishment of Cain, Adam and Eve have another son, whose name—Seth—means "appointed." Noah will eventually come out of Seth's line.

The Human Spirit in Relationship with God

The rest of Genesis explores the realm of spiritual relationships. It's the story of the human spirit in relationship with God, as told through the lives of five men. If you remember the lives of these five men and what they mean, you will have most of Genesis in the palm of your hand. They are Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Genesis reveals in their stories what human beings are always seeking.

We tend to spend our lives seeking *things*. A popular bumper-sticker slogan puts it this way: "He who dies with the most toys, wins." But story after story of the final moments of people who die with the most toys prove otherwise. Those who die with nothing to show for their lives but a collection of castles, cars, fame, wealth, and empires tend to die miserably, clutching at a life that they can no longer have. They regret having invested their lives in things that don't last.

All the restlessness of our age can be understood as an attempt to acquire the right things in the wrong way. What are the right things? According to the Bible, righteousness, peace, and joy are the things we should pursue. But because our understanding is warped by sin, our search for these things gets skewed.

Deep inside, we want righteousness, a sense of being right and justified. But instead of seeking the righteousness of God and being justified by faith in the righteous sacrifice of Jesus Christ, we try to justify ourselves. When anyone accuses you of something wrong, what do you do? You start justifying yourself. You make excuses.

That's human nature. Even when we know we are wrong, we want to somehow make it right. But the only righteousness that can justify us is the righteousness of God. Only His righteousness covers us and satisfies our hunger and searching for righteousness.

The second thing we seek is peace. John F. Kennedy once said, "The absence of war is not the same thing as peace." How true! Even when our society has enjoyed so-called peacetime, we have known tension, unease, and dissatisfaction. As a people, we are not at peace with each other, nor with ourselves. Why? We are not at peace because we seek peace in the wrong places, and in the wrong ways. We seek money and a higher standard of living as the key to peace of mind; yet the more we have, the more we want. The only true peace is the peace God gives us, even in uncertain times—the peace that passes understanding.

The third thing we seek is joy. We want a sense of happiness and adventure in life. Tragically, most of us seek our joy-substitute in the form of kicks, highs, and sinful pleasures. The purpose of the last part of Genesis is to introduce us to God, the One of whom the psalmist wrote, "You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand" (Ps. 16:11).

Where do we find the true satisfaction of all three of these unseen, almost unconscious, goals of life—righteousness, peace, and joy? Romans 14:17 tells us: "The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." Only God offers these things to human beings, and that is the story of this book.

Our Adequacy with God

Genesis reveals our inadequacy apart from God—and it demonstrates our completeness and adequacy with God. This is the great positive message of Genesis.

In the garden before Adam fell, we see Adam as the lord of creation. God has given him dominion. If only we could have known Adam before the fall! What a rich personality he must have been. What tremendous power and knowledge he must have had. He knew the world's mysteries and controlled its activities. Humanity can no longer do that. We have the urge to do so, but we cannot.

When we look at the New Testament and read of the miracles of the Lord Jesus walking on the water, changing water into wine, stilling the storm with a word, we say to ourselves, "That is God at work." But the Old Testament says, "No, that isn't God; that is unfallen humanity. That is what human beings were intended to be: rulers of the world."

We find this reflected in Psalm 8:4, 6. Gazing into the heavens, David says, "What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" And then he answers his question, "You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet." Since the fall, the only human being in whom we have seen these words fulfilled is Jesus. That is why the writer of Hebrews says, "Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. But we see Jesus . . ." (Heb. 2:8–9).

Genesis reveals that when human beings live with God, they are able to live at peace and in harmony with other human beings. One of the most beautiful stories in this book is that of Abraham's dwelling under the oaks of

Mamre with the Canaanites all around him, a race that for many years had been his enemy. But God worked in the life of Abraham so that even his enemies were at peace with him.

The story of Abraham closes with the Canaanite tribes coming to him and saying, "You are a mighty prince among us" (Gen. 23:6). When a person's ways please the Lord, He makes even that person's enemies to be at peace with him. This is the secret of life in all our relationships.

Genesis declares that only human beings in fellowship with God can know supreme happiness—the righteousness, peace, and joy that people always hunger for. Realization comes only as people discover that the indwelling God is the answer to all their needs.

This is revealed in five ways, through the lives of five men:

Noah is a man who went through symbolic death. That's the meaning of the flood. Noah was surrounded by the flood waters, he rode upon waters, he was preserved through the death that befell the world, and he was saved from it. The waters of judgment, the waters of death, could not overwhelm him. He was carried into a new world and a new life by His faith in a redeeming God.

Many books have been written depicting what the world might be like after an atomic holocaust. Yet this is virtually the same scenario produced in the days of the flood. Human civilization was destroyed, and Noah and his family were forced to begin afresh on a new earth. Here is a picture of regeneration, of new life. The act of Christian conversion is a transition from death into life in Christ, just as Noah passed from death to life in the flood.

The flood began when the fountains of the great deep burst forth, the windows of heaven opened up, and the rain continued for forty days and nights, then ceased. At the end of one hundred and fifty days the waters began to abate and the ark came to rest on Mount Ararat on the seventeenth day of the seventh month.

The seventeenth day of the seventh month is exactly the same day of the year when, centuries later, Jesus rose from the dead. After the exodus from Egypt, God changed the beginning of the year from the seventh month (in the fall) to the first month (in the spring) when the Passover was eaten. Jesus rose on the seventeenth day of the first month, which would be the same as the seventeenth day of the seventh month in the old reckoning in this passage in Genesis.

So the emergence of Noah from the ark is intended to be a picture of new life, a new beginning. It is the new life every Christian experiences when he or she enters into the resurrection life of Jesus Christ by the new birth.

Abraham teaches that we are justified by faith. Though far from perfect, he lived by faith. Everything Abraham achieved was a result of God's grace, not Abraham's merit or effort. As God led him along and Abraham stepped out in faithful dependence upon the promises of God, he found that God's promises were true. Eight times Abraham's faith was dramatically tried, and eight times he passed the test. If you are ever in a trial of faith, read the life of Abraham. You will find circumstances similar to your own. Abraham teaches us what it means to be a friend of God by faith.

One of the greatest demonstrations of Abraham's faith was his reliance upon God's promise of a coming son, despite Abraham's advanced age. It is at that point in Abraham's walk of faith where we read for the first time in Scripture that marvelous statement, "Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (see Gen. 15:6), and that is why Abraham was called "God's friend" (James 2:23).

Isaac is a beautiful picture of sonship, what it means to be a child of God. If ever a boy was spoiled and pampered by his father, it was Isaac. I doubt that any message could be more welcome today than the one so beautifully exemplified in Isaac: that God loves us, values us, and calls us the darlings of His heart. "Dear friends, now we are children of God," says 1 John 3:2, "what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him." We shall be like Christ.

Jacob was the rascal of Genesis. He was the schemer, the man who thought he could live by his own wits and his own efforts. He tried to deceive everybody and ended up being deceived. He troubled his own household by playing favorites, indulging one of his sons over the rest, creating bitterness and resentment among his sons.

Despite his many faults, Jacob is a beautiful picture of sanctification, in which God works through trials and failures, shaping His people's character, driving them to Himself. Sometimes we give God no choice but to corner us and contend with us until we discover that He is speaking to us, and we surrender. With our surrender, God is able to take over, and we are able to truly live.

That is what Jacob did at the brook of Peniel. Jacob knew that Esau was coming with a band of armed men ready to take his life, yet he crossed the brook, sent away his family and servants, and he waited alone. That night, an angel in the form of a man met him and wrestled with him through the long night. As the day broke the angel sought to disengage himself, but Jacob stubbornly hung on to him. The angel touched Jacob's thigh and threw it out of joint, but still Jacob clung to the divine messenger, refusing to let go until he was blessed of God.

Then the divine being changed the name of Jacob to Israel, which means "he who prevails with God." As the sun rose, Jacob limped off to meet Esau with a totally different attitude in his heart. He no longer feared people but was confident that God would fight his battles for him. Jacob learned the great principle of sanctification: God is Jacob's strength and refuge, and He is able to work out all of Jacob's problems.

Jacob's life can be seen in three distinct stages: (1) His early years at home when he was a deceiver of others, epitomized by his theft of Esau's birthright. (2) The middle period of his life, when Jacob learns what it is like to be deceived, as illustrated in the story where Jacob labors for seven years to win Rachel as his wife, only to be tricked into marrying Rachel's sister Leah first. Later, his own sons deceived him, selling Joseph into slavery then reporting to Jacob that Joseph had been killed by wild animals. (3) Finally, Jacob learns to live as a man devoted to the word and will of God, when he wrestles with—and is blessed by—the angel of God.

Joseph is a picture of glorification. This

young man is loved by his father, Jacob, and mistreated by his brothers. They pounce on him and sell him into slavery, yet even in the chains of a slave, Joseph is exalted by God. His life is a roller coaster of highs and lows. His employer, Potiphar, gives him a position of prestige and authority. But when Potiphar's wife lies about Joseph, Potiphar casts him into prison. Later, Joseph is again exalted, taken out of prison, and made an advisor to the pharaoh of Egypt. Ultimately, Joseph becomes the second highest leader in the land.

Joseph symbolizes the hope of all believers. What do we look forward to after death? We look forward to deliverance from the darkness and pain of this earthly existence, and from the prison in which we have lived our years—deliverance and exaltation to the very throne and presence of God Himself.

How did Joseph obtain God's deliverance and exaltation in his own life? Faith is the only way to reach God and take hold of His delivering power. "Without faith it is impossible to please God," says Hebrews 11:6. Note that in Joseph's life and in ours, faith does not mean giving intellectual credence to God's promises. It means stepping out and acting on His promises. When we act in faith, it all becomes true in our experience.

Joseph's character is presented to us with almost unblemished consistency. He is often considered symbolic of Christ, since he was beloved of his father but rejected by his brothers, sold into slavery for twenty pieces of silver, and seemingly died (or so his father thought) and was "brought to life" again as a triumphant king instead of a suffering servant. Like our Lord, Joseph forgave his brothers for their treatment of him and

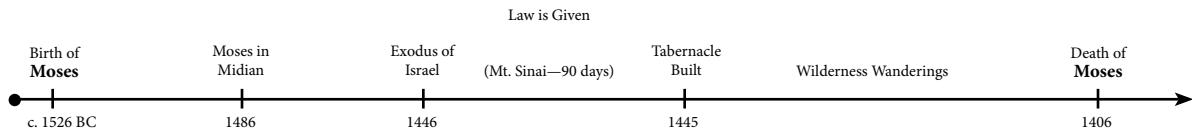
he was used to save them from death and preserve the family line.

The Secret of Life

The thread that runs throughout all fifty chapters of Genesis is that there is a secret to living. We will never experience completeness of life until we have learned and experienced this secret. The secret is simple—yet many people miss it. The secret is friendship with God. Without God you cannot understand the world around you. You can't understand yourself or your neighbor or even life itself.

You will never have any answers without God. But with Him, everything comes into focus and makes sense.

The secret of life is a personal, daily relationship with the living God. He truly wants to have fellowship with the people He has so lovingly created. This is the first note sounded in the opening chapters of Genesis—and it is the concluding note sounded in the book of Revelation. From beginning to end, the Bible is a love letter to the human race. And we have examined only the first chapter of that letter.

The Design for Deliverance

When God wants to do something big, He starts with a baby. He uses the weak things, the simple things, the small things, to confound the great and the wise.

What do we consider to be great historical events? Wars, battles, revolutions, upheavals. We would never think to include the birth of a baby as we consider great historical movements and social changes. We think babies are small and weak and essentially unimportant. God knows better. He knows that it is babies who become the great men and great women who shake the foundations of the world.

In 1809, the whole world anxiously focused on the military exploits of Napoleon Bonaparte. He wanted to conquer the world, and he was well on his way to doing so. The whole world trembled before his towering ambitions and anxiously awaited news from the battlefield.

Yet, in that same year, 1809, babies were being born all around the world. The world took little note of those babies during the time that Napoleon was redrawing the maps of Europe. Yet the seeds of revolutionary change were being

planted in that year. The great English poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson was born that year. So was Charles Darwin, whose theory of evolution would send shock waves through the scientific community. Gladstone, who would one day become prime minister of England, was born. And, in a log cabin in Kentucky, so was Abraham Lincoln.

When God wants to change history, He doesn't start with a battle. He starts with a baby. That is God's pattern throughout history, and that is how Exodus begins. As the story opens, a baby is born under the sentence of death—yet this baby's life is preserved by God's intervening hand. With a twist of irony, the Holy Spirit of God moves in a beautiful way: Despite the order of Pharaoh to kill all Hebrew male babies in Egypt, the baby Moses is not only saved but is brought right into

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This chapter surveys the narrative and themes of Exodus—the life of Moses, the Passover, the crossing of the Red Sea, the giving of the law, and the construction of the tabernacle. In Exodus, we find that the people of Israel were redeemed out of bondage in Egypt in the same way that Christians are redeemed out of bondage to sin—by grace through faith.

LEFT: Judean wilderness

Pharaoh's household. Then, piling irony upon irony, God moves Pharaoh to hire the baby's own mother to take care of him.

Such a design is surely an expression of God's humor. If you haven't yet discovered that God has a sense of humor, a great discovery is in store for you. Humorous glimpses appear throughout the Old and New Testaments. I relish biblical accounts of the clever ways in which God cleverly turns the tables and brings a delightful twist out of an evil situation.

Moses grew up in the court of Pharaoh, with access to all the learning opportunities of the Egyptians. He was trained in the best university of the ancient world's greatest empire. He was the foster son of the king himself and every privilege and advantage was his. But when he came of age, God spoke to him and placed upon him the mantle of Israel's deliverer. So Moses went out to do God's work in his own strength, and he ended up murdering a man and fleeing into the wilderness.

As you trace the story, you find that Moses left Egypt and herded sheep for forty years in the wilderness. Here, God found him and dealt with him in the remarkable confrontation of the burning bush. God called Moses back to his original task, for which Moses felt completely unprepared. He had to learn the same lesson that you and I must learn: To do anything in God's name, we need nothing more than God Himself.

The Structure of Exodus

First, let's place Exodus within its context in the Pentateuch. It immediately follows Genesis, the book that reveals the need of the

human race. Genesis is about humanity—our creation, our sin, and our groping for God as personified in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Genesis ends with the words "a coffin in Egypt," a phrase that underscores the fact that we human beings live in the realm of death.

If Genesis is all about humanity, Exodus is all about God. Exodus is God's answer to human need. This book begins with God's activity, and the rest of the book depicts God mightily at work. Exodus is a picture of God's action to redeem us fallen human beings from our need, our sin, our misery, our death. It is a beautiful picture and contains instructive lessons about God's redemptive grace, His involvement in our lives, and His purpose for our lives.

But Exodus is an incomplete book. The redemption that begins in Exodus is not completed in this book. To gain the full perspective on God's redemptive story, you must continue on through Leviticus, through Numbers, through Deuteronomy, and on into the book of Joshua, the story of Israel's triumphant possession of the Promised Land.

You can understand the story of Exodus by remembering four great events that sum up its great themes:

1. The Passover (Ex. 12–13)
2. The crossing of the Red Sea (Ex. 14)
3. The giving of the law (Ex. 19–31)
4. The construction of the tabernacle (Ex. 35–40)

The Passover and the Red Sea crossing are but two aspects of one great truth: the deliverance of God's people from bondage and death. They symbolize the act of Christian conversion and regeneration—that

is, the deliverance of an individual from the bondage of sin and spiritual death. If you want to know what God did in your life when you became a Christian, study the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea.

The giving of the law and the construction of the tabernacle are similarly inseparable. The pattern of the tabernacle was given to Moses when he was on the mountain with God, at the same time the law was given. The law and the tabernacle are inextricably linked, as we shall soon discover.

Let's examine the four great themes of this book:

FIRST THEME: *The Passover*

The first two chapters of Exodus form a transition from the story of Joseph in Genesis to the story of Moses. We learn that, following the death of Joseph in Egypt, the Israelites—the descendants of Joseph's father Jacob—have multiplied and become numerous. Then a new Egyptian king arose who did not know Joseph. Fearing the growing numbers of the Israelites, this new pharaoh plots to enslave them. He orders the slaughter of all Israelite male children.

When Moses is born, his mother hides him and finally places him in a basket and sets him afloat along the banks of the Nile. Pharaoh's daughter finds the basket, rescues the baby Moses, and adopts him. In this way, Moses becomes part of the royal family of Pharaoh. In Exodus three, Moses kills an Egyptian who is beating a Hebrew slave, then escapes into the wilderness of Midian, where he lives as a shepherd.

In Exodus three and four, God comes to Moses and calls him to take the role of

redeemer of his people. Speaking to Moses from a bush that burns but is not consumed, God challenges Moses and instructs him to return to Egypt. At first Moses is reluctant. "O Lord," he says, "I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue" (4:10).

God doesn't rebuke Moses for his sense of inadequacy. Instead, God says, "Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? . . . Is it not I, the LORD? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say" (4:11-12).

But Moses is still reluctant. "O Lord," he says, "please send someone else to do it" (4:13).

At this point, the Lord becomes angry with Moses. Why? Why was God initially patient with Moses? And why did He finally become angry with Moses?

Initially, Moses expressed *self-doubt*, a humble sense of inadequacy. But when God promised to be with him and Moses still protested, it was clear that Moses didn't merely doubt himself—he doubted God. Moses was saying, in effect, "God, I can't do it—and I don't believe You can do it either." When Moses challenged God's adequacy to be his strength, God's anger was kindled against him. That's an important distinction to remember whenever God challenges us to take on a challenge in His name.

Moses returned to Egypt and immediately challenged Pharaoh. There is no more dramatic scene in the Old Testament than this tremendous test of wills between Pharaoh and Moses. It is a clash between the representative of Satan and the representative of God. In the

course of this contest of wills, Pharaoh forces God to unleash His power against Egypt. Again and again we read, “Pharaoh hardened his heart.”

There were ten plagues in all: blood, frogs, lice, flies, disease on the animals, boils on people and animals, hail, locusts, darkness, and finally, death of the firstborn sons. Each of the first nine plagues is directed at one of the gods of Egypt, and designed to show the worthlessness of Egypt’s false religious system. The tenth plague is aimed at Pharaoh himself, striking Pharaoh’s son and all the firstborn sons of Egypt. It is God’s attempt to melt Pharaoh’s heart of stone. By these plagues, God acts in judgment against the false gods of Egypt and Egypt’s hard-hearted king.

After Pharaoh loses his son in the tenth plague, his stubborn heart is finally overcome. God’s power breaks the king’s iron will. Pharaoh relents—and he tells Moses to leave and take his people with him. During the tenth plague, God’s power and love are dramatically revealed—power to punish those who oppose Him and love toward those who trust and obey Him. During the tenth plague, the beautiful tradition called Passover is celebrated for the first time, which Jews still celebrate to this day.

At Passover, God commands His people to sprinkle blood on the doorposts of their houses and to share a special meal of lamb with unleavened bread—the Passover supper. This event is a beautiful Old Testament foreshadowing of a New Testament truth. Before coming in faith to Jesus Christ, we struggle vainly to make our way through life. But after receiving the gift of eternal life through the shedding of His blood upon the

“doorposts” of the cross, by partaking of the innocent Lamb and the unleavened bread of His broken body, we become a part of Him and of every other believer who also partakes.

The Passover is a beautiful picture of the cross of Christ. The angel of death passes over the land, darkening Egypt with the death of the firstborn. But the Israelites—those who, by a simple act of faith, place themselves under the shelter of the shed blood of the lamb—are perfectly safe. Then and now, salvation is accomplished by the simple act of faith, a trusting response to God’s loving provision of a Savior who has settled our guilt before God. Then and now, the angel of death passes over those who are covered by the blood of the Lamb.

SECOND THEME: *The Red Sea Crossing*

The Passover is just part of the story. The Passover is never of value until it is linked with the Red Sea experience, which immediately follows.

When Pharaoh releases the people of Israel, they immediately go into the wilderness and walk to the shore of the Red Sea. They are still on the Egypt side of the sea, and their situation seemed hopeless. Looking behind them, they see that Pharaoh has again hardened his heart and now comes after them with an army. The people cry out to Moses and ask him why he has brought them to die at the water’s edge.

Moses replies with a statement of unswerving faith in God: “Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today” (14:13). The Israelites, however, lack Moses’ far-seeing eyes of faith. Moses obeys the Lord’s instruction to stretch out

his rod over the sea. As he does, the waters roll back and the people pass safely between two walls of suspended water. As soon as the last person to cross sets foot on the other side of the sea, the waters roll back into place, drowning their Egyptian pursuers.

The Red Sea experience is not only a historical event; it is also a powerful symbol for your life and mine. It typifies our break with the world, once we have placed our trust in Jesus Christ. Egypt is behind us; the journey to the Promised Land is before us. True, the people of Israel found themselves in a wilderness beyond the Red Sea, but they were safely out of Egypt and out of bondage. They had passed through the waters of death.

These same waters of death roll between the world and ourselves once we claim Jesus Christ as our Lord. When we pass through a Red Sea experience, when we die to the old life, through Christian baptism, and take a stand for Jesus Christ, we divorce ourselves from our former life. We turn our backs on our former bondage. As Paul tells us, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Cor. 5:17).

Before the Red Sea experience, the people of Israel were not a nation. They became a nation when they passed through the Red Sea together. That is the meaning of the words from 1 Corinthians 10:2, “They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.” By this miraculous baptism, they were transformed from a disorganized mob into a mighty nation. This powerfully symbolizes the transformation that takes place when we, through faith in Christ, become part of the body of Christ, the

church. Through water baptism, we signify that we have died with Christ and that, through Him, we are joined together in a living unit with all other Christians.

Notice the link between the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea. Both involve faith, but the Red Sea crossing takes faith one step further. The Israelites were passive recipients of their Passover deliverance: they painted the doorposts with blood, they ate their meal, and they waited for God to act. But the crossing of the Red Sea was active, it required obedience, it required a deliberate and risky step of faith.

Today, as in the days of Exodus, true faith requires action and obedience. We cannot remain Passover-passive. We must move ahead as God commands, boldly stepping out and trusting Him to part the waters and lead the way. As we cut our ties to the bondage of this world, allowing the waters of God’s judgment to flow between us and the ways of the world, our faith takes on substance and power. That is when God truly dwells in us and moves through us. God cannot complete His work in us and bring us to maturity until we have passed through the Red Sea.

Notice, in Exodus fifteen, that the first thing the Israelites did as they reached the other shore was to break into song. They had not sung in Egypt—that place of bondage, misery, and toil. But when they emerged from their “dry baptism” through the Red Sea, they couldn’t keep from singing!

Preserved in the Desert

Immediately after crossing the Red Sea, the Israelites come to the waters of Marah, the place of bitterness. In order to cure the waters, Moses cuts down a tree that the

Lord shows him and he throws it into the water. Thereupon, the water becomes sweet (Ex. 15:25). The tree symbolizes the cross. The tree upon which the Lord Jesus was crucified is God's answer to the bitterness of sin and suffering.

Next, the Israelites move out into the desert. There, manna, food from heaven, falls to feed and sustain the people. God instructs the people to gather this bread sent from heaven on a daily basis, six days a week. On the sixth day, they are to gather an extra day's supply to carry them through the Sabbath. God forbids the people to store up extra manna, except for the Sabbath ration. But some find it hard to obey, just as we find it hard to trust God for our daily bread today. When the people gathered extra manna, it spoiled and became full of maggots. God wants His people to trust Him day by day.

The people's faith is again tested when they come to a barren, waterless desert. Here again, God patiently responds to their murmuring and unbelief by providing water from a rock.

In Exodus seventeen, we come to a battle that is symbolic of the Christian's battle with the flesh. The battle against the sin of the flesh is always troubling to new Christians. They have experienced the emotional and spiritual high of discovering new life in Christ, and suddenly sin rears its ugly head. They wonder, "What happened?" The Israelites have gone through the glory of the Passover, the Red Sea crossing, the demonstration

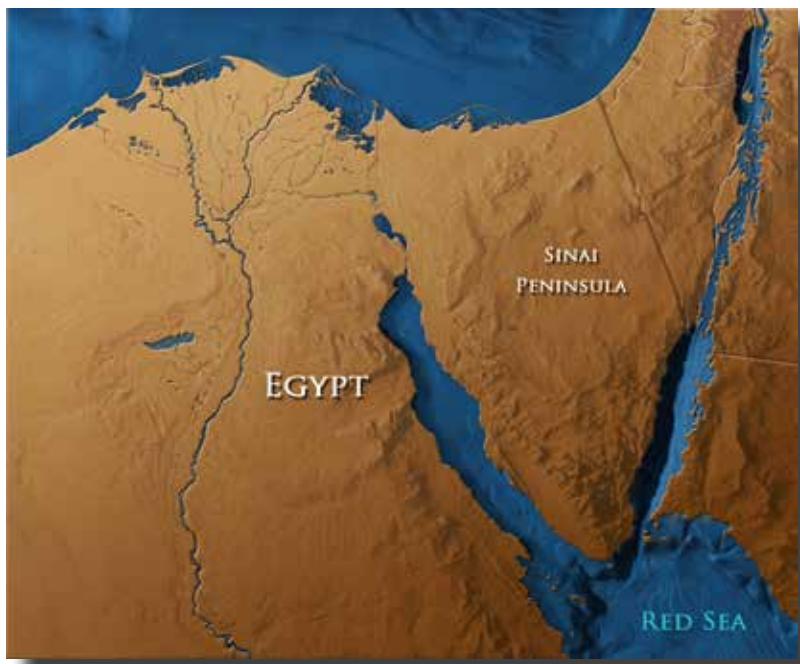
of God's fatherly love by the provision of the manna—but now they realize that there are battles to fight. Amalek attacks Israel, and God declares war against Amalek (17:10).

The apostle Paul described the battle that takes place in every Christian: "The sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other" (Gal. 5:17). You can never make peace with Amalek, with the sinful desires of the flesh.

In chapter nineteen, we arrive at Sinai, the place of God's tabernacle and the giving of the law. These are the third and fourth major themes of Exodus. We will examine these themes and see how they are linked together.

THIRD THEME: *The Giving of the Law*

What is the law? The law is a picture of God's unchanging character and His holiness, expressed in rules for living. That is why the giving of the law is a time of terror, because



nothing is more frightening to human beings than the moment of squarely facing God's true nature.

The unchangeable nature of God comforts us, because He is a God of love and grace. But His character fills us with awe and fear when we think of His holiness, anger, and justice. The law means that God cannot be talked out of His righteous judgments. God cannot be bought off. He will not compromise His standards. The law is the expression of the absolute, irrevocable standards of God's character.

Some people think there are two Gods: an unrelenting Old Testament God and a warm and fuzzy indulgent New Testament God who winks at sin. Nothing could be further from the truth! Jesus, in Matthew 5:48, said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is

perfect." Jesus knows that we cannot achieve perfection, we will fail, we will sin; but He also wants us to know that God's standard has not changed. The law is the law, and it remains in force in both Testaments, Old and New.

How does God expect us to be perfect and keep every point of His law without error? He doesn't! But He has made it possible for our sins to be covered by His perfection. His answer to our imperfection is the fourth theme of Exodus: the tabernacle.

FOURTH THEME: *The Tabernacle*

On Mount Sinai, where God gave Moses the law as a revelation of His character, He also gave instructions regarding the tabernacle. This is God's provision for His dwelling place with the human race and for the covering of human sin.



Reconstruction of Old Testament Tabernacle

The camp of Israel was divided up in an orderly fashion, with some of the tribes on the east, some on the north, some on the west, some on the south. In the center was the tabernacle. Over the whole camp was the great cloud by day and the fiery pillar by night. The cloud and the fire gave evidence of God's presence dwelling among His people. This was made possible by an intricate system of sacrifices and rituals designed to focus the faith of God's people and cleanse their lives. Only by a regular, renewed cleansing could the people be brought into His presence.

If you could have gone into the camp of Israel, you would have passed through all the tribes on either side, and at the center of the camp, you would have found the tribe of Levi—the priestly tribe. Continuing on, you would have come to the tabernacle. At first you would have passed through a great gateway into the outer court where you would have found certain articles—the brass altar and the brass laver. Then you would have come to an inner building with a veil across the entrance, where only priests dared enter: the Holy Place. Behind another veil inside the Holy Place was the Holy of Holies. The only piece of furniture in the Holy of Holies was the ark of the covenant, adorned by the cherubim of mercy with their wings touching each other over the ark. Into that place only the high priest could go—once a year and under rigid and precise conditions.

What do the symbols of the tabernacle teach us? Here again, we find a message that God is changeless and holy. He could dwell among His people only under certain

conditions, and the common people could only approach Him through a mediator, a go-between, the priests of the tribe of Levi.

Why couldn't the people approach God directly? The act of assembling before God directly was prohibited because the tabernacle and the sacrificial systems were not complete in themselves. They weren't final. They were a shadow, a symbol, not the ultimate spiritual reality. That's why, when we come to the New Testament book of Hebrews, the whole book is dedicated to teaching us that the law of God is unchanging, but our approach to God is different under the new covenant than it was under the old covenant.

In Exodus, only the high priest could enter the sanctuary. But in Hebrews we read, "we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place" (Heb. 10:19) without fear. The blood of Jesus, the perfect sacrifice of the God-Man upon the cross, completes what the blood sacrifices of the Old Testament only symbolized. Through the perfect sacrifice of Jesus, we now have access to the presence of God, which was forbidden to the common people in the days of Moses.

The message of Exodus is, by means of the cross, that God has made it possible for a holy, unchangeable God to dwell with us. The tabernacle is a picture of God's dwelling place with His people. The great truth for us here is that God has completely and finally settled the problem of sin. Paul writes in Romans 8:1, "There is now no condemnation," none whatsoever! We have perfect access to the Father through the Son, and God's indwelling Spirit will never leave us or forsake us. He has established His tabernacle in our hearts and lives.

It's tragic that we often teach children that *a building* is the house of God. This is not true. A building (the tabernacle) was the house of God in the Old Testament—but it was a mere shadow. The house of God in the New Testament, in our own age today, is people—those who have placed their trust in Jesus Christ. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3:16, “*You yourselves* are God’s temple” (italics added). Once you are in Christ, you are never out of church. Every believer is a walking tabernacle.

The book of Exodus is written to impress upon us a great New Testament truth: the glory of God lives in us and with us. This truth exalts us, energizes us, and exhilarates us. This truth also places a great responsibility on us. We need to continually remind ourselves to walk worthy of the eternal presence that indwells us. All of our thoughts, words, choices, and actions should be examined in light of the question, “Am I bringing honor or shame to God and His walking tabernacle, my body?”

Idolatry in Israel: The Golden Calf

When Moses went up on Mount Sinai to receive the law (Ex. 19:20), he was gone for forty days and nights. During that time, the people of Israel became restless and feared he would not return. They persuaded Aaron to craft an idol in the form of a golden bull calf—a gross violation of God’s instructions to the nation. Bull worship was common in the surrounding nations, including Egypt, and by depicting God as a golden bull, the Israelites had mingled the true worship of God with the false worship practiced by the surrounding pagan nations.

When Moses returned and saw what Aaron and the people had done, he became angry and broke the tablets of the law. Moses ordered that the golden calf be ground into powder and scattered on water. Then he commanded the people to drink the water. Moses later went back up on Mount Sinai to receive replacement tablets of the law from the Lord.

We look at the idolatry of the Israelites and say, “How foolish these people were! God spared them from the plagues in Egypt and He led them through the depths of the Red Sea unharmed—and this is how they respond? While Moses was gone for forty days and nights, they make an idol! How quickly they turn to idolatry after all God has done for them!”

But don’t we do the same? Don’t we easily exchange the God of the Bible for the “God” of our own imagination? Some Christians say, “The God of the Old Testament was too angry and judgmental. I prefer a God who is always loving and kind.” But the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are one and the same! Both testaments present Him as a God of justice *and* a God of mercy, a God who loves the world and a God who will judge the world. Let’s not pretend that there are two Gods, a different God for each testament.

Whenever we reject the God of the Bible in favor of a “God” of our own choosing, our own imagination, *we have committed the sin of idolatry*. We have created a “golden calf” idol to stand in place of the one true God of the Bible.

It’s common for people to remake God in their own image. The harsh, legalistic,

judgmental individual tends to worship a harsh, legalistic, judgmental God. Others prefer to worship a God who winks at sin, who makes no demands, and who ignores violations of His law.

God will only be worshiped in spirit and in truth—not in the form of an idol. Let's not re-create God in our own image. That is idolatry. That is our golden calf.

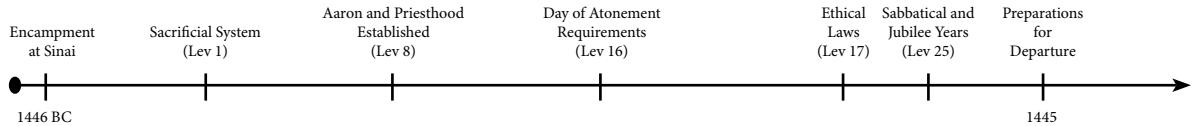
Law and Grace Together

Sometimes we hear that the weakness of the Old Testament was that Israel was under the law and did not know the grace of God. This is untrue! Yes, Israel was under the law—but the law was not given to the Jewish people to be their savior. It was given

to reveal their sin and to make them aware of the hopelessness of their condition apart from God's redemptive grace. Even in the Old Testament, salvation was a matter of God's grace, appropriated by faith.

The symbols of Exodus teach us that, by means of the cross, God now dwells with us. That's why Matthew 1:23 says of Jesus, “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, ‘God with us.’ God is with us, here and now. He has made His dwelling place in our hearts. That is the message of Exodus.

But Exodus isn't enough. We need to go on into Leviticus and see how the demands of God's law serve to correct us and guide our lives.

The Way to Wholeness

When I first came to the Bay Area of California, I visited a large steel-products factory owned by a friend of mine. He was about to give me a tour when he was called away to deal with a business matter. As I waited for my friend to join me, I wandered out onto the factory floor and looked around.

My first impression as I stepped into the huge building was one of tremendous clamor. Great machines pounded, hammered, clattered, and clanked. Other machines made grinding noises and spit out parts. I couldn't hear myself think.

My next impression was one of mass confusion. People ran here and there, paying no attention to one another and getting in each other's way.

Then my friend joined me and we began our tour. He showed me one area of the factory and explained what they did there. He explained the workings of various machines, and told me what the workers did. We went from one department to another, and he explained how each operation was carefully planned and executed to produce a finished product.

Finally, we arrived in the shipping

department. There, packaged in glistening shrink-wrap and tucked neatly into cardboard boxes with Styrofoam chips, was the finished product.

Suddenly, I understood the factory. It was not all “sound and fury, signifying nothing,” as I had originally supposed. The noise, the activity, the seeming confusion were all carefully orchestrated to produce the desired effect. I was no longer confused. It all made sense.

Reading the book of Leviticus can be a lot like visiting a factory without a guide. In Leviticus, you encounter many strange ceremonies, sacrifices, and restrictions. You wonder what it all means. But the more you understand Leviticus, the more these strange details merge into a cohesive, intricately coordinated relationship, moving toward a purposeful goal.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter examines the central theme of Leviticus: “You are to be holy to me because I, the **LORD**, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own” (Lev. 20:26). This chapter explains the meaning of holiness, which truly means wholeness—the state of being complete before God.

What is the goal of Leviticus? You find it stated clearly in a verse near the middle of the book. If you grasp this one verse, you understand the essence of Leviticus: “You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own” (Lev. 20:26).

God says, in effect, “I have separated you from all the nations around you in order that you might be Mine.” What God said to Israel in that day He also says to us today, for in the new relationship we have in Jesus Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile. We are one body in Christ. The promises that appear in picture form in the Old Testament also belong to us who live on this side of the cross.

Holiness and Wholeness

When the Lord says to the people, “You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy,” we have to ask ourselves, “What does ‘holiness’ really mean?” Most of us associate holiness with religious solemnity. We think holy people look as if they’ve been soaked in embalming fluid. I used to think of holiness that way—and the concept of holiness was not at all attractive to me.

Then I encountered Psalm 29:2, which speaks of “the splendor of his holiness.” I had to ask myself, “What’s so splendid about holiness?” When I found out, I had to agree that holiness is indeed a splendid thing.

To get at the meaning of this word, you must go back to its original root. The word *holiness* is derived from the same root as the word *wholeness*. Holiness actually means “wholeness,” the state of being complete. Throughout Scripture, “holiness” means to have all the parts that were intended to be

there and to have them functioning as they were intended to function.

So God is really saying in Leviticus, “You shall be whole, because I am whole.” God is complete. He is perfect. There is no blemish in God. He lives in harmony with Himself and knows none of the inner conflict we humans often experience. God is a beautiful person. He is what a person ought to be. He is filled with joy and love and peace. He lives in wholeness. He sees us in our brokenness and says, “You, too, shall be whole.”

In life, we are continually reminded of our brokenness, and we long to be whole. We know how much we hurt ourselves and each other. We are conscious of our inability to cope with life. We put up a façade and bluff our way through life, pretending we can handle anything yet running scared within.

When man first came from the hand of the Creator, he was whole. Made in the image and likeness of God, Adam functioned as God intended him to function. But when sin entered the picture, the image of God was marred. The likeness of God was broken. We still have the image, but the likeness is destroyed.

God made a decision to heal our brokenness and make us whole again. He knows how to do it, and He says so: “I am the LORD your God, who has set you apart from the nations” (Lev. 20:24). Our brokenness is rooted in the brokenness of our race. Our attitudes are wrong. Our vision of life is distorted. We believe illusions, take them to be facts, and act upon them. So God must liberate us from bondage to the thought patterns of our fallen race.

But God never forces us to become

whole and holy. We become holy only as we voluntarily trust God and respond to His love.

Learning to Trust Him

As a teenager, I once tried to coax a female deer out of a thicket so I could feed her an apple from my hand. She was wild and scared, but she saw the apple and wanted it. She would venture a few steps toward me, then retreat into the woods. Venture forward and retreat again. Eventually, she came out, stood still and look around for a minute, and casually began to graze as if she were indifferent to that apple. I stood perfectly still, holding out the apple, waiting for her to come to me in trust.

Now, it was completely possible for that doe to simply walk right up and grab the apple and start eating it. I would not have hurt her or tried to capture her, but she didn't know that. I was there a long time, at least half an hour, trying to get her to come out of the woods. Finally, she came about halfway toward me and stood with her neck stretched out, trying to muster the courage to reach for the apple. Just as I thought she was going to do it, a car passed nearby and she was gone—

I had to eat the apple myself.

That incident is a picture of how God patiently, lovingly reaches out to us. He wants to overcome our fear and doubt in order to give us good gifts—but our ability to trust Him and approach Him is damaged. That's why God gave us this book.

He starts us out in spiritual kindergarten. He uses pictures and shadows as visual aids to show us what He is going to do someday. All the ceremonies and offerings of the Old Testament are shadows and pictures of Jesus.

The Lord Jesus Christ is as present in the book of Leviticus as He is in the gospels, but because He is present in symbols and signs, you must look carefully to see His image. Jesus is the focus of Leviticus, and the theme of this book is that God has made His holiness, and wholeness, available to us through Jesus Himself.

"But," you might say, "the people of the Old Testament didn't know that the pictures and shadows of Leviticus pointed to Jesus." True, the Israelites did not fully understand that the Old Testament sacrifices and tabernacle pointed to Jesus, but that doesn't matter. People of the Old Testament needed Christ as much as we need Him today. They were hurting and broken, just as we are. And Christ was available to them through the symbols and pictures of Leviticus. They met Him through the form of worship God gave them in Leviticus. As they placed their trust in God, they came into the same joy and peace we now have as New Testament believers.

This is why Leviticus is such an important book for us today. The sacrifices, rituals, and ceremonies of Leviticus are a foreshadowing of Jesus and His saving work. That is why this book teaches us so much about how Jesus Christ can meet our needs today. This is not just a book of history. It's a practical manual on how to live the Christian life.

The Structure of Leviticus

Leviticus falls into two main divisions. The first part (chapters 1 through 17) speaks to human need and tells us how we should approach a holy God. It reveals our inadequacy as a sinful people and sets forth God's answer to our inadequacy.

The second part (chapters 18 through 27) reveals what God expects from us in response. It instructs us in how to live holy, sanctified lives, distinct from the world around us.

Part 1: How to Approach God

The first seventeen chapters of Leviticus are all about how we, as sinful people, can approach God. They contain four elements that establish human need and reveal what we are like. The first is a series of five offerings that symbolize in different ways the offering of Jesus Christ upon the cross for our sins. Perhaps God gave us five fingers on each hand so that we can remember the five offerings:

1. The burnt offering
2. The grain offering
3. The fellowship offering
4. The sin offering
5. The guilt offering

These are all pictures of what Jesus Christ does for us, but they are also pictures of the fundamental needs of human life. They speak of the two essentials for human existence: love and responsibility. We can never be complete if we are not loved or if we do not love. Love is an essential ingredient of life. Nothing harms, distorts, disfigures, or injures a person more than being denied love.

But there is another essential: In order to be whole, in order to have self-respect and self-worth, we must have a sense of responsibility. We must be able to accomplish what is worthwhile. So in addition to love, we need responsibility.

The second element in the first seventeen chapters is the priesthood. In the Old Testament, the priesthood was comprised

solely of the sons of Levi (which is where Leviticus gets its name). But the priesthood takes a new form in the New Testament.

First there is our Lord and High Priest, Jesus Christ, who has pierced the veil of the tabernacle, the Holy of Holies, and has given us free access to God the Father. Second is the priesthood of all believers, the body of Christ, where we are all made priests (see 1 Peter 2:5). We love one another, confess to one another, pray for one another, encourage one another, exhort one another, and perform all the functions that, in the Old Testament, were performed by the priestly class, the sons of Levi. That is why we need each other in the body of Christ.

The third element that we see in these first seventeen chapters is the revelation of a standard of truth. By this standard we are able to tell the difference between the true and the false, between reality and illusion. Isn't it strange that human beings in their natural condition cannot tell the difference? That's why there are millions of people who do things that they think are helpful but that end up causing harm and destruction—and they don't understand why. Our loving God points us to the truth and warns us to avoid the deceptions and snares that would destroy us.

The fourth and final element that we see in these first seventeen chapters is an opportunity to respond to God. This opportunity is completely voluntary. God never imposes His will on us. This opportunity is provided by means of something called "the Day of Atonement." If we say no to Him and reject the atonement He offers us, He will allow us to do so.

But we must recognize that we may never return to the moment of opportunity again. God always gives us a long period of preparation in which He leads us into a full understanding of the choice He sets before us. Our rejection of Him tends to be progressive, resulting in a gradual hardening of our hearts. Finally, we reach a point where our rejection of Him becomes tragically final.

Part 2: How to Live: Sanctification and Holiness

The second section of the book, chapters 18 through 27, describes the holy, sanctified lifestyle that God makes possible. This section of Leviticus is all about how we should live as

obedient people who belong to a holy God. Notice that God does not tell us how we should live until He has first told us about the provision He has made to enable us to approach Him. First, He discusses the power by which we are to act, and then He talks about our behavior.

We in the church often get this backward. We do enormous damage by insisting that people behave a certain way without showing them how to tap into God's power for living. New Christians and non-Christians often think they must live up to a certain standard before God will accept them. That is a deadly, legalistic lie of Satan, designed to keep people away from God's truth and out of God's

LEVITICUS: THE CRY OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT



The book of Leviticus teaches that God wants us to see our need for a substitute. Despite all of our accumulated psychological and scientific knowledge, we cannot handle life by ourselves. So, through the sacrificial offerings, God tells us that He has provided a Substitute who, through the shedding of His blood, can take away the entire weight of our sins. Our Substitute is Jesus Christ.

In addition, Leviticus teaches us that we can't understand the mysteries of our existence apart from someone who can help us explain and apply them. So we also need a great High Priest, which is also met in Christ.

We also need a standard by which to measure our lives and our actions, so that we can know the difference between wholesome and harmful, between good and bad. We need God's revealed Word in order to understand what confronts us in life, so we can distinguish right from wrong. Discerning that difference is not always easy, but God has provided a standard.

Finally, Leviticus teaches us about the Day of Atonement—a day known as Yom Kippur in Israel, which is still the high point of the Jewish year. Within every human being there is a hunger and a cry for atonement—for a wonderful sense of reconciliation between God and us. It is the cry of the human spirit for the face of God. It seems that there is a part of us that can never forget that humans once walked in daily fellowship with God, in the cool of the garden. We still long for that special relationship with the One who made us, and no human relationship can quite satisfy that yearning.

Ray C. Stedman
The Way to Wholeness: Lessons from Leviticus
(Discovery House Publishers, 2005)

church. God counters this lie in the book of Leviticus. He wants us to understand that He has first made the provision, and His provision gives us the basis on which to build a holy lifestyle.

The second part of Leviticus, like the first, is built upon four essential elements. First, there is a need to understand the basis for wholeness, which is blood. Anyone who has read the Old Testament knows that a river of blood flows through it. There are sacrifices of bulls, calves, goats, sheep, and birds of all kinds. Why all this bloodshed? Because God is trying to impress us with a fundamental fact: Our sin condition runs deep and can only be resolved by a death. The death that is pictured in every one of these sacrifices is symbolic of the death of God's only Son, Jesus Christ.

The second element that runs through the concluding part of Leviticus is the practice of love in all the relationships of life. The Bible is intensely practical. It is not nearly so concerned with what you do in the tabernacle as what you do in the home as a result of having been to the tabernacle. So this book deals with relationships in the family, among friends, and with society in general. It shows us exactly the kind of love a relationship with God makes possible in all these areas of life.

The third element in this last section is the enjoyment of God—His presence and His power. This section tells us how to live in relationship to God, how to worship Him, and how to experience His living presence. Our focus in life should not be on rituals and laws but on an experience of the living God. The rituals and laws all point to Him.

The fourth and final element is the choice

God calls us to make. He makes us aware of the important issues at stake, of how our lives hang in the balance, and that we must make a decision. In the final analysis, the choice is entirely ours. God never says, "I'm going to make you leave your misery." Rather, He says, "If you prefer being broken and don't want to be healed, you can stay where you are. But if you want life, then you must *choose* life." God never forces His will on us, but He does expect a response.

The choice is ours to make.

The Key Theme of Leviticus

In closing, we return to the key verse and the key theme of Leviticus, found in Leviticus 20:26: "You are to be holy [whole] to me because I, the LORD, am holy [whole], and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own." It is important to note the verb tense of that last phrase. In our English text, it is in the future tense: "You are to be . . . my own." But the Hebrew language incorporates into this one phrase all three tenses—past, present, and future. It is as if God is saying, "You were Mine, you are Mine, you shall be Mine."

If you pursue this idea throughout the Bible, you can see how true it is. You may know from experience that after you became a Christian, you realized that there was a sense in which you had belonged to God all along. He was active and involved in your life long before you became aware of Him. The apostle Paul expressed this thought when he wrote, "[God] set me apart from birth" (Gal. 1:15). Prior to his conversion, Paul was a fanatical enemy of Christianity, but God patiently drew Paul to Himself even when Paul opposed Him.

“You are Mine,” God says to us. “Even though you are fighting Me, you are Mine!”

In the present tense, God looks at us in our brokenness, pain, and imperfection, and He places His loving hand on us and says, “You are Mine, right now, just the way you are. You belong to Me.”

Some years ago, a children’s service was held at a rescue mission in the Midwest. One of the children taking part in the program was a six-year-old boy with a pronounced humpback. He walked across the stage to give his recitation, and he was painfully shy and self-conscious about his deformity. As he crossed the stage, a cruel boy in the audience called out, “Hey, kid, where are you going with that pack on your back!” The boy stopped in his tracks, shaking and sobbing before the audience.

A man stood up, went to the platform, and lifted the boy in his arms. Then he looked out over the audience. “Who said that?” he asked.

No one answered.

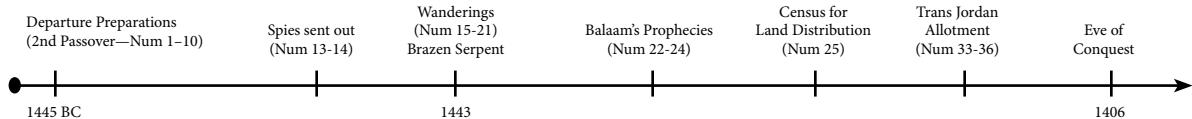
“I thought so. It takes a coward to say something like that. This boy is my son, and whoever you are, you’ve hurt my son for no reason. But I want everyone here to know that I love him just the way he is. He belongs to me, and I’m very proud of him.”

That’s what God says to you and me. He sees our hurt and brokenness, and He says, “You’re Mine!”

But that isn’t all. Because of His power and wisdom, God also addresses the future, with all the hopefulness of a loving father. “You will be Mine,” He says in the future tense. “You will be healed and made whole. All your blemishes and deformities will be corrected, all your sins will be erased, all your tangled relationships unsnarled. You will be whole, for I am whole.”

That is the message of Leviticus, and that is the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ: “You will be Mine.”

From Failure to Victory



A king once lay ill in his bedchamber. He called for the royal physician to bring medicine for his ailing stomach. But before the physician could arrive, a messenger delivered a secret letter, accusing the physician of plotting to murder the king. “Receive no medicine from the doctor’s hand,” read the letter. “It will be poison.”

The king hid the letter under his pillow just moments before the royal physician arrived with a goblet filled with a medicinal potion. “Trust me, Sire,” said the doctor. “This medicine will cure your stomach.”

“I trust you,” said the king. Reaching beneath his pillow, he took the accusing letter and handed it to the doctor while at the same time reaching for the goblet.

“What is this?” asked the doctor.

“Read it,” said the king. Then he lifted the goblet and drank the potion.

The doctor read the letter, then looked up in shock. “Your Highness, this letter is nothing but lies! I would never harm you!”

“I believe you,” said the king, “and I trust you completely—see?” The king held out the goblet. He had drunk every

drop. By the next morning, he was recovered. He had demonstrated his complete trust in his physician.

The theme of Numbers is trust. In this book, God dramatically sets forth what may be the hardest lesson any of us has to learn: our need to trust God rather than our own reason.

In the Desert of Discipline

The issue of trust is a major struggle for many Christians. It’s the same struggle the Israelites had—the struggle to believe and trust that God is in control, that He knows what He’s doing and doesn’t make mistakes. We struggle to believe that everything He tells us in His Word is true and that it is for our good.

Again and again, we Christians get into trouble because we believe we know better

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter presents Numbers as a book of failure and wanderings—yet a book that ultimately points the way to spiritual victory. The teachings in Numbers are tremendously practical for our own lives today, and remind us of the spiritual danger of complaining against God.

than God, and we had better take control of the situation because we can't trust God to come through when we need Him. Proverbs puts it accurately: "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death" (Prov. 14:12). The book of Numbers is a picture of this experience in the life of a believer.

The New Testament counterpart of Numbers is Romans 7, which depicts the unhappy, defeated Christian who finds himself being disciplined by God, the loving Father, who loves him and wants the best for him. The Christian in Romans 7 is experiencing "tough love"—a painful form of love designed to produce character growth and maturity. That is also the kind of love portrayed in Numbers.

The book of Numbers depicts a people who have come out of Egypt but who have not yet reached Canaan. They had enough faith to follow God out of bondage in Egypt, but they have not yet come into liberty and rest. They have not reached the Land of Promise. God preserves them in their wanderings, but they are in the desert of discipline, not the haven of peace and rest.

Numbers is a book of wanderings. Until the people of Israel learn to trust their God, they must endure the desert of discipline. This tragic book is laden with relevant instruction and warning for our own lives today.

The Structure of Numbers

The book of Numbers falls into three divisions. In the first section, the people of Israel are prepared to inherit the Promised Land, the land of Canaan. In the second section, the people fail, sin, and are judged;

the judgment of God is that this generation must wander in the wilderness and will not inherit the Promised Land. In the third, and final, section, a new generation is prepared to move into and possess the Promised Land.

God's Provision for Guidance and Warfare

The first section of Numbers, chapters 1 through 10, is a picture of God's provision for guidance and victory in warfare. These are the two critical needs of the Israelites in their march from Mount Sinai, where the law was given, to the northern wilderness of Paran, at the edge of the Promised Land. On the way they would need guidance, because this was a trackless wilderness. And they would need protection and victory in war, because the wilderness was occupied by fierce, hostile tribes.

Does this sound familiar? We all need guidance as we wend our way among the dangers, temptations, and evils of this world. We all need protection from the enemies who surround us.

This section also describes the arrangement of the encampment, including the position of the tabernacle with the tribes on every side, and a numbering of the armed men of Israel. These are pictures for us of the need for defense against the enemies of God. He provides the strategy and resources necessary to meet every enemy we face. He provides the cloud over the camp by day and the pillar of fire by night.

These three elements—the tabernacle, the cloud, and the pillar of fire—picture for us the great truth of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We have God in our midst. He is able to direct us and to lead us through the wilderness of

the world by the guidance of His Word. We are led by the cloud and the fire, just as Israel was led, and we are to obey that leading. This is all we need to get us from the place of the law (the knowledge of the holiness of God) to a resting place in the Spirit, which the land of Canaan represents. We have everything we need, just as the people of Israel had all they needed.

Rebellion and Complaining

But in chapters 11 through 25, something goes tragically wrong. This tragedy occupies the central section of Numbers. Here is a description of rebellion and willful disobedience against God. The rebellion starts with murmuring and complaining. Whenever you begin to complain against your circumstances, consider this: You are on the threshold of rebellion, because rebellion always begins with complaining.

Three levels of complaining mark this part of the wilderness journey:

First, the people complained against their circumstances. God had given them manna and quail meat to eat and water to drink, but they complained about the manna and the water. They complained about the meat. They complained about the wilderness. Nothing was right, not even God's miraculous provision for their needs.

What does the manna symbolize for us today? It is a type, or symbol, of the Holy Spirit. The manna tasted like a thin wafer of oil and honey mixture. Oil and honey are both symbols of the Holy Spirit. They were to eat this substance, and it would be enough to sustain the people. It was not enough to satisfy them, because God never intended for them

to live so long in the wilderness. He intended for them to move on into the land of Canaan and begin to eat the abundant food there.

But the people grew tired of manna. After all, who wouldn't have gotten tired of forty years of oil-and-honey wafers for breakfast, lunch, and dinner? Every day, nothing but manna, manna, manna! First, the people complained. Finally, they rebelled.

Whose fault was it that they rebelled? Not God's. His plan was for the people to possess a land of abundance and endless variety. The people chose to turn their backs on satisfaction and to wander in a dry wilderness with nothing but manna to eat.

When the people complained about a lack of meat, God gave them meat for a month until they were tired of meat. So the people complained that there was too much meat. On and on it went. God provided, the people complained; God provided more, the people complained more. In their murmuring, the one subject the people kept coming back to was Egypt—the land of bondage.

Here is a symbolic picture of a degenerating Christian experience. All the Israelites could think of was the meat, melons, cucumbers, leeks, onions, and garlic of Egypt. Talk about a selective memory! Didn't they remember the backbreaking toil, the slave master's lash, the chains of slavery? And what about the land to which God was calling them? They had no thought of Canaan because they had no knowledge of it. They had heard of Canaan, but they had no experience of it.

The murmuring of the people against their circumstances brought God's judgment. His judgment came in three forms: fire, plague, and poisonous serpents. This is a picture of

the inevitable result of complaining. When we complain about where God has put us and the kind of people He has surrounded us with and the kind of food we have to eat and all of our other circumstances, we soon discover:

- the fire of gossip, scandal, and slander;
- the plague of anxiety and nervous tension;
and
- the poison of envy and jealousy.

Not only did the Israelites murmur against their circumstances, but *they murmured against the blessing of God*. Imagine—they came at last to the borders of the land of Canaan, and there God said, “Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites” (13:2).

The Israelites sent out spies and learned that Canaan was a land flowing with milk and honey. The spies returned with bunches of grapes so large that they had to carry them on a stick between the shoulders of two men. But they also learned that it was a land full of giants—and because of the giants they were afraid to go forward. Their fear of the giants was greater than their trust in God, so they refused the blessing He was eager to pour out upon them.

So God judged them. They were sentenced to wander in the wilderness for forty years. Because they had refused to move forward and possess God’s loving will for their lives, God’s disciplining judgment required them to experience the full results of their failure. Only then could they progress in God’s program.

Many Christians live the same way, languishing in a miserable, howling wilderness, living on a minimum supply of the Holy Spirit—just enough to keep going, no more. They complain about their circumstances yet are unwilling to move into the land God has provided for them. You can be sustained in the wilderness, but you will never be satisfied there. That’s why the wilderness experience is always marked by a complaining heart.

For Israel, the wilderness experience would not end until a new generation was ready to enter the land. God said to them, “In this desert your bodies will fall—every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me. Not one of you will enter the land . . . except Caleb . . . and Joshua” (Num. 14:29–30). These two men were the only members of the older generation who had demonstrated the faith and trust to move forward and possess the Land of Promise.

There is a powerful lesson here for our own Christian lives. Often, we find that it’s not until we come to the end of ourselves, until it becomes clear that we must make a new beginning in our lives, that we are able to allow the Spirit to take over and lead us into our own Land of Promise. That’s why so many Christians never seem to find victory until they have a crisis experience followed by a new beginning. God says, “Trust Me,” but we resist and resist, so God has to knock all the props out from under us. When we have nothing left to cling to but Him, we cry out, “God, You’re my only hope!” Then He can say, “Now you are ready to trust Me. Now I can bless you as I have always longed to bless you.”

One of the distinguishing features of

Israel's wilderness experience is death. The people wandered in a land of death. Did you ever consider how many Israelites died in the forty wilderness years?

This book begins with a census of Israel, and it totals 603,000 men—men who are able to go to war, who are at least twenty years old. Most are married, so there must be a comparable number of women, plus many children in the camp. Many scholars have estimated the total population to have been well over two million people.

So in the wilderness, during those forty years, roughly 1.2 million people died. That's an average of eighty-two deaths per day! The journey in the wilderness was a long, sad funeral march—forty years of grief and loss. The wilderness was one huge graveyard. This is an Old Testament picture of what Paul warns against: "The mind of sinful man is death" (Rom. 8:6).

The sound track of Numbers is the endless babble of murmuring and complaining. The people murmur against their circumstances. They murmur against God's provision for them. Finally, they murmur against the divinely appointed leadership of Moses, and Aaron. The people complain, "You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the LORD's assembly?" (16:3). They judge themselves by their own standards and rebel against the properly constituted authority in their midst.

This is another characteristic of defeated Christians. They always think they are holy enough, that they are as holy as they need to

be, and they resent anyone else who seems to exercise spiritual or moral authority.

God meets this attitude with the severest judgment of all. The situation climaxes with the open rebellion of two Israelite priests, Korah and Abiram. These men have brought division to the nation of Israel, just as rebellious people often divide churches today. When they openly challenge the authority of Moses and Aaron, God says to the two men He has chosen to lead the nation, "Separate yourselves from this assembly so I can put an end to them at once. . . . Say to the assembly, 'Move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram'" (16:21, 24).

Then God leads Moses to say to Israel, "If these men die a natural death and experience only what usually happens to men, then the LORD has not sent me. But if the LORD brings about something totally new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them, with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the grave, then you will know that these men have treated the LORD with contempt" (16:29–30).

As Moses says these words, the ground opens up beneath Korah and Abiram and their families, and they go down alive into the pit. Thus, God establishes His authority through Moses by this remarkable judgment. When we rebel against authority, God judges with severity.

After this judgment, we see an amazing demonstration of the mulish obstinacy of human nature. Murmuring and criticizing is so much a part of who we are as human beings that even after seeing the ground open up and swallow a group of rebels, the people

continue to complain! The complaining dies down only when two things occur.

First, following the death of Korah and Abiram, all the leaders of the twelve tribes took rods and laid them down before the Lord. One of those rods belonged to Aaron. The next morning, they found that Aaron's rod had grown branches, the branches had blossomed, the blossoms had grown fruit, and almonds hung from the branches. All of this had taken place overnight! Of the twelve rods, only Aaron's blossomed. This is a picture of the resurrection life. God was saying to Israel that the only ones who have the right to bear authority are those who walk in the fullness and power of resurrection life.

Second, when the people murmured about the food, God sent poisonous serpents among them. The people would die without a savior. So Moses cured the effects of the poison by lifting up a brass serpent on a pole. As God directed, all who looked at the serpent were healed. By this symbol, God says to Israel and to us, "The only cure for sin, including the sin of believers, is to gaze again at the cross."

In John 3, the Lord Jesus makes reference to this incident and points to its symbolic significance in our lives: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:14–15). The cross utterly repudiates all human endeavor and human worthiness. We are powerless to save ourselves and can only be saved on the basis of the resurrection life of Jesus Christ.

Victory at Last

Chapter 26 begins the third and final

movement of the book. It records the second census taken of the men of war and their families. God gives specific instructions to Moses concerning the division of the land when they come into Canaan.

An interesting incident is related concerning the five daughters of Zelophehad. Because these daughters are fatherless, they could not expect to receive a share of the real estate when Israel moves into Canaan, according to Middle Eastern cultural norms. Yet these women petition and receive an inheritance in the Land of Promise (27:1–11). This may seem like a minor incident, yet it symbolically establishes the principle that (as Paul writes in the New Testament) there "is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). This principle in both the Old and New Testaments paved the way for the equal treatment of women.

Next, God informs Moses that the time has come for him to die. At Moses' request, God appoints Joshua, the son of Nun, to be his successor (27:18–19). Joshua does not inherit the full authority that Moses has exercised, so he will discover the will of God through the high priest.

God also repeats the various offerings and sacrifices for Israel's great feast days, as previously outlined in Leviticus. Certain exceptions are made to the general rule concerning vows.

The concluding chapters of the book, from chapters 31 through 36, describe an account of a holy war led by Phinehas the priest against the Midianites, during which Balaam, the false prophet, is slain. Here the two tribes of Reuben and Gad and half the

tribe of Manasseh unwisely insist on settling on the east side of the Jordan rather than in the proper regions of the Land of Promise. They are permitted to do so only by agreeing to join their brethren in subduing their Canaanite enemies.

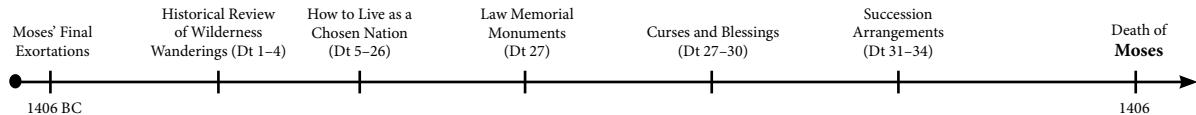
After reviewing the route taken by Israel from Egypt to the Jordan and giving directions for the division of the land when the tribes entered it, Moses then assigns certain cities as residences for the Levites, six of which are especially designated as cities



of refuge (35:10–15). The cities of refuge were for people who had accidentally taken a human life, and who needed a safe place to flee from avengers until a trial was held.

Numbers is the record of the failure of the people in their perpetual stubbornness and foolishness, yet it is also the story of the continual patience and faithfulness of God.

This book encourages us in our own spiritual lives, showing us that even when we fail, the victory can still be ours if we hold fast to our trust in God. We have come to learn, as the New Testament declares, that “if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself” (2 Tim. 2:13).

The Law That Brings Deliverance

Most people know that John Newton, the composer of “Amazing Grace,” had been a slave trader before he gave his life to Christ. But few people know that Newton’s conversion was one of the longest, slowest conversions in history, taking place over a period of years.

While sailing aboard the *Greyhound* in 1748, the ship encountered a brutal storm and nearly sank. As the ship filled with water, Newton called out to God and pleaded with Him to save him. The ship weathered the storm—and Newton began reading the Bible. By the time he reached England, he had decided that he wanted Jesus to be his Savior. He gave up profanity, gambling, and drinking—but he couldn’t give up the profits of the slave trade.

Sailing as first mate on the slave ship *Brownlow* in 1749, he became sick with fever. Again, he begged God to save him and promised to give his life to the Lord. But from 1750 to 1754, he made three more voyages—each time as captain of slave ships. Captains were paid handsomely—and Newton couldn’t resist the pay.

Returning home after the third

LEFT: Sheep

voyage, he suffered a stroke. Again, he pleaded with God and promised to live for Him. After his recovery, Newton finally left the slave trade for good. He took a job as a port tax collector in Liverpool and spent his spare time studying Greek and Hebrew so he could read the Bible in the original languages. He preached part-time as a lay minister, and in 1764 he was ordained as an Anglican priest.

In 1779, Newton became Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth Church in London. He joined the abolitionist (antislavery) movement along with social activist Hannah More and Parliament member William Wilberforce. Working together over more than a decade, they succeeded in ending the slave trade in Great Britain. During that time, Newton penned his famous hymns, “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken,” “How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds,” and of course, “Amazing Grace.”

John Newton always thought of himself as

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter explores the themes and significance of the three great sermons Moses delivered shortly before his death, as recorded in the fifth book of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy.

a slave to sin who was set free by the grace of God. Over the fireplace of his study, where he wrote his hymns and sermons, Newton had a verse of Scripture painted:

Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today (15:15).

The lesson of John Newton's life—and of the book of Deuteronomy—is that we must not dwell on memories of our slavery. Instead we must remember God's provision for us as He set us free from slavery. He redeemed us—and that gives Him the right to command us today.

The Structure of Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy consists of three great sermons delivered by Moses shortly before his death. These sermons were given to Israel while they waited on the east side of the Jordan in the Arabah, following their military triumph over Sihon, the king of the Amorites, and Og, the king of Bashan. At this time the nation of Israel consisted largely of a generation of Israelites who were mere children or not even born when Moses gave the law from Mount Sinai.

FIRST SERMON: What God Has Done for Israel

As the people were about to enter the land of Canaan, it was essential that they understand their history. So chapters 1 through 4 give us the first message of Moses, in which he reviewed the journey from the giving of the law at Mount Sinai until the people reached Moab, at the edge of the Jordan River.

Moses' first task was to recite to the people the wonderful love and care of God who had both *led* them and *fed* them. God *led* the Israelites with a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day. And God *fed* the Israelites through a miraculous provision. Moses reminded the people of how God brought forth water from the rock to quench their thirst, how He had fed them with manna and quail, and how He delivered them again and again from their enemies.

In chapter 1, Moses recalls the migration of the people, from the giving of the law at Sinai (also called Mount Horeb) to the refusal of the people to enter the land at Kadesh-barnea. In chapter 2, he reviews the second movement from Kadesh-barnea to Heshbon, around the land of Edom, and through the wilderness of Moab to their encounter with Sihon, the king of Heshbon. Throughout this passage, Moses emphasizes God's continual deliverance of His people from their enemies, in spite of their unbelief.

Continuing his discourse in chapter 3, Moses reviews the conquest of the Jordan Valley as far north as Mount Hermon, and the decision of Reuben and Gad to settle on the east side of the river. He movingly and poignantly recalls his own desire to enter the land with his people, but he acknowledges that God has justly denied him this privilege. Still, he was permitted to view the Promised Land from the top of Mount Pisgah.

Moses closes his historic review in chapter 4. He exhorts the people to remember the greatness of their God and to live in obedience to Him. He warns against the danger of idolatry and the making of graven images. He concludes by setting aside three

cities of refuge on the east side of the Jordan for the protection of those who committed involuntary manslaughter.

As we survey this record of God's provision for the people of Israel, we see that God has led them out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and right up to the borders of Canaan. In their journey, they have experienced the same kinds of problems, obstacles, enemies, failures, and victories that we encounter in the Christian life. The bondage the Israelites experienced as slaves in Egypt reminds us of the bondage to sin and the world that we experienced before we were Christians. The land of Canaan, flowing with milk and honey, pictures a life filled with victory and joy, which is ours in Christ.

If you read your Old Testament with this key in hand, it becomes a luminous and practical book. Every Old Testament story is full of meaning and lessons for our daily lives. I don't believe we can truly grasp the mighty truths of the New Testament until we see them demonstrated in the Old Testament.

SECOND SERMON: *The Law of God*

Chapters 5 through 26 contain the second message of Moses. It begins with a fresh recital of the Ten Commandments as God gave them to Moses on Mount Sinai. Deuteronomy means "the second law" or "the second giving of the law." The message of Moses in these chapters is more than a mere recounting of the law. It's the divinely inspired commentary of Moses on the law.

Moses reminds the people that they have promised to hear and to do all that God said. To this God responded, "Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my

commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!" (5:29).

Next, Moses declares the "Shema," or "Hear, O Israel," which devout Jews still recite to this day as a summary of the central feature of their faith—the uniqueness of God. Moses admonishes the people to observe these words and teach them diligently to their children. This is a great lesson on parenting—on the importance of making the most of "teachable moments," using at-hand situations to reinforce family values and beliefs.

Moses then reviews the conditions they will find in the land and the blessings that await them there. He especially warns them to beware of three spiritual dangers: the peril of prosperity, the peril of adversity, and the peril of neglecting to teach their children.

In chapter 7, Moses deals with the danger Israel will face in confronting the corrupt nations already in the land. Moses commands the Israelites to show no mercy to the inhabitants of Canaan but to thoroughly eliminate them so that no vestige of their idolatries and practices will remain to turn the Israelites away from the true worship of Jehovah. Moses reminds the Israelites that they were chosen, that the Lord had set His love upon them and He would be their strength in subjugating enemy nations. Their prosperity and health would depend on their faithfulness and obedience.

Chapter 8 reminds the people of lessons God taught them in the wilderness; how they were humbled and fed with manna so that they might know that "man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD" (8:3). These were familiar words to Jesus, who used them to good effect

against the tempter in the Judean wilderness (see Matt. 4:4).

God wanted His people, when they entered the land and feasted on its richness, to beware of spiritual pride. God knew how quickly people became spiritually smug, and tended to take credit for all He had given them. They should not trust in their own righteousness, but remember their persistent stubbornness in the wilderness. They had provoked the Lord again and again, yet He continued to love them.

Moses also recalls the awesome scene at Sinai, when, in the midst of God's mighty demonstration of His power, the people sinned by making an idol of a golden calf. They committed this sin at the same time Moses was interceding for them for forty days and nights. At that time Moses also received the second tablets of stone and later placed them in the ark of the covenant where they remained.

In a passage of great beauty and power, Moses reminds the people that God does not ask anything of them but to love Him and to serve Him wholeheartedly, keeping His commandments and statutes for their own benefit. The central emphasis is this passage is that "the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome" (10:17). Yet His actions toward His people are demonstrations of His infinite tenderness and love.

As the people enter the land, God promises them rain from heaven to water the earth, grass in the fields for their cattle, and power in their warfare to drive out enemy nations. The whole land was to become their possession. To remind them of God's love and

discipline, God instructs them to annually recite the blessings on Mount Gerizim and the cursings on Mount Ebal, which face the site of Jacob's well.

Deuteronomy 12 through 21 contains a series of statutes and ordinances that were given to the people to govern their behavior within the land. They were commanded to destroy all the places of idol worship of the nations then in the land. They were to tear down the foreign altars and burn the Asherim (phallic symbols)—evidence of the foulness of the idol worship in the land at the time.

God told Israel that, in due time, He would show them a place where they would bring their burnt offerings and sacrifices, and would worship and rejoice before the Lord. This promise was fulfilled in the days of David and Solomon when the temple was built (though a temporary provision was made when the ark was located at Shiloh).

The Lord gave Israel further instructions about the foods they could eat, telling them that they should always avoid eating the blood. God also told the people how to tell false prophets from true prophets. Though the false prophet may be a wonder-worker, if he suggests that they go after other gods, the people were to stone him. Even if close friends or relatives should seek to entice them to idolatry, Israel was instructed to put such people to death. If a whole city should apostatize and begin serving other gods, the inhabitants of that city were to be put to the sword, for "you are the children of the LORD your God" (14:1).

Next, we see the dietary laws, the rules on tithing for the support of the Levites, the sabbatical years (to resolve economic

inequities), and the great feasts of Passover, Unleavened Bread, and Tabernacles are again restated. God makes provision for judges to decide cases where the law has not specifically spoken and for the choosing of a king (who must carefully walk by the statutes of the law and keep his heart humble before the Lord his God).

In Deuteronomy 18, we encounter God's great promise that "the LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him" (18:15). What does this promise mean? It was partially fulfilled by all the true prophets who later arose in Israel. But its ultimate fulfillment took place when Jesus came, Moses-like in being able to behold the face of God, and in His preaching to the people. Jesus perfectly fulfilled the Old Testament ideal of priest, prophet, and king.

Next, in Deuteronomy 19, God through Moses again designates three cities of refuge, this time on the west side of the Jordan. Anyone guilty of deliberate murder could find no sanctuary in those cities, but those who killed accidentally (manslaughter) were to flee to those cities and escape the avenger of blood. God also set forth the importance of integrity, commanding that boundary stones marking property lines could not be removed, and the people of Israel were to be truthful *to* one another and *about* one another at all times.

Deuteronomy 20 gives the Israelites instruction for going to war. People are often disturbed over the amount of war and bloodshed in the Old Testament. But we have to remember that God was sending the Israelites into hostile territory. They were not

only to gain the Promised Land for their own use, but God was also sending Israel as His instrument for cleansing that land of a foul and evil people. The Canaanites practiced horrible rites of idolatry, including sacrificing their own infants to the fires of the demon-god Molech.

Was God cruel in ordering the extermination of these wicked people, along with the atrocities they committed against their own children? Or was God truly being merciful in bringing these abominable practices to an end?

God charged His people to always keep before them the vision of their God and His power. He ordered that the Israelites offer terms of peace to every city they attacked; if the terms were accepted, the inhabitants were not be killed but were put to forced labor. If the enemy refused those terms, the city was to be destroyed.

In chapters 22 through 26, we find the various regulations for the life of the people within the land. These rules governed such matters as lost or stolen property, transvestism, sexual purity, sanitation, lending money, vows, and divorce. Provision was then made for the punishment of theft, but cruel and unusual punishment was strictly forbidden. It was likewise forbidden to muzzle an ox as it tread out the corn—a command that was given spiritual significance by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:8–10.

Deuteronomy 25 sets forth the law of the kinsman-redeemer. On the surface, this seems to be merely a provision for those who die without leaving an heir. But these verses turn out to have a deeper, prophetic significance:

If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel (25:5–6).

The kinsman-redeemer is a symbolic type of the coming Messiah. The surviving brother is the kinsman who redeems the bride of the dead brother. To be a kinsman-redeemer, he must meet certain qualifications:

He must be a blood relative of the dead husband, just as Christ became our blood relative through the virgin birth. In the story of Ruth and her kinsman-redeemer in the Ruth 4, we see other parallels between the kinsman-redeemer and Christ. The kinsman must be able to pay the price of the inheritance of the deceased man, just as Christ paid the price for us when we were dead in our sins. And the kinsman must marry the widow of the deceased man, just as Christ became the husband of His bride, the church. We will look at this relationship more closely when we explore the book of Ruth.

The most important principle here in Deuteronomy 25:5–6 is that God makes provision for the kinsman-redeemer to do what the dead brother cannot do for himself. He makes it possible for the dead brother's name to “not be blotted out from Israel,” just as the Lord Jesus Christ provides for us so that our names will not be blotted out from God's Book of Life.

The second sermon concludes with Moses' instructions about the way the people were to worship in the new land. They were

to bring the firstfruits and offer them to God, gratefully acknowledging His provision and grace. The firstfruits are followed by the gifts given to the Levites, to strangers, to the fatherless, and to widows. Then Moses gives detailed instructions regarding the impressive ceremony to be carried out on the two mountains of Gerizim and Ebal. The Ten Commandments were to be displayed on plaster-covered stone monuments, and each year the sons of Rachel and Leah were to recite the blessings upon Mount Gerizim, and the sons of Jacob's concubines were to recite the curses upon Mount Ebal. The curses are detailed in chapter 27 and the blessings in the opening words of chapter 28.

THIRD SERMON: *The Covenant of God*

The third message of Moses, chapters 27 through 31, lays out the choices Israel must make, as well as the potential blessings and curses that would flow from those choices. This sermon could be viewed as a grand exposition of the theme Moses set forth in Deuteronomy 11:26: “See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse.”

At the heart of this message we find chapter 28, one of the most amazing prophecies ever recorded. It predicts in remarkable detail the entire history of the Jewish people. It even predicts events following the crucifixion of Jesus when the Jewish people would cease to be a nation and would be scattered over the face of the earth.

Deuteronomy 28:1–14 speaks of God's delight in pouring out His abundant blessings on His people, if only they would be faithful to the Lord and His commands. Verses 15–44 speak of the curses for disobedience. This

prophecy predicts the Babylonian captivity and dispersion (under the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar) which would take place as a consequence of the unbelief and disobedience of the people. After this comes a prediction of the Israelites' ultimate return to the land.

Embedded in this message are intriguing clues to the coming Messiah whom God would send—and whom the nation of Israel would reject. As a consequence of Israel's rejection of the Messiah, a strange nation—the Roman Empire—would one day rise up against Israel. Here is how Moses described those events:

The LORD will bring a nation against you from far away, from the ends of the earth, like an eagle swooping down, a nation whose language you will not understand, a fierce-looking nation without respect for the old or pity for the young. . . . They will lay siege to all the cities throughout your land until the high fortified walls in which you trust fall down. Because of the suffering that your enemy will inflict on you during the siege, you will eat the fruit of the womb, the flesh of the sons and daughters the LORD your God has given you (28:49–50, 52).

The Roman Empire conquered Israel in 63 BC and oppressed the Jewish nation until the people rose up in rebellion in AD 67. The prediction of Moses that this strange nation would come “from the ends of the earth, like an eagle swooping down” was literally fulfilled with the armies of Rome were called out from the four corners of the empire to converge on Israel—and every Roman legion marched behind a standard bearing the sculpted image of an eagle in flight. Ancient historians record

the destruction of nearly a thousand Israeliite villages by the Romans.

The commander of the Roman forces was Titus, who later became the emperor of Rome. In AD 70, Titus laid siege to Jerusalem, causing starvation and terror within the city walls. Just as Moses predicted, the trapped citizens of Jerusalem began to kill and eat their own children. The historian Flavius Josephus records in horrifying detail the story of a wealthy woman who killed her own son and offered his flesh to the soldiers who guarded the city walls. The siege ended when the Romans entered the city, killed the inhabitants, toppled the walls, and destroyed the great temple of Jerusalem.

Moses warns in verse 64, “Then the LORD will scatter you among all nations, from one end of the earth to the other.” After the fall of Jerusalem, the Jewish people were dispersed throughout the world. They remained a people without a homeland until the nation of Israel was restored in May 1948.

At the conclusion of his great prophecy, Moses reminds the people that they are under the government of God. Moses has reminded them of their past so that they would walk faithfully before God in the future. In graphic terms, he has described to them what their future would be if they turned away from God in disobedience.

In his closing word to the people of Israel, Moses seems to look far into the future to see the people dispersed around the globe. He reminds them that if they will return to God with a whole heart, He will forgive their sin, restore their fortunes, and gather them again into the land.

Then, in Deuteronomy 30:11–14, Moses

utters the great words that the apostle Paul will quote centuries later in Romans 10:6–10. These words reveal why Deuteronomy is called “the second law.” Moses says to the people, “What I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach” (30:11). This speaks of the divine provision by which the demands of the law might be fully met. “It is not,” Moses continues, “up in heaven, so that you have to ask, ‘Who will ascend into heaven to get it’ . . . beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, ‘Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?’” (see 30:12–13); instead, as Moses puts it very plainly, “The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it” (see 30:14).

In Romans 10:5, Paul writes that “Moses describes in this way the righteousness that is by the law: ‘The man who does these things will live by them.’” Here he quotes the words of Moses concerning the law given at Sinai and taken from the book of Exodus. Then, in Romans 10:6–9, Paul quotes from Deuteronomy 30, indicating that it refers to Christ: “The righteousness that is by faith says: ‘Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ (that is, to bring Christ down) ‘or ‘Who will descend into the deep?’’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? ‘The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,’ that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:6–9).

In this quotation from Deuteronomy 30, Paul declares that it is not necessary to bring

Christ down from heaven (the incarnation) or to bring Him up again from the dead (the resurrection), for this has already been done. It is only necessary that the heart believe and the lips confess that Jesus is Lord and that He is risen from the dead. Thus the second law, which Paul calls “the law of the Spirit of life [in Christ Jesus],” fulfills, by another principle, the righteousness that the law demands.

Moses clearly taught these principles to the people of Israel. He constantly reiterated the just and fair demands of God as expressed in the Ten Commandments. That is the first law. But Moses also reminded them of the gracious provision through the sacrifices and offerings by which they could receive the life of the living Lord, the coming Messiah, by grace through faith. If they would keep God’s Word in their mouths and in their hearts, they would be able to do all that God demanded.

Moses concludes this great address by saying, “See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction” (30:15), words which echo his earlier theme, “See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse” (11:26). With earnest words, Moses pleads with the people to choose life “so that you and your children may live and that you may love the **LORD** your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the **LORD** is your life, and he will give you many years in the land” (30:19–20).

From Moses to Joshua

Finally, Moses summons Joshua and gives him this solemn charge:

*Be strong and courageous, for you must go with this people into the land that the **LORD** swore to their forefathers to give them,*

and you must divide it among them as their inheritance. The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged” (31:7b–8).

Then God tells Moses that the time had come for him to sleep with his fathers and that, in spite of his faithful warnings, the people whom he had led would not fulfill all his solemn predictions, and God would have to discipline the people as He had promised.

God commands Moses to write a song that will remain in the memory of the people long after Moses has gone. The song deals with the great themes of God’s everlasting covenant with Israel, His mercies to them, their failures, the penalties of their disobedience, and the promise of final deliverance. Then Moses offers the people his last benediction, reminding them that “the eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms” (Deut. 33:27).

The final chapter is undoubtedly added

by another hand, perhaps the hand of Joshua, for it recounts how Moses ascended Mount Nebo, and there, with his eyes not dim, with his natural force undiminished, Moses stretched out on the ground and died. The Lord Himself buried Moses in an unknown place in the valley of Moab, and we do not see Moses again in Scripture until we find him on the Mount of Transfiguration, along with Elijah the prophet and Jesus the Messiah, talking together about the crucifixion that awaited Jesus at Jerusalem (see Matt. 17:1–13; Mark 9:2–13).

Though the people rallied around Joshua and gave him the obedience they had shown to Moses, they knew they would never see anyone like Moses again—a man who spoke to God face-to-face, a man whose deeds were great, terrible, and often miraculous. Not until the Messiah Himself appeared would the achievements and wonders of Moses be surpassed.

The Message of History

Our adventure through the Bible now brings us to the historical books of the Old Testament, Joshua through Esther. The great purpose of God's Word is to bring us to maturity in Jesus Christ, so that we might reflect His image and character. God wants us to be mature in Christ so that we will no longer be children, tossed about by every changing wind of man-made doctrine.

The Bible is not like any other book. It's not designed to merely cram knowledge between our ears. God gave us His Word in order to change our lives. So He also gave us His Spirit, who opens our spiritual eyes so that we can understand the Bible and apply it to our daily lives. Through His Word, through the enlightening power of the Holy Spirit, we are able to discover where we have come from, where we are going, and why we are here.

Each division of the Old Testament makes a unique contribution to our maturity as believers. The Pentateuch lays the foundation for our faith and maturity, telling us that we are God's image-bearers, but we are also fallen, broken by sin, and in need of a Savior. We have explored the foundational truths of the Pentateuch: human helplessness and need, God's answer to that need through His provision of a pattern of worship, the example of Israel's failure and wandering in the wilderness, the encouragement of God's gracious and undeserved provision for Israel, and the second giving of the law in Deuteronomy that restores and

prepares believers to enter the Promised Land, the place of victory.

Now we are ready to dig into the rich history presented in the books of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. We will see how these books contribute to the preparatory work of the Old Testament. If the Pentateuch gave us the pattern of God's working, then the historical books give us the perils that confront us when we try to walk in the life of faith. The record of history exists to serve as a warning for generations to come: "Those who do not learn from history," the saying goes, "are doomed to repeat it." The history of Israel includes much that we would be wise not to repeat.

Some say that history is "His story," meaning Christ's story. But that is true only in a secondary sense. Christ is in history—but He is behind the scenes. That is why I love those words of James Russell Lowell:

Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne,
But God is standing in the shadows,
Keeping watch above His own.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

God gave us His Word in order to change our lives. The goal of this chapter is to present the historical books of the Old Testament—Joshua through Esther—as life-changing books. The historical books of the Old Testament show us the perils that beset the life of faith—and how to gain the victory over these perils.

That is the relationship of God to history. He is always active in history, but He stands in the shadows, behind the scenes.

History is primarily the story of humanity's cycle of failure, the rise and fall of one empire after another, one civilization after another. Great historians, such as Arnold Toynbee, remind us that human history is one cycle of failure after another.

In the historical books of the Bible, we find all of the same lessons that secular history teaches, but they are more condensed, more personal—and we have the added bonus of God's perspective to help us understand them. These books trace the history of one nation, a peculiar nation with a special ministry. In a symbolic way, these books picture for us the perils, pressures, and problems that confront all believers.

Every Christian is engaged in warfare. One of the first rules of warfare is: Know your enemies. Know who they are. Know their style of attack. Know how they are armed and defended. This is true in human warfare—and in spiritual warfare.

No one would be foolish enough to send a submarine against an army entrenched in the desert. In the same way, Christians should not choose their spiritual weapons at random for use against the powers of darkness. We must know our enemies—and their weapons.

These historical books illuminate our enemies. They show us the perils that beset the life of faith. And they show us how to gain the victory over these perils.

Joshua

The first of the historical books is Joshua. It begins with a story of victory as Israel

enters the Land of Promise—the place God wanted them to possess ever since He brought them out of Egypt. There is a parallel here to the Christian life. As Christians, we are not only called *out* of a wilderness, but we are also called *into* an inheritance, the Land of Promise.

Unfortunately, many of us are quite content to be brought out of Egypt—the world and its ways of bondage—but we never get around to entering the Promised Land. We have faith enough to leave Egypt, but we falter in the wilderness. We fail to lay hold of the faith that takes us over the Jordan and into the Land of Promise.

But in the book of Joshua, we see God's pattern for victory. We see Israel entering the land. We see Israel's errors and its triumphs as the book of Joshua traces for us the experience of conquest.

What was the first enemy the Israelites faced on the other side of the Jordan? Jericho—that walled super fortress of a city. Their own weapons seemed feeble and useless compared with those unassailable walls. They asked themselves, "How can we prevail over a city like this?"

Have you ever faced an obstacle that seemed insurmountable? An opponent who mocks and belittles you? A task that is beyond your strength or an illness that won't go away? That is your Jericho. The siege of Jericho symbolizes the world in its assault on the Christian—and it symbolizes our Lord's enabling victory over the world.

Israel's victory at Jericho is followed immediately by their defeat at Ai. The irony of these two stories is that Jericho was a fortress while Ai is an insignificant little village, a wide

spot in the road. Ai should be an easy victory for Joshua and his army—yet the villagers of Ai handily defeat the Israelites, sending Joshua's army running. Why? Because sin was in the Israelite camp—sin that was Israel's undoing. One of the Israelites, a man named Achan, had taken and hidden some of the spoils from the victory at Jericho, in violation of God's command. Here we see an illustration of the biblical principle that one believer's sin can cause harm and set back to the entire community of believers. Until the Israelites dealt with the sin of Achan, they could not defeat Ai.

The story of Ai symbolizes the danger of seemingly “minor” and “hidden” sins. We think “insignificant” sins like anger, resentment, lust, and evil thoughts won’t hurt anyone else. Those sins are hidden within us. Who will ever know? But those “hidden” sins have a way of becoming a Christian’s Achilles’ heel—the very sin that brings a believer down in sorrow and disgrace. Sins of the flesh not only produce tragic defeat in our own lives, but can bring hurt to the people around us, just as the sin of Achan caused the death of three dozen Israelite soldiers.

The book of Joshua tells the story of your life and mine. If you cannot find the perils of your life in the book of Joshua, you are not looking closely enough, because they’re all there.

The theme of the book is set forth in chapter 13, verse 1: “When Joshua was old and well advanced in years, the LORD said to him, ‘You are very old, and there are still very large areas of land to be taken over.’ ” The peril Joshua faced is one we all face from

time to time. It’s the temptation to stop short of complete victory.

Our indwelling Lord empowers us to experience victory over Satan, and when we experience that victory, it is a glorious experience indeed! Every believer has access to God’s power to experience this victory—but too many of us back away and stop short of complete victory. We say, “Why go on any further? I know I haven’t conquered all aspects of my sinfulness in the name of Christ—but I have conquered a lot. Lord, let me just rest here. No more challenges, no more battles—just for a while.” Do you know that feeling? It’s always the enemy’s first subtle attack whenever we experience a moment of spiritual victory.

Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matt. 5:6). Our lives should be marked by a hunger and thirst for the righteousness of God. We are never to get over that hunger and thirst. Until the war is completely won and God calls us to a place of rest in the Land of Promise, we are on a war footing. We must see the battle through to victory—or the battle will be lost.

In the closing chapter of the book, Joshua warns the people against moral and spiritual compromise, because they still have a great deal of land to conquer and possess. He exhorts them to “choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD” (Josh. 24:15). Joshua was relentless in his faith and obedience. He was on the march, serving the Lord until the day he died.

In each of the historical books of the Old Testament, we find a unique peril much like the peril Joshua faced—the peril of stopping short before the mission is completed. But in each of these historical books we also find at least one person who gains the victory over that peril, one human being who serves as an example and an encouragement to us. In the book of Joshua, that example is Joshua himself.

Judges and Ruth

Next we come to the books of Judges and Ruth, which we examine together because the events of Ruth are contemporary with the last part of Judges. While the book of Joshua covers a period of only twenty-five years, Judges covers a period of about three hundred years. The book of Judges is the story of a cycle that repeats again and again down through history: first decline, then discipline, and finally deliverance. Over and over, God sends judges to the people of Israel to deliver them from this recurring cycle.

Judges begins with the story of Othniel, the first judge sent to Israel by God and ends with the familiar story of Samson, the last judge. Altogether, God used twelve judges to deliver the Israelites. In each case, just as God's judge set His people back on their feet, they fell away again.

Why did the people repeatedly fail? What is the spiritual peril that confronts us in the book of Judges? We find it stated in Judges 2:11–13:

The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. They forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and

worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the LORD to anger because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths.

Why did the Israelites fall into idolatry? How do people descend from victory to moral and spiritual degradation so quickly? You find the key to the book in the final verse—and this principle is also the key to victory or failure in our own lives:

In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit (Judg. 21:25).

Judges warns us against what we might call “the peril of well-intentioned blundering.” It wasn’t that the people of Israel didn’t want to do right. They were simply deluded. Judges doesn’t say they did wrong; it says they did as they saw fit. They did what was right in their own eyes—but their eyes didn’t see clearly. They didn’t truly know what was right. This is the danger of well-intentioned ignorance—and it’s a danger that is very much with us today.

Many of God’s people are crippled by well-intentioned ignorance in our own time. They are weak and defeated because they suffer from what we could call “dedicated ignorance.” They are dedicated to their faith, and they mean well—but they lack the knowledge and wisdom to know what is right and true.

I’ve listened to many people, young and old, recounting their tales of regret, saying, “I don’t know what happened. I started out wanting to do the right thing, but something went terribly wrong.” The “something” that went wrong is that they didn’t expose

themselves to God's truth. Instead, they did what seemed right in their own eyes. The inevitable result, just as in the days of the judges, was failure, sorrow, and regret.

The last chapters of Judges describe one of the worst times of sexual depravity in Israel's history. Yet it is during this same time frame that the events of Ruth take place—a wonderful story of faith and faithfulness in the midst of defeat. It's a story briefly told, just four chapters long. It's the story of a woman named Ruth from the heathen land of Moab. She hears the voice of God and leaves home, friends, and family to be with her beloved mother-in-law, Naomi, who believes in the God of Israel.

It's a beautiful romance story in which this young widow, Ruth, meets a rich bachelor, Boaz, with whom she finds true love. It's important to note that by marrying Boaz, Ruth joins herself to the line of Christ and becomes one of the historic links God uses to bring His Son, the Messiah, into the world. Ruth is listed in the genealogy of Christ in the book of Matthew: "Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth . . ." (Matt. 1:5).

The story of Ruth not only tugs at the heartstrings, but is an integral part of the larger story of God's plan of human redemption. It is not only one of the Bible's most delightful stories, but it is also historically and spiritually profound.

1 Samuel

First Samuel is largely the story of two men: Samuel and Saul. In the latter part of the book the early history of David is woven

into the story of King Saul. Samuel was the greatest judge Israel ever had with his ministry lasting approximately forty years. During this time the people were still hungering after something other than God. The great peril of faith set forth in this book is given to us in chapter 8, verse 5. One day the people of Israel came to Samuel and said: "You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have."

The problem is that God had called Israel to be *unlike* other nations, yet the people of Israel were demanding to be just like all the other nations—ruled by an authority other than God. Here we find the peril of legalistic conformity, the desire for outward rule over their lives. Instead of taking responsibility for their own choices, legalists hand over their God-given liberty to external authorities and rules.

I'm continually amazed at how many people don't really want the freedom that God gives us in Christ. They come to me and say, "Don't tell me I have to practice wisdom and discernment in the Christian life. It's too hard to evaluate circumstances and make choices. Just give me a rule. That's what I want. If I just had a rule, then I could satisfy God and I wouldn't have to worry about exercising judgment and making decisions." That is the story of Israel during Samuel's time.

So God chose a king who would make decisions for Israel. The story of Saul is one of the great tragedies of the Bible. He was a man of great promise, a handsome man with great abilities. The lesson of Saul's life is relevant to our lives today and deserves to be underscored:

We place our lives and souls in mortal jeopardy when we seek the favor and approval of other people.

The defeat of Saul came about as a result of his expedition against the Amalekites. God told him to kill all the Amalekites, but Saul refused God's command and saved King Agag. Why did he do it? Because he thought that, in so doing, he would find favor in the eyes of the people. Saul loved glory, he loved to receive honor and acclaim.

The terrible tragedy of Saul's life was that he divided his allegiance. He was quite content to serve God as long as it pleased those around him—but when it came to a choice between pleasing God and pleasing people, Saul chose people. His hunger for the favor and acclaim of other people was his downfall.

Do you seek God's favor—or the favor of people? The danger of people-pleasing can defeat you as surely as it defeated Saul. In the end, Saul lost his kingdom, his crown was snatched from his head, and he went down in defeat and disgrace, losing everything.

People sometimes ask, "What about Saul's relationship with God? What about his salvation? Did he lose that, too?" Bible scholars have come to differing conclusions, and the Scriptures do not give us a clear-cut answer. But the apostle Paul suggests that the answer may be that Saul was saved, even though he was rejected by God as king of Israel. Paul writes:

If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the

quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames (1 Cor. 3:12–15).

Saul built his life and his kingship on the wrong foundation—a foundation of people-pleasing rather than God-pleasing. His glories and achievements as king were tested by fire—and burned up. He was saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

Yet, in the midst of this grim story, the light of God breaks through. The story of Saul's son Jonathan and his friendship with David, the future king of Israel, is one of the great stories of the Old Testament.

2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles

The next book, 2 Samuel, overlaps chronologically with the book that follows, 1 Chronicles. Yet these are two very different books, written from different perspectives. These two books center on the story of one man—David, the king after God's own heart.

David is a flawed hero. But in spite of his flaws, he is a symbolic picture of the Lord Jesus Christ. We know this because Jesus Himself used this analogy. David was not only the forerunner and ancestor of Jesus according to the flesh, but his reign in ancient Israel is a symbolic picture of the reign of Christ during the millennium. David experienced a long period of rejection and persecution, but during his exile he gathered men around him who later became his commanders and officers. Thus, David signifies Christ in His rejection—forsaken by the world but gathering in secret those who will be His

commanders and leaders when He comes to reign in power and glory over the earth.

David also symbolizes every believer. The story of David portrays what happens in a Christian's life as he or she follows God into the place of dominion. Every Christian is offered a kingdom, just as David was offered a kingdom. That kingdom is the believer's own life and it is exactly like the kingdom of Israel. Enemies threaten it from the outside and from within, just as there were enemy nations beyond and within the boundaries of Israel. The external enemies represent the direct attacks of the devil upon us. The internal enemies represent the flesh that threatens to overthrow God's influence in our lives. While David contended with the Ammonites, Jebusites, Perrizites, and other Old Testament enemies, we contend with jealousy, envy, lust, bitterness, resentment, worry, and so forth. In many ways, our own external and internal enemies attack us in much the same way.

While David's story is one of the more wonderful stories in the Old Testament, there is also an ugly side to the story of David. He became an adulterer and a murderer. It is almost incomprehensible to think of David, God's own man, committing these sins. How did his failure begin? We find a clue in 2 Samuel 11:1, which tells us: "In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king's men and the whole Israelite army. . . . But David remained in Jerusalem."

What was David's peril? I call it "the peril of the neglected calling." David was the king of Israel and Judah. It was his business to be at the head of the army—but he neglected his calling. He stayed home and rested while

others went into battle. The result was that he indulged in the lusts of the flesh.

While he was home, he went onto his rooftop and looked into his neighbor's yard. There he saw a beautiful woman bathing. The sight did to him what such a sight does to any normal male—it filled him with lust. His lust turned to scheming, and he took the woman and possessed her sexually. She became pregnant. So, to cover up his sin, he murdered the woman's husband—a man who faithfully served in the army of Israel.

The gleam of grace in this story is David's repentance. That is why, despite David's fall, he can still be called a man after God's own heart. The moment he is confronted with his sin, he admits it and repents—and he accepted God's forgiving grace. David offers a wonderful picture of a contrite heart, down on his face before God, crying out his sorrow and repentance over his sin. Out of this experience comes Psalm 52, the psalm of a truly repentant heart.

2 Chronicles, 1 and 2 Kings

We may link 2 Chronicles with 1 and 2 Kings because they cover the same general historical period. These books focus on the stories of two men, Solomon and Jeroboam. Solomon, of course, was the king of Israel who was renowned for his wisdom and who wrote some of the most beautiful wisdom books of the Old Testament. Jeroboam was the rival to Solomon's son Rehoboam; Jeroboam became king of the northern kingdom, Israel. These books tell the story of the division of the nation into two kingdoms, Judah (the southern kingdom) and Israel (the northern kingdom).

The story of Solomon is fascinating. He stepped into his inheritance and was crowned king of Israel even before his father David's death. He came into the kingdom at the height of its glory, and God gave him riches and power. At the beginning of his reign, while still a young man, Solomon chose a heart of wisdom rather than wealth. Along with his wisdom, God gave him power, magnificence, and riches in abundance. But Solomon's misappropriation of these gifts, later in life, proved to be the seed of his downfall.

In 1 Kings 3:1–3, we find a glimpse of the peril that ultimately brought him failure and defeat:

Solomon made an alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt and married his daughter. He brought her to the City of David until he finished building his palace and the temple of the LORD, and the wall around Jerusalem. The people, however, were still sacrificing at the high places [pagan religious sites], because a temple had not yet been built for the name of the LORD. Solomon showed his love for the LORD by walking according to the statutes of his father David, except that he offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places (1 Kings 3:1–3).

As we trace the account, we find that Solomon took seven years to build the temple. But in 1 Kings 7:1 we read, “It took Solomon thirteen years, however, to complete the construction of his palace.” Doesn’t that strike you as strange? He spent seven years building the temple, but lavished thirteen years constructing his own mansion. This suggests the beginning of a self-centered life and the peril of a love of material things.

The downfall of Solomon was the peril of material magnificence, a heart wooed away from the Lord by a love of worldly goods.

The rest of the book is the story of Jeroboam, the rebellion he fomented, and the beginning of the kingdom of Israel. The peril set forth in Jeroboam’s life is the peril of a substitute faith, of false and deceptive religion. We read:

Jeroboam thought to himself, “The kingdom will now likely revert to the house of David. If these people go up to offer sacrifices at the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem, they will again give their allegiance to their lord, Rehoboam king of Judah. They will kill me and return to King Rehoboam” (1 Kings 12:26–27).

After seeking advice, the king made two golden calves. He said to the people, “It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt” (1 Kings 12:28).

I once spoke on the incarnation, the virgin birth, and the glory of the baby in Bethlehem who was God Himself, manifest in the flesh. At the close of the meeting, a woman charged up to the podium and said to me, “Did I understand you to say that the baby of Bethlehem was God?”

“Exactly so,” I replied.

“Oh,” she said, “I can’t believe anything like that! God is everywhere. God is vast and infinite. He fills the universe. How could He be a baby in Bethlehem?”

“That’s the glory of the mystery, that God was manifest in the flesh,” I said. “You know, there was a time when one of His own disciples took the Lord Jesus by the feet and

said to Him, ‘My Lord and my God.’ Now, do you know more about Him than His disciples did?”

She said, “I was raised in a faith which taught that God is in all the universe, and I simply can’t accept this idea.”

“What you were taught,” I said, “is not what the Bible very clearly teaches. You have been taught a false faith.”

Not wanting to hear any more, she turned on her heels and walked away.

This is the peril that deludes and destroys the faith of so many people today. There are many sects, cults, and “isms” that claim to be “Christian,” but they teach a substitute faith, a “faith” that opposes the clear teaching of the Bible. That is the kind of deceitful faith Jeroboam brought into the nation of Israel. But even in those spiritually dark days, God’s grace came shining forth in the form of a holy and untainted man: Elijah the prophet.

In 2 Kings and the latter part of 2 Chronicles (which are chronologically linked), we have story after story chronicling the downfall of one king after another. Many of these kings were murdered by power-hungry rivals. The story of this period in Israel’s history—the story of the ten tribes of the northern kingdom—is a story of moral failure and abdication.

We face the same moral peril today that Israel faced then. In our mad pursuit of so-called “freedom,” in our rejection of moral standards and restraints, we are in danger of falling into bondage. That is the supreme irony: we are so easily enslaved by our so-called “freedom.” We often hear people say, “Oh, I’m tired of Christians with all their moral restriction! I just want to do what I

want and go where I please and enjoy myself. Then I’ll be happy and free!” But we find the result of such “freedom” in 2 Kings:

They forsook all the commands of the LORD their God and made for themselves two idols cast in the shape of calves, and an Asherah [an idol] pole. They bowed down to all the starry hosts, and they worshiped Baal. They sacrificed their sons and daughters in the fire. They practiced divination and sorcery and sold themselves to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, provoking him to anger (2 Kings 17:16–17).

As Paul writes in Romans 1, people who knew God refused to acknowledge Him or give thanks to Him. So God gave them up to the most dissolute, depraved, immoral practices. God gave them the “freedom” they demanded. The result of such “freedom” is always depravity, captivity, and bondage.

Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther

The books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther tell the story of the nation of Israel in captivity—morally bankrupt, socially disintegrated, economically bereft, and carried away into bondage. But even in Israel’s time of disgrace and captivity, God began to work. After the seventy years of Israel’s exile, God raised up the prophet Ezra to lead a group back into the desolate land of Palestine to begin rebuilding the temple.

The book of Ezra is the story of a discouraged people who were reluctant to leave captivity. Just as their ancestors looked back longingly to their Egyptian captivity, these Israelites were largely content to remain as captives in Babylon. Only a

handful want to return to their homeland while the rest drifted off and became “lost” into the surrounding nations. We call them “the ten lost tribes of Israel.” No one knows where they are or who they are. They are lost. But those who were willing to return to Israel found all the promises of God waiting for them there.

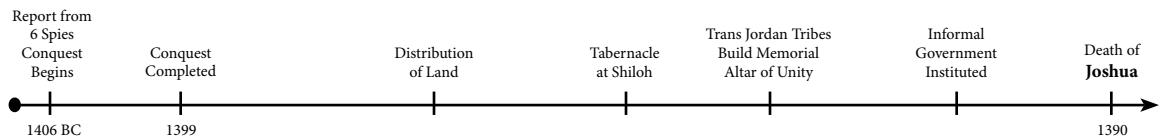
The peril depicted in these three books is the peril of a discouraged heart. Sometimes we get into this same frame of mind, don’t we? We say, “What’s the use? I might as well throw it all in and just stay where I am. I know I’m not victorious. I know I’m getting nowhere. I might just as well quit.” But the story of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther is the story of the triumph of faith in the midst of discouraging circumstances.

In Ezra, a faithful remnant chose to return and build the second temple. In Nehemiah, the people persevere against determined opposition and rebuild the shattered walls of

the city. In Esther, God brings about victory in the midst of impossible circumstances. All three books demonstrate that faith is triumphant, even when circumstances seem to predict disaster and defeat.

In this brief survey of the historical books of the Old Testament, you may recognize your own life and the moral and spiritual perils you face. If so, I urge you to open the book that deals with your peril, go to your knees, and read that book prayerfully, asking God to speak to you and show you the way of deliverance.

That is God’s purpose for these historical books—to illuminate the pressures and perils that face us in the Christian life so that we can find God’s strength and see His leading as He guides us to a place of safety and rest. May the message of history, contained in these twelve precious books, instruct you, encourage you and bless your life as we explore them together.

Guidebook to Victory

Abraham Lincoln was an unknown Illinois prairie lawyer when someone asked him if he had political ambitions. “I will prepare myself and be ready,” the future president replied. “Perhaps my chance will come.” The book of Joshua is the story of another leader who prepared himself. When his chance came, Joshua, the son of Nun, the disciple of Moses, was ready.

Along with Daniel, Joshua is one of the two Old Testament books every Christian should master. Joshua and Daniel are primarily designed to help Christians withstand the full impact of our spiritual battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil. If you struggle with the deceptiveness and opposing spiritual forces of this age, if you want to see a historical demonstration of the spiritual warfare we face, Joshua and Daniel will be especially helpful to you.

Joshua is also important for those who would be leaders in the world or in the church, as the leadership model of Joshua is powerfully relevant to the world we live in today. The world urgently needs righteous, courageous leaders who can

stand up to the pressures and hostility of this world.

The book of Joshua is packed with practical lessons—challenging concepts to help us grasp the principles of a Spirit-led life. The key to the book is given to us in the New Testament: “These things . . . were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come” (1 Cor. 10:11). The events of Joshua are patterns or metaphors we can apply to the spiritual battles in our lives.

Chapters 1 through 4 concern Israel’s entrance into the Promised Land and all that involves. If you struggle with how to enter into a life of victory with Christ, how to move out of the wilderness of doubt, how to settle your restless wanderings and move into the full blessing of the Spirit-led experience, these chapters will instruct and encourage you.

Chapters 5 through 12 deal with Israel’s

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter reveals insight into the life and leadership of Joshua, while also providing practical lessons in how to live the Spirit-led life, how to move out of the wilderness of doubt, and how to wage spiritual warfare and live victoriously through Christ.

conquest of the Promised Land through a series of battles and conflicts. Chapters 13 through 21 deal with the division of the land. Chapters 22 through 24, which include many passages from Joshua's own lips, set before us the perils we must guard against in order to maintain our victory.

Beginning with chapter 1, we see a descriptive picture of the Spirit-filled life—a life God intends *every* Christian to live, not just a few “supersaints.” In Joshua 1:2, God says to Joshua, “Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them.”

The Entrance into Canaan

Joshua's name is especially significant. It means “God is salvation.” The names Joshua and Jesus are two English forms of the same original Hebrew name Yeshua. To their Jewish contemporaries, both Joshua and Jesus were known as Yeshua, “God is salvation.” This is no mere coincidence. Joshua is a symbolic forerunner of the victorious Messiah, Jesus the Lord.

The Promised Land was given to the people of Israel, just as the promised life in Christ is made available to us as Christians without any effort on our part. But though the land has been given, it still needed to be possessed. Title

to the land is a gift from God; possession of the land is the result of obedience: “I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses” (1:3).

You can have all you are willing to take. You can have every bit of spiritual life in Christ you want. God will never give you more than you are ready to take. If you are not satisfied with the degree of your real experience of victory, it's because you haven't really wanted any more.

The land is described as abundant and far-reaching, a land in which you will find all you need in every area of life—“a land flowing with milk and honey,” as described in Exodus 3:8. The extent of the land is as long and wide as the imagination: “Your territory



will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates—all the Hittite country—to the Great Sea on the west” (Josh. 1:4).

But possessing the land is not easy. The Christian life is a life of adventure, and the way to victory is through the battlefield of spiritual warfare. Even so, the end of the war is never in doubt: “No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you” (1:5).

One of the first things we learn in coming into this place of walking in the Spirit is that although it is a place of conflict, every conflict can end in victory. The Land of Promise is a frontier, and nothing is more exciting than life on a frontier. But frontier living requires courage. You cannot drift aimlessly with the crowd. You must go against the current, as the Lord said to Joshua:

“Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful” (1:7–8).

Joshua is a book of great promises. The Word of God is our source book of wisdom, guidance, and insight. The more we read it, meditate on it, speak it, and do it, the greater our prosperity and success will be in the way that God leads us.

“Have I not commanded you?” the Lord continues in verse 9. “Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be

discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go” (1:9). Coupled with God’s Word is the presence of God’s Spirit. An obedient heart always brings an empowering Spirit.

That is life in the Land of Promise.

Rahab and the Spies

In chapter 2 we encounter the intriguing story of Rahab and the Israelite spies. When these spies came into the house of Rahab, she hid them under some flax drying on the roof. While the men of Jericho searched for them, the spies learned a startling secret from Rahab:

“I know that the LORD has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below” (2:9–11).

How long before the spies entered this city had these events taken place? How long had the Canaanites been living in fear of the mysterious wandering nation whose God had led them through the very midst of the Red Sea? Forty years! In other words, for forty years the inhabitants of Jericho had been a defeated foe. Their hearts were melted. They were defeated before the army of Israel got anywhere close. The Israelites could have gone

in at any time and taken the land. Instead, they had pulled back in fear, causing the Lord to sentence them to forty years of wandering in the desert. What a waste!

But before we condemn the Israelites too harshly for their lack of confidence, we should ask ourselves: What opportunity has God set before us? Did we boldly accept that challenge—or did we shrink back in fear? How long have we been waiting and hesitating to take on that foe whom God has already delivered into our hands? Have we, in our timidity, wasted five, ten, or forty years of our own lives, when we could have trusted God and possessed the land He wanted to give us?

Next we read of the spies:

When they left, they went into the hills and stayed there three days, until the pursuers had searched all along the road and returned without finding them. Then the two men started back. They went down out of the hills, forded the river and came to Joshua son of Nun and told him everything that had happened to them. They said to Joshua, “The LORD has surely given the whole land into our hands; all the people are melting in fear because of us” (2:22–24).

After three days they came back and told this story. Notice the opening verse of chapter 3. On the third day, “early in the morning,” they prepared to go into the land. God included these details for a reason. Here is a reminder to us that on the third day, early in the morning, the resurrection took place. And it is in resurrection power that they entered to take Canaan, symbolizing Christ in His risen life working in and through us to make us victors over all that threatens to hinder or defeat us.

Crossing the Jordan

Between the Israelites and the Promised Land, however, a barrier remained: the Jordan River. This account of the crossing of the Jordan is very similar to the story of the crossing of the Red Sea. In many ways the two crossings picture the same thing: death. Anyone venturing into the Red Sea without the waters having been parted would have faced certain death.

The crossing of the Red Sea is a picture of Christ’s death for you and me—when He cuts us off from the world in all its attitudes and ways. In other words, when you became a Christian, you changed your ideas and sense of values. Your baptism depicts the fact that you have given up one life for another and your whole attitude has changed. The Red Sea represents the Lord’s death for you.

But the Jordan pictures your death with Christ, when all that you are as a fallen son or daughter of Adam comes to an end—including your self-reliance and your desire to have your own way. If you cling to your own program, you can have only your own, fallen Adamic life. But if you want His life, you must also adopt His program, which is a program of victory. You cross the Jordan when you let go of your own agenda and say to God, “All right, if this is what You want for me, Lord, this is what it will be. Not my will, but Yours be done.” That’s what happened in the national life of Israel when the people crossed the Jordan and walked into the Land of Promise.

You cross the Jordan the same way you crossed the Red Sea: by obedience and faith. God says to Joshua, in effect, “In the same way I used Moses to lead Israel through the Red

Sea, so I will use you to lead Israel across the Jordan." The faith that got you out of Egypt is the same faith that gets you into the Land of Promise. "Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord," writes the apostle Paul, "continue to live in him" (Col. 2:6).

Was it any harder for Israel to cross the Jordan River than to cross the Red Sea? No, they just walked to the shore, the waters rolled back, and they went right through. It was the same process both times. And your spiritual walk is no different. You simply believe that God is in you and that what He said about you is true—that He has cut off the old life (as you asked Him to) and He has given you a new basis for living. Acting on that basis, you say, "Thank You, Lord, for empowering me to do everything You have called me to do." And you enter the land.

In chapter 4, Israel sets up two memorials. One is a pile of twelve stones on

the bank of the river, erected as a continual reminder to the people of the principle of faith to which they had now returned after years of wandering in the wilderness. This memorial represents the Lord's Supper, which is a continual reminder to us of the principle of life by which we are to live.

The other memorial was a series of twelve stones in the middle of the river that were to be placed where the priests stood while Israel passed over to the other side. The stones were put in place before the waters returned to fill the riverbed. This symbolizes for us the way Jesus Christ stays in the place of death long enough for us to relinquish control of every area of our lives to Him.

The Conquest of Canaan

In chapter 5 we come to the second section, the conquest of the land. As the Israelites contemplate taking possession of the land, they see the fortress city of Jericho with its massive walls. While Jericho is the first visible obstacle in Israel's path, the first obstacle the Israelites face is not external but internal. They must first deal with something in their own lives. God never begins His conquest with the outward problem. He always begins with what lies within us.

The people of Israel had to do three things before they could destroy the outward enemy. First, they had to *be circumcised*. The whole generation that was circumcised in Egypt had died in the wilderness. A whole new generation had grown up uncircumcised. So when they came into the land, their first act was



circumcision. As we know from the New Testament, circumcision is a picture of a surrendered heart—a heart in which the reliance on the flesh has been cut off and put aside. Paul calls this “circumcision of the heart” (Rom. 2:29).

The second thing the people had to do was *celebrate the Passover*—the first such celebration since their emergence from the wilderness. The Passover is a remembrance of the night when the Lord and the angel of death passed over the houses of the Israelites back in Egypt. It also symbolizes a thankful heart that looks back to that day of deliverance when Christ became our Passover sacrifice for us.

After their celebration of the Passover came a new food. The manna that had sustained them in the wilderness ceased on the day after they came into the land, and they began to eat the satisfying food of the Promised Land. As far as I can discover, the food we have today which most resembles manna is cornflakes. How would you like cornflakes for breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day for forty years? The Israelites were tired of “heavenly cornflakes” by the time they reached the land of Canaan. Manna sustained their strength but it didn’t satisfy. When they came into the land, however, they found satisfying food.

Finally, before their conquest began, Joshua had to *plan the strategy for the assault on Jericho*. He must have been perplexed. How could he conquer this huge walled city with this ragtag “army” of people who had never fought a war?

He withdrew from the camp and looked out over the city in the moonlight. Suddenly,

he saw a man facing him, sword drawn, just a few paces away. Joshua didn’t know if the man’s sword was drawn as a threat—or an offer of assistance. Instinctively, Joshua challenged the stranger: “Are you for us,” he asked, “or for our enemies?”

“Neither,” the man replied, “but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come” (5:14). In other words, “I haven’t come to take sides, I have come to take over. It isn’t your job to plan the strategy of battle. That’s My job. I have given the city of Jericho into your hands.”

Joshua knew that this was no mortal soldier. This was God’s own messenger. In fact, this stranger may have been what theologians call a “theophany,” a preincarnate appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ in human form.

The man proceeded to lay out for Joshua the most remarkable battle plan that has ever been devised. Joshua was to have the people march around the city with the ark of the covenant in their midst. They would do this once a day for six days and on the seventh day, seven times. Then they would blow a long blast on the trumpets and shout—and the walls would fall down.

The Lesson of Jericho

Three preparations were necessary before battle. So, in this section, we see three major obstacles to be overcome before the land is won. These obstacles picture for us the three types of problems we confront in the Christian life.

The first obstacle was Jericho, a city with two walls, an inner wall about twelve feet thick and an outer wall about six feet thick,

with both being about twenty feet high—a seemingly insurmountable obstacle at the time. Jericho symbolizes the problems that generally occur at the beginning of our walk with the Spirit. In our early Christian experience, we are often confronted by something that has baffled and mocked us for years. Maybe it's an old habit we have failed to overcome.

But when we follow the strategy outlined here—when we obediently walk around the problem in the presence of God (which is represented by the ark of the covenant), and shout the shout of triumph—then the walls will fall down. When there is a complete change of attitude toward an “insurmountable” problem, the problem dissolves into dust. The visible obstacle is not the problem; our attitude toward it is.

Why did God have Israel march for seven days around the city of Jericho? Perhaps Israel marched for seven days because that's how long it took for them to change their attitude toward Jericho. All that time they were thinking, “What a huge place. How will we ever take this city?” Day after day, as they walked around the city, they had time to think about God in their midst, the power that He had already displayed, and what He could do again. Gradually their attitude changed. Finally, on the seventh day they shouted in triumph and the walls fell down. There was nothing to it when they obeyed.

The Lessons of Ai, Gibeon, and Beth-horon

The second obstacle in Israel's path was the little city of Ai. The story of the campaign

against Ai begins with the revelation of the sin of a man named Achan. He coveted a forbidden object taken from the defeated city of Jericho, so he took it and hid it among his personal belongings. Later, when the army of Israel went up against the city of Ai—a comparatively weak and unfortified city—Israel was utterly defeated.

Joshua fell upon his face before the Lord and said, “Why did you ever bring this people across the Jordan to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us?” (7:7). God said to him, “Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? Israel has sinned. . . . I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction” (7:10–12) Finally, after searching through the ranks of Israel, it became clear that Achan was the one who had sinned—and he confessed.

Ai, then, is an instructive and sobering lesson: God expects us to deal completely with our lusts. He expects us to obey Him without compromising with sin. Even a seemingly small sin can have disastrous consequences, so we dare not allow sin to gain a foothold in us.

When the sin of Achan was hidden, Israel was defeated. But once Achan had confessed his sin, the army of Israel was able to conquer Ai handily. By dealing firmly and decisively with sin in the camp, Israel was able to go into battle unhindered. The key to gaining victory on the battlefield is gaining victory over the inner enemy—the lurking sin within. Once we gain victory over the enemy of the flesh, spiritual warfare ceases to be a problem. God will win the battle for us.

The two battles of Gibeon and Beth-horon signify a third aspect of Satan's special attacks on the believer. The satanic attack pictured in the story of Gibeon is deception. The Gibeonites dressed themselves up in old clothes, took moldy bread and tattered wineskins, and rode emaciated donkeys out to meet Joshua (see 9:3–27).

They came into the Israelite camp and said, “Your servants have come from a very distant country because of the fame of the LORD your God. For we have heard reports of him: all that he did in Egypt, and all that he did to the two kings of the Amorites . . . Our elders and all those living in our country said to us, ‘Take provisions for your journey; go and meet them and say to them, “We are your servants; make a treaty with us.”’”

The Israelites were suspicious, but the Gibeonites continued, “This bread of ours was warm when we packed it at home on the day we left to come to you. But now see how dry and moldy it is. And these wineskins that we filled were new, but see how cracked they are. And our clothes and sandals are worn out by the very long journey.”

Joshua believed them and made a pact with them. When they had signed the treaty, Israel walked over the hill and there was Gibeon! Now, God had previously instructed Joshua to remove all the inhabitants of the land—and that included Gibeon. But Joshua had been taken in by a clever satanic ruse. Even though he had been tricked into signing the treaty, Joshua honored the agreement and spared the Gibeonites. As a result, Gibeon became a thorn in Israel’s side for centuries to come.

Then comes the account of Beth-horon, where all the kings of the Canaanites banded together and came roaring down in a tremendous axis of evil against Joshua—reminiscent of the various times in our own century, such as the 1967 Six-Day War, when various surrounding nations banded together to attack modern Israel. The battle of Beth-horon was a mighty military engagement. Though Israel was greatly outnumbered, God gave them victory in a remarkable way: He stopped the sun in the sky, causing the day of battle to last until victory came. This was the famous “long day” of Joshua.

Here is a picture of what happens when the devil comes as a roaring lion in some overwhelming catastrophe that seems to shatter us, to shake our faith, and make us cry out, “God, why have You allowed this to happen?” We feel we are being crushed by our obstacles and opposition. But Joshua stood fast in faith, depending on God to work a miracle—and God honored his faith.

Proverbs 10:30 tells us, “The righteous will never be uprooted.” This is why Paul says in Ephesians that when the enemy comes like this, we are to stand still, planting our feet on God’s promises—and our enemy *will* be defeated (see Eph. 6:13).

The Division of Canaan

The rest of this section (chapters 11 through 21) deals with the mopping-up operation after the major battles, along with the division of Canaan among the tribes of Israel. After the battle of Beth-horon, the land was practically theirs, although individual victories remained to be won.

The victories of Caleb, Othniel, and the Josephites, and the provision for the cities of refuge all contain wonderful lessons on the audacity of faith—boldly taking and using what God has promised.

In the last section we learn of three particular forms of peril that beset us in the Christian life. First of all comes the account of the *misunderstood* motives ascribed to the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half tribe of Manasseh. They built an altar on the wrong side of the Jordan, causing indignation among the other tribes of Israel.

To the other tribes, this was idolatry and disobedience to God's command. So these tribes gathered together and went to make war against their own brethren. When they arrived, all decked out for war, the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh were deeply offended. "If we have built our own altar to turn away from the LORD . . .," they cried out, "may the LORD himself call us to account" (22:23).

Then they explained that they were afraid that sometime in the future the Israelites in the land might say to the tribes outside the land, "You have no share in the LORD." In that case, a good response would be, "If they ever say this to us, or to our descendants, we will answer:

"Look at the replica of the LORD's altar, which our fathers built, not for burnt offerings and sacrifices, but as a witness between us and you" (22:28).

Does this scene have a familiar ring to it? How many times have you jumped to the wrong conclusion, ascribing wrong motives to your spouse, to a family member, to your pastor, or to another Christian? How

many times have other people misjudged or wrongly attacked you? It happens too often in Christian families and churches. If anything can drive us out of the land of victory, it is conflict over misunderstood motives.

The second peril is *incomplete obedience*. Although the land had been given to the people of Israel, they did not possess all of it but left some of it unconquered. Joshua warned the people near the end of his life that the unconquered peoples they had permitted to live would always be a thorn to them (see 23:12–13).

The final peril that we see here is the peril of *false confidence and pride*. Joshua made a final appearance before the people, challenging them to walk before the Lord their God, saying, "Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve" (24:15). He is saying, in effect, "You think you can maintain a neutral position between following the devil and following the Lord—but you can't." This is what Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters" (Matt. 6:24). You must serve either God or Satan. You cannot serve both. Hearing this challenge, the people replied:

"Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our fathers up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. And the LORD drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God" (24:16–18).

Brave words! But Joshua confronts their

bravado (much as Jesus confronted the bravado of Peter when he pledged never to deny his Lord). “You are not able to serve the LORD,” says Joshua in verse 19. Why did Joshua confront his people just as they are pledging their allegiance to the Lord? Because Joshua understood that the greatest peril Christians face is false confidence, which comes from pride.

You may say, “I can do what God wants. I’ve got what it takes. After all, I know the Scriptures. I have been raised in the right church. I can walk faithfully before God. Don’t talk to me about apostasy, defeat, backsliding, or sin. I will serve the Lord!” To this spiritual pride, Joshua responds, “You are not able to serve the Lord.”

We can never stand in our own strength. True spiritual power comes from admitting our own weakness and dependence on God. Only as we are willing to cling to God and

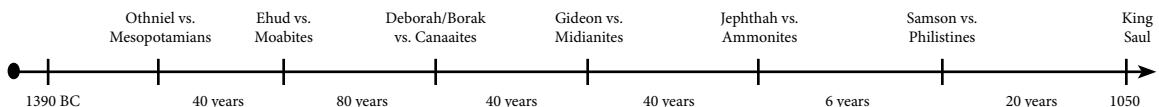
His strength can we experience victory. That is why wise old Joshua, near the end of his life, says:

“You are not able to serve the LORD. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. . . . If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you” (24:19–20).

It must have saddened Joshua deeply to hear the people’s response, for they said, in effect, “No, Joshua, you don’t know what you’re talking about. We are going to serve the Lord anyway.” Words of spiritual arrogance! Because of the people’s attitude, the story does not end with the victories of the book of Joshua. The story continues in the next book, the book of Judges—the book of defeat.

A Panorama of Defeat

[JUDGESHIPS ARE NOT SUCCESSIVE]



Few books of the Bible compare to Judges for excitement and intrigue. You wince as you read how Ehud the judge goes to visit the king in his summer palace and slides his dagger between the king's fifth and sixth ribs so that the flesh closes around it and the knife cannot be withdrawn (Judges 3). You cringe when Jael drives the tent stake through the skull of Sisera and pins him to the ground (Judges 4). You bite your fingernails alongside Gideon as God introduces deep military cutbacks, reducing Israel's army from thirty-two thousand to three hundred—then sends this vastly outnumbered miniature army into battle (6–7).

Perhaps your heart sinks with mine when Jephthah's daughter comes out to meet him on his return from battle, and he remembers his vow to sacrifice to God the first person he meets—then fulfills that horrible vow (11). Perhaps you glory with Samson as he wreaks havoc among the Philistines, but wonder at his folly in allowing the Philistine temptress to seduce him into revealing the secret of his strength (13–17). And you undoubtedly feel revulsion at the story of the Benjamite perversion

LEFT: Wall surrounding Jerusalem

that marks one of the worst chapters in Israel's history (19–20).

Devotees of historical romance, military history, soap operas, conspiracy theories, spy novels, swashbuckling adventure, or political intrigue will find it all here in the book of Judges. For sheer drama and fascination, Judges is a spellbinding book. But from a deeper historical perspective, Judges must be read as the story of a deteriorating nation. It serves as a sober warning against moral and spiritual decline in our own nation and our own Christian lives.

From Joshua, the book of victory, we move to Judges, the book of defeat. It's the first in a series of books that sets before us the warnings and danger signs regarding the perils that lie in our path as believers. The pattern of defeat described in Judges repeats again and again. The key principle that always

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter reveals the multidimensional nature of Judges. On the surface, it's a book of intrigue and human drama. Dig deeper, and you discover that it chronicles the decline of a deteriorating nation. Dig even deeper, and you find urgent warnings against the moral and spiritual compromises that can destroy our own lives today.

spelled defeat in the lives of the people of Israel is given to us in the very last verse of the book: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit” (21:25).

The people were not trying to do wrong. They were not rebellious people, bent on frustrating God’s will for their lives. At this stage of Israel’s history these people were determined to do right—but they were trying to do what was right in their own eyes. They succumbed to the folly of consecrated blundering. They were well-intentioned blunderers, intending to do right but ending up all wrong.

I’ve seen this pattern again and again in my counseling experience. Time after time, I’ve heard people say, “I don’t know what went wrong. I tried to do right. I did what I thought was best. But everything seemed to go wrong.” This was the problem with Israel in the book of Judges.

As the text says, there was no objective authority in their lives. The Lord Jehovah was supposedly their King, but they did not take Him seriously. And when they did not take Him seriously, they ended up taking themselves too seriously. So they did what they thought was right, guided by their own intellects and reasoning—ultimately proving that their ways were not God’s ways.

The Pattern of Defeat and Deliverance

In the first two chapters, we see the pattern of defeat that will repeat itself again and again. Each time God in His grace delivers the people, they slip into yet another cycle of defeat. The tone of defeat is set in chapter 1: “Manasseh did not drive out the people of Beth Shan . . . and their surrounding settlements” (1:27).

The tribe of Manasseh failed to obey God’s command to drive out all the tribes of the Canaanites. And there are other stories of failure: “Nor did Ephraim drive out the Canaanites living in Gezer, but the Canaanites continued to live there among them. Neither did Zebulun drive out the Canaanites living in Kitron or Nahalol, who remained among them. . . . Nor did Asher drive out those living in Acco or Sidon. . . . Neither did Naphtali drive out those living in Beth Shemesh, or Beth Anath” (1:29–31, 33).

That was just the beginning of the story of Israel’s defeat. They did not take God seriously about the threat their enemies posed. Instead, they moved in among their enemies. God had said that they were to drive out every inhabitant of these Canaanite villages. They were not to mingle with them or have anything to do with them. They were not to marry them.

But when Israel came to some of these villages, they didn’t go to war. Instead, they went in and met the people—and the people seemed harmless and peaceful. So the Israelites ignored God’s command and they permitted the Canaanites to stay. They built their own Israelite town right next door to the Canaanites. They traded with them, mingled with them, and compromised God’s command. They settled for less than complete victory.

We read this story, and we think, how foolish these Israelites were not to obey the commandment of God! But don’t we do exactly the same? Don’t we settle for less than complete victory over our sins and bad habits? Don’t we say, “Well, yes, I do have a problem with anger, or gossip, or swearing,

or impure thoughts, or substance abuse, or pornography—but that's just one little bad habit! I mean, everybody needs one small vice, don't we?"

No! God says that when we accommodate ourselves to these "little things" and compromise with sin, they will eventually defeat us and destroy us. We cannot afford anything less than total victory.

Israel Spurns God and Serves Baal and the Ashtoreths

Now look at the next step in the process of decline and defeat. In chapter 2 we see God's grace as He warns Israel about the results of failure:

The angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bokim and said, "I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land that I swore to give to your forefathers. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars.' Yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this? Now therefore I tell you that I will not drive them out before you; they will be thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you" (2:1-3).

What did Israel do in response?

The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. They forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the Lord to anger (2:11-12).

The next step was open idolatry. The

Baals and the Ashtoreths were the gods of the Canaanite tribes. Baal was a male fertility god, Ashtoreth a female fertility god. The Israelites didn't intend to do wrong—at first. They knew that God had commanded them not to bow down before any idols. They knew the Ten Commandments. But they began by compromising with evil, by allowing idolaters to coexist with them in the land God had given them. But soon they were doing the unthinkable: partaking in the pagan practices of the ungodly Canaanites.

How did this happen? The Israelites had been farmers in Egypt, and they irrigated their crops; so they weren't used to dry-land farming. After forty years of wandering, they didn't really know how to farm anymore, especially in an arid land without irrigation, and their crops came up



Wikimedia Commons

Baal idol

poor and scraggly. The Israelites saw the lush grain fields of the Canaanites and asked for advice.

The Canaanites said their abundant crops were a blessing from the fertility gods that they worshiped and they invited the Israelites to adapt to their ways. Have you ever experienced cultural pressures such as those faced by the Israelites? “If you want to get ahead in this company, you’ll have to play the game our way. Come on! Everybody cheats a little! Everybody plays dirty in order to win! If you expect to be one of us, you’ll have to adapt to our ways.”

So the Israelites sank to the level of the people they were commanded to destroy. The Canaanites taught the Israelites how to plant their crops and fertilize the soil, as well as the proper way to sacrifice to their demon gods. The following spring—sure enough!—they found that the crops were wonderful. The Israelites thought, “There must be something to these fertility gods. We’d better worship these gods after all.” They forsook the God of Israel and bowed down to the Baals and Ashtoreths.

Though the Scriptures don’t record all the obscene details about the Baals and Ashtoreths, history tells us that these were Canaanite sex deities. The worship of these gods involved more than merely bowing down before stone idols. It also meant engaging in obscene sexual practices. So as the Israelites engaged in idolatry, they also descended into indescribable sexual immorality.

God’s Anger and Grace

The next step in the cycle is the re-injection of God’s grace. God in His arresting

grace puts obstacle after obstacle in the path of the people, trying to warn them about the consequences of their disobedience and depravity. In chapter 2, we see how God dealt with their disobedience:

They forsook [the Lord] and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. In his anger against Israel the LORD handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the LORD was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress (2:13–15).

Have you ever had the Lord’s hand against you? What you thought you were doing in sincerity was so opposed to His will for your life that you discovered His hand was against you—not to hurt you, but to save you from your own foolish error. This is what Israel discovered: Nothing seemed to work out right. They found themselves in bondage. One after another of the tribes around them was allowed to rule over them. These tribes came in and made slaves of them, year after year.

Finally, God’s grace comes to deliver them:

The LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. Yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them. Unlike their fathers, they quickly turned from the way in which their fathers had walked, the way of obedience to the LORD’s commands. Whenever the LORD raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived (2:16–18).

That's why this book is called Judges. Over and over, this pattern is repeated. God raised up judge after judge—twelve judges altogether, eleven men and one woman, each representing God's intervening grace. The twelve judges are as follows:

- **Othniel** (3:9–11). He defeated the king of Aram and brought forty years of peace to Israel.
- **Ehud** (3:12–29). He delivered Israel from bondage to the Moabites.
- **Shamgar** (3:31). He repelled a Philistine invasion, killing six hundred enemy soldiers armed only with an ox goad.
- **Deborah** (4–5). She rallied Israel against Jabin, king of Canaan, and his military commander Sisera, bringing forty years of peace to Israel. The inclusion of Deborah in the list of Judges indicates another instance in which the Bible elevates the status of women, in contrast to the low estate of women throughout the Middle East, even to this day.
- **Gideon** (6–8). He obeyed God, paring his army down from thirty-two thousand men to a mere three hundred, with which he defeated the vastly superior forces of the Midianites by the power of God alone.
- **Tola** (of whom little is known).
- **Jair** (of whom little is known).
- **Jephthah** (11:1–12:7). He delivered Israel by defeating the Ammonites—but tragically, Jephthah made a rash and unnecessary vow to the Lord which required him to sacrifice his only daughter.
- **Ibzan** (of whom little is known).
- **Elon** (of whom little is known).
- **Abdon** (of whom little is known).

• **Samson** (13–16). The most famous of the judges, Samson wreaked havoc among the Philistines. Armed only with a donkey's jawbone, he killed a thousand Philistine soldiers. Samson foolishly gave the secret of his strength to the Philistine spy Delilah. She betrayed him, and the Philistines blinded him and enslaved him in Gaza. In the end, Samson prayed for strength, then pulled down the pillars of a Philistine temple, collapsing the structure and killing himself and the Philistine rulers.

(It's worth noting that two men in the books of Samuel—Eli, the high priest of Shiloh, and the prophet Samuel himself—also served as judges in Israel, even though they are not spoken of in the book of Judges.)

Through these twelve judges, God repeatedly tries to save the people from their folly and disobedience. Israel's perpetual folly is demonstrated by these tragic words:

When the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways (2:19).

So the book of Judges records the relentless decline of the people of Israel. The great lesson of Judges is that we must take God seriously, and we must take our enemy seriously. Jesus came to *save us from our sins*, not to help us accommodate ourselves to sin. He has come to drive those sinful habits out of us. If we do not take God seriously about these so-called “little things,” then step-by-step we will gradually move away from His grace and bring about our own destruction.

We sometimes hear the story of an outstanding man or woman of God who suddenly, unexpectedly experiences a moral “fall.” A scandal erupts, and everyone who hears of it says, “How could this happen so suddenly? What caused such an abrupt change in this person?” But this was not a sudden “fall.” It was a long and gradual slide involving moral compromise, secret habits, and “little” sins. They took their toll, day by day, until a major moral collapse became inevitable.

It’s important to remember, as you read through Judges, that some of these judges were deeply flawed human beings. Some of their actions serve as warnings, not role models. Samson, for example, behaves more like a thickheaded “thud-and-blunder” barbarian than a true man of God. He marries a Philistine woman in violation of God’s commands and his parents’ advice, he kills Philistines out of sheer self-centered revenge when he feels they have insulted him, he visits a prostitute in Gaza, and he falls in love with Delilah, giving her the secret of his strength even when he knows she is planning to betray him.

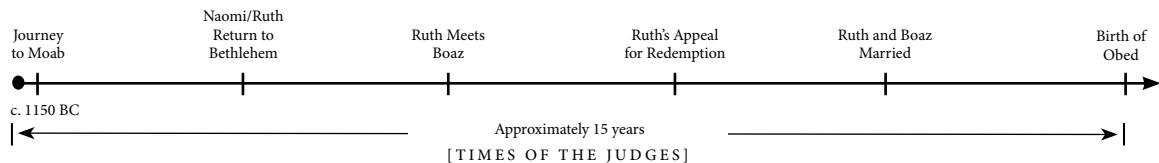
Jephthah is another judge who serves as a warning, not a role model. He swears a rash vow to sacrifice the first creature or person who comes out of his house after God gives him victory over the Ammonites. In all of Scripture, God never demands a human sacrifice, other than His own Son. Even when God tested Abraham, commanding him to sacrifice Isaac, God ultimately spared Isaac and provided a ram as a substitute. So Jephthah has made this vow out of his own foolish self-will. When he returns home from

the war, his own beloved daughter runs out of the house. Bound by his vow, Jephthah feels he must kill his own daughter. Without question, this is a horrifying story.

What many people miss, however, is the sweet spirit of Jephthah’s daughter. After a two-month grace period during which she goes to the mountains to mourn the life she will never live, she returns and willingly surrenders herself to be sacrificed by Jephthah. I believe that Jephthah’s pure and virginal daughter is yet another Old Testament symbol of Christ. As a virgin, she represents the sinless perfection of Christ, our sacrifice. While Jephthah’s vow is foolish and disgusting, his daughter’s self-sacrifice is beautiful and Christlike.

We must remember, as we read through this book, that Judges describes a pattern of defeat that repeats again and again. The key principle of Judges is stated twice, in 17:6 and 21:25: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit”—or as the King James Version renders that last phrase, “every man did that which was right in his own eyes.” When we live by our own human will, by our own foolish “wisdom,” we doom ourselves to defeat. That is the message—and the warning—of the book of Judges.

Listen to the message of Judges. Read the book carefully. Listen to God speaking through these stories. He’s warning you—but He is also calling to you in love. The book of Judges is a mirror in which we see ourselves more clearly. May the image in the mirror grow less and less like that of disobedient Israel—and more and more like that of Christ.

The Romance of Redemption

When Benjamin Franklin was ambassador to France, he occasionally attended the Infidels Club, a group of intellectuals who spent most of their time together reading and discussing literary masterpieces. Like so many intellectual snobs, the members of this group were largely atheists and agnostics who sneered at the Bible.

On one occasion, Franklin brought in a book and read it before the group. When he was finished, the other members were unanimous in their praise. They said it was one of the most beautiful stories they had ever heard and demanded that he tell them where he had run across this remarkable literary masterpiece. It was his delight to tell them that the story was from a book they all loudly regarded with scorn. Franklin had simply changed the names in the story so that they would not recognize it as a book in the Bible!

The book of Ruth is certainly a literary masterpiece and a touching romance. I wonder how it would be featured in some of our romance magazines today. I can picture the headline: "Woman Finds Happiness in the Arms of a Second Husband." It's a book that inflames the

imagination because it is entwined with the captivating theme of love, devotion, and true romance.

Yet the events in this beautiful book take place against the ugly backdrop of the era of Judges. Although Ruth is a beautiful story in itself, it is the story behind the story—its meaning and significance—that makes this book so valuable for our lives. The book of Ruth is one of those beautiful Old Testament pictures that God designed to illustrate the truths of the Christian faith, as found in the New Testament. It illustrates the romance of redemption.

Naomi: A Woman Bereft

The book of Ruth begins with an introduction to its key characters:

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

The goal of this chapter is to reveal the beauty and romance of the love story between Ruth and Boaz, and also to delve into the deeper symbolic meaning of this story for our lives today. The story of Ruth's redemption by Boaz, the kinsman-redeemer, parallels the story of our redemption by our kinsman-redeemer, Jesus the Messiah.

Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband (1:1-5).

Elimelech, whose name means “my God is King,” leaves the town of Bethlehem with his wife, Naomi, whose name means “pleasant.” Because of famine in the region, they take their two sons, Mahlon and Kilion, and move to the land of Moab. Note that in

Bethlehem—the name of which means “the House of Bread”—there was no bread, only famine. The book of Leviticus has already told us that famine indicates a low level of spiritual vitality within a land.

In Moab, Elimelech died and his two sons, Mahlon and Kilion, married women of Moab, Orpah and Ruth. After ten years, the two sons also died and Naomi was left with her two daughters-in-law.

Ruth: A Devoted Daughter-in-Law

After the famine was over, Naomi expressed her plans to return to Bethlehem, but she encouraged her two Moabite daughters-in-law to remain in Moab and remarry there. Orpah was unwilling to leave her home for an uncertain life in Palestine, and she decided to take Naomi’s advice to stay in Moab. But Ruth refused to stay in Moab and, in a plea of enduring beauty,



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Painting of Ruth gleaning in the fields

declared her determination to identify with Naomi's land, people, and faith.

The source of Ruth's devotion and determination is seen in her statement in 1:16: "Your God [shall be] my God." This clearly represents her willingness to leave the idols of Moab for the worship of the living God of Israel.

Boaz: A Man of Character

So Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest with a very uncertain future before them. The providing and protecting hand of the Lord is apparent in the statement that Ruth went into the fields to glean and "found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz" (Ruth 2:3). This man, a close relative of Elimelech, Naomi's husband, appears in the story as a man of unusual character and sensitivity.

This is a wonderful story of boy meets girl, the kind of romantic story that never goes out of style. Ruth was gleaning in the field and Boaz saw her. He said to his workmen, "Whose young woman is that?" They told him, and Boaz went down to meet Ruth. Now the text doesn't go into detail about their meeting, but if you use your sanctified imagination, you can see that it must have been a bit awkward at first.

She is working away, picking up the grain here and there, and along comes this handsome fellow—evidently a wealthy man by his clothes. She drops her eyes shyly and he shifts nervously from one foot to the other, clearing his throat. Finally, he says, "Shalom, peace." She looks up and says, "Shalom." He goes on to commend her for her kindness to her mother-in-law and especially for her faith in Jehovah, the God of Israel.

Obviously attracted to the beautiful Moabite woman, yet acting always with restraint and dignity, Boaz instructs his workmen to deliberately leave grain in the field for Ruth to glean. To her amazement, Ruth discovers that these workmen are the sloppiest workmen in Israel! When she returns to Naomi in the evening with an unexpected abundance, she learns from her mother-in-law that Boaz is a potential kinsman-redeemer.

We previously saw that the law of the kinsman-redeemer was set forth in Deuteronomy:

If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel (Deut. 25:5-6).

This law (in which the brother of a man who dies without children is obligated to marry the widow) is called “levirate marriage.” The brother who marries the widow is called a kinsman-redeemer.

The kinsman-redeemer is a symbolic type of the coming Messiah. The surviving brother is the kinsman (blood relative) who redeems the bride of the dead brother. The kinsman pays the price of the inheritance of the deceased man, just as Jesus paid the price for our redemption when we were dead in our sins. The kinsman marries the widow of the deceased man, just as Christ became the husband of His bride, the church.

That is the background of Naomi’s

instruction to Ruth as Ruth continues gleaning in the barley and wheat fields of Boaz for approximately three months.

A Plan of Redemption

At the end of the harvest, after the winnowing of the grain, Naomi seizes the initiative. Invoking the rights of her kinship with Boaz, Naomi advises Ruth of a plan for her redemption. This is what Ruth does: She comes to the sleeping Boaz by night and lies at his feet. In doing so, Ruth follows an ancient custom in Israel by which she symbolically asks Boaz to fulfill the responsibility of a kinsman to marry her and raise up heirs to the deceased Elimelech.

Ruth does this so modestly that Boaz commends her for her action. Having fallen in love with her, Boaz eagerly consents to take on the responsibility. He has evidently hoped such a situation would occur, for he immediately informs Ruth that a closer kinsman is available and his claim must be settled first.

In the morning, Boaz sends Ruth back to Naomi with a generous gift of six measures of barley, and Naomi wisely tells Ruth that the matter will be settled that day. That same morning, Boaz takes his seat at the city gate where the elders gather for the settling of lawsuits and the judging of disputes. When the closer kinsman comes by, Boaz requests an informal court. When all are seated, he presents his case to the other relative.

Boaz declares that Naomi wants to sell a piece of land that belonged to Elimelech, but if she does so, the next of kin will be

responsible to care for the family, since they now would have no property. Seeing the possibility of obtaining a choice piece of property, the first kinsman declares his willingness to assume this responsibility. That's when Boaz played his trump card.

Boaz informs the other kinsman that the land has a marriage encumbrance. According to custom, if he buys the property, he must marry the woman who legally encumbers the property. This changes the picture for the first kinsman, since the land would then not belong to him but to any children resulting from his union with Ruth. He decides he would be better off without the property, so he chooses not to take it.

To solemnify his decision, in the colorful custom of the East, the man removes his right shoe and hands it to Boaz in the presence of witnesses. The shoe symbolizes his right as owner to set foot upon the land. This right is now transferred to Boaz, and he is now free to take Ruth as his wife.

The account closes with the birth of a son to Boaz and Ruth. This son, named Obed, brings great joy to the heart of his grandmother, Naomi. He grows up to become

the father of Jesse, and the grandfather of David, Israel's mightiest king.

The beautiful story of Ruth not only provides a link between the days of the judges and the subsequent reign of David, but it symbolizes (through the figure of Boaz) how Christ, our great Kinsman-Redeemer, overcomes the obstacle of our birth in Adam. It shows how Christ takes us to Himself in a union that will produce the fruit of the Spirit, to the honor and glory of God.

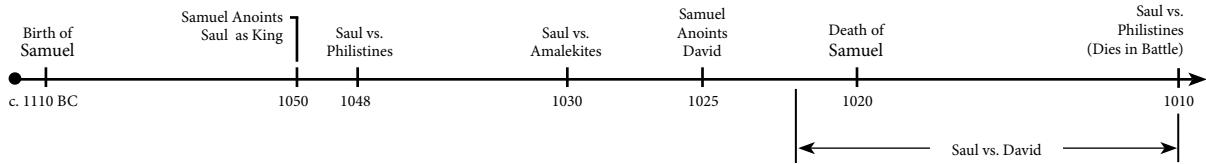
The genealogy of the Lord Jesus, as recorded in Matthew, points back to these events in the book of Ruth:

Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab,

Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth,

*Obed the father of Jesse,
and Jesse the father of King David
(Matt. 1:5–6).*

The faithfulness of Ruth, and her depiction as a symbolic type of the church, the bride of Christ, earned her a significant and honored place in the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah.

The Flesh and the Spirit

First Samuel records the story of two men, Saul and David, who symbolize two principles at work in the heart of every Christian seeking to walk with God: the *principle of the flesh* and the *principle of faith*. Saul is a man of the flesh, a carnal believer. David is a man of faith, a spiritual believer.

In 1 Samuel, we see how these two principles, the principle of flesh and the principle of faith, come into dramatic conflict in our lives. We see in Saul the ruin caused by the will that is set on the flesh. In David, we see the blessings that result from a mind set on the Spirit. As Romans 8:6 tells us, “The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace.”

Both men are kings, illustrating the supremacy of the will in human life. When God created the human race, He gave us a supreme free will. Even the Spirit of God does not violate it. If we want to say “No” to God, we can. We rule over the kingdom of our lives, just as Saul and David ruled over their kingdoms.

Even though the book of Samuel is primarily about Saul and David, it opens with the story of the man who gives his

name to the book, Samuel. The prophet Samuel is the human expression of God’s voice to both Saul and David. The stories of these three men—Samuel, Saul, and David—mark the three divisions of the book. The first seven chapters give us the life of Samuel, chapters 8 through 15 present King Saul, the man of the flesh, and chapters 16 through 31, concern David, the man of faith, who symbolizes the mind that is set on the Spirit.

Samuel: The Judge-Prophet

Samuel was the last of the judges and the first of the prophets. The events of this book take place after Israel has passed through some three hundred years of the rule of the judges. Samuel is God’s chosen instrument to close the era of the judges and introduce the era of the prophets and the monarchy.

The book opens with the story of a

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter explores the two central themes found in the book of 1 Samuel, the principle of the flesh and the principle of faith. The central lesson of 1 Samuel is that the lives of those who rely on the flesh will end in tragedy, but God will use the lives of those who live by faith in mighty ways.

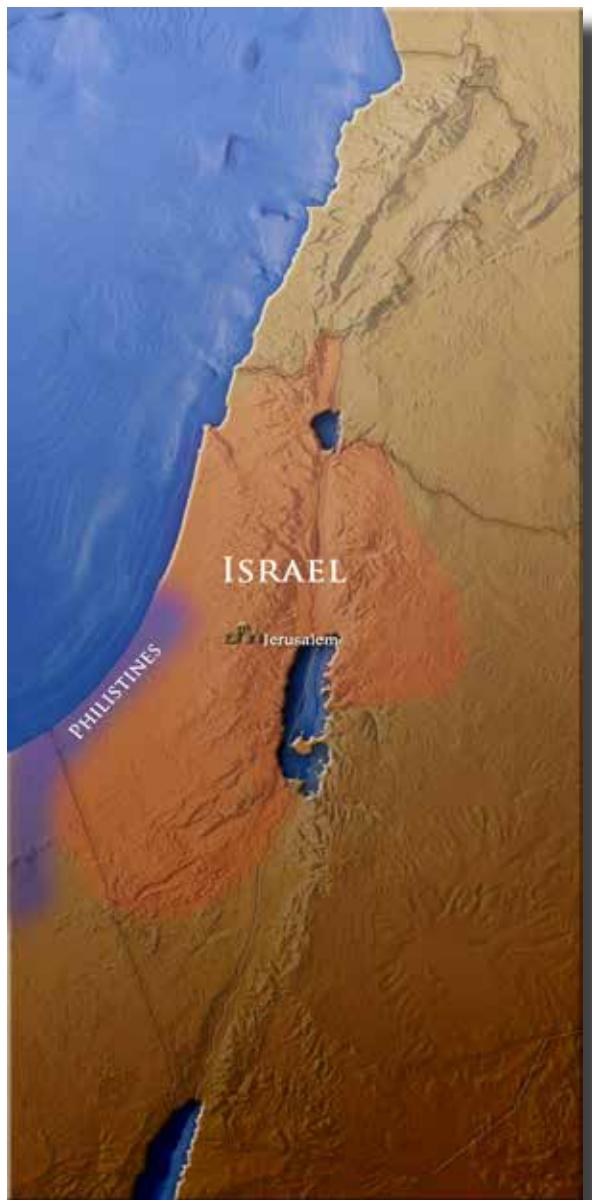
barren woman, Hannah, one of two wives of a man named Elkanah. The other wife had borne Elkanah numerous children, and she taunted and mocked Hannah in her barrenness. Hannah's barrenness is symbolic of the spiritual state of Israel at this time. God's chosen people had fallen into a state

of spiritual infertility and barrenness. The priesthood, which God had established along with the tabernacle and the Levitical law, was disintegrating. The cause for this failure is found in the song Hannah sings after her prayer is answered and she gives birth to a boy, Samuel. In her song, Hannah announces:

"Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance, for the LORD is a God who knows, and by him deeds are weighed. The bows of the warriors are broken, but those who stumbled are armed with strength" (2:3-4).

Hannah goes on to sing that God exalts the lowly and casts down the proud. In this book we see the eternal conflict between the proud, self-sufficient heart and the humble spirit that depends on God. This was Israel's problem. The priesthood was failing not because of any flaw in the priestly institution (which God established to symbolize the coming ministry of Jesus the Messiah). Rather, the priesthood was failing because the people refused to bow before the Lord. They refused to come for cleansing. They refused to turn from idolatry. As a result, the priesthood was about to pass away as an effective means of mediation between God and His people.

At this point we have the account of Samuel's birth and childhood. When Samuel was just a boy, he was brought to the temple and dedicated to God. He becomes the voice of God to Eli the priest and receives a message of judgment. Later Samuel becomes the voice of God to the nation—and especially to the two kings, Saul and David.



The Capture of the Ark and the Decline of the Nation

The first seven chapters tell the story of Israel's decline. The most obvious mark of Israel's decline is the story of the ark of the covenant in chapters 3 through 6. The ark is the gilded chest containing the two tablets of the Law, which were inscribed by the finger of God on Mount Sinai. The ark was carried by the Israelites during their exodus in the wilderness, during their crossing of the Jordan, and during the conquest of Jericho. It has always represented God's presence among the Israelites, giving them the victory over their enemies.

But in 1 Samuel 4, the Philistines defeat the Israelites in battle and captured the ark of the covenant. Upon hearing of the capture of the ark, Eli—the Israelite priest and judge who trained young Samuel—fell and died. His priesthood was taken from him because he did not discipline his sons. And when Eli's grandson was born, his mother named him Ichabod, meaning “the glory has departed,” a reference to the loss of the ark.

The Philistines held the ark for seven months, taking it to several different sites. Wherever the Philistines set the ark, calamity befell them. The worst misfortune took place in the city of Ashdod. The Philistines placed the ark in the temple of their grotesque fish-god Dagon, but the next morning, the statue of Dagon lay facedown before the ark. The Philistines put the image of Dagon upright once more—but the next morning the image was again prostrate before the ark—this time in pieces. The fish-god could not stand in the presence of the ark.

The people also suffered outbreaks of

tumors or boils on their bodies and rats in their streets. The Philistines realized that they couldn't get away with trying to keep the ark of God in their own temple. So, after holding the ark for seven months, the Philistines returned it to Israel.

The ark was set in the field of Joshua the Beth-shemite. Out of curiosity, the men of Beth-shemesh looked into the ark—and were punished for their blasphemy. Seventy of them were struck down by the Lord. So, in chapter 7, the ark was taken to the house of Abinadab, whose son Eleazar was consecrated as the caretaker of the ark. It remained in the town of Kiriath Jearim, about seven miles west of Jerusalem, for the next twenty years.

In the course of these events, Israel reached one of the lowest ebbs in its national history.

Saul: Israel's First King—A Man of the Flesh

Next, we read about the entrance of King Saul—God's response to the demand of the people that they have a king like other nations:

All the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, “You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have” (1 Samuel 8:4–5).

Here we find the principle of the flesh at work in the nation of Israel. The fleshly, worldly mindset of the people is clearly at work to destroy Israel's fellowship with God and the people's enjoyment of His blessing. They rejected the authority of God in favor

of having a human king—the same kind of authority as all the other nations. In other words, the desire of the flesh is to live in a manner accepted by the world, to conduct its business as the rest of the world does.

You may have seen this principle at work in your church, where people may have wanted to interject worldly business principles into the conduct of the church rather than the principles of Scripture. Instead of relying on the leadership of the Holy Spirit, we often prefer to appoint a committee to devise a program; then we ask God to bless our program and make it work. The problem is that it is our fleshly program, not God's spiritual program.

Someone has said, "Be careful what you ask for—you may get it." Here is a case that proves the saying true: Israel prays for a human king and God gives them one. Samuel was displeased when the people asked for a king, because he knew that this was not God's plan for Israel. When Samuel prayed to the Lord, the Lord replied:

"Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will do" (8:7-9).

This is always God's way. If we want something badly enough, He will usually give it to us—even if it is not His perfect will for our lives. The catch is that we must also be ready to face the consequences.

A true story: An eight-year-old child once begged her father for new skates. "The skates I have are too slow!" she said. "All the other kids have fast new ball-bearing skates!" Her father resisted and resisted, but the little girl kept begging for faster skates. She even pinned notes to his pillow at night: "Daddy, pretty please with sugar on top, buy me some new ball-bearing skates? Please! Please! Please!"

Finally, the father relented and bought her the new skates. The child gleefully put on the skates, zoomed out onto the sidewalk, and disappeared around the corner. The father heard a cry, followed by a sickening clatter. He ran around the corner and found his daughter on the sidewalk, unconscious. She had slipped on the faster skates and hit her head. The father rushed her to the hospital, but she died without ever regaining consciousness.

Sometimes we beg God for "ball-bearing skates" in our own lives. We think that God is unkind to say "No" to our repeated prayers. But sometimes a "No" answer is God's blessing to us—for if we continue to beg Him and He finally says "Yes," we may find ourselves enduring more tragedy and heartbreak than we ever imagined. That's the situation of the Israelites when God yielded to their demands for a king.

The story of Saul is the story of a young man who, like so many young people today, lived by the principle of the flesh, not the principle of faith. He did what *he* wanted to do, disregarding God's plan for his life. Young Saul was busy with his father in the donkey business. How did God reach Saul? He went into the donkey business Himself! He caused

Saul's donkeys to stray, forcing Saul to set out in search of the donkeys. After a fruitless search, Saul reached the town where Samuel lived.

In chapter 9, Saul was about to give up and go back home when his servant said, "Look, in this town there is a man of God. . . . Let's go there now. Perhaps he will tell us what way to take" (9:6). Saul was not anxious to do this. In fact, he wanted to stay as far from the prophet as possible, because prophets were a disturbing sort of people. Saul just wanted to go home. But the servant prevailed on him to see Samuel—and to Saul's amazement, Samuel was expecting him.

God had told Samuel the day before to expect a visit from a young man named Saul. Samuel had a great dinner prepared for Saul and thirty invited guests. Saul was surprised to learn that he was the guest of honor. Those troublesome donkeys had gotten him into this and he wanted to get out of it as fast as possible.

Samuel took him aside as they finished the dinner and announced to him a stunning thing: "Has not the LORD anointed you leader over his inheritance?" (10:1).

Saul had been out looking for donkeys, but he ended up as the king of Israel. He didn't even want the job! In fact, when Saul was on his way home, he encountered his uncle, who asked what had been happening in his life. Saul said he had gone out looking for the donkeys but had run into Samuel, who told him that the donkeys were safe at home.

Obviously, Samuel had told Saul a lot more than that. I doubt that it just slipped Saul's mind that Samuel had anointed and commissioned him as king of Israel—but he

didn't say a word about that. Saul was not interested in what God wanted him to do, unless he could use God for his own purposes.

The prophet Samuel's next step was to announce to Israel that God had heard their plea and would give them a king. Samuel called the people together to cast lots for the choice of a king. A lot was cast first to see from which tribe God would call the king: It was the tribe of Benjamin. Then which family group: It was the family of Kish. Finally, Saul was selected.

The word went out, "Has the man come here yet?" No one could find him. Finally, at the Lord's direction, they found him hiding among the baggage—a rather unlikely place to find a king.

Why did Saul hide? Was he shy? No, Saul hid because he didn't want to be inconvenienced by God's plan for his life. Saul wanted to live his life his own way and get away from God's call. Eventually, Saul was crowned king—and he looked the very picture of a king. He stood head and shoulders above everyone else, handsome as could be, a wise young man in many ways, and just.

But trouble was brewing as the Ammonites were amassing for war. Saul sent word to the people of Israel to come together. Thirty-six thousand men responded. They marched north and utterly destroyed the Ammonites in a great victory. Saul began to feel that serving God might be a good thing after all. Maybe he could use his new appointment for his own glory and advancement.

Next, Saul went to war against the Philistines, who aren't merely a tribe but the ancient equivalent of a superpower—heavily armed and fierce. The Philistines gathered

a force of thirty thousand iron chariots, six thousand horsemen, and an army too vast to number. When Saul saw the great horde of people advancing, he wondered if being king of Israel was such a great job after all.

Saul sent out word for more volunteers, just as he had when the Ammonites threatened; then he waited. And he waited. Where was the support? Where were the eager young soldiers?

Finally, a thousand men showed up, and then another thousand, and then another thousand. And that was it. No more came. He compared this pitiful force of three thousand soldiers with the Philistines' tremendous force. Then he sent for the prophet Samuel. In typical fashion, the man of the flesh depends upon his own resources until he gets into trouble; then he calls upon the Lord.

But God was ahead of Saul as usual, and Samuel delayed in coming. While Saul waited for Samuel to arrive, his soldiers began to slip away one by one and return home. His army dwindled from three thousand to two thousand to one thousand and finally to only six hundred men. By this time, Saul was getting desperate.

When Samuel had not come after five or six days, Saul took it upon himself to offer a burnt offering to the Lord. The moment he finished, Samuel came walking up. We read:

"What have you done?" asked Samuel.

Saul replied, "When I saw that the men were scattering, and that you did not come at the set time, and that the Philistines were assembling at Micmash, I thought, 'Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the LORD's favor.' So I felt compelled to offer the burnt offering."

"You acted foolishly," Samuel said. "You have not kept the command the LORD your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people, because you have not kept the LORD's command" (13:11-14).

Samuel prophesied that Saul's kingdom would be taken from him. Reading on, we find that God gave a great victory through Jonathan's faith and delivered the people from the vast horde of Philistines.

When at last the battle was won, Saul built an altar. It is the first altar that we are specifically told he built. Here is a man who thinks that the outward marks of faith are all that are necessary. Sadly, too many believe that way today. "If I go through the external rituals," they think, "if I belong to a church, recite the creed, sing the hymns, then God will be satisfied." That is the thinking of the flesh.

But God says that when you act on that basis, your autonomy is lost. You no longer have authority in your own kingdom. You become the slave of an inexorable force that will grind you under its heel and bring you into subjection. This is what every man or woman who lives by the flesh ultimately discovers (see Rom. 6:16).

After Saul builds an altar in his own self-will, God brings him to his knees and gives him one last chance to live by faith instead of by the flesh. At the beginning of 1 Samuel 15, we read:

Samuel said to Saul, "I am the one the LORD sent to anoint you king over his people Israel;

so listen now to the message from the LORD. This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt. Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.’”

This was Saul's last chance, because if Saul obeyed this command, he would demonstrate that he was ready to allow the Spirit to do His work against the flesh. In New Testament terms, God was giving Saul a chance to allow God to crucify the flesh and put it to death. The Amalekites are a picture throughout Scripture of the principle of the flesh that opposes the things of God.



Painting depicting defeat of Agag, king of the Amalekites

They were a foreign tribe about whom Moses said to Israel, “The L will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation” (Ex. 17:16). God gave Saul this opportunity to carry out His will and obliterate the Amalekites, but what did Saul choose to do?

Then Saul attacked the Amalekites all the way from Havilah to Shur, to the east of Egypt. He took Agag king of the Amalekites alive, and all his people he totally destroyed with the sword. But Saul and the army spared Agag and the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs—everything that was good. These they were unwilling to destroy completely, but everything that was despised and weak they totally destroyed (15:7–9).

Note that line: “everything that was despised and weak they totally destroyed.” Despised and weak in whose eyes? I wonder if it wasn't the donkeys that Saul wanted to save. After all, he appreciated farm animals. He probably reasoned, “Why should we destroy these perfectly good animals?” He presumed to find something good in what God had already condemned as useless.

In the New Testament, Paul wrote that we must put off the old nature with its ways of jealousy, perverseness, bitterness, envy, anger, intemperance, selfishness, and the like (Col. 3:9). The mind of the spirit makes no compromise with such things. But the mind of the flesh rationalizes, “Oh, some of this is worth keeping. I can hardly be a real personality if I don't have a hot temper and tell people off once in a while.” So we presume to find good in what God has declared bad.

So Samuel came to Saul, and Saul

told him, “I have carried out the LORD’s instructions” (15:13).

But Samuel said, “What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear” (v. 14)?

Saul answered, “The soldiers brought them from the Amalekites; they spared the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to the LORD your God, but we totally destroyed the rest” (1 Sam. 15:15). That is a common excuse, isn’t it? We keep something for ourselves, and we pretend to dedicate it to God! The exchange between Samuel and Saul is very instructive for us today:

[Samuel said], “Why did you not obey the LORD?” . . .

“But I did obey the LORD,” Saul said. . .

Samuel replied: “Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king” (15:19–23).

No one can walk in authority and freedom as God intended while rejecting the authority of God’s Spirit. That is the lesson of the tragic story of Saul—the man of the flesh.

David, Israel’s Second King—The Man of Faith

The story of David, starting in chapter 16, is the story of a man after God’s own heart. We can reap tremendous lessons from the account of David, his rejection, and his exile. He was chosen from the eight sons of

Jesse. The seven eldest sons passed before Samuel and each one looked—from a human perspective—like a king in the making. But each time, God said through Samuel, “The LORD has not chosen this one.”

At last came the youngest and the skinniest one of all: David. God put His seal upon him. God’s choice was not according to outward appearance, but instead He looked at David’s heart.

Unlike Saul, David was not set on the throne immediately, but was tested and proved by struggle and adversity. This is the principle God often follows with those who learn to walk by faith. They are put through a time of obscurity and testing. Everything seems to go against them until at last they recognize the great principle by which God’s activity is always carried on: Human beings can do nothing in their own strength but only in complete dependence upon the power of the indwelling God.

This is the lesson David learned even as a shepherd boy, so that he could say, “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul” (Ps. 23:1–3).

The most famous of David’s various tests was his confrontation with the Philistine giant Goliath. Israel was held in the grip of fear as Goliath paraded up and down in the no-man’s land between the armies. He taunted the Israelites, but no one dared to face him.

When little David came from his flocks to bring food to his brothers, he found the camp of Israel plunged in gloom and despair. He asked, “Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living

God?" (1 Sam. 17:26). That is always the outlook of faith. Those who trust in God are never shaken by circumstances.

Saul receives word about this young man in their midst and asks David what he wants to do. David says, "Your servant will go and fight him." Saul, to be helpful, puts his armor on David. Now Saul was about one and a half feet taller than David, and the armor on the young lad only weighed him down. David couldn't even take a step. Finally he said, "I cannot go in these . . . because I am not used to them." David then went down to the brook and got five smooth stones. Why five? A little later, in 2 Samuel, you will read that Goliath had four brothers. David took five stones because he was prepared to take on the whole family!

David went out with his sling in his hand, let fly, and Goliath fell to the ground with a stone lodged between his eyes. Then David took Goliath's own sword and cut off his head. This scene reminds us of Hebrews 2:14, which tells us that by His own death the Lord Jesus slew him who had the power of death, the Devil. So David symbolizes Christ—and the believer who allows Jesus Christ to live His life through him or her.

This event is followed by Saul's jealousy of David. From chapter 18 on we have the story of Saul's growing persecution of David—an illustration of the principle that Paul declares in Galatians: "At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now" (Gal. 4:29).

So Saul persecuted David and tried to kill him, so David went into exile. It was during this time that David wrote so many of the

psalms, those wonderful songs that speak of God's faithfulness in the midst of distressing and depressing conditions.

In chapters 21 and 22, we find God's abundant provision for David even in his exile. God provides David with the holy bread of the tabernacle to sustain him. This bread represented the presence of God and symbolized God's deliverance for everyone who looks to Him while undergoing intense stress. To all such people, God gives the hidden bread, the bread from the very table of the Lord Himself. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35), and, "I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me" (John 6:57).

In his exile, David the king had a prophet, Gad, and a priest, Abiathar. The resources of these men of God were available to David even though he was hunted like a wild animal. Even greater resources are available to us in our own times of trouble, because we have available to us all the resources of the Lord Jesus Christ (our Prophet, our Priest, and our King).

Twice during this exile period David had the opportunity to kill Saul—and twice David spared Saul. In a remarkable spirit of faith, David waited for God to work out his problems.

The end of 1 Samuel brings us to the end of the man of the flesh—Saul. Out of a sense of desperation, Saul begins to mentally and spiritually crumble. He descends into witchcraft in an effort to determine the mind of the Lord after the Spirit of God had departed from him. Though witchcraft was forbidden by God, Saul visited the witch of Endor and tried to get her to summon the spirit of Samuel.

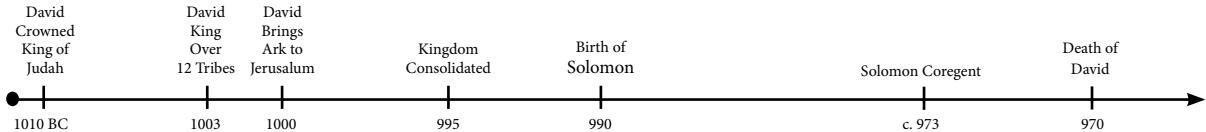
The witch probably intended to fool Saul with some sort of fraudulent “manifestation.” But God overruled the witch’s plans and instead of sending an impersonating spirit, as the witch expected, He sent the actual spirit of the prophet Samuel. The spirit of Samuel predicted Saul’s doom on the field of battle the next day.

True to the prophecy, Saul and his son Jonathan, David’s bosom friend, were slain. Saul’s death illustrates Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 3 concerning the works of the fleshly or carnal believer—the Christian who

relies on the flesh rather than faith in the Spirit of God. Paul wrote: “If it [*a man’s work*] is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames” (1 Cor. 3:15).

So Saul passes out of history and into eternity—a man whose earthly life and opportunities for serving God are largely wasted. It is an instructive tragedy for us all.

But there are more tales of both glory and tragedy ahead of us. The story of King David continues in the second book of Samuel.

The Story of David

A magazine reporter once visited a wealthy rancher. “I’d like to do a magazine story on your career as a sheep rancher,” said the reporter. “I’ve heard that yours is a true rags-to-riches tale, and I’d like to share the secret of your success with my readers.”

“Fine,” said the rancher. “I’m happy to tell you all about it.”

“Well, I understand you own several hundred thousand sheep. Your ranch covers half the county and your net worth is in the millions. Yet I hear that, twenty years ago, you started out with only one sheep.”

“Not only that,” said the rancher, “but in those days, my wife and I didn’t have a roof over our heads or a dollar to our name. So we sheared that one sheep, sold the wool, and used the money to buy another sheep.”

“Then what happened?”

“The next spring, one of our sheep gave birth to two lambs. Then we had four sheep. We sheared them, sold the wool, and used the money to buy two more sheep. That gave us a total of six sheep.”

“Then what?”

“The next spring, we had six more lambs—so now we had twelve sheep to

LEFT: Modern day Gilgal

shear. We sold the wool and bought more sheep.”

“So now we’re getting down to it—the secret of your success!”

“That’s right,” drawled the rancher. “The next year—”

“I know! I know!” the reporter interrupted. “You sold more wool and bought more sheep!”

“Nope,” said the rancher. “That was the year my father-in-law died and left us fifty million dollars.”

King David got his start in much the same way. He began with a few sheep—and suddenly, unexpectedly, God exalted him and made him the king over Israel, a man of extraordinary wealth and power. If the story of David were made into a TV miniseries, the episode covering 1 Samuel 16 to 31 might be called “King David: The Early Years.” Now, in 2 Samuel, we come to the episode we might call “King David: The Agony and the Ecstasy.”

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter explores the story of King David in the book of 2 Samuel, and uncovers the lessons to be learned from the king who sinned greatly, repented in tears, yet remained “a man after God’s own heart.”

Outline of 2 Samuel

The book of 2 Samuel falls into four simple divisions:

(1) Chapters 1 through 5 trace the road to dominion. David begins his reign as king over the tribe of Judah. Seven years later, he is crowned king over Israel's twelve tribes.

(2) Chapters 6 through 10 highlight worship and victory. These two elements always go together in God's economy and in the Christian life.

(3) Chapters 11 through 20 record David's failure and God's forgiveness.

(4) Chapters 21 through 24 close the book with an appendix setting forth some of the important lessons King David learned in the course of his reign.

The Road to Dominion

There are two ways to look at the life of David.

You may look at him as a symbolic representation of Jesus Christ—not only as the forerunner and genetic ancestor of Jesus, but also as a reflection of Jesus Christ in His millennial reign at the end of history. David was rejected and persecuted, as was Christ. During David's exile, he gathered around him men who became his leaders and generals when he became king. Thus David is a picture of Christ who also was rejected, forsaken by the world, and who secretly gathered his inner circle of leaders for the day when He would come to establish His kingdom and reign over the earth.

But David is not only a picture of Christ. He is also a picture of each individual believer, of you and me. When we read the story of David from this point of view, the lessons of

David's life come alive for us. If you look at these Old Testament books as mirrors, you will always find yourself there.

David's story symbolizes what happens in a Christian's life when he gives everything over to God. Every Christian is offered a kingdom, just as David was offered a kingdom. The kingdom is the kingdom of one's life, and it is much like the kingdom of Israel; enemies threaten it externally while temptation and folly threaten to undermine it from within. As we see how God established David as ruler over his kingdom, we will see how the Holy Spirit works in our lives to enable us to reign with Christ Jesus.

The first section opens with the death of Saul, a man of the flesh. David learns about the death of Saul and his son Jonathan from a passing Amalekite who boasts that he slew King Saul, took the crown off his head, and brought it to David (1:10). An Amalekite is a descendant of Jacob's brother Esau; as Moses prophesied, "The LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation" (Ex. 17:16).

We can regard this Amalekite's tale as a lying boast, because it differs considerably from the account of Saul's death in 1 Samuel. This man undoubtedly found the dead body of the king, plundered it, and attempted to use that plunder for his own advancement. One lesson of this story is how the flesh (symbolized by the Amalekite) can steal away our crowns and seek to glorify itself. David however honors Saul as the Lord's anointed and kills the Amalekite.

In a song of great beauty and power, David lauds Saul and Jonathan as men used by God, despite their weaknesses. The song closes

with an eloquent expression of David's deep loss at the death of his dear friend Jonathan (2 Sam. 1:26).

With Saul dead, David is free to be king. This symbolizes for us the time when we come at last to the full truth of the cross. The cross of Jesus Christ puts the old man to death and brings an end to the reign of the flesh, as symbolized by Saul. When it finally breaks upon our astonished intellect that God truly seeks to crucify the life of Adam in us and raise us with Christ, we stand alongside David: Our "inner Saul" is dead. We are free to reign over our own lives.

At first David was king over his own tribe, Judah. For seven years he lived and ruled in the city of Hebron. But while he was king over Judah, a fierce struggle raged between the house of David and the house of Saul. The old flesh dies hard. It doesn't give up easily.

Finally, in chapter 5, we read that David comes to the place where he is acknowledged king over all twelve tribes. He is free now to assume his God-given royal prerogatives over the entire land. It is a long and difficult road, but David finally arrives at the place of dominion.

Worship and Victory

Chapter 6 begins the second division of this book. Here David assumes full authority within the kingdom. As king over all twelve tribes, David's first concern is to bring the ark of God back to the center of Israel's national life. He wants the presence of God and the holiness of God to have first place in the life of the nation. King David's realization parallels the realization a committed Christian comes

to upon recognizing that Jesus has the right to be Lord over every area of life.

For twenty years, the ark has been preserved in the hilltop house of Abinadab in the town of Kiriat Jearim, about seven miles west of Jerusalem (see 1 Sam. 6:21–7:2). Here, at the beginning of 2 Samuel 6, David builds a brand new oxcart and sets the ark in the middle of it. Then he starts back with all the people rejoicing around the ark.

But then a terrible thing happens. The oxen stumble in the road, and the oxcart shakes. A man named Uzzah, walking alongside the cart, reaches out to steady the ark. The moment his hand touches the ark, the power of God strikes the man and he falls dead.

This tragedy casts a pall over the entire procession. Even David is afraid of God because of this sudden, frightening judgment against Uzzah. Why did Uzzah die? His intentions were good. He wanted to keep the ark from falling to the ground—but he had ignored God's instructions on how the ark was to be moved.

David was so sick at heart that he stopped the procession and placed the ark of God in the first house that was handy. Then he went back to Jerusalem, feeling bitter and resentful toward the Lord. This was the first lesson David had to learn as king.

In fact, it was David's fault that Uzzah had died. God had already instructed Israel through the law of Moses that only the Kohathites of the tribe of Levi were to be in charge of the ark, and they were to carry the ark on poles on their shoulders (see Deut. 10:8; Num. 7:9). The ark was not to be carried by cart or pack animal. Even those who were

in charge of the ark were forbidden to touch it (see Num. 4:15). David was so presumptuous that he assumed that God would let him ignore the law of Moses. He simply loaded the ark on an oxcart and began to move it along the road—and an innocent man died.

David had to learn that God must be served God's way, not our way. Our good intentions are never enough if we are to accomplish God's will. We must act in obedience to His commands.

I once talked with a young man who, like David, experienced a time of deep resentment toward God. He was convinced that God had called him to carry out a certain plan. He even announced to his friends what God was about to accomplish through him. But everything fell apart—and the young man was bewildered.

"I can't help feeling God is unfair," he told me. "He doesn't back up what He promises."

As we talked, it became clear that he had made some of the same errors David had made. He was presumptuous about God's will and tried to carry out God's will in his own way, rather than the way God set forth in His Word. If we want to serve God, we must sign on to His agenda and use His methods—not simply expect Him to endorse our plans. David had to learn this truth, and the death of Uzzah stands as a vivid testimony that God will never compromise His commands.

Next we read about David's desire to build a temple for God. David said to Nathan the prophet, "Here I am, living in a palace of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent" (7:2). Nathan encouraged David to go ahead with his plan.

But then God sent a message to Nathan to

say that David should not proceed because he was a man of war. Only Jesus Christ, or in Old Testament terms, someone who symbolizes Christ as the Prince of Peace, will build the temple of God among humanity.

God had chosen David to symbolically represent Jesus as the conquering king over all. But God rejected David's plan to build the temple, even though David was well-intentioned and sincere. From David's response, it seems that he learned the lesson of the death of Uzzah. David praises God and graciously accepts this disappointment. He agrees that God is right and that the temple should be built by Solomon, his son.

The rest of this section reports David's victories over Israel's enemies, the Philistines and the Ammonites. When God is in the center of David's life, when the king of Israel subjects himself to the King of the universe and His eternal program, nothing can hinder victory. All internal and external enemies are in complete subjection to the one who walks in a humble, obedient relationship with God.

Failure and Forgiveness

The next major section tells the story of David's failure and sin. Chapter 11 begins: "In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war . . ." (11:1).

In some ways, wars in ancient times were conducted in a more civilized way than at other times in history. Kings waited for good weather before sending their men out to fight. It was the spring of the year, and the Lord's agenda called for wars to be fought against the evil, idolatrous nations. It was the season for kings to go forth to battle.

So where do we find King David? The

text goes on to tell us: “David sent Joab out with the king’s men and the whole Israelite army. They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem” (11:1).

Now we see where the failure begins. David had forsaken his post. He was AWOL—absent without leave—from the Lord’s service. Whenever we are not doing what God has called us to do, we expose ourselves to temptation. What happens next can be told in three simple statements: David saw. He inquired. He took.

Walking on the roof of his house *he saw* a beautiful woman taking a bath. He sent a messenger and *he inquired* about her. And then *he took* her.

That is how temptation progresses. It follows the same pattern in your life and mine. Temptation starts first with simple desire. There is nothing wrong with the desire. It is awakened in us simply because we are human, but it must be dealt with when it arises. Either we put temptation away from us completely—or it becomes an intent to sin.

David saw a beautiful woman named Bathsheba. He desired her, and began to plan a way to take her for himself. He sent and inquired about her and the sinful act of taking her followed immediately. Thus did David—the man after God’s own heart, the man of the spirit—become involved in the deep, treacherous sin of the flesh.

After he had taken the woman sexually, he refused to face the truth of his sin. Instead of openly confessing his sin and repenting of it, he committed another sin to cover it up. This, as we all know from sad experience,

begins a descending spiral of progressive sin and cover-up.

David’s sin of adultery resulted in Bathsheba becoming pregnant. This was a major problem since Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah, had been out on the battlefield (where David should have been!). It would be obvious that Uriah was not the baby’s father. So David sent for Uriah and tried to trick him into having sexual relations with Bathsheba. But Uriah, in his simple faithfulness to God and to his king, refused to spend the night with his own wife. David’s plan failed.

Finally, David arranged for Uriah to be double-crossed on the battlefield. David had his own soldiers withdraw from Uriah in battle, leaving him to be killed by the enemy. It was one of the most callous and dishonorable acts one human being ever perpetrated on another—and we can hardly comprehend how low this man of God had sunk. In the attempt to cover up his sin, David corrupted one of his generals, making Joab a co-conspirator in the plot against Uriah. Though it was an Ammonite sword that killed Uriah, it was as if David himself had plunged it into Uriah’s heart.

God’s verdict on David’s act is recorded in 2 Samuel 11:27: “The thing David had done displeased the LORD.” David was an adulterer and a murderer.

So God sent Nathan the prophet to David. Nathan approached the king very carefully, using the same teaching method Jesus would later use so effectively: a parable. Nathan told David the story of a rich man who had many flocks of sheep and had taken away a poor man’s ewe lamb.

Hearing the story, David became angry and said, “The man who did this deserves to die!” (12:1–5).

Nathan had him! “You are the man!” the prophet said accusingly.

Immediately, David recognized the point of this story and acknowledged his sin. He no longer tried to justify it or hide it. In fact, David wrote Psalm 51 during this time—the psalm of confession and repentance. This should be our psalm whenever we are burdened by guilt and remorse.

David’s Restoration

God’s grace and forgiveness are so great that He will even restore a person who has committed sins as great as David’s. But even though His forgiveness is all-encompassing, sin has natural consequences—and those consequences cannot be avoided. David must face these consequences as the prophet Nathan says to him:

“The sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own.”

This is what the LORD says, “Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity upon you. Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight” (12:10–11).

This prophecy was later fulfilled by Absalom, David’s son. Nathan goes on:

[God says] “You did it in secret, but I will do this thing in broad daylight before all Israel.”

Then David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD.”

Nathan replied, “The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die. But because by doing this you have made the enemies of

PSALM 51

1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. 2 Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. 3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. 4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge. 5 Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. 6 Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb; you taught me wisdom in that secret place. 7 Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. 8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. 9 Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. 10 Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. 11 Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. 13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you. 14 Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, you who are God my Savior, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. 15 Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise. 16 You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. 17 My sacrifice, O God, is[b] a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise. 18 May it please you to prosper Zion, to build up the walls of Jerusalem. 19 Then you will delight in the sacrifices of the righteous, in burnt offerings offered whole; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

the LORD show utter contempt the son born to you will die” (12:12–14).

The law demands the death penalty for this sin—but God in His grace forgives David after his confession. The king’s life is spared, and God restores a personal relationship between Himself and David.

But God deals with us not only according to His grace, but according to His government. The government of God demands that our deeds, which affect others, carry consequences, even when forgiveness has taken place. So David faces the result of his deeds and, as we learn in the New Testament, God chastens those whom He loves (Rev. 3:19).

The baby born of this illegitimate union dies, despite David’s pleadings and tears as recorded in Psalm 51.

Moreover, there is trouble coming into David’s family and his kingdom. The New Testament tells us, “Do not be deceived”—that is, don’t kid yourself—“God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction” (Gal. 6:7–8). Because of his sin, David will never again know peace in his house.

In chapters 13 to 20, we see how this prophecy works itself out in David’s life. Chapter 13 tells the story of Amnon, David’s son, as he sins against his own sister, Tamar. This sin produces hatred in Absalom, David’s other son, against Amnon. So lust, bitterness, and murder spring up within David’s own family—and King David is helpless to prevent it. David lacks the moral authority to rebuke Amnon, because

Amnon is following in his father’s footsteps, committing sins of passion for which David himself had set the example.

In chapter 15, we read of the treachery and rebellion of Absalom. This handsome, gifted son of David steals the allegiance of the nation away from King David, drawing men into a conspiracy to seize the throne. Absalom is so successful that David must flee into exile. Imagine that—the man God set over Israel as king must now flee like a common criminal—and this is just one consequence of his sin with Bathsheba. David saw. He inquired. He took. And for years afterward, he paid the price.

Throughout his troubles, David’s heart is humble, penitent, and trusting. David never complains or blames God. He recognizes that God can still work out the details of his life. Eventually, God restores David to the throne and Absalom is overtaken, conquered by his own vanity. His long hair, the source of his pride, gets caught in the branches of a tree and Joab, David’s ruthless general (who also carried out David’s order against Uriah), finds Absalom and kills him.

With Absalom’s death, the rebellion is crushed. But that’s not the whole story. In chapter 20, we find the ultimate result of David’s sin in the rebellion of Sheba, the son of Bicri, against King David. All the trouble in David’s life stems from his moral failure, years earlier. There is no peace throughout the rest of his reign. He has God’s forgiveness, God’s grace, God’s restoration, and God’s blessing, but he continues to reap the result of his own folly. The king’s sorrow is a lesson to us all.

Lessons Learned by King David

In chapters 21 through 24, we come to the epilogue or appendix of this book. Here we find some of the lessons that King David learned throughout his forty-year reign. In chapter 21 we read the story of the Gibeonites, who teach us that the past must be dealt with. If we have past sins that can still be corrected, we must go back and set them straight. Many a Christian discovers that a lie told or an item stolen in the old life now weighs heavily upon a Spirit-led conscience. So make amends, pay the debt, set the wrong thing right.

In the story of the Gibeonites, David went back and corrected something that happened under King Saul. As Saul's heir to the throne, he had the responsibility. Second Samuel 22:26–27 reproduces the text of Psalm 18, in which David sings: "To the faithful you show yourself faithful, to the blameless you show yourself blameless, to the pure you show yourself pure, but to the crooked you show yourself shrewd."

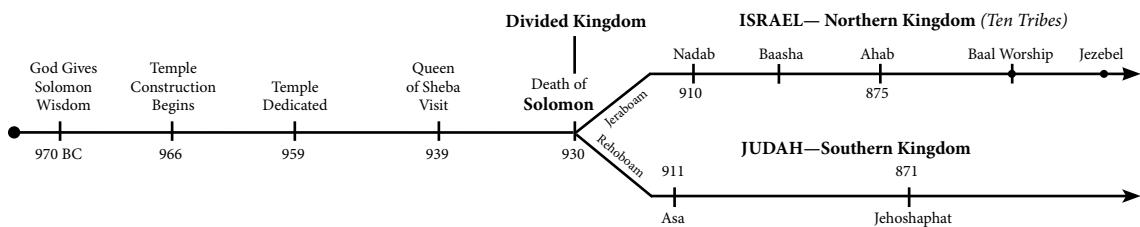
David says that God will be to you what you are to Him. If you are open and honest with Him, God will be open and honest with you. If you are crooked and deceitful toward God, He will cause all your circumstances to

deceive you and lie to you. If you are pure in heart, you will discover that God brings more of His beauty, purity, and perfection into your own heart and soul.

This is what Paul cries out for in Philippians when he says, "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me" (Phil. 3:12).

The last chapter of the book contains the account of David's final moral failure—the sin of numbering Israel. A plague came upon the people of Israel when David, in his pride, began to rely on his own resources and his military might, instead of relying upon the power of God. This story teaches us that our old nature is always there, ready to spring into action the moment we cease to rely on the Spirit of God.

Sin never dies of old age. No matter how long you walk with God, it is still possible to fall. The only thing that maintains the spiritual life is the quiet, day-by-day, moment-by-moment walk of faith. It's fitting, then, that 2 Samuel closes with the man after God's own heart repenting of his sin and turning back to the worship of the living God.

How to Lose a Kingdom

First Kings is the gripping story of how to lose a kingdom. Like so many Old Testament books, this book is a dramatic and powerful visual aid by which God illustrates many important principles about how we, as Christians, should live. We can see our own lives, struggles, and needs reflected in the stories of this book.

The book of 1 Kings holds the secret of success in reigning over the kingdom of your life. It's the secret of learning to be submissive to God's authority. In other words, you can never exercise dominion over your life unless you first subject yourself to the dominion of God. When you do, He gives you greater freedom and responsibility. If you reject His rule over your life, then you cannot rule your own life, and you cannot fulfill the enormous potential God has planned for you.

Those who insist on running their own lives their own way inevitably end up handing control of their lives over to other forces: to lusts and desires, to appetites and cravings, to other people, to worldly values and worldly pressures. Only by submitting our self-will to God's will can we truly be free!

LEFT: Arnon Gorge

In the Hebrew Bible, the books of 1 and 2 Kings are combined into one book of Kings. They are aptly named Kings, for they trace the royal dynasties of Israel and Judah. Throughout these books, the spotlight is always on the king; as the king goes, so goes the nation. When the king walks humbly with God, He blesses the kingdom.

There were no such blessings for the northern kingdom because it had no godly kings. But in Judah, in the house of David, there was victory and prosperity when godly kings had dominion. The rains came, the crops grew, the economy flourished, enemies were vanquished, and there was peace in the land. When the king walked with God, there was victory and prosperity. But when the king disobeyed, there was famine, drought, war, and suffering.

Good kings are always symbolic types of Christ, and the list of good, godly kings includes David, Solomon, Hezekiah, Joash, and Jehoshaphat. In the lives of these kings

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter examines the tragedy of the kings of Israel, extracting powerful life lessons for how we, as Christians, should "rule" wisely over the "kingdom" of our lives.

(despite their human failings), we see symbols of the kingly reign of the Lord Jesus Christ. The disobedient kings were types of the Antichrist, the man of sin, the personification of evil who is yet to appear upon the earth.

The Age of Solomon Begins

As the book opens, we see that God has called Israel out from among all the nations of the earth and marked them as His own special people. He has made this little plot of land an international stage and He will focus the attention of the world on this small but special collection of people.

In chapter 1, we find King David upon the throne. His son, Solomon, is in line to succeed him as king. But one of David's other sons, Adonijah, has different ideas. He is plotting rebellion in order to gain control of the throne even before his father dies. David, learning of this, acts to immediately place Solomon on the throne. So Solomon is anointed king while his father still lives.

This symbolically suggests what the reigning authority in our lives should be. True authority comes as a gift from the hand of God. We cannot reign except as we are established by God. When we give ourselves to the authority of God, He brings every circumstance, every rebel, and every enemy under His control so that they cannot threaten our reign.

In chapters 2 and 3, Solomon ascends to the throne and rules in power and glory. Solomon's reign marks the greatest extension of the kingdom of Israel. His dominion is characterized by a display of outward majesty and power. But in chapter 3 we also find the seeds of defeat. These are crucial to notice:

Solomon made an alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt and married his daughter. He brought her to the City of David until he finished building his palace and the temple of the LORD, and the wall around Jerusalem. The people, however, were still sacrificing at the high places, because a temple had not yet been built for the Name of the LORD. Solomon showed his love for the LORD by walking according to the statutes of his father David, except that he offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places (3:1–3).

Solomon loved God with all his heart and began his reign with a wonderful expression of yieldedness and desire for God's authority over his life. He followed in the footsteps of his father, David. Nevertheless, he did two little things—seemingly trivial matters—that plant the seeds for the ultimate overthrow of his kingdom.

First, he made an alliance with Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. Throughout Scripture, Egypt is generally presented as a symbolic picture of the world. Solomon not only makes a political alliance with Egypt, but he makes a personal alliance as well: he marries Pharaoh's daughter and brings her into the heart of the nation of Israel. Thus Israel, through King Solomon, makes an alliance with the world.

Second, Solomon worshiped at the high places. He followed all the statutes of his father David, the passage tells us—*except that he offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places*. In the pagan religions of that day, all worship was conducted on the mountaintops. The pagan tribes had erected altars, many of which were the center of idolatrous and obscene worship. Frequently, the mountaintop altar was where the fertility

rites of sex gods were carried out. Because Israel had no temple, these pagan altars had been taken over by the people of Israel and were used for sacrifices to Jehovah.

Though David had placed the ark of God in the tabernacle in Jerusalem, Solomon did not present his offerings there, but instead made his offering at the high places. Though Solomon sacrificed to the God he loved, he burned those sacrifices on pagan altars.

Outwardly, young King Solomon's rule was admirable and his heart was honorable. Nevertheless, there was one area of his life that was not fully committed to God. His fellowship with God was weakened by his alliance with the world. He didn't understand that the secret of experiencing God's blessings lay in an inner yieldedness to God's will, represented by worship in strict accordance with His Word. Solomon should have worshiped God before the ark of the covenant. Solomon's lack of adherence to the Levitical rules regarding worship was the first indication that something was wrong in his life.

Solomon's One Request

Also in chapter 3, we have the account of Solomon's dream, in which God appears and tells him to ask for whatever he wants. In response, Solomon asks not for riches or honor but for wisdom: "Give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?" (v. 9).

By beginning his reign in this way, Solomon showed that he understood the most essential ingredient in effective

leadership: wisdom. Solomon's great wisdom is demonstrated in 1 Kings 3:16–28, when he settles a dispute between two women who claimed to be the mother of the same baby. The two women were prostitutes living in the same house, and both had given birth at about the same time, but one baby had died. Each woman claimed the living baby as her own. So the two women took the matter to court and asked King Solomon to judge whose baby it was.

In a dramatic display of God-given wisdom, Solomon said, "Bring me a sword." Then, laying the baby down before these two women, he said, "Cut the living child in two and give half to one and half to the other." One woman said, "Neither I nor you shall have him. Cut him in two!" But the other woman—the real mother—immediately protested, "Please, my lord, give her the living baby! Don't kill him!"

Solomon flushed out the imposter—and spotlighted the real mother. This was a powerful demonstration of Solomon's wisdom—and a challenge to today's judges who decide divorce cases, custody cases, and adoption cases by emotionally cutting children in half rather than placing them with people who truly love them. Today's judges desperately need the God-given wisdom of Solomon.

In 1 Kings 4, we find a commentary on Solomon's great wisdom [my own commentary appears in brackets]:

God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East and

greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than any other man, including Ethan the Ezrahite—wiser than Heman, Calcol and Darda, the sons of Mahol [these were the media pundits of that day]. And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. He spoke three thousand proverbs [we have them recorded in the book of Proverbs] and his songs numbered a thousand and five [we only have one of those—Song of Songs]. He described plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. Men of all nations came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom (4:29–34).

Here we have a picture of the kind of intellect Paul describes: “We have the mind of Christ,” and “The spiritual man makes judgments about all things” (1 Cor. 2:15–16). Solomon did not need anyone to teach him, since he already discerned all things. He was able to analyze and understand the workings of the world and the human heart, because he had the wisdom that comes from God.

Why was Solomon so wise? Because wisdom was the one and only request he asked of God, and God granted it to him. As James 1:5 tells us, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.”

But Solomon’s request contained one slight weakness. He asked for wisdom that he might govern the people. We can only wish that he had also asked for wisdom to govern his own life. That is where he so often failed. God granted Solomon the wisdom of governance, but He also allowed

circumstances in Solomon’s personal life that put his wisdom to the test. Along with wisdom, God gave Solomon riches and honor, which eventually proved to be his undoing. As he gloried and exulted in the magnificence of his kingdom, pride began to enter his heart; and as Solomon himself observed in his earlier, wiser days, “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18).

The Glory of Solomon’s Kingdom

The wisdom of Solomon produces a well-ordered, peaceful, prosperous kingdom, as chapter 4 tells us. In verses 1 through 19, we see that Solomon is a master at delegating, appointing eleven princes and twelve governors over the kingdom. By dividing the governance of the kingdom in this way, Solomon ensures that the various levels of government will function effectively and efficiently. The most responsive government is the one that is closest to the people.

Solomon wisely understands that God is not the author of confusion. The Lord of creation does all things decently and in order. So Solomon patterns his governance after the orderly governance of God. As a result, the people of Israel prosper and are happy under the firm but wise leadership of Solomon, as we read:

The people of Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand on the seashore; they ate, they drank and they were happy. And Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the River [Euphrates] to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt. These countries brought tribute and were Solomon’s subjects all his life (4:20 – 21).

Here is a picture of Solomon's godly authority over the dominion God had given him. This is the kind of firm control God wants all of us to exercise over our own lives.

In chapters 5 through 8, we find the account of the glorious temple Solomon built. For four hundred years, Israel had worshiped in the tabernacle—a mere tent! But Solomon fulfilled the dream of his father David, the dream of a permanent and splendid place in which the people of Israel could worship their God.

The description of the temple in these chapters conveys a splendor beyond imagining. It was built of great hand-quarried stones and imported cedar. The interior was covered with gold. In today's dollars, the structure would have cost billions of dollars. The true grandeur of the temple, however, was not the gold but the glory—the Shekinah glory of God that came down and dwelt in the Holy Place when Solomon dedicated the temple.

In chapter 10, we have the story, wonderful in its detail, of the visits of the queen of Sheba and the king of Tyre. They came to see with their own eyes the widely reported glories of Solomon's kingdom.

The Decline and Fall of Solomon

Then we come to chapter 11, where the story of Solomon takes a sudden turn for the worse. The seeds of decline and disobedience that were sown earlier in Solomon's life now begin to sprout:

King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter—Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the Lord had told the Israelites, "You

must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods." Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray (11:1–3).

This is the same man who, in the book of Proverbs wrote, “He who finds a wife finds what is good” (Prov. 18:22). Apparently, Solomon didn't know when he had too much of a good thing! A thousand wives is nine hundred and ninety-nine too many.

Here we see the failure of Solomon as his heart is turned away from God. Where did Solomon's decline begin? It began with his enjoyment of the magnificence of his rule. The wealth and power of Solomon's reign were evidence of God's blessing on his life, but Solomon's downhill slide began when that which God had forbidden captured his heart. God had warned the Israelites against marrying women from the surrounding idol-worshiping cultures:

And when you choose some of their daughters as wives for your sons and those daughters prostitute themselves to their gods, they will lead your sons to do the same (Ex. 34:16).

Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the Lord's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you (Deut. 7:3–4).

Solomon presents a vivid picture of a principle stated by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: “Where your treasure is, there your

heart will be also” (Luke 12:34). Solomon gave his heart to women from idolatrous cultures—and in time, those women turned his heart away from God.

I recall the story of a man who enjoyed a tremendous ministry in the pulpit and in many other ways. Suddenly, his ministry collapsed, brought down in shame by charges of immorality. It turned out that for many years there had been an unrighteous, unrepented, and unjudged affection in his heart. Outwardly, he was a minister for God; inwardly, sin ate away at this man’s heart and life. Finally, his ministry for God was destroyed. Tragically, this story is replayed again and again in the lives of Christians in all walks of life.

The first step in moral decline always begins with our desires and emotions. What has captured first place in your mind, your desires, and your emotions? If it is something that God has disallowed, then you have planted the seeds of destruction in your own life just as Solomon planted them in his life. We see the tragic result in the next few verses:

He followed Ashtoreth [the sex goddess] the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD; he did not follow the LORD completely, as David his father had done.

On a hill east of Jerusalem, Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable god of Moab, and for Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. He did the same for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and offered sacrifices to their gods.

The LORD became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away (11:5–9).

Chemosh was the hideous image to which the pagan worshipers sacrificed their children in fire. Incredibly, Solomon himself built a place of worship for this grinning demonic god! As we read through the rest of this chapter, we see that three times in rapid succession, “the Lord raised up against Solomon an adversary.”

At the end of this chapter, Solomon “rested with his fathers” and was buried in the city of David—a sudden collapse of the glory and majesty of his kingdom. Even the glory of Solomon’s temple proves transitory. Though it would stand for four hundred years, it would be plundered and stripped of its gold and furnishings only five years after Solomon’s death.

A Kingdom Divided

Chapter 12 begins the second movement in this book: the breakup and decline of the nation of Israel. Disaster overtakes the kingdom as Solomon’s son Rehoboam takes the reigns of government. Jeroboam splits the kingdom, taking the ten tribes of Israel in the north to begin the northern kingdom of Israel, while Rehoboam is left to rule the remaining southern tribes in the south, which became known as Judah. During Jeroboam’s reign over Israel in the north he reintroduced the worship of golden calves—a sin God had judged during Israel’s trek in the desert (see Ex. 32).

Chapter 14 presents the story of Egypt’s invasion and defeat of Rehoboam and the southern kingdom of Judah—the very nation out of which God delivered Israel under Moses (14:25–26). Again, Egypt is a picture of the world and its ways—its wickedness,

its folly, and its futility. Most of the treasures Solomon amassed during the height of his reign were plundered and carried off.

The account tells of various kings who ascend to the throne of Israel—most of them evil, or incompetent, or both. Jeroboam is followed by Nadab, who is followed by Baasha and Zimri. Finally comes Ahab—probably the most evil king Israel ever knew—and his wicked wife Jezebel.

The concluding section of the book, beginning in chapter 17 with Elijah, introduces the prophetic ministry. While there were other prophets before Elijah, they did not perform miracles as Elijah did. The prophets who ministered to Judah, the southern kingdom, did no miracles because God's testimony there was still central to the life of the nation. But Israel, the northern kingdom, rejected God's presence and worshiped golden calves instead of Him. The ministry of miracles was a testimony to the people that God was still in their midst and He demanded their attention. God sought to shake them up so that they would see how far they had drifted from Him.

Elijah's ministry is a revelation of God's dealings with the wayward human heart. First, he asks God to shut the heavens so that it would not rain for three years. Then the prophet called down fire from heaven upon those who were sent to arrest him and bring him before the king. These miracles caught the attention of the people and produced at least a degree of repentance. God uses a harsh hand to bring about our repentance when we human beings force Him to do so.

In chapter 18, we come to the judgment against Baal as the two opposing religious

philosophies in Israel come to a climactic clash on Mount Carmel. Here Elijah challenges four hundred priests of Baal to a contest to determine which deity has the power to send down fire from heaven. In a remarkable scene, Elijah taunts the idolatrous priests as they slash their flesh and cry out to their god. " 'Shout louder!' he said. 'Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened' " (1 Kings 18:27).

When the pagan priests have exhausted themselves to no avail, Elijah rolls up his sleeves and goes to work. He repairs the altar of the Lord, which has fallen into disrepair. Then he orders four large jars of water to be poured over the bull and the wood upon the altar. He intends to make sure that the demonstration of God's power is not just spectacular but nothing less than astonishing. Then he calls upon God, and God sends down a fire so intense that it not only consumes the sacrifice but the water and the stones of the altar! Once judgment is exercised, the heavens open again and rain pours down upon the land.

This is a picture of what happens in the life of anyone who resists God's rightful rule. In what has been termed God's "severe mercy," He brings us under His chastening until our stubbornness is broken and we are humbled at last before Him. Then the rain of God's grace can pour once again upon our hearts, bringing good fruit and sweet blessing once more.

In 1 Kings 19 comes an account I have always found amusing: the story of Elijah's fear of Jezebel. This bold, courageous prophet of God has faced four hundred priests on the

mountaintop—yet he runs in terror from one angry woman! He is so defeated that, as he hides under a juniper bush, he begs God to take his life. But God deals with Elijah according to His grace.

The first thing God does is to put Elijah to bed under the juniper tree and give him a good night's rest. Then God gives him a good square meal, divinely provided by an angel of the Lord. Finally God takes Elijah out on a mountain, and Elijah witnesses all the unleashed fury of nature—an earthquake, a raging fire, and a booming thunderstorm. Through this experience, Elijah learns an amazing secret: Jehovah, the Lord God Almighty, is not always to be found in the overwhelming forces of nature. Sometimes His power is most dramatically demonstrated when He moves through the still, small voice of a changed conscience.

The story of 1 Kings is the story of a kingdom lost. Solomon, perhaps the wisest man who ever lived, fell into folly and disobedience and lost a kingdom. After his death, the kingdom was divided in two, and a succession of unwise and evil kings brought nothing but misery to the people. The book closes with the story of King Ahab and his self-centered desire for Naboth's vineyard, which ultimately brings God's judgment.

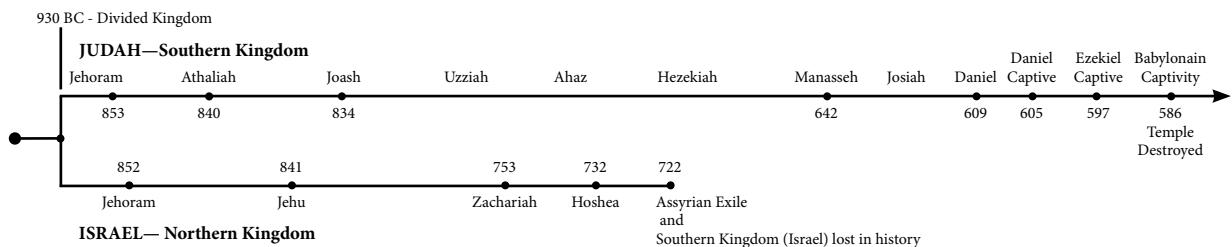
In chapter 22 we learn how God works through apparently accidental circumstances as the king of Israel and the king of Judah go out to battle. Ahab, king of Israel, in his

satanic cleverness, tries to put the king of Judah in the forefront of battle. But as Ahab compliments himself on his trickery, a stray arrow, randomly unleashed by a warrior on the opposite side, pierces a chink in his armor and penetrates his heart.

Our God is the Lord of all circumstances. His will is accomplished even through seeming accidents and coincidences. He is behind all the movements of our lives, and His perfect will is accomplished.

Outward circumstances will never dethrone you from ruling your life as God intended from the beginning. Nothing you encounter—pressures, mistreatment, obstacles, accidents—can ever succeed in dethroning you. You can be enslaved by the flesh and the devil if you allow it, if you permit some rival form of worship to enter into your heart, leaving no room for God. That rival form of worship may be a habit, an obsession with status and money, a sinful desire or forbidden affection, or an attitude of rebellion.

If you, like Solomon, allow folly to replace godly wisdom in your life, then your kingdom's days are numbered. But if you make God and His kingdom the sole desire of your heart, then you will reign forever, and the kingdom of your life will be secure.

A Wasted Life

A pastor once told his congregation to go home and read the book of Hezekiah in preparation for next week's sermon. The following Sunday, he stepped into the pulpit and asked how many in the congregation had done the assigned reading. Several people raised their hands.

If you are familiar with the books of the Bible, you know why this story is funny: There is no book of Hezekiah! But we will meet good King Hezekiah here in the book of 2 Kings.

The first half of 1 Kings was dominated by the story of King Solomon. In the second half of 1 Kings, a new and towering figure emerges—not a king but a prophet, Elijah. The story of Elijah continues in 2 Kings, as God repeatedly intervenes in the lives of Israel's kings in an attempt to reverse the trend of corruption and decay. In addition to Elijah, God also raises up the prophet Elisha. The book of 2 Kings is noteworthy primarily because of the ministries of these two mighty men of God.

God never spoke to the nation through a king. The king's role was to govern and administer justice. The life

and character of the kingdom was a reflection of the life and character of the king.

But when God wanted to speak to the nation and call the nation back to its founding principles, He sent a prophet. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, God sends other prophets to Israel—men such as Hosea, Amos, Joel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. But the prophets who take center stage in 1 and 2 Kings are Elijah and Elisha.

The Prophet Elijah: Thunderings of the Law

Elijah was a rugged outdoorsman who wore haircloth bound by a leather girdle. He was a scraggly, mangy-looking character who repeatedly risked his life to confront the king face-to-face. He was bold and faithful, and God protected him. We have already seen in 1 Kings 18 how he challenged the four

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter looks at the decline of Israelite society under a series of evil kings, and the ministries of two prophets, Elijah and Elisha, who were sent by God to wake the nation out of its deadly sleep. In this chapter, we find lessons for victorious Christian living by learning from the tragic record of Israel's decline and fall.



Mount Carmel

hundred priests of Baal at Mount Carmel and single-handedly defied the power of their abominable false god.

The ministry of Elijah—this bold, cantankerous prophet of the law—was to bring the thunderings of the law to Israel, to awaken the nation to its shameful condition. His was a ministry of mingled love, fire, and judgment.

At the close of his ministry, Elijah was triumphantly and miraculously caught up into heaven in a chariot of fire as described in chapter 2. When faithful Elisha refused to leave his mentor Elijah, the mantle of the prophet literally fell upon Elisha and he was promised a double portion of the prophetic spirit of Elijah.

The Prophet Elisha: Grace and Glory

In contrast to Elijah, Elisha's ministry is a ministry of grace, sweetness, and glory throughout Israel. Why was this? If you study the narrative carefully, comparing it with the narrative of the four gospels, you will see that Elijah and Elisha symbolize the double-edged ministry of Jesus Christ, who (as John 1:14 tells us) "came from the Father, full of grace and truth." Elisha represents the sweet grace of Jesus; Elijah represents His thundering truth.

When the Lord Jesus came to Israel, He found the nation in a state of decay and corruption, just as it was when Elijah came. Herod was on the throne as a vassal of Rome. The high priest's office was in the hands of the Sadducees—the rationalists of that day. They had turned the temple into a place of corruption and commerce.

The Lord Jesus' ministry to official Israel was in the power of Elijah. He began His ministry with a prophetic act: the cleansing of the temple. He made a whip of many cords, and with a voice of thunder and eyes of fire, He drove the money changers out of the temple, turning over tables and flinging the merchandise into the courtyard.

But our Lord's ministry to the individual was the ministry of Elisha—the ministry of grace and of tender compassion and forgiveness.

There's another interesting comparison here: Elisha also seems to symbolize the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the church after the day of Pentecost. Elisha's ministry begins when Elijah bodily ascends into heaven, just as the Spirit's ministry begins when Jesus ascends into heaven. Elisha's first miracle depicts the ministry of the Holy Spirit: putting salt into the water, causing it to turn sweet. The miracle of the oil that kept

flowing continually is another symbol of the Holy Spirit, as is the miracle of the water that suddenly appears in the parched and barren land. There is also the miracle of resurrection when Elisha raises a dead boy to life by laying his staff upon him and breathing on his face. This was not mouth-to-mouth resuscitation but a genuine resurrection.

When everything looks dead and hopeless, the Spirit (as symbolized by Elisha) conquers death and produces life.

The Decline and Fall of the Kingdoms

The book of 2 Kings traces the continuing decline of these two kingdoms. Israel, the northern kingdom, is the first to fall. In chapter 17, while under the reign of King Hoshea, Israel is conquered by Assyria's King Shalmaneser and carried away into slavery and captivity:

The LORD warned Israel and Judah through all his prophets and seers: “Turn from your evil ways. Observe my commands and decrees, in accordance with the entire Law that I commanded your fathers to obey and that I delivered to you through my servants the prophets.”

But they would not listen and were as stiff-necked as their fathers, who did not trust in the LORD their God. They rejected his decrees and the covenant he had made with their fathers and the warnings he had given them. They followed worthless idols and themselves became worthless. They imitated the nations around them although the LORD had ordered them, “Do not do as they do,” and they did the things the LORD had forbidden them to do.

They forsook all the commands of the LORD their God and made for themselves two idols cast in the shape of calves, and an Asherah

pole [that is, a sex god]. They bowed down to all the starry hosts, and they worshiped Baal. They sacrificed their sons and daughters in the fire. They practiced divination and sorcery and sold themselves to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, provoking him to anger.

So the LORD was very angry with Israel and removed them from his presence. Only the tribe of Judah was left (17:13–18).

Here is a shocking picture of human evil, and the consequences of human sin. Here we see evil infecting the life of a nation that was once dedicated to God. We also discover that evil has an enormous power to infect and enslave people, even those who once dedicated themselves to God. Even the smallest sins and moral compromises may lead to greater sin and rebellion against God.

Judah's decline and fall was delayed for a while because of a godly king named Hezekiah, who arose during this time of national darkness and led his country for a while into the light. Amazingly, Hezekiah's father had been an ungodly king, and in time, Hezekiah's own son would also become an ungodly king. But Hezekiah himself was a gift of God's grace to the southern kingdom of Judah.

When Hezekiah comes to the throne in chapter 18, his first official act is to cleanse the temple. It took the Levite priests sixteen days just to remove all the rubbish and filth out of the temple before they could even begin purifying it for service. That's how corrupt the nation had become.

Next, Hezekiah reintroduced the Passover. He destroyed the brass serpent the people worshiped. This was the very serpent God had used for their blessing when Moses lifted

it up in the wilderness (see Num. 21:8–9), but God never intended it to become an object of worship. It was merely a symbol of the saving work of Christ, which still lay ahead in history. Hezekiah understood that there was nothing intrinsically sacred about the brass serpent, so he destroyed it to make sure it would never again be used for idolatrous worship.

Here's an important lesson for us all: Anything, even a God-given blessing in our lives, can become a source of idolatry if we put our trust in it. That includes money, a career, a religious leader, or a church. Instead of trusting in our blessings, we must trust solely in the One from whom all blessings flow.

Hezekiah's life was miraculously extended when the shadow on the sundial turned back ten degrees and he was allowed fifteen more years of life. In those fifteen years, however, he had a son named Manasseh who became one of the worst kings Judah ever had—prompting some to suggest that perhaps Hezekiah lived too long! But it's important to compare

Scripture with Scripture to understand the entire story of Manasseh.

In 2 Kings 21:1–18, we only see the wickedness of Manasseh. But comparing this account with 2 Chronicles 33:11–13 and 18–19, we find that after being defeated in battle and taken captive in Babylon, Manasseh repented, sought God's forgiveness, and was restored to the throne of Judah, where he reigned wisely for the rest of his days.

Eventually, the kingdom declined and the people of Judah were carried away by Nebuchadnezzar into Babylon, the symbol of worldly corruption and defilement. For a few years the temple remained in Jerusalem, but eventually it too was stripped and burned. The walls of the city were broken down, and all the people were carried away into captivity. The book closes with Zedekiah, the last king of Israel. The king of Babylon captured Zedekiah, killed his sons before his eyes, and then destroyed his eyes. Blinded and utterly devastated, Zedekiah was bound and led away to Babylon.

Zedekiah was the last king Judah ever had. Later, in the tumult and confusion in Jerusalem during the Passover week when our Lord was crucified, Pilate offered Israel a new king: the Lord Jesus, beaten and bleeding, wearing a crown of thorns. “Here is your king,” he said.

But the crowd rejected Him. They meant it when they cried out, “We have no king but Caesar” (see John 19:14–15). Yet it was Caesar’s Gentile governor who spoke God’s truth to Israel by having this inscription written above the cross: “JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS” (see John 19:19). The nation of Israel will never know another moment of genuine peace and blessing—either spiritually or politically—until the people see Him whom they have pierced and recognize the King who was sent to them in lowliness as Zechariah prophesied (see Zech. 12:10).

A Wasted Life

In the end, this book is a picture of a wasted life. The life of the nation of Israel is analogous to the life of an individual Christian. In order to fulfill our potential and become all that God intended us to be, we must build our lives on the foundation built by Jesus Christ, not a foundation made of wood, hay, and stubble.

Those who, in the secret places of the heart, fail to walk in obedience to the Holy

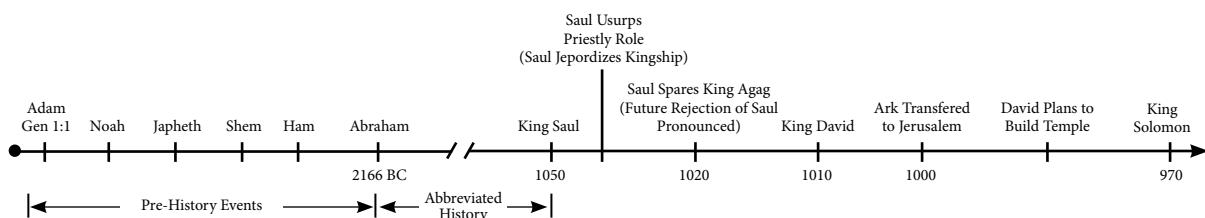
Spirit’s prompting will gradually sink deeper and deeper into corruption. The temple of the human spirit will become darkened and defiled. Eventually, cruelty and rebellion will set in, so that finally the temple of the personality is burned and destroyed.

The apostle Paul tells us that each of us will face a judgment of fire that will reveal our work. The wood, hay, and stubble will be burned, and the believer will be saved, “but only as one escaping through the flames” (1 Cor. 3:13–15). The lesson of 2 Kings is that it need not be so.

We may be prone to wander, prone to leave the God we love, but God in His mercy continually interrupts the reckless course of our lives. He wants to draw our attention to the real issues of life and rescue us from our stubborn and willful ways. Like the two kingdoms, Israel and Judah, we are free to ignore His pleadings. We are free to disobey. We are free to waste our lives.

But one day we shall stand naked and without excuse before the One who loves us and gave Himself for us. Will we hear Him say, “Well done, good and faithful servant”—or will we have to kneel and confess that we barred Him from the temple of our lives? Will we be glad at His coming—or ashamed?

May God grant that the lesson of 2 Kings take root in our hearts—and above all, that the lesson of this book change our lives.

David and the Ark of God

The books of 1 and 2 Chronicles cover the same historical era as the books of Samuel and Kings, but from a different perspective. Much like the four gospels provide four different perspectives on the life of Christ, the books of Chronicles give us an additional perspective on the kingdom period of Israel's history. The purpose, style, and selection of events differ dramatically between the books of Chronicles and the histories of Samuel and Kings.

The Chronicles accounts center around King David and the temple. The first book focuses on the life and reign of David himself while the second book traces the lineage of David as they sit upon the throne of Judah, the southern kingdom. Israel, the northern kingdom, is almost completely ignored in these books. Why? Because the temple is located in Judah and because David, who is seen as God's king, is the king of Judah.

It is evident that 1 Chronicles was written after the seventy years of Israel's captivity in Babylon. The writer was probably Ezra, the priest, who also wrote the book that bears his name. Ezra was one of the great figures who returned

from the Babylonian captivity to reestablish the temple and the worship of God in Jerusalem.

Don't Skip the Genealogies!

The selective character of 1 Chronicles is evident immediately. The first nine chapters are devoted to a list of genealogies. At first glance, you might think nothing could be more boring than a long list of names. It looks like a phone book! We're tempted to hurry past these names, much like the old Scottish preacher who was reading from the opening chapter of Matthew. Beginning in Matthew 1:2 (KJV), he read, "Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas and . . . and they kept on begetting one another all the way down this side of the page and clear on to the other side."

These genealogies, however, are very

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

Though 1 and 2 Chronicles cover some of the same events as the books of Samuel and Kings, they do so in markedly different ways. This chapter looks at the unique perspective found in the book of 1 Chronicles and finds important lessons for our lives today.

important for obtaining a full understanding of 1 Chronicles and the history of Israel for two reasons:

First, the genealogies help us to ascertain and understand Bible chronology. Second, the genealogies are carefully selected and constructed to show God's plan in working through human beings to achieve His purposes.

The genealogy goes back to the dawn of human history and lists the sons and descendants of Adam: Seth, Enosh, Kenan, and Mahalalel. We know Adam had sons named Cain, Abel, and Seth, but here, Cain and Abel are not mentioned. The whole focus is on the descendants of Seth, for from him eventually came the family of Abraham and the Israelites.

Then the line of Seth is traced down to Enoch and to Noah. The three sons of Noah—Shem, Ham, and Japheth—are listed, but Ham and Japheth are dismissed with a brief word. Attention focuses on the line of Shem. From Shem we trace on down to Abraham and his family. The genealogy narrows down, excluding Abraham's son Ishmael, then excluding Esau, the brother of Jacob. It focuses on Jacob's twelve sons, the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel. Then it selects the tribes of Judah and Levi—that is, the tribes of the king and the priestly line. It traces the tribe of Judah to David, to Solomon, and then to the kings of the house of David, and then into the captivity. The tribe of Levi is traced back to Aaron, the first of the priests, and then to the priests who were prominent in the kingdom at the time of David.

One fascinating incident stands out among these genealogies. In chapter 4, we read of a man named Jabez:

Jabez was more honorable than his brothers. His mother had named him Jabez, saying, "I gave birth to him in pain." Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, "Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain." And God granted his request (4:9–10).

It is significant that this brief story appears in the midst of a “phone book” list of names. This is God’s way of shining a spotlight on Jabez and saying, “Pay attention to this man. There is something highly instructive in his story.”

The name Jabez means “pain” in Hebrew, and his mother gave him that unfortunate name because she experienced great pain in giving birth to him. But Jabez prayed a wonderful prayer, asking God to bless him, to enlarge his territory (which could also be a prayer for greater influence to bless others), and for God’s protective hand on his life so that his name (“Jabez, the Big Pain”) would be nullified.

In the original Hebrew, the last phrase of the prayer of Jabez could be taken two ways: It might mean, “Keep me from being harmed so I will not suffer pain,” or, “Keep me from doing evil, so that I may not cause pain to others.” Some translations, such as the New King James Version, reflect this second interpretation. The beauty of this prayer is that either translation is equally valid and meaningful. Jabez undoubtedly wanted God to keep evil and suffering away from his door—and he also wanted God to keep him from sinning and causing pain and suffering to others. And, the Scriptures tell us, “God granted his request.”

In His Word, God often spotlights those who obey Him. And when God excludes a name, when He turns away from an individual or family, He generally does so because of their disobedience. Throughout Scripture, we often see God excluding or dismissing people of high rank, high privilege, and high ancestry—according to human views of such matters—because their hearts were not aligned with the heart of God. You can trace this principle throughout this entire genealogy. This principle also sets the pattern for the rest of the book.

In chapter 10, the entire span of King Saul's life is covered in a mere smattering of verses. The reason Saul receives such scant attention is given in verses 13 and 14: "Saul died because he was unfaithful to the LORD; he did not keep the word of the LORD and even consulted a medium for guidance, and did not inquire of the LORD. So the LORD put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse."

The King After God's Own Heart

The rest of 1 Chronicles is about David, a king after God's own heart. The book traces David's life from the moment he is anointed king until his death.

First Chronicles 11 tells of David's first act after becoming king of Israel—the conquest of the stronghold of Zion in Jebus, the land of the pagan Jebusites. The Israelites storm the stronghold and defeat the Jebusites. Then they rename the stronghold the City of David. Afterwards, David has an entire city built around the stronghold. The city becomes known as Jerusalem, which means "Abode of Peace" in Hebrew—God's holy city. This is

the place God has chosen to plant His name among the tribes of Israel.

Immediately following the conquest of Jerusalem comes a flashback to the time of David's exile and to the mighty men gathered around him there. These were men of faith and courage who were attracted to David by the character he demonstrated. These mighty men who shared his exile eventually became leaders in his kingdom, symbolizing for us the reign of the Lord Jesus with His saints after returning to earth again. Those of us who share His sufferings now will also share His glory when He comes to establish His kingdom of righteousness.

This book also underscores the importance of the ark of God. In chapter 13, David goes to the house of Abinadab in Kiriath Jearim where the ark was kept. David loads the ark onto an oxcart and begins to bring it back to Jerusalem—but he violates the law governing the handling and transportation of the ark. David knew that the law of Moses required the ark be carried only by the Levites (see Deut. 10:8; Num. 7:9), but in his joy and zeal for God's cause he assumed that God would not mind if the ark were carried in a different way.

Then disaster struck. One of the men walking alongside the ark, a man named Uzzah, saw the ark totter as the oxen stumbled. Instinctively, he reached out to steady it. When his hand touched the ark, he was immediately struck dead. David was tremendously shaken by this tragedy, both emotionally and spiritually.

But as he meditated and prayed over this incident, he realized that this disaster was his own fault, not God's. He had neglected the

word of the Lord. There is no incident from the Old Testament that teaches more clearly the importance of knowing and following God's Word. David was sobered by the lesson of this tragedy. Afterward, he directed the Levites to bring the ark up to Jerusalem according to the law of Moses.

Now, the tabernacle had been the home of the ark throughout the Israelites' journey in the wilderness. The tabernacle had been the central place of worship for Israel during the time of the judges and the reign of Saul—but the tabernacle was not located in Jerusalem. It was in the city of Gibeon. Shouldn't the ark be returned to the tabernacle? After all, the rightful place of the ark was the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle.

Instead, David had the ark taken to Jerusalem, the city of the king. By his own authority, he set up a center of worship on the very site where the temple would later be built. In so doing, he replaced the authority of the priests with the authority of the king. Why? Because David was making a symbolic statement: He was showing that when the king comes, the ark is to be established on a permanent site, not in a tabernacle made of skins and tent poles. The ark belonged in a permanent temple made of wood and stone and precious metal. Though the temple would not be built until Solomon's day, the temple site in Jerusalem symbolized a new beginning and a new government for Israel.

Chapters 18, 19, and 20 are devoted to King David's victories over Israel's enemies within the borders of the kingdom. These victories symbolize what happens in the heart of the believer when Christ is crowned Lord and King of that person's life.

The only negative incident in the book is in chapter 21, where we read of David's sin in numbering the people of Israel. Remarkably, the double sin of David—his adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband, Uriah—is not recorded here. I believe it is because that sin was David's personal sin as a man. The only sin of David recorded in 1 Chronicles is his public misconduct as king.

But the sin of numbering the people of Israel was an official act of David's kingly office and an abrupt departure from his dependence on the strength of God. Why did he number the people? He wanted to glory in the number of people who were available to him as king. He wanted to see his political and military strength.

We see this same problem in Christian circles today when Christian leaders begin to depend on numbers more than on God's leading. We need to always remember that God never wins His battles by majority vote. When we think the cause of Christ is losing because Christians are declining in proportion to the population of the world, we've succumbed to the false notion that there is strength in numbers. God doesn't need numbers. All He needs is a nucleus of people who believe and obey His Word.

In Judges, we saw that thirty-two thousand men were too many to fight for God under Gideon's command. And ten thousand were too many. Finally, when Gideon had whittled his force down to a mere three hundred men, God said, "With the three hundred men . . . I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands" (see Judges 7). That's a lesson Gideon learned well—and a lesson David needed to learn.

As a result of David's departure from this principle and because the whole nation looked to the king as an example, God's judgment on David was severe. The Lord sent a prophet to David with strict instructions:

"Go and tell David, 'This is what the LORD says: I am giving you three options. Choose one of them for me to carry out against you.'"

So Gad went to David and said to him, "This is what the LORD says: 'Take your choice: three years of famine, three months of being swept away before your enemies, with their swords overtaking you, or three days of the sword of the LORD—days of plague in the land, with the angel of the LORD ravaging every part of Israel.' Now then, decide how I should answer the one who sent me."

David said to Gad, "I am in deep distress. Let me fall into the hands of the LORD, for his mercy is very great; but do not let me fall into the hands of men."

So the LORD sent a plague on Israel, and seventy thousand men of Israel fell dead. And God sent an angel to destroy Jerusalem. But as the angel was doing so, the LORD saw it and was grieved because of the calamity and said to the angel who was destroying the people, "Enough! Withdraw your hand." The angel of the LORD was then standing at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.

David looked up and saw the angel of the LORD standing between heaven and earth, with a drawn sword in his hand extended over Jerusalem. Then David and the elders, clothed in sackcloth, fell facedown.

David said to God, "Was it not I who ordered the fighting men to be counted? I am the one who has sinned and done wrong. These are but sheep. What have they done?"

O LORD my God, let your hand fall upon me and my family, but do not let this plague remain on your people" (21:10–17).

Then God instructed David to buy the cattle and the threshing floor of Ornan and there to erect an altar and worship God. The temple was later built on that site, and the altar was placed where the angel of God stayed his hand from judgment. So the grace of God came even at a time of disobedience and turned the judgment upon David into grace and blessing for the nation.

The Mighty Warrior and the Man of Peace

The rest of the book tells of David's passion for building the temple. Because he understood that a nation without a center of worship could never be a nation, he longed to see the temple built.

But David was a man of war, and God wanted a man of peace to rule over the nations of the earth (1 Chron. 22:6–19). So God said to David, "You will have a son who will be a man of peace and rest. . . . He is the one who will build a house for my Name." By this time, David had learned the principle of obedience so well that he accepted God's will, even though it was a great disappointment.

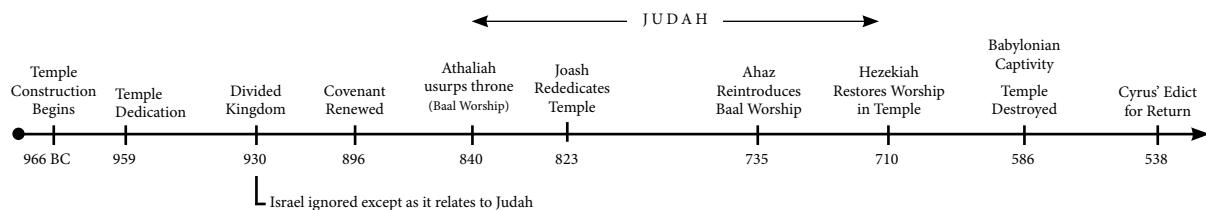
In grace, however, God allowed David to do everything for the temple except build it. He drew the plans. He designed the furniture. He collected the materials. He made the arrangements. He set up the order and ritual. He brought down the cedar lumber from Mount Hermon and Mount Lebanon in the north. He directed the quarrying of the stones. He gathered in the gold, silver, and iron.

Then, as the book closes, we see the

anointed Solomon and King David reigning side by side. This is a complete picture of the ministry of the Lord Jesus. Christ is both the mighty warrior, David, and the man of peace, Solomon.

What is the message of this book? First Chronicles speaks to us of the supreme importance of the temple—the authority of God—in our lives.

Over the three great doors of the cathedral in Milan, Italy, are three inscriptions. Over the right-hand door is carved a wreath of flowers and the words, “All that pleases is but for a moment.” On the left-hand door is a cross and the inscription, “All that troubles is but for a moment.” Over the main entrance are the words, “Nothing is important save that which is eternal.” That is the lesson of this book.

God's King in God's House

Tremendous riches are hidden away in the much-neglected book of 2 Chronicles. As 1 Chronicles is all about King David, 2 Chronicles is all about the house of David. This book records the lives and deeds of the kings of Judah who were the descendants of David. Like the first book, 2 Chronicles focuses largely on the temple. It shows us that when God's king walks in the light of God's house, there are blessings throughout the kingdom.

The Construction of the Temple

The first nine chapters of 2 Chronicles center on the temple.

As the book opens, Solomon asks God for wisdom, and God replies, “Since this is your heart’s desire and you have not asked for wealth, riches or honor, nor for the death of your enemies, and since you have not asked for a long life but for wisdom and knowledge to govern my people over whom I have made you king, therefore wisdom and knowledge will be given you” (1:11b–12).

Then Solomon goes to the tabernacle on the high place at the city of Gibeon. The tabernacle was the center of God’s

guidance to the people throughout the wilderness journey, the days of the judges, and the reigns of King Saul and King David. So Solomon goes there to worship God and offer sacrifices.

The passage briefly describes the glorious reign of Solomon. Under his leadership, Israel quickly grows in military might, economic power, international trade, and cultural splendor.

In chapter 2, the account shifts from the tabernacle to the temple site that David selected in Jerusalem. This symbolizes the fact that when the Lord Jesus reigns as king in our lives and we yield to His lordship, we no longer have a relationship with the tabernacle—an impermanent tent of worship that is pitched here and there during our wanderings. We now walk in a permanent relationship with God in which He rules our lives and we walk in the light of God’s house.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter records the rise and splendor of Israel under King Solomon—and the decline and captivity of Israel under a succession of (mostly evil) kings. We find crucial warnings and lessons for our lives in the chronicle of the glory and tragedy of ancient Israel.

Solomon now begins building the temple that his father David planned and provided for. Solomon, as a type of Christ in His role as the Prince of Peace, has the honor of building the temple. He represents the symbolic picture that is completed in the New Testament which depicts the Lord Jesus Himself as the builder of the temple of the human spirit.

Solomon's prayer in chapter 6 shows that God intended the temple to be a place where the people would come and be restored from the effects of sin. Whether the people suffered from spiritual failure or the punishment of captivity, they knew they could come to the temple, offer prayers, sacrifices, and genuine, humble confession of their sin—and God would restore them to a place of forgiveness and righteousness.

The people waited in the temple courts while Solomon prayed. Then, when he finished his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the sacrifice on the altar. Immediately the temple was filled with a cloud of glory so that the priest could not enter. This was the sign that God had accepted the offering and that His presence had filled the temple.

The Glory of Solomon's Kingdom

Chapter 9 begins a detailed account of the glories and conquests of the Solomonic kingdom. We are treated to the story of the queen of Sheba's visit, which illustrates how God makes His grace known throughout the nations. The Jews, in the days of the kingdom of Israel, weren't sent out into the whole world as we are commanded to do now by the Great Commission (see Matt. 28:19–20). Instead, God's grace was displayed by the building of

a land and a people so wondrously blessed by God that word spread to the uttermost parts of the earth. People came from around the world to see for themselves what God was doing in Israel.

This is a picture of God's supreme method of evangelism. Believers everywhere are commanded to live lives that are so controlled by the Spirit of God that people everywhere are amazed to see the light of God shining through them. When believers manifest the victory and rejoicing of the Lord, others can't help but ask, "What is it about these people? I want to know what this is all about."

The queen of Sheba came to meet Solomon and she saw "the palace he had built, the food on his table, the seating of his officials, the attending servants in their robes . . . and the burnt offerings he made at the temple of the LORD" (9:3–4). She was overwhelmed and awed by all she saw, saying, "Not even half the greatness of your wisdom was told me; you have far exceeded the report I heard" (9:6).

Perhaps you have had a taste of the experience Solomon had, the experience of hearing someone say, "There's something about your life that drew me when I first saw you." It's the experience Peter describes when he says:

In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15).

This is God's primary method of evangelism.

From Solomon to the Captivity

The death of Solomon is recorded at the end of chapter 9.

In chapters 10 through 36, we find a record of Judah's kings from the death of Solomon to the time of the Babylonian captivity. Nine of the kings of this period are good kings and eleven are evil. Manasseh, who reigned for fifty-five years in Judah, started out as the worst king in Judah's history and ended up repenting. He ultimately became one of Judah's best kings because God was able to reach his heart, redeem him, and restore him. As you read through these accounts, the evil kings reveal the pattern of temptation and sin in a disobedient heart.

A moral and spiritual decline is evident in this procession of kings. It begins with the minor infiltration of evil into the kingdom. Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, was unwilling to follow the good counsel of the wise men of his kingdom. He asked the older men, "How would you advise me to answer these people?" They said, "If you will be kind to these people and please them and give them a favorable answer, they will always be your servants." But the young men advised him to say, "My father laid on you a heavy yoke; I will make it even heavier." Rehoboam refused to follow the old men's good counsel. That is all he did. Yet that was the beginning of the progressive evil that led to the destruction and captivity of the kingdom.

Later, you find evidence of even further decline in the moral standards of the king:

After Rehoboam's position as king was established and he had become strong, he and all Israel with him abandoned the law of the LORD (12:1).

Rehoboam turned a deaf ear to what God commanded. As a result, the kingdom was invaded by the Egyptians. The moment that the king disobeyed the law of God, the defenses of the nation were weakened and the enemies came pouring over the border. It was only by God's grace that the Egyptians were turned back. When Rehoboam humbled himself and returned to God, the Egyptians were repelled.

The next evil king, Jehoram, makes his appearance in 2 Chronicles 21:4:

When Jehoram established himself firmly over his father's kingdom, he put all his brothers to the sword along with some of the princes of Israel.

Whereas Rehoboam had refused good advice and turned a deaf ear to the law, Jehoram turns to murder as his unrestrained jealousy undermines the kingdom. He kills all his brothers to prevent them from threatening his reign and leads the nation into even deeper moral and spiritual corruption:

He had also built high places on the hills of Judah and had caused the people of Jerusalem to prostitute themselves and had led Judah astray (21:11).

The Hebrew people once worshiped Jehovah on the high places, when there was no temple. But after the temple of Solomon was built and the Lord put His name there, He commanded the people to worship Him and offer sacrifices in the temple—not on the high places. From then on, only the idolatrous religions offered sacrifices on the hilltops. Jehoram directed the building of altars on the

high places—and those altars were used to worship the idols of false gods.

As the worship of Jehovah deteriorated society weakened and crumbled. The nation's military and economic might began to disintegrate—and the nation was soon invaded by foreign powers. During King Jehoram's reign, the Philistines, the nation that symbolized the desires of the flesh, invaded the kingdom.

The next evil ruler is King Ahaz, who is introduced in chapter 28:

Ahaz was twenty years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem sixteen years. Unlike David his father, he did not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD. He walked in the ways of the kings of Israel and also made cast idols for worshiping the Baals (28:1-2).

Here is the introduction of vile practices of idolatry that were primarily sexual in nature. Judah was increasingly afflicted by these practices, and the evil kings—including King Ahaz—actually introduced these vile religions into the life of the nation:

He burned sacrifices in the Valley of Ben Hinnom and sacrificed his sons in the fire, following the detestable ways of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites. He offered sacrifices and burned incense at the high places, on the hilltops and under every spreading tree (28:3-4).

The pattern is always the same. The king leads the nation away from God and into the practice of a false and loathsome religion—and God allows the nation to suffer the

consequences of it sin at the hands of an invading nation:

The LORD his God handed him over to the king of Aram. The Arameans defeated him and took many of his people as prisoners (28:5).

I believe there is a similar principle that operates within each Christian believer. If we allow the inner temple of our lives to be destroyed, if we allow ourselves to be spiritually and morally weakened by some inner idolatry (the love of money and possessions, the love of power, the worship of fame or the approval of others), we lower our defenses. We open ourselves to attack by the invaders of the spirit—bitterness, anger, depression, frustration, and defeat. In fact, this may be one explanation for why so many people are prone to emotional afflictions.

If we maintain our obedient love for God within the inner temple of our lives, if we obey His will and seek His wisdom for our lives, we guard and defend ourselves against invasion. We maintain our inner sense of peace and security.

Reformation and Restoration

Throughout much of this book, the people of Judah suffer under the evil leadership of wicked kings. By contrast, the good kings reflect the grace of God in cleansing and restoring the nation. They bring peace and prosperity to their people. In 2 Chronicles we read of five great reformations and revivals in Judah. God continually seeks to halt the deterioration of the nation and to call the kingdom back to its place of glory and blessing. The first period of reformation was

under King Asa in chapters 14 through 16. In chapter 14, we read:

Asa did what was good and right in the eyes of the LORD his God. He removed the foreign altars and the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles [which involved the worship of the phallus, the male sex organ]. He commanded Judah to seek the LORD, the God of their fathers, and to obey his laws and commands (14:2-4).

The goodness of King Asa brought blessing and safety to the nation. When a massive attack came against Judah with superior numbers from the south, God delivered the nation in a mighty way:

Zerah the Cushite marched out against them with a vast army and three hundred chariots, and came as far as Mareshah. Asa went out to meet him, and they took up battle positions in the Valley of Zephathah near Mareshah.

Then Asa called to the LORD his God and said, “LORD, there is no one like you to help the powerless against the mighty. Help us, O LORD our God, for we rely on you, and in your name we have come against this vast army. O LORD, you are our God; do not let man prevail against you.”

The LORD struck down the Cushites before Asa and Judah. The Cushites fled (14:9-12).

We may be put under pressure at times, but if our hearts are obedient to the Holy Spirit's prompting, our defenses will be secure whatever may come. As Isaiah says, "You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you" (Isa. 26:3). We see this principle at work when Asa returns from the battle with the Cushites and meets the prophet Oded:

The Spirit of God came upon Azariah son of Oded. He went out to meet Asa and said to him, “Listen to me, Asa and all Judah and Benjamin. The LORD is with you when you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will forsake you (15:1-2).

Is Oded saying that God would forsake a believer so that the believer would be lost? No. The prophet Oded is talking here about being forsaken in the sense of losing access to God's power, victory, and ability to stand under stress. In order to access the power of God, we must seek fellowship with God. If we forsake Him, how can He impart His power to us? As Paul says in the New Testament, "I press on to take hold of that [resurrection power] for which Christ Jesus took hold of me" (Phil. 3:12). That is the secret of real power.

Here is the key to understanding the lessons of the lives of the good kings: Each king who leads a reformation in Israel illustrates a different principle of restoration.

In Asa we find the first principle of restoration—determination to obey the law:

They entered into a covenant to seek the LORD, the God of their fathers, with all their heart and soul. All who would not seek the LORD, the God of Israel, were to be put to death, whether small or great, man or woman. They took an oath to the LORD with loud acclamation, with shouting and with trumpets and horns. All Judah rejoiced about the oath because they had sworn it wholeheartedly. They sought God eagerly, and he was found by them. So the LORD gave them rest on every side (15:12-15).

Asa awakens the nation to the fact that it had been drifting into defection, and with defection comes invasion, bondage, and slavery. The way of reformation involves a renewed determination to follow the Lord, to seek Him with a whole heart, which is sealed by a renewed vow. As a result, the Lord gives the nation peace and rest.

In the reign of King Jehoshaphat, the next king on the throne of Judah, there is another time of restoration. Jehoshaphat clears the idols out of the land. The second principle of restoration is set forth by the reign of Jehoshaphat—the ministry of teaching:

In the third year of his reign he sent his officials. . . . They taught throughout Judah, taking with them the Book of the Law of the LORD; they went around to all the towns of Judah and taught the people (17:7–9).

We see the ministry of teaching followed by another reformation and God's blessing of peace:

The fear of the LORD fell on all the kingdoms of the lands surrounding Judah, so that they did not make war with Jehoshaphat (17:10).

Later, unfortunately, Jehoshaphat makes an alliance with Ahaziah, the king of Israel, the apostate northern kingdom. Israel and Judah join together in a naval expedition that ends in disaster. It's a moment of weakness in the life of King Jehoshaphat, and it causes the entire nation of Judah to be weakened. As a result, Judah is later attacked by Ammon, Moab, and Edom—all symbolic types of the flesh.

In chapters 23 and 24, we come to the story of King Joash, who illustrates the third

principle of restoration—*paying what is owed*. The third restoration of Israel was accomplished by the collection of the temple taxes from the people:

Joash decided to restore the temple of the LORD. He called together the priests and Levites and said to them, “Go to the towns of Judah and collect the money due annually from all Israel, to repair the temple of your God. Do it now” (24:4–5).

The temple tax had long been neglected. Because no one had paid to repair the temple, it had fallen into such a sad state of disrepair that its doors were actually shut. No sacrifices were offered in the temple, so Joash gathered money to restore the temple. The temple symbolizes the human spirit as a place of worship, so restoring and repairing the temple is a picture of the strengthening of the spirit. How? By what is called restitution—paying what is owed. It may involve apologizing to someone for a sin or offense, or it might require making restitution for a theft or returning something that was wrongfully used. This is the principle of restitution and restoration.

In Hezekiah's reign, chapters 29 through 32, we find the fourth principle of restoration—*cleansing of the temple*. By the time Hezekiah came to the throne, the nation had fallen on such evil days that the temple was filled with rubbish and filth. There was garbage strewn throughout the courts. Hezekiah ordered the cleansing of



Half Shekel Coin

Wikimedia Commons

the temple, and the workers found so much filth that it took sixteen days to remove it.

Once the temple was clean, Hezekiah restored worship and celebrated the Passover for the first time since the days of Solomon. What does this represent? It is the cleansing of the temple of our spirits. It symbolizes the act of putting away the filth that has accumulated and turning away from false ideas that have infected our minds. This cleansing allows us to return to the worship of the Lord.

In Josiah, the last good king of Judah, we find the fifth principle of restoration — *return to the hearing of the Word of God*. By the time Josiah came to the throne, the temple had fallen into complete disuse once again. Josiah directed the people to clean it up again:

While they were bringing out the money that had been taken into the temple of the LORD, Hilkiah the priest found the Book of the Law of the LORD that had been given through Moses (34:14).

This sounds incredible, but the people had actually forgotten that there was a copy of the law of Moses in the temple. Worship had been so neglected in the land that God's Word had been totally forgotten. When the priests went through the temple to clean it, they discovered the scroll of the law and brought it to the king and read it to him. Hearing the words of the law, King Josiah tore his clothes. He commanded his advisors to inquire of the Lord what he should do:

The king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. He went up to the temple of the LORD with the men of Judah, the people of Jerusalem, the priests and the

Levites—all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the LORD. The king stood by his pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the LORD—to follow the LORD and keep his commands (34:29–31).

Whenever the temple of our lives falls into disrepair and disarray, it's time to rediscover God's Word and return to the hearing of the Bible. When we hear God's Word to us with a fresh understanding, and renew our covenant relationship with Him, promising to follow Him and keep His commands, we are restored to a sense of peace, security, and a right relationship.

Judgment and Captivity

God's patience had come to an end.

The last chapter of 2 Chronicles relates how Jerusalem was conquered by Egypt, and the king of Egypt set up Jehoiakim as a puppet ruler. Jehoiakim became king at age twenty-five, and the passage tells us that he "did evil in the eyes of the LORD" (36:5).

The Babylonians attacked Jerusalem, deposed King Jehoiakim, and led him away in shackles. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, established Jehoiakim's son Jehoiachin as Judah's next puppet king. So Jehoiachin did the bidding of Nebuchadnezzar from the throne of David. He, too, "did evil in the eyes of the LORD" (36:9), even though he reigned for just three months and ten days.

Nebuchadnezzar then installed Jehoiachin's uncle, Zedekiah, as king over Judah and Jerusalem—and he was the last king the people of Israel ever had. Zedekiah ascended to the throne at age twenty-one and

reigned for eleven years. The passage tells us that Zedekiah “did evil in the eyes of the LORD his God and did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet, who spoke the word of the LORD” (2 Chron. 36:12). He was hard-hearted and stubborn, and refused to heed God’s Word. The priests and the people followed his example, becoming more and more unfaithful to the one true God, while defiling the temple in Jerusalem with the obscene rites of the idolatrous nations.

Even so, God had pity on the people, in spite of their wicked king, and sent a series of prophetic messengers to them, pleading for them to return to God. But the people rejected the prophets, mocking them and driving them out.

Zedekiah also rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, which infuriated the Babylonian king. Nebuchadnezzar sent his army to Jerusalem. The passage makes it clear that the Babylonians were the instruments of God’s judgment:

He [God] brought up against them the king of the Babylonians, who killed their young men with the sword in the sanctuary, and spared neither young man nor young woman, old man or aged. God handed all of them over to Nebuchadnezzar. He carried to Babylon all the articles from the temple of God, both large and small, and the treasures of the LORD’s temple and the treasures of the king and his officials. They set fire to God’s temple and broke down the wall of Jerusalem; they burned all the palaces and destroyed everything of value there (36:17–19).

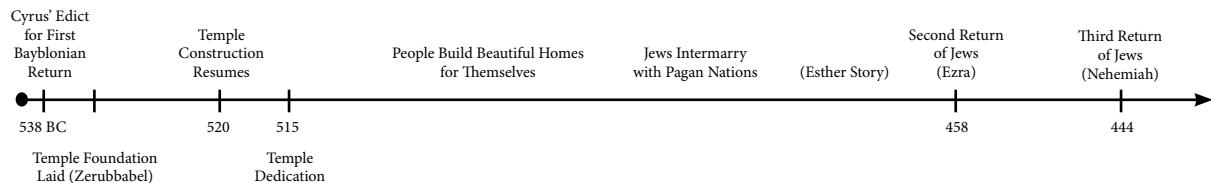
Contrast this scene of devastation, death, and horror with that wonderful scene from the

glory days of Solomon’s reign: King Solomon, in his royal robes, knelt before the people and prayed to the God of heaven. The kingdom was at peace. Solomon’s rule extended to the outermost limits of the kingdom promised to Abraham, from the Euphrates River to the River of Egypt. People from all over the world made pilgrimages to Jerusalem to see the glory of God. The fire of God came down from heaven and the glory of God filled the temple like a cloud.

But at the end of 2 Chronicles, the fire that filled the temple was the fire of judgment and destruction. The temple lay ruined, the city was leveled, the walls were knocked down, the people were slaughtered or taken away in chains. The realm once known as the Land of Promise now crawled with enemies and scavengers. Everywhere was smoke and the stench of death.

This is the picture God draws for us of our lives when we choose to walk in disobedience. The book of 2 Chronicles serves as a warning—and an encouragement. Decline and destruction are not inevitable. If we choose obedience and restoration, we can experience the presence of God’s glory in the temple of our own inner lives—His peace, His prosperity, His blessing upon our lives. We can experience the wonders of the Solomonic era, the riches of heaven poured into the vessels of our own human spirits; “a good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over,” as Jesus promised (Luke 6:38).

Abundance and blessing—or loss and devastation. The choice is ours.

The Road Back

The books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther cover Israel's captivity in Babylon and their return to Jerusalem. The book of Ezra describes how Ezra the scribe led Jewish exiles out of Babylon and back to their home city, Jerusalem, where he restored the observance of the law of Moses and cleansed the Jewish community of ungodly practices. The name "Ezra" is an abbreviated form of Azaryahu, which means "Yahweh has helped."

The journey home from Babylon involved about fifty thousand Jewish men, women, and children—far fewer than the five hundred thousand Jewish war refugees who flooded Israel when the nation was reestablished in 1948, or the 5.7 million Jews who live in Israel today. Yet, though the number of returning Jews in Ezra's time was small, it was an event of great historical importance.

In the Hebrew Bible, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are one book. And though most Bible commentators say that the events of Nehemiah occurred after the events of Ezra, I believe a careful study of these two books shows that the events they cover run parallel to one another.

LEFT: Camel in wilderness

Ezra is concerned with the rebuilding of the temple. Nehemiah is concerned with the rebuilding of the city and walls of Jerusalem. The temple was the last structure destroyed when the nation fell into captivity. It was the last holdout (if we may put it that way) of the Spirit of God within the nation of Israel. In a symbolic sense, the temple, representing the dwelling place of the Spirit, is the last place to be destroyed when a person allows his or her relationship with God to fall to ruin. It's also the first place God begins His work of restoration.

So the book of Ezra, which deals with restoring the temple, is placed before Nehemiah in the Scriptures. Notice the opening words of this book:

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter presents the story of Ezra, who led Israel back to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. We learn important lessons for the Christian life including: How to return after straying from God; how to rebuild your life after a time of spiritual "exile;" and how to restore a broken relationship with God. The three themes of "return," "rebuild," and "restore" are the keys to this chapter.

order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing:

“This is what Cyrus king of Persia says:

“The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you—may his God be with him, and let him go up . . .” (1:1-3).

These words are almost identical to 2 Chronicles 36:22-23. The book of Ezra begins right where Chronicles leaves off. This strongly suggests that Ezra the scribe wrote both books.

Return, Rebuild, and Restore

The book of Ezra illustrates for us the

work of God in restoring a heart that has fallen into sin. Restoration can take place on several levels: an individual basis, in the life of a church, in an entire denomination, in a city, or in a nation. Restoration is the work of God that brings people back from secularism and materialism to true spiritual knowledge and strength. Genuine restoration always follows the pattern depicted here in Ezra.

The book divides very naturally between the ministries of two men: Zerubbabel, chapters 1 through 6, and Ezra, chapters 7 through 10. These two men worked together to lead the captive Jews from Babylon to Jerusalem. Zerubbabel, interestingly enough, was a descendant of David, an heir of the kingly line. Ezra, descended from Aaron the priest, was a priest himself.

The book of Ezra clearly shows the need

for the work of both a king and a priest in accomplishing restoration. The work of the king is to build (or, in this case, rebuild). The work of the priest is to cleanse and restore. Both functions are essential for a restored relationship with God.

Restoration in the individual requires complete surrender to God's Spirit and humble submission to the kingship and lordship of Jesus Christ. Thus, personal restoration involves Jesus' ministry as king in our lives. It means recognizing God's right to own us, to direct us, to change us, and to replace our plans with His own.

But restoration also means cleansing. The spirit and the soul are cleansed by our Great High Priest who, upon our confession of sin, washes away our guilt and restores us to a place of fellowship and blessedness in His sight. A return from sin is always the work of God's grace, as we see in Ezra 1:1: "The LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia."

Verse 5 continues the theme of God's active grace by moving people to action: "The family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites—everyone whose heart God had moved—prepared to go up and build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem."

God always takes the initiative. No one, after falling into a sinful experience, would ever come back to Christ unless God brought that person back. We see this principle clearly in the life of the exiled nation of Israel.

In Babylon, the Jews—who began their captivity as slaves—soon became prosperous. They became so prosperous, in fact, that their spiritual values deteriorated and they became lost to materialism. Eventually, many of them became so attached to their material

goods that they did not want to go back to Jerusalem even though, as captive subjects of Babylon, they did not enjoy freedom in the land. So when God opened the door to return, many refused.

But the Spirit of God stirred up the hearts of some and made them unsatisfied with their material prosperity. Mere things will never satisfy the deep-seated cry of the human spirit. When we feel a deep spiritual thirst that material things cannot quench, we should realize that God's Spirit is stirring us to return and rebuild the things that lead to spiritual strength.

The First Return

The Babylonian captivity lasted about seventy years.

Then, in 539 BC, King Cyrus of Persia invaded and defeated the Babylonians. Cyrus issued a decree giving the Israelites their freedom to return to their homeland. So, in chapters 1 and 2, Zerubbabel, the kingly descendant of David, leads fifty thousand people from Babylon back to Jerusalem.

When the people arrive in Jerusalem, it is the seventh month of the year—just in time for the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles. This feast (also called the Feast of Ingathering) was the time when Israel dwelt in tentlike booths to remind them of their pilgrim past. This feast also looks forward to the eventual regathering of Israel from the vast worldwide dispersion (or Diaspora) for the Millennium. It is the feast that is mingled with tears of sorrow as the people see the foundations of the temple being rebuilt.

The returning Jews undertake two significant actions upon their return. Their

first act was to build an altar at the original temple site. Beneath the open sky, in the midst of the rubble and ruins, they erect an altar to God. Then they worship Him and offer sacrifice as the law of Moses requires.

This is an important action. Rebuilding an altar to God is the first act of a heart that desires a restored fellowship with God after a time of wandering. Further, an altar symbolizes ownership. It is both an acknowledgment that God possesses sole right to our lives and a symbol of our personal relationship with Him. Therefore, an altar almost invariably involves sacrifice, worship, and praise.

As a Christian who wants to restore a broken relationship with God, the “altar” you build would not be a structure made of stone. Your “altar” would be a renewed commitment to prayer and meditation and the study of God’s Word. It would be a renewed “family altar,” devotional time spent with your spouse and children, growing closer to God through regular family Bible reading and prayer. It might also include a return to such spiritual disciplines as fasting or becoming involved in a small group Bible study. When you want to rebuild a broken relationship with God, you begin at the altar.

In the Old Testament, a sacrifice involved the symbolic death of an animal. In the New Testament, “sacrifice” means the death of self, the recognition that “you are not your own; you were bought at a price” (1 Cor. 6:19–20). The experience of sacrifice, worship, and praise brings a restored relationship and the joy of a restored heart.

A man once took time off from work to meet with me and talk about his prayer life. He brought along sheets of paper on which he

had written all the things he had been trying to pray about—three or four single-spaced sheets. “I have a great deal of trouble with this,” he said. “I find it hard to remember all these things and to go through these lists. It’s so mechanical, so empty.”

“Why don’t you just forget all this,” I said. “Just spend your time, for a few prayer sessions anyway, simply praising the Lord.”

At first this man was resistant, even resentful. He later told me that he thought, *I took time off work to talk to you, and all you told me was, “Why don’t you spend your time praising the Lord?”* He wanted advice in organizing his prayer life to make it more effective and goal oriented—but I had just told him to scrap his lists and goals!

But after he left, he thought about what I had said—and he tried it. Almost instantly, he found that his prayer life was revolutionized. He experienced a sense of restoration, a sense of restored personal communion.

That is what God is after in your life and mine. That is why the altar of worship is so important in the process of spiritual restoration.

The second act of the returning Jews was to lay the foundation of the temple, and it was met with mixed feelings of both tears and shouts of joy:

All the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping.

because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away (3:11-13).

Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever come back to God after a time of coldness and withdrawal—a period of captivity to sin's power? Do you remember that great sense of joy as His Spirit reestablished the foundations of communion within your heart? Yes, there was rejoicing—but there was also sorrow and regret for the lost and wasted years.

That mix of emotions is exactly what is portrayed here: tears of joy mingled with tears of sorrow as the people see the temple foundation being laid.

Opposition and Delay

Even in this moment of joy and restoration, however, opposition is developing, as we see in chapters 4 through 6. A force is at work in Israel which mirrors the force in every human heart that bitterly resists the work of God's Spirit. This force immediately manifests itself here, and it does so deceptively, in the guise of friendly solicitude and courtesy:

When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were building a temple for the LORD, the God of Israel, they came to Zerubbabel and to the heads of the families and said, "Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here" (4:1-2).

Incidentally, these enemies are the people who would come to be known as the Samaritans, frequently mentioned in the New Testament. These Samaritans approach the Jews and say, "Let us help you build [the temple] because, like you, we seek your God

and have been sacrificing to him." They come with an open hand, volunteering to roll up their sleeves and work.

That would be a hard offer for most of us to turn down. It's easy to say no to an enemy who comes breathing threats, but what do you say to an enemy who comes saying, "Let me help"? The only way to do so is with a heart that is obedient to God's Word:

Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the rest of the heads of the families of Israel answered, "You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the LORD, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us" (4:3).

That sounds rude and offensive, but God had commanded Israel not to fellowship with other nations or to engage with them in enterprises concerning the faith. What does this mean? That it was wrong for one nation to intermingle with another? No, this principle has been distorted and misapplied to situations today where it does not apply.

It means simply that God rejects the philosophy of the world in carrying out His work. There is a worldly religion and there is the faith that God gives us, and the two must never be mingled. Worldly religion reflects the spirit of Satan, the god of this age, who says to us, "Use religion to advance yourself, to achieve self-glorification. Do this for your own glory. Be religious to win admiration, power, fame, or whatever your heart desires." But God rejects this principle.

The dishonesty behind the Samaritans' offer is demonstrated by the fact that the Jews' rejection of the offer removes all

pretense. The “friendship” offered by the Samaritans quickly turns to hatred:

The peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building. They hired counselors to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to the reign of Darius king of Persia (4:4-5).

Chapters 5 and 6 relate the story of how successful the opponents were in stopping the work of rebuilding the temple. By deliberately frustrating the Jews, mocking and taunting them, they hindered Israel from doing the work God had commanded. These so-called friends used every means, including legal means, to undermine Israel’s authority and right to build. This is what happens whenever someone stands for God.

As Paul wrote to the Galatians, “The sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit” (Gal. 5:17). This is what we have here, and the principle was quite successful. The work was stopped for sixteen years and the temple lay half completed, overrun with weeds and grass. Again, worship ceased.

Then God sent two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah. These two men were God’s instruments to move the people’s hearts. When the people began to turn back to God, He also turned the hearts of the kings, Darius and Artaxerxes, and they issued the decree that directed that work on the temple should resume. So, finally, the work was finished.

In chapter 6 we read that the first thing the Jews did upon completing the temple was to celebrate the Passover. This marked

the beginning of their restored fellowship with God.

In much the same way, when we experience a restored relationship with the living God, our lives should be marked by celebration and joy. Apart from God, we have nothing to celebrate. Once we are rejoined with God, we enjoy the glory and light of heaven as it shines upon our hearts. The temple of our spirits stands tall and resplendent, filled with the glory of God’s presence—and we can bask in the joy that He gives us.

The Second Return

The latter part of the book concerns the ministry of Ezra, who led the second return to the land. In chapter 7, we read:

This Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given. The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him (7:6).

Wouldn’t you like to have this written of you: “the king granted him everything he asked”? What kind of person is this whom a heathen Gentile king regards so highly that he will give Ezra anything he asks? We find the secret of this man’s character in this chapter:

Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel (7:10).

Ezra is a man of the Word. Therefore, God sent him to Jerusalem to strengthen and beautify the temple. That is the work of the Word of God in our lives: strengthening and

beautifying within us the place of fellowship with God:

After these things had been done, the leaders came to me and said, “The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Modabites, Egyptians and Amorites. They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness” (9:1–2).

The leaders of the nation came to Ezra and reported that the Jews were once again mingling with the surrounding nations, adopting their idolatrous practices, and taking wives and husbands from among those alien people. These were the very practices that had broken the strength of the nation before. These were the sins that caused God to finally disperse the Jewish people, separate them into two nations, and deliver them into captivity and exile. Now, it seemed, after seventy years under the Lord's disciplining hand, they hadn't learned a thing!

The flesh never changes. No matter how long you walk in the Spirit, you will never get to a place where you cannot fall, where you cannot revert to your worst spiritual condition. All it takes is a little inattention, a little straying, a little departure from your dependence upon God's Spirit, and before you realize it you are back in the mire of your old ways. Ezra was shattered to learn that this has happened:

When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled . . . until the evening sacrifice (9:3–4).

As the book nears its close, Ezra prays to God and confesses the great sin of the nation. In response, God graciously moves in the hearts of the people. The leaders come to Ezra brokenhearted, acknowledging their sin. Then the leaders issue a proclamation, calling all the people to assemble together. Though it is raining, the people still gather, thousands thronging into the square before the temple, and together, they confess their disobedience.

What happens next is hard for us to accept: The people pledge to put away the wives and children they had acquired outside of God's will. Now this is a hurtful thing, isn't it? This is what Jesus meant when He said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children . . . he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). Our relationship with God comes first.

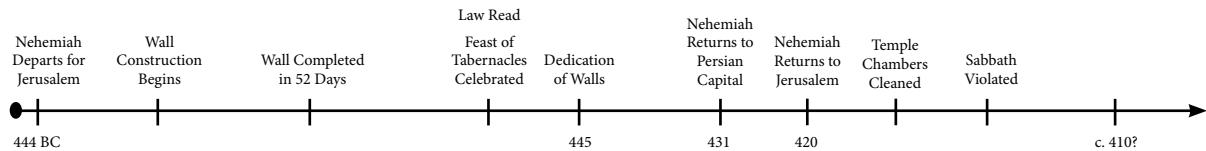
This is a symbolic teaching. God is not saying that we have to divorce and then abandon our children today. Rather, He is saying that we should ruthlessly divorce ourselves from anything that comes from the flesh and hinders our spiritual purity and our relationship with God. We must divorce ourselves from our materialism, our lusts and coveting, our ungodly goals and values, our anger and grudges, our habits and sins, all of which are symbolized by these Canaanite tribes in the land.

It was hard for the Israelites to put away their wives and children, but they realized that their only chance of being restored to fellowship with God lay in absolute, radical

obedience to His Word. Jesus said, “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. . . . If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off” (Matt. 5:29–30). Be ruthless in putting away the sins that keep

you from a right relationship with God.

That is the road back to holiness, the path to a restored relationship with the One who loves us. The road of obedience is the road back to God.

Rebuilding the Walls

Nehemiah is not one of the most prominent personalities in the Bible, yet he was a key player in God's plan for the nation of Israel. The story of his life is rich in lessons for us today. Nehemiah was born in exile and had a comfortable, honored position as cupbearer to King Artaxerxes. Yet his heart was burdened for the homeland he had never seen. His heart was broken over the things that broke the heart of God.

He knew that his nation had been destroyed and his people had been led into captivity because the people had sinned against God. When the time came for the people to return to Israel the Lord gave Nehemiah a vision for restoring and rebuilding the nation of Israel. Nehemiah responded by demonstrating character traits of faith and godly leadership.

The book of Nehemiah falls into two divisions, which I call "Reconstruction" and "Reinstruction." The first six chapters cover the *reconstruction* of the city wall, while chapters 7 through 13 deal with the *reinstruction* of the people. Reconstruction and reinstruction—

those two words offer a thumbnail sketch of the book of Nehemiah.

Reversed Chronology

As we noted previously, the two books of Ezra and Nehemiah appear as one book in the Hebrew Bible. Ezra is the story of the rebuilding of the temple; Nehemiah is the story of the rebuilding of the city and the walls of Jerusalem. Many Bible commentators believe that the events of Nehemiah chronologically follow the events of Ezra. I believe, however, that the events in Ezra and Nehemiah are parallel, occurring at the same time.

The histories contained in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther all occurred during the same general period of Israel's

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter tells the story of Nehemiah, a key leader in Israel's history, the architect of the reconstruction of Jerusalem and its walls following the Babylonian exile. The two key themes of the book of Nehemiah are "reconstruction" and "reinstruction." His life teaches us important lessons for the Christian life including: How to move from captivity to a rightful place with God; how to rebuild your defense against spiritual attack; and how to righteously judge sin.

history. They actually appear in reverse chronological order in our Bible. In other words, the events in Esther actually occurred before events in Ezra and Nehemiah, when God first began to move the people of Israel out of captivity and back to their own land. The prophet Jeremiah had predicted that Israel's captivity would last seventy years, and the events in Esther mark the middle of that seventy-year period. Let's put these interconnecting events into a chronological perspective:

During the captivity, God raised Esther, a young Jewish maiden, to the throne of Persia as queen. Her husband, the king of Persia, is known by different names in these three books. That seems confusing at first, but just remember this: King Ahasuerus of Persia is the same king who is called Artaxerxes in the opening chapters of Nehemiah. This king, though he was not a follower of the God of Israel, was moved by God to give the command for Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city walls.

When Nehemiah recounts his meeting with the king in 2:6 there is one phrase that underscores the importance of the queen: "The king, with the *queen sitting beside him*, asked me . . ." (italics added). I believe the queen mentioned here was Queen Esther, the Jewish woman whom God had raised to a place of prominence and influence with the king.

Why would these books use different names for the same king? It's because they are not names but titles. Artaxerxes is a title that simply means "the great king." Ahasuerus is a title meaning "the venerable father." These were not the king's given names. It may be

helpful to know that Artaxerxes/Ahasuerus is the same king who is identified in the book of Daniel as "Darius the Mede." Ironically, however, Artaxerxes in the book of Nehemiah is not the same person as the Artaxerxes in the book of Ezra!

Fortunately, the identity of these kings is not the crucial issue in these books. It is much more important to know who Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther are—and how God used them in a mighty way to advance His plan. Each has a unique place in God's blueprint of history, and each has much to teach us about our own place in God's plan.

Ezra is God's priest, calling the people of Israel back to true worship and fellowship with God through the restoration of the temple. Esther is an instrument of God's grace, sent to the throne of Persia to move the heart of her husband, the king.

Nehemiah is a cupbearer—the king's servant—but he also emerges as a leader of his people. At God's direction, under Queen Esther's influence, the king allows his servant Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem. There, Nehemiah demonstrates godly leadership as the supervisor of God's divine urban renewal project.

About twenty-five years after Nehemiah began rebuilding the city of Jerusalem, Zerubbabel returned with around fifty thousand captives from Babylon, as recorded in the book of Ezra.

Chronologically, the events in these three books follow this order: Esther, Nehemiah, and Ezra. But God reversed the order of the books, so we have Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. Scripture is not concerned with chronology alone. It is concerned with the teaching of

truth, and the central truth that each of these books teaches is *how to move from captivity to a rightful place with God*. Each book explores this truth in a different way.

Ezra begins with the building of the temple; the theme of this book is that the restoration of authentic worship is the first step on the road back to God. Nehemiah tells the story of rebuilding the walls; the theme of this book is that God fulfills our need for security, protection, and strength. Esther reveals God selecting of a woman from a captive race to become queen, affecting the course of nations and achieving His plan; the theme of this book is that God has an ultimate purpose for each of us and uses individual people to achieve His eternal, cosmic plan.

That, in a brief survey, is how these three books fit together, like puzzle pieces, forming a picture of God's blueprint for the people of Israel. Each of these three leaders—Esther, Nehemiah, and Ezra—arrived on the scene at a significant moment in history as God uses each one to liberate the people from bondage and to restore them as a worshiping people.

The Symbolic City of God

A wall is more than a barrier of stone and mortar. A wall is a statement.

The walls of the city of Jericho symbolized the pride and arrogance of that godless city. That is one reason why God chose to pull them down with nothing but Israel's faith, His own invisible power, and the people's shout. God wanted to show that the arrogance of Jericho was no match for the humble faith of God's people when it was aligned with the limitless power of God Himself.

The Berlin Wall symbolized not only the

division between East and West, but also the misery and despair of people enslaved by communism. There is no more eloquent statement of the collapse of communism than the photos of the German people tearing down that hated wall with their own hands.

The fifteen-hundred-mile-long Great Wall of China symbolizes the vast power of the Ch'in Dynasty of the third century BC. The Great Wall, one of the largest human engineering projects ever built, was erected to defend China from warring tribes in the north. Up to thirty feet high, twenty-five feet wide, with a roadway running along the top and watchtowers spaced at regular intervals, it is a formidable, intimidating structure. It makes a clear statement: "Don't even think of invading our land!"

Walls symbolize strength and protection. In ancient cities, massive walls were the first, last, and only line of defense. The walls of Babylon, as recounted in Daniel, were about 380 feet thick and over 100 feet high—not as long as the Great Wall of China but much higher and more massive. Given the size of its walls, the Babylonians had every reason to consider themselves safe from attack.

The wall that Nehemiah was called to rebuild around Jerusalem, however, had an even deeper, more spiritual meaning than any of the walls just named. The rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem symbolizes an act all believers should undertake. God calls each of us to rebuild the walls of our lives. What does that mean?

Jerusalem is a symbol of the City of God—His dwelling place and the center of life for the world. In the New Testament, we see that God's ultimate dwelling place is in us,

His people. When we rebuild the walls of our individual lives, we reestablish the protection and strength of God in our lives.

We all have met people whose defenses have crumbled away. They have become human derelicts, drifting along the streets of our cities, hopeless and helpless, and frequently slaves to alcohol, drugs, or sexual addiction.

But God in His grace will often reach down and take hold of such a person. He will bring that person out of captivity and He will work with that person to rebuild the defenses so they can resist temptation and escape the bondage of sin and addiction. The rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, the City of God, symbolizes how we can rebuild the walls of any life, any church, any community, or any nation. It's a picture of the strength, power, and purpose God wants to rebuild in us as a barrier to sin, failure, and destruction.

The Five-Step Rebuilding Process

The text describes a five-step process that drives Nehemiah's action—a process

that is relevant to any life: (1) concern, (2) confession, (3) commitment, (4) courage, and (5) caution. Let's look at each of these five steps.

Step 1: *Concern*. The first step in the rebuilding process is given in chapter 1: Nehemiah's concern about the ruins. While in the citadel of Susa, serving as the king's cupbearer, Nehemiah learns from travelers (including his brother Hanani) that Jerusalem's wall was broken down, her gates had been burned, and the few surviving Jews in the region were suffering persecution. Nehemiah writes:

When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven (1:4).

Rebuilding the walls begins with concern over the damage. You will never rebuild the walls of your life until you have mourned the ruins of your life. Have you ever stopped to compare what God wants to make of your life versus what you have allowed your life



LEFT: Excavation of Jericho



LEFT: Aerial view of Jericho

to be? Have you examined the potential God created in you? Have you grieved the possibilities and opportunities you have already squandered?

Like Nehemiah, you have been informed of the desolation and ruin in your life—and a normal and fitting response is to mourn, weep, and pray to God. But don't let your remorse harden into paralysis. Realize, as Nehemiah did, that the desolation in your life is not a call to give up, but a *call to wake up!* It's a call to action, a challenge to rebuild.

When Nehemiah hears the report about Jerusalem, he weeps and prays for days, demonstrating his intense concern and burden for God's dwelling place, which has tumbled into ruin. His grief is a necessary first step, but he doesn't stop there.

Step 2: Confession. In chapter 1 we hear Nehemiah's powerful prayer as he confesses that the nation had forsaken God and that His discipline of Israel is just. Fully identifying himself with the sins of his people, Nehemiah says, in part:

"I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. . . ."

"Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name'" (1:6, 8–9).

Step 3: Commitment. These words of confession are followed immediately by commitment, as we now see:

"O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man" (1:11).

A plan is already forming in Nehemiah's mind even while he prays. This often happens when we spend time with God in prayer: He speaks to us and gives us insight, ideas, inspiration, and empowerment to solve the "impossible" problems we bring before Him. Here, we see that God has given Nehemiah the beginnings of a plan.

By the end of the prayer, Nehemiah has something definite he wants to ask of "this man." What man? The answer is in the last sentence of verse 11:

I was cupbearer to the king (1:11).

The king! So Nehemiah, the servant of the king, commits himself to a project in far-off Israel. He asks God to begin moving the king's heart. This is always the process by which we return to the grace of God. We demonstrate concern. Then we confess. Then we commit ourselves to action and ask God to act on our behalf. Because we face obstacles and factors beyond our control, God must arrange the circumstances that will lead to success.

I once heard a man give his testimony at a men's conference. He said that, in the early days of his Christian experience, someone encouraged him to pray about problems that he was having in the workplace—strained relationships with his boss and with other employees. He said, "I didn't think praying was the right thing to do at

first. I didn't even want to pray for people who were making life difficult for me. But I began to pray for them, almost against my own will, and soon I saw changes in the way these people related to me. Looking back, I think we Christians have an unfair advantage over those who don't know the Lord! We have instant access to the One who created the universe! How can those who don't know God ever hope to compete with that?"

In this passage, we see that Nehemiah is aware of the limitless power of God to change circumstances that are beyond human control. So Nehemiah prays about talking to the king. Later, when he goes before the king, the king notices the look of sadness on Nehemiah's face, and he asks why.

Remember, as we saw in Nehemiah 2:6, when Nehemiah goes before the king, the queen is also present—who is none other than Queen Esther. This circumstance was part of God's answer to Nehemiah's prayer: In His foreknowledge, He had already arranged to place a Jewish queen on the throne in Susa. Because of his Jewish wife, the king already had a built-in understanding of the Jews' history and a concern for their problems. So the king responds favorably to Nehemiah's plea for permission to return to Jerusalem.

Step 4: *Courage*. The next step in the program of reconstruction is courage. We now read:

I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates [the province beyond the Euphrates River] and gave them the king's letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me.

When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites (2:9–10).

Pay close attention to those names, Sanballat and Tobiah, and note the nations they come from, the Horonites and the Ammonites. Whenever you read of the Ammonites, Amorites, Amalekites, Hittites, Jebusites, Perizzites, or any of the other "ites," you have a picture of the enemy of God in the flesh. These various tribes symbolize satanic agency within human beings. They are led by Satan to oppose and resist the work of God. Sanballat and Tobiah are no different; they are enemies of God and enemies of Nehemiah.

We immediately see that courage is necessary to rebuild the walls of God's dwelling place. Whenever someone like Nehemiah says, "I will arise and build," Satan always says, "Then I will arise and destroy." Satan always places roadblocks in our way when we start returning to God.

Step 5: *Caution*. Finally, we see in Nehemiah's program the importance of caution. When Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem, in 2:11–16, he doesn't simply pile bricks on top of one another. He doesn't rush out and get the people excited about building the walls. If he did that, he would fall into the trap of his enemies. First, he arises at night and goes out secretly to inspect the walls of the city and survey the ruins. He makes careful, cautious plans of exactly what needs to be done.

These five steps are fundamental to the task of rebuilding walls, whether they are the walls of a city or the walls of a human life:

concern, confession, commitment, courage, and caution.

In chapter 3 we learn how Nehemiah went about the task of reconstruction. If the walls of your life are broken down, if your defenses have crumbled, if the enemy is surrounding you on every hand, if you easily fall prey to temptation, then pay special attention to Nehemiah's process of reconstruction.

We learn two key insights: (1) the people were willing to work, ...and (2) they immediately became involved and sprang into action. Nehemiah, in his God-given wisdom, set each worker to the task of rebuilding whatever part of the wall was nearest to his own house, his own family. In this way, Nehemiah ensured that each worker had a personal stake in the work of rebuilding.

The Significance of the Gates

The rest of Nehemiah 3 centers on the ten gates of the city of Jerusalem. As you read through this chapter, you find the names of these gates, and each gate has a specific symbolic significance. We can draw an important practical lesson from each gate.

The Sheep Gate (3:1–2). This is the gate through which the sheep were brought into the city to be sacrificed at the altar. The Sheep Gate signifies the Lamb of God, whose blood was shed on the cross for us. So this gate reveals the principle of the cross of Christ. The cross is always the starting place for personal strength. You have to begin by recognizing the principle of the cross. You must crucify your ego, your plans, and your self-interest—nail them to the cross of Christ. The cross puts human pride to death. We cannot save

ourselves. Only the Lamb of God, slain for us, can save us. The cross, represented by the Sheep Gate, is the starting place and the source of our strength for the task of rebuilding.

The Fish Gate (3:3–5). What does the name Fish Gate suggest to you? Do you remember the Lord Jesus saying to His disciples, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Mark 1:17)? The Fish Gate suggests the witness of a Christian. Has that gate broken down in your life? Has your witness for the Lord fallen into disuse and disrepair? If so, this gate and its surrounding wall needs to be rebuilt and restored. The Lord Jesus tells us that every Christian is to be a witness for Him. If this wall is broken down, the enemy will have a wide-open avenue through which to enter your life again and again.

The Old [Jeshanah] Gate (3:6–12). This gate represents truth. For many of us, this gate is broken down, and we no longer rest upon the truth of God, which is settled and eternal. Old truths, established and enduring, provide the base upon which everything new must rest. Somebody has well said, "Whatever is true is not new, and whatever is new is not true." These are the days when old truths are being forsaken—not only in our culture but also within the church. Many people say that the old truths and values are unnecessary, invalid, and obsolete. But if a thing is true, it is never obsolete. If we allow truth to go by the wayside, we find that our walls quickly crumble and our enemies gain access to our souls. God's truth never changes; it is eternally true.

A man went to visit an old musician. He knocked on the musician's door and said,

“What’s the good word for today?” The old musician said nothing, but turned, took a tuning fork from his shelf, and struck the tuning fork against the shelf. A note resounded through the room.

The musician said, “That, my friend, is A. It was A yesterday. It was A five thousand years ago, and it will be A five thousand years from now.” Then he added, thumbing over his shoulder, “The tenor across the hall sings off-key. The soprano upstairs flats her high notes. The piano in the next room is out of tune. But the note from that tuning fork is A. And that, my friend, is the good word for today.”

That is the nature of truth. Many voices around us will claim to speak the truth, but if their “truth” does not conform to the ultimate tuning fork of God’s truth, they are out of tune. Their “truth” is a falsehood. God’s truth never changes. In our churches and our individual lives, we must rebuild the Old Gate of truth.

The Valley Gate (3:13–14). The symbolism of this gate is obvious: It is the place of humility and lowliness of mind. Throughout Scripture, God says that He opposes human pride. He seeks out and lifts up the lowly, the humble, and the contrite. Our goal should be to have a humble opinion of ourselves and an exalted opinion of God.

The dominant attitude of our age is one of arrogance and pride: “I can do anything I want!” But the attitude God wants to build in us is one of humble dependence upon His infinite resources: “I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Phil. 4:13). When ego and pride dominate in our lives, our gate is broken and shattered. Our

Valley Gate—our sense of humility before God—is in need of repair.

The Dung Gate (3:14). This gate has an unpleasant name, but it serves a necessary function. This is the gate for the elimination of the rubbish and corrupt things in the city. The refuse was taken through the Dung Gate and flung into the garbage dump in the Hinnom Valley.

Our lives need an elimination gate as well. Paul urges us to “purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God” (2 Cor. 7:1). We need to daily purge ourselves of secret sin and private corruption. The failure to purge our sins will ultimately produce misery and ruin in our lives.

The Fountain Gate (3:15). The name of this gate reminds us of the words of the Lord Jesus to the woman at the well: “Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14). This gate was located at the end of the Pool of Siloam. It symbolizes the Holy Spirit, which is the river of life in us, enabling us to obey His will and His Word. Notice that this gate comes immediately after the Dung Gate. After our inner corruption is purged by our active consent, then the cleansing fountain of the Spirit washes us clean.

The Water Gate (3:26). Water is always a symbol of God’s Word. It is an interesting coincidence that, in our own nation’s history, the term Watergate is etched as a symbol of governmental crisis, scandal, and disgrace. At the Watergate Hotel in Washington, D.C.,

a presidential administration ran aground, foundered, and sank. Yet, out of that terrible national tragedy, one Watergate figure—Charles Colson—discovered the Word of God. After confessing his role in the Watergate affair and turning his life over to Jesus Christ, he emerged a changed man, and to this day he is a vital full-time witness for God.

Note that the Water Gate in Jerusalem did not need to be repaired. Evidently it was the only part of the wall still standing. The text mentions that people lived nearby, but it doesn't mention that the Water Gate needed repair. The Word of God never breaks down. It doesn't need to be repaired. It simply needs to be re-inhabited.

The East Gate (3:28–29). This gate faced the rising sun and is the gate of hope. It is the gate of anticipation of the coming day when all the trials of life and the struggles of earth will end, when the glorious new sun will rise on the new day of God. This gate needs to be rebuilt in us when we fall into the pessimistic spirit of this age and are crushed by the hopelessness of our times.

The Horse Gate (3:28–29). The horse in Scripture is a symbol of warfare or, in this case, the need to do battle against the forces of darkness. “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood,” the apostle Paul writes, “but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph. 6:12). Life is a battle, and each of us is a soldier in a mighty struggle against evil—and we are in this war for the duration.

The Inspection Gate (3:31). This was evidently the place where judgment was conducted. We need to stop and conduct a thorough self-inspection. We need to ask God to sift our consciences, to remove the buildup of toxic sins, false attitudes, and bad habits from our lives. Then we will be able to strengthen the protective walls of our souls.

Verse 32 brings us full circle, back to the Sheep Gate, the gate of the cross. The cross must be at the beginning and the end of every life. Through these beautiful symbolic gates, the book of Nehemiah has shown us how to rebuild the walls in our lives.

Opposition!

Chapters 4 through 6 show us the opposition that confronted Nehemiah and his people as they began to rebuild the city walls. The opposition came primarily from a trio of schemers: Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem the Arab.

This persecution can be summarized in three words: contempt, conspiracy, and cunning. The enemies heap contempt and mockery on God's activity. When that fails, they hatch a conspiracy, trying to involve the Israelites in a plot that would overthrow this work. When that fails, they try to draw Nehemiah away from his work by a very cunning scheme. But soon you come to this triumphant statement:

So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God (6:15–16).

That is an amazing testimony. The work of reconstruction is done. Now begins the work of reinstruction.

Reinstruction Begins

The latter part of the book, chapters 7 through 13, is the story of the reinstruction of the people. The city has been strengthened and fortified; now it's time to strengthen and fortify the people, so that the nation of Israel can remain strong. In chapter 8, we have the great convening of the people by Ezra the priest—an event that is also recorded in the book of Ezra. Notice the steps here. Ezra begins by reading the law before the people (8:5–6):

Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, “Amen! Amen!” Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

What is Ezra doing here? It's called "expository preaching." This form of preaching differs from "topical preaching," which is preaching on a certain topic or subject. Expository preaching "throws light" (or exposes) the meaning and application in a particular passage of Scripture. So Ezra is "throwing light" on the Word of God and making its meaning clear to the people, so that the walls of their lives would be strengthened.

After Ezra preached, the people celebrated the Feast of the Tabernacles, commemorating when the people of Israel camped in booths made of tree boughs to remind them that they were strangers and pilgrims on this earth.

Next came the remembrance of the lessons of the past. In chapter 9, Ezra offered a prayer recounting what God had done in the life of the Israelites. You will always be encouraged and strengthened when you pause to remember what God has done for you in the past.

Following this prayer, the people signed a covenant and agreed to obey the law of God. They resolved to take the step of obedience. I can tell you from my own experience that you will never be able to retain the strength of God in your life until you are ready to obey Him.

In chapter 11, we find the recognition of gifts among the people. There are the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, and various others who ministered in the temple. Similarly, in the New Testament, we are told to discover the gifts that the Spirit has given us and to put them to work. "Fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you," Paul wrote to Timothy (2 Tim. 1:6). If you want to retain your strength, use the spiritual gifts God has given you.

In chapter 12, we find the dedication of the walls. The people gather and march around them with instruments, singing and shouting, playing and rejoicing, and crying out joyfully. Nothing will add more to your strength in the Lord than to express and celebrate His joy in your life.

The book closes on the theme of resisting evil. You will remain strong if you adopt the attitude of Nehemiah. He was steadfast in saying "No!" to the forces that wanted to destroy the work God was doing in his life. Observe what he had to do. In chapter 13, we find that Nehemiah leaves Jerusalem and

returns to serve King Artaxerxes in Babylon for a while. Then, with the king's permission, he again comes back to Jerusalem. And what Nehemiah finds upon his return infuriates him:

I learned about the evil thing Eliashib had done in providing Tobiah a room in the courts of the house of God (13:7).

God's priest Eliashib had actually allowed Tobiah, the enemy of God who had opposed Nehemiah, to move right into the temple! What did Nehemiah do? Nehemiah recounts:

I was greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah's household goods out of the room (13:8).

He tossed Tobiah out on his ear! And that's not all. He found that the priests had been cheated, so he restored the money that belonged to them. Then he discovered that the citizens of Jerusalem were violating the Sabbath by bringing in merchandise and selling it in the streets. Nehemiah says:

When evening shadows fell on the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I ordered the doors to be shut and not opened until the Sabbath was over. I stationed some of my own men at the gates so that no load could be brought in on the Sabbath day (13:19).

Nehemiah locked them all out of the city! Then he discovered that some waited outside the doors all night, hoping someone would come out and do a little business. So what did he do then? Nehemiah writes:

I warned them and said, "Why do you spend the night by the wall? If you do this again, I will lay hands on you." From that time on they no longer came on the Sabbath (13:21).

Unfortunately, Nehemiah discovered yet another problem. The people were still intermarrying with the forbidden races around them. At this point, Nehemiah had simply had enough:

I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. I made them take an oath in God's name and said: "You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves" (13:25).

Was Nehemiah too severe? Shouldn't he have been more tolerant? Many people today feel it's enlightened and virtuous to tolerate evil behavior. "We shouldn't be too judgmental," they say. "We shouldn't look at everything in such black-and-white terms. We need to recognize that there are moral shades of gray."

But we must never compromise with evil, with the forces that are opposed to God and His Word. That's one of the greatest lessons that the Spirit of God can ever teach us, and Nehemiah had learned that lesson well.

Significantly, the book of Nehemiah closes on the very same note that opens the ministry of the Lord Jesus in Jerusalem. He came into the temple and found it filled with money changers and merchants who defiled the house of prayer. He made a whip of cords and drove the defilers out of the temple. Jesus

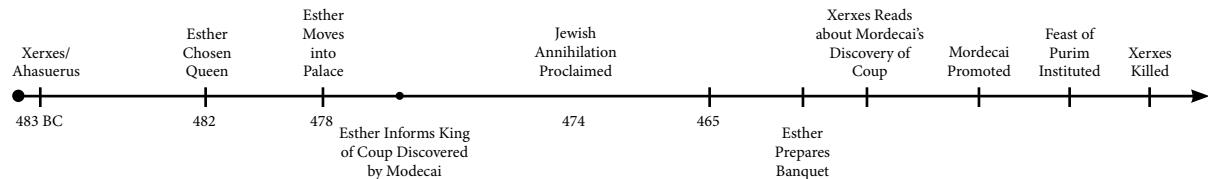
was not trying to build a reputation as a kind and gentle Messiah. He was not willing to tolerate those who defiled God's house. He cleansed the temple, and did so with obvious anger, with sparks flying, yet with complete righteousness and full justification.

Whenever someone makes a positive difference for God in the world, they do so by refusing to compromise with sin. They are people like John the Baptist, the apostle Paul, the Covenanters, Martin Luther, John and Charles Wesley, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

The book of Nehemiah closes on a note of triumph. The walls have been rebuilt.

The evildoers have been purged. The people have been restructured and renewed within. Strength and vitality surges once more in a city once dead and in ruins. Jerusalem has once more become a fit dwelling place for God.

The reconstructed walls of Jerusalem stand once more, bearing witness to the fact that God is alive and active in the lives of His people. When we have reconstructed the walls of our lives, then God will truly live and act through us, and our lives will bear dynamic witness for Him.

The Courage of the Queen

The Holocaust, which took the lives of six million Jews during World War II, is a horror that must never be forgotten. Unfortunately, the Holocaust is not unique in history. Over the centuries, God's chosen people have been marked for extinction again and again by murdering fanatics. In the book of Esther we encounter one of these Hitlerian extremists, a man named Haman. As he prepares to launch his genocidal assault against the Jews, only one thing stands in his way—a Jewish woman named Esther.

The book of Esther is a fascinating little gem in the Old Testament. It is rich in drama and emotional power, and there's considerable evidence (despite those who scoff at the Bible as a collection of legends) that Esther is an accurate historical account of the events that take place during Israel's exile.

Esther is one of the much-neglected books of the Bible, which is amazing, because it reads like a novel. It has everything a good page-turning novel should have: unforgettable characters, romance, intrigue, suspense, arch villainy, murder, betrayal, action, and a thrilling climax. Yet the book of Esther is

LEFT: Judean wilderness

unlike any other novel you have ever read in that it is literally true. This is a richly detailed account of actual historical events. There are parallels between this account and other historical records of the time, such as the account of King Xerxes' invasion of Greece in *The Histories* of Herodotus.

The story of Queen Esther takes place in Persia, which corresponds to modern-day Iran. To this day, there is a sizable Jewish population living in the Muslim state of Iran—the Mizrahi (or “Eastern”) Jews, who are descended from the Jews in Persia during the time of Esther.

The book of Esther tells us how the Jewish festival of Purim came to be—the celebration of the Jews' deliverance from the genocidal plot of Haman nearly 2,500 years ago. It is here, in this book, that the people of Israel are

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter mines the levels of hidden meaning embedded in the beautiful story of Esther. It's a powerful story of faith, courage, and obedience to God's will—even though God is not mentioned once in the book! If you are facing a seemingly impossible challenge in your life right now, the story of Esther is exactly what you need.

first called “Jews” (*Yehudim* in the original text; they had previously been referred to as Israelites or Hebrews). Also in this book, we see the first major outbreak of that irrational, genocidal hatred which has afflicted the Jewish people for centuries—right up to our own time.

Esther is one of three books in the Bible primarily about women—the book of Esther, the book of Ruth, and the Song of Solomon. Each book is a delightful and engaging love story on the surface—and each contains treasures of meaning hidden just beneath the surface.

Esther is a remarkable book in which God is not mentioned. Although it is not an overtly “religious” book, the invisible hand of God is on every page, guiding the events.

King Xerxes and Queen Vashti

The story begins in the same setting as the opening scene of the book of Nehemiah: the royal palace in Susa. It is a time of peace and material blessing. King Xerxes throws a great feast—a six-month long feast—to display the glory, wealth, and power of his kingdom. As he is “in high spirits from wine,” the king calls for his servants to bring Queen Vashti to the banquet hall so that her beauty can be displayed. But proud Queen Vashti snubs the king’s order. Angered by her refusal, King Xerxes issues a decree and divorces the queen.

You and I were created to be like this king, with a “kingdom” over which to rule. I speak of the “kingdom” of our souls, which includes the mind, the emotions, and above all, the will—the right to choose. Your body is the capital city of your kingdom. Your empire includes all that you influence, touch, and

control. Like a king, your will is seated upon the throne of your kingdom. There is also a hidden aspect of your life—your innermost being, your spirit. That is the deepest and most sensitive part of you, the part that was designed to be in touch with God. It’s the place where God Himself is to dwell.

When we meet the king in the book of Esther, we see that he has nothing to do but throw a lavish party to display the glory of his kingdom. In the same way, Adam and Eve, our forebears, had nothing to do but display the glory of God and to rule over the earth. In the book of Esther, the prideful king summons Queen Vashti to display her before his drunken cronies.

This scene parallels the account of the fall of man, when people chose to assert their own wills against God’s revealed will. In the palace of the human spirit, symbolized by Queen Vashti, the God of glory and truth lived. It was there that the human mind, emotions, and will were guided by fellowship with the living Lord, who dwelt in the royal residence of the human spirit. God explained His will to the first two members of the human race, Adam and Eve. If they would simply be obedient to His revealed will, they would fulfill their God-given destiny and utilize the full powers of their un fallen humanity as God originally intended. Tragically, they set their will and reason above God’s will and revelation. With this human choice came the fall.

The fall, the beginning of humanity’s woes, is symbolized for us in the opening chapters of Esther, when the king issues a decree that Queen Vashti be deposed from the throne. Once issued, a decree became the law of the Medes and Persians; the king

could do nothing to reverse it, even though he would later regret the decree when he was sober.

In his loneliness and remorse, he searches for a new queen. He sends a proclamation throughout the kingdom, ordering that all the most beautiful young virgins of the land be brought before him. One of the young women in this procession was a beauty Jewish girl named Hadassah in Hebrew. Many scholars believe the Persian name Esther means “star,” but noted Bible scholar Wilhelm Gesenius (1786–1842), says that the name Esther derives from a word meaning “to hide” or “hidden,” which is a beautiful description not only of Esther’s hidden status as a Jew among

the Gentiles, but of the hidden status of the spirit of man.

Esther was born into the community of captive Jews who had been exiled from Jerusalem and enslaved in Babylon. Born in exile, Esther has never known her ancestral homeland. Having grown up in Persia, she learned to talk and act like a Persian, so that no one even suspected that her heart belonged to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Following the death of her parents, Esther’s cousin Mordecai raised her.

In these two characters, Esther and Mordecai, we see an important symbolic image. Esther signifies the renewed spirit that is given to a person when he or she becomes

a Christian. Esther is under the influence and control of her cousin, Mordecai, who throughout this book is a picture of the Holy Spirit. His behind-the-scenes influence on Esther represents the influence of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer.

Mordecai's name means "little man" or "humble man" in the Persian tongue. In his humility, Mordecai is also a symbolic representation of Jesus Christ—the One who humbled Himself and became a man and was obedient unto death, even the death of the cross (see Phil. 2:5–8).

Esther Is Chosen

In chapter 2, Esther, under Mordecai's guidance, comes before the king. We read:

The king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins (2:17).

King Xerxes chooses her to be his queen. So Esther is exalted from a place of bondage to the second most honored position in the kingdom. On Mordecai's advice, Esther does not tell the king that she is Jewish. (The king's ignorance of this fact will later become a key detail in the story.)

The marriage between King Xerxes and Queen Esther is a symbolic picture of conversion. In essence, the king receives a new spirit (the queen), even though he has no awareness of Mordecai (who represents the Holy Spirit). The king symbolizes those Christians who have little or no understanding of what has happened to them the moment they received Christ.

In the background of the story, unseen but active, is Mordecai. As he guides the actions of his cousin, Esther, he helps to engineer the eventual deliverance of the people of Israel.

Chapter 2 closes with the story of Mordecai's discovery of a plot to assassinate the king. Mordecai sends word of the plot to the king through Queen Esther, who gives credit to Mordecai for the tip. After the report is investigated and found to be true, the two would-be assassins are hanged on a gallows. These events—including Mordecai's role in uncovering the plot—are recorded in the annals of the kingdom. The importance of this record will soon become clear.

Enter the Villain

Chapter 3 introduces us to the villain—a power-hungry, Hitlerian character named Haman the Agagite. Tracing his ancestry through Scripture, you find that an Agagite is an Amalekite. Amalek was an ethnic group descended from Esau, against whom God said He would make war forever (see Ex. 17:16). King Saul had been ordered to eliminate Amalek, but in his folly he spared Agag, king of the Amalekites, and thus perpetuated this enemy force within Israel. Throughout Scripture, the Amalekites represent the human heart's desire to oppose all that God wants to do. The New Testament calls this desire "the flesh." Whenever God's Spirit begins to bring blessing and renewal, the flesh arises to oppose the Spirit and undermine the work of God. The will of the flesh is symbolized in Haman the Agagite.

Haman rises to a place of prominence, subordinate in power only to the king. He is called a "captain of princes," and his position

is much like the one Joseph held under the Egyptian pharaoh, somewhat like a prime minister. When Haman learns that Mordecai refuses to bow the knee and pay honor to him, he becomes enraged. Learning that Mordecai is a Jew, he vows to eliminate Mordecai from the kingdom. Moreover, to repay Mordecai for his insult, Haman hatches a Hitlerian plan “to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews.”

Throughout this account we read how Haman is consumed by his hatred of the Jews. Why does he hate this race so much? The text gives us a clue:

Haman said to King Xerxes, “There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of all other people and who do not obey the king’s laws; it is not in the king’s best interest to tolerate them” (3:8).

In other words, Haman is attacking the Jews because they obey a different life principle. Just as the human spirit that is indwelt by the Holy Spirit is subject to a different rule of living and a different way of thinking, so too, these Jews obeyed a different principle of life. Whenever you live in a moral, upright way, you become a light that highlights the spiritual filth and moral decay of those around you. You stick out like a sore thumb, to use an old expression, and by your conspicuous righteousness you invite persecution from those whose deeds are evil.

Because the Jews were God’s people, living according to God’s principles, Haman hated them—and out of his hate came a terrible strategy. The central theme of the book from this point on is how God works to get the

wrong man out of control and the right man in, and how He uses Esther to bring salvation out of a seemingly hopeless situation.

In the stark struggle between good and evil that’s portrayed in this book, we see the struggle of our own lives. Some people wonder why, after becoming Christians, they still struggle with sin and temptation. The reason is simple: The flesh is continually at work, tenaciously opposing all that God wants to do in our lives. We are opposed by the flesh within us and by fleshly enemies without. The apostle Paul explains the dynamics of our ongoing inner struggle:

The sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want (Gal. 5:17).

Haman craftily persuades the king, for his own sake, that he should eliminate these people. A master of the hidden political agenda, Haman becomes the power behind the throne, controlling the king like a puppeteer. On Haman’s counsel, the king issues an edict to eliminate all Jews from his kingdom—completely unaware that his own wife, Queen Esther, is a Jew.

“If I Perish, I Perish.”

In Esther 4, we see God’s invisible hand setting events in motion. Mordecai is grieved over the king’s proclamation of a coming holocaust. His grief parallels the grieving of the Holy Spirit—God’s anguish over sin that disquiets our own human spirit. We may not be able to put a finger on it, but when sin is

present, we know that something is not right between ourselves and God.

Esther finds Mordecai in a state of grief and distress, wearing sackcloth and ashes. Not knowing why he is grieved, Esther sends him a change of clothes, hoping he will put off the sackcloth and put on some decent clothes. Often, when we see someone in distress, we try to correct the problem with a superficial change when a more radical treatment is needed.

So Esther summons one of the royal eunuchs assigned to serve her, and sends him to Mordecai to find out why he is in such distress. The eunuch's name is Hathach, which means "verily" or "in truth." So Esther sends "In Truth" out to find out the truth. Mordecai explains Haman's plot to Hathach and gives him a copy of the proclamation calling for the extermination of the Jews. His message to Esther: Go to the king and plead for mercy for the Jews.

When Esther receives this word, she sends back this message: The law states that any man or woman who approaches the king without being summoned will be put to death. The only exception is if the king extends the gold scepter and spares that person's life. This law applies to everyone—including the queen." Mordecai sends back this reply:

"Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" (4:13-14).

For such a time as this! God had placed Esther in a strategic position as His chosen instrument. And you and I need to remember that we, too, are His chosen instruments "for such a time as this." God may not have placed you in a "royal" position, as he did Esther, but He wants to use you in your home, your neighborhood, your office or factory, your church, and your community. Esther could not afford to be passive. She needed to yield herself to God's will. As Edmund Burke once observed, "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

God has an infinite number of ways to accomplish His will. If we refuse His call, that is our choice. But our failure cannot thwart His plan. If we fail Him, He will raise up someone else. But when we fail Him, we miss out on the beauty of His perfect will for our lives. We "suffer loss," as Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 3:15. Esther answered the call of God, sending this reply to Mordecai:

"Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish" (4:16).

As we have previously seen, the story of Esther becoming the queen of Persia is a symbolic picture of Christian conversion. What is the purpose of conversion? What did God have in mind for you when He saved you? Was it only that He might take you to heaven some day? No! He saved you so that you could know Him and join Him in His great plan for human history. He saved you so that you might manifest the fullness of the

character of God. He brought you into His kingdom for such a time as this.

When Esther tells Mordecai to gather all the Jews in Susa to fast on her behalf, she is prophetically prefiguring the death of Christ. Notice that she calls for the Jews to fast for three days. This is no coincidence. Esther calls upon the Jews to symbolize an event that is yet to come: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For three days He lay in the grave, where He could not eat or drink. Esther identified herself with the death of Christ and with the three days He spent in the tomb.

The key to living like a Christian is to live in the knowledge that we are identified with Christ. We have died with Him, and we are raised with Him. When that is your perspective on life, you cease to see yourself as a worldling who puts on a Sunday act and begin to see yourself as a Christian who occasionally stumbles and acts like a worldling. When you fail, the Spirit of God is grieved—and He will bring it to your attention, so that you may repent and be restored to sweet fellowship with Him.

The Courage of Queen Esther

On the third day, Esther puts on her royal robes and stands in the inner courts of the king's palace, opposite the king's hall, anticipating with dread what will happen when she steps into the presence of the king. Here we see the true courage of the queen. Courage is not the lack of fear but the willingness to obey even when we are afraid. As Esther steps into the throne room on this third day, beautifully symbolic of the resurrected life, her radiance captivates the king's heart:

Then the king asked, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you" (5:3).

Amazingly, Esther doesn't ask him for anything. Instead, she invites him to a banquet and says he should bring Haman, too. She didn't ask for Haman's head on a platter. She is operating on God's logic, not human logic. In obedience to Mordecai's orders, she bides her time. In doing so, she is able to do more than simply destroy Haman. She gives Haman the opportunity to trap himself, so that he will be exposed as the evil conniver he is.

So they go to the banquet. After dinner, the king again asks Queen Esther what she wants. She replies, "Let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. Then I will answer the king's question."

Haman goes out walking on air. He returns home and tells his family, in effect, "I knew I was the king's fair-haired boy, but now it looks like I'm the queen's favorite as well! I've got them eating right out of my hand."

Then, full of pride and arrogance, he goes out to his enemy, Mordecai, at the king's gate. When Mordecai, as usual, refuses to bow and scrape before Haman, this self-important little man is "filled with rage against Mordecai" (5:9). Haman cannot stand it that Mordecai is unimpressed with his power. Here again, Mordecai symbolizes the Holy Spirit, who is not impressed by the arrogance of human flesh. Haman tells his wife and friends that he cannot be happy "as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate" (5:13).

His wife and friends tell him, in effect, "If Mordecai stands in your way, get rid of him.

Erect a gallows seventy-five feet high, then go to the king and tell the king to hang him!" Isn't that just like the flesh? If anyone gets in your way, destroy him!

During that night, King Xerxes is unable to sleep. So he does what many people do when they have insomnia: He decides to read to take his mind off his troubles. He orders the annals of the kingdom—the book of memorable deeds—to be brought and read to him (6:1).

In the annals, he hears once again how a man named Mordecai exposed a plot against his life. Listening to the story, he realizes that Mordecai had never been properly honored for his service to the king. As a result of divine timing, Haman chooses that moment to come to the king's court to ask that Mordecai be hanged.

Haman Is Trapped by His Own Folly

The king learns that Haman has arrived (but he has no idea what Haman has in mind). So the king summons the man into his presence and asks him, "What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?" (6:6).

Ironically, Haman leaps to the wrong conclusion. He says to himself, "Who is there that the king would rather honor than me?" So Haman replies:

"For the man the king delights to honor, have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the king's most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honor, and lead him on the horse through the city streets,

proclaiming before him, 'This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!'" (6:7-9).

Still more irony! The king thinks Haman's suggestion is the perfect way to honor Mordecai. So we read:

"Go at once," the king commanded Haman. "Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Do not neglect anything you have recommended" (6:10).

You can imagine Haman's shocked expression. The king has just told him to bestow kingly honors on his hated enemy—the man he wants to kill! But what can Haman do? How can he call for Mordecai's hanging now?

So Haman carries out the king orders! He suffers the humiliation of having to seat Mordecai on the king's horse and lead him through the city. He must call out the very praises he sought to heap upon himself: "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!"

A Christian actor once told me of being in a large New York City church. The church had a band of young people who went around the area holding concerts and giving testimonies. The group used the same vocabulary that evangelicals use, but the thrust of the testimonies was the glorification of the people giving the testimonies, not the glory of God. There was a glitzy brilliance about the entire production, but it was all an act.

The actor concluded, "That's when I learned how the flesh can behave in a religious, pious way, yet still be the flesh." That kind of

insincerity and phoniness is what Haman pictures here.

The next day, King Xerxes, Haman, and Esther come together for another dinner. That's when Queen Esther reveals Haman's plan to destroy the Jews. What's more, Esther tells the king for the first time that she is a Jew—and is under the same death sentence as the rest of her people.

The king is devastated. He goes out in the garden and paces up and down. It is a drastic thing to kill a prime minister—but Haman's hatred for the Jews placed the Queen herself under a death sentence. The king reaches the only logical conclusion: There can be no peace in the kingdom until this matter is ended, so he gives the order to hang Haman on the gallows.

Ironically, Haman is hung on the very gallows he prepared for Mordecai.

The word "gallows" is somewhat misleading. In English, a gallows is a crossbeam stretched across two upright posts from which condemned prisoners are hanged at the end of a rope. In the original Hebrew, the word translated "gallows" simply means a timber or post. The victim would not be hanged from a rope but would be nailed to the post and impaled upon it, much as criminals in the Roman Empire would be nailed to crosses.

The truth is that Haman sought to *crucify* Mordecai. The flesh always wants to crucify all that is good, all that is of God. There is something within us all that would willingly put Christ to death again if it could. The corrupt flesh lurks within us, crying, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" That is the Haman within you and me. When someone slights you, insults you, cheats you, or proves you wrong,

how do you feel? Do your teeth clench? Does your blood pressure rise? Do you want to get even? That's Haman. That's the flesh.

Haman—the sinful flesh—is our enemy. But God, in His grace, drives us to our knees—not only in prayer, not only in humility, but in recognition of the truth about ourselves. He allows us to see what we are truly like without our pious Sunday morning masks. He permits us to see that lurking behind our masks is the leering flesh of Haman.

Once we acknowledge the corruption of the flesh within us, we are ready to be forgiven, cleansed, and healed.

The Fullness of the Spirit

That same day, King Xerxes gives to Esther the entire estate of Haman, and she confers the estate upon Mordecai. The king exalts Mordecai to the place of power, symbolizing the fullness of the Spirit.

In chapter 2, the Spirit is received. In chapter 3, the Spirit is resisted. Early in chapter 4, the Spirit is grieved. In the latter part of chapter 4, the Spirit is quenched. Now, in chapter 8, we see the fullness of the Spirit, the exaltation of God symbolized in the exaltation of Mordecai. When Mordecai comes to power, everything changes. Instantly another decree goes out, liberating the Jews to defend themselves and destroy their enemies.

In Esther chapter 8, the Jews are freed from the king's decree of death by the ascendancy of Mordecai. This parallels the truth of Romans 8, which declares that we are freed from the law of sin and death by the power of the Spirit in our lives. One passage in Romans sums up the story line of Esther:

What the law was powerless to do in that

Music to Live By

The third section of the Old Testament consists of five poetic books: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. These books reflect the sorrow and joy of our lives and our relationship with God. In them you find the sigh, the exultation, the anger, the contentment, the tears, and the laughter of the human experience.

The poetic books are the music of Scripture. They were written in the Hebrew manner of poetry—a form that derives its artistic expression not from rhyming and rhythms but from the structure and restatement of ideas and emotions. Because we are three-dimensional beings, and these five books are bound to our humanity, they reflect the human experience and nature in all three dimensions: the spirit, the soul, and the body.

Job is the cry of the human spirit, the deep cry of someone who desperately struggles to trust in God when everything in life is crumbling. When suffering reaches such a white-hot intensity that life itself seems senseless, then one's only recourse is to cling to God in faith. Humanity was made to believe in God.

Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes join together to express the cry of the human soul. There are three facets of the human soul—the emotions, the mind, and the will—and each of these

books reflects one of these realities. Psalms is the book of emotions. Proverbs is the book of the will. Ecclesiastes is the book of the mind, the story of Solomon's philosophical quest for meaning and purpose in life. In these three books, you have the soul's expression of its deep yearning for answers. Just as the answer to the cry of the spirit is faith, the answer to the cry of the soul is hope.

In the Song of Songs you have the cry of the body, the physical being, for love. Our deepest need as men and women is love. Children cannot grow up whole unless they have love expressed not only in words, but through affirming eye contact and physical touch. The same is true between marriage partners. The cry of the body for affirming physical connection and love is expressed in the most beautiful love poem ever written, the Song of Songs.

Let's briefly survey each of these books:

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

The goal of this chapter is to present the five poetical books of the Old Testament as the heart cry of humanity. These are the books that express the highs and lows of human emotion. They express the heights of our faith and devotion—and the depths of our sorrow and doubt. Every emotion that is common to humanity is expressed in these books with honesty and authenticity. Whenever we want to express our feelings to God, we can turn to these books and find the very words we are searching for.

LEFT: Jordan Valley today

The Book of Job

The book of Job addresses the needs, and particularly the pain and grief, of the human spirit. Job is generally thought to be the oldest book of the Bible and, in many ways, the most profound. It is a deep and honest protest of the human spirit in the face of seemingly meaningless pain and suffering.

We have not experienced life fully nor thought about life deeply until we have asked ourselves the questions Job asks in this book. He poses the kinds of questions that are asked by more contemporary writers such as Philip Yancey in *Disappointment with God*, or C. S. Lewis in *A Grief Observed*. By immersing ourselves in the book of Job, we learn that God understands our limitations and accepts the tough, angry questions we bring to Him in our pain.

The Psalms

The Psalms reflect every emotional experience of life and are divided into five books, each of which—except for the last—ends with the words “Amen and Amen.” The fifth book ends with the words “Praise the Lord.” Within the Psalms you find a fivefold pattern that parallels the fivefold pattern of the five books of Moses, the Pentateuch:

1. In the Pentateuch, Genesis is the book of human need. In the first book of Psalms (Ps. 1 through Ps. 41) you have the great expressions of the need of the human heart. This theme reaches its apex in Psalm 23, which begins, “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.”

2. Exodus is the book of grace and redeeming love and echoes in the second book of Psalms (Ps. 42 through Ps. 72).

This theme resonates, for example, in Psalm 46, which speaks of God as “our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.”

3. Leviticus is the book of worship wherein humanity is told how to live in close fellowship with the living God. This same note reverberates in the third book of Psalms (Ps. 73 through Ps. 89). These psalms are songs of reverence and worship, exalting the majesty of God, exemplified by the words of Psalm 76: “You are resplendent with light, more majestic than mountains rich with game.”

4. Numbers is the book of wandering, of the desert experience, and the ups and downs of daily living. Similarly, the fourth book of Psalms (Ps. 90 through Ps. 106) contain alternating victories and defeats in the experience of life. You will find many joyful songs in this section, but also many Job-like passages in which the psalmist questions and cries out to God in anguish. A typical passage is Psalm 102:1–3:

*Hear my prayer, O LORD;
let my cry for help come to you,
Do not hide your face from me
when I am in distress.
Turn your ear to me;
when I call, answer me quickly.
For my days vanish like smoke;
my bones burn like glowing embers.*

5. The last book of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy, is a book of helplessness and dependent obedience. This corresponds to the fifth book of Psalms (Ps. 107 to Ps. 150), which sounds a chord of obedience and praise. Perhaps nothing gathers up this theme more beautifully than the well-known words of Psalm 139:23–24:

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Countless believers have treasured the Psalms as music to live by. The Psalms lift our hearts and minds to God and bring God down to us so that we can experience true fellowship. Whether your heart is singing or sighing right now, you can turn to the Psalms to find those feelings translated into moving, inspired poetry.

Proverbs

The book of Proverbs is the expression of human intelligence guided by divine wisdom. Here you have a logical, reasonable approach to life—the discovery of the laws of heaven for life on earth. It is a simple book that begins with a magnificent introduction explaining why it was written.

Next, we read a series of discourses on wisdom, given from a father to his son. These fatherly discourses begin with the child in the home, then follow the youth out into the busy streets of the city as he encounters various circumstances, perils, and temptations of life. The proverbs teach him how to choose and make friends; how to spot and avoid dangers; how to build character and strength.

The fatherly discourses are followed by two collections of proverbs. The first collection, chapters 10 through 24, is made up of proverbs of Solomon concerning godliness. The second collection, chapters 25 through 29, are Solomon's proverbs about relationships; these were copied and preserved by Hezekiah's scribes.

Chapter 30 contains the proverbs of Agur. The very last chapter, Proverbs 31, stands alone, for it was written by King Lemuel and contains proverbs that his mother taught him. Verses 10 through 31 of this chapter contain one of the most magnificent descriptions of a godly wife to be found anywhere in literature.

Ecclesiastes

The word Ecclesiastes means “The Preacher.” This book is a human protest against the monotony and emptiness of life. It is an inquiry into the meaning—or seeming meaninglessness—of life.

Ecclesiastes was written by Solomon, a man with unlimited resources and money and someone with complete freedom to spend his time as he wished. Solomon deliberately set himself the challenge of answering two vital philosophical questions: “Can life be satisfying apart from God? Can the things found in this world truly satisfy the human heart?”

He questions the satisfaction to be found in acquiring knowledge, in seeking pleasure, in accumulating wealth, and in exploring philosophy. In every realm with potential for meaning and satisfaction, he is forced to conclude, “All is vanity. Everything is in vain.”

At this point, you may be thinking, “What a depressing book!” Not at all—because in the final chapter of the book, chapter 12, Solomon places all of life’s “vanity” into its proper perspective. In 12:13 he writes, “Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.”

But wait! See that word “duty”? Cross it

out! It does not appear in the original Hebrew text but was supplied by a translator who missed Solomon's point. Solomon was not saying that fearing (worshiping) and obeying God is our duty. He was saying that this is our *purpose* in life. This sums up *the reason for our existence*.

At the end of the book, Solomon stumbles upon a profound truth. He has discovered, after years of searching, that nothing can make anyone complete except God. Knowing and obeying God is the sum total of our satisfaction in life. When we worship and obey God, we are whole, we are doing what we were created to do, and we find true satisfaction.

Apart from God, everything is vanity, meaninglessness. But when we are in a right relationship with God, then all of life—even death itself—has meaning. The person who lives and walks with God does not live in vain.

Song of Songs

The last of the poetic books is Song of Songs, which is probably the least understood and most neglected of all the books of the Bible. It is a story of spiritual love, and also a surprisingly candid book about the sexual expression of love between a husband and wife. In times past, this book has actually been considered shameful by some religious groups that had an unwholesome view of the human body and human sexuality, as well as an unwholesome view of God's Word. There is nothing shameful about this book, nor is there anything shameful about the human body. The Song of Songs points us toward a

pure and loving expression of our sexuality within the protective, holy enclosure of marriage.

There is no more thrilling sight to a man than the beautiful body of a woman. There is no higher expression of nobility and strength to a woman than the clean, fine body of a man. This book places our God-given bodies and our God-given sexuality in a wholesome perspective.

The story line of this book can be confusing, because it is written in several voices—the voice of the Lover (Solomon), the voice of the Beloved (the Shulamite woman), and the voice of the Friends. The Song of Songs is the story of a young peasant woman who unknowingly meets the king of Israel who is disguised as a shepherd. Later, he reveals himself to her as the king and whiskers her away to his palace where they share their love and live happily ever after.

But note the deeper meaning to this beautiful book of love poetry. It is a symbolic parable of God's redeeming grace toward the human race. The Shulamite woman, the Beloved, represents the followers of God who have been redeemed by His grace. The Lover, the Shepherd, the great King in disguise, manifests His love to her while disguised as a shepherd. He goes away, then returns in His full royal splendor to take the woman away, representing the Lord Jesus Christ!

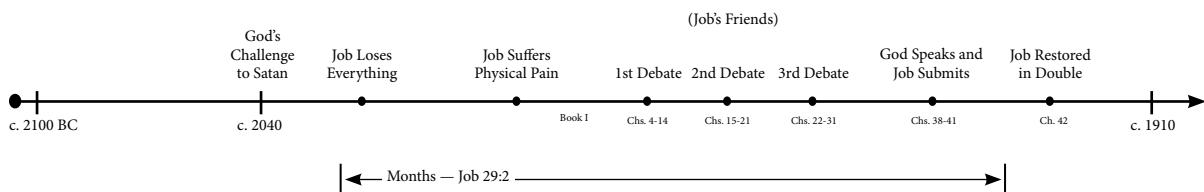
We will explore this rich symbolism further when we examine this book in chapter 28. For now, observe that the Song of Songs is actually two songs in one. On the surface, it is a love song, a beautifully romantic story told in poetic form. Beneath the surface, it is a hymn, a sacred and symbolic retelling of

the story of our redemption from sin by our Shepherd and King, Jesus Christ.

The pages of the poetic section of God's Word are rich, radiant, and fragrant with experiences that touch our emotions and

transcend our experiences. Turn the page with me, and immerse yourself in stories and poetic lines that resonate in the core of our being.

Here is music to live by.

The Hardest Question

Johnny Gunther was a handsome boy of sixteen. He majored in math and chemistry at Deerfield Academy and was a straight A student when he began having blinding headaches. It didn't take the doctors long to diagnose the problem, Johnny had a brain tumor.

The character of this brave young man was revealed following his first surgery. In the course of that surgery, the doctors discovered that there was really nothing they could do for Johnny. Afterwards, they explained the seriousness of the situation to Johnny's parents, John and Frances Gunther.

"What should we tell Johnny about his condition?" they asked.

"He's so bright and so curious about all that's happening to him," the surgeon replied. "He really wants to know everything, so I think we should be honest with him."

The Gunthers agreed, so the surgeon went to Johnny alone in his hospital room and explained to him the seriousness of his brain tumor. The boy listened attentively and then asked, "Doctor, how shall we break it to my parents?"

Even after a second operation, Johnny

passed the grueling entrance examinations for Columbia University. Two weeks after being accepted to Columbia, Johnny died.

Johnny Gunther was a young man with so much promise, so much to live for. Why did such a terrible thing—brain cancer—invade his life? That question echoes the tough, painful questions we encounter in the book of Job.

"Why, Lord?"

Job is poetry, and it is an epic drama not unlike the Greek poetic dramas of Homer, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. But the book of Job is also history as Job was an actual, living person. These events took place and are recounted for us in a beautiful literary style so that we might have an answer to the age-old question, "Why does tragedy invade our lives?"

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter seeks to reveal hidden dimensions of practical truth contained in the story of the suffering Old Testament saint, Job. It seeks to answer such questions as: Why do we suffer? Where is God in our times of suffering? Why does He sometimes seem to be silent? What is the best way to be a friend to someone who is suffering?

Whenever you find yourself going through pain and trials, whenever you cry out, “Why, Lord?” open the book of Job. Here is a man who experienced agony, loss, and desolation of spirit beyond our ability to comprehend. Job asks questions of God, seeks answers from God, becomes angry with God—yet he remains faithful, and God brings him through his time of trial.

The ultimate answer to the “Why” question is given at the beginning of the book. In the opening scenes of Job, we learn the background of Job’s drama—information that Job himself doesn’t have. The answer to the great “Why?” question is this: Senseless suffering arises from Satan’s continual challenge to the government of God.

As the book opens, we find God meeting with the angels. Among them is Satan, who strides in swaggering, convinced that self-interest is humanity’s only motivator. In the presence of God, Satan asserts that anyone who claims to be motivated in some other way is a phony. In fact, Satan claims he can prove it. God responds by selecting a man named Job to be the battleground.

Battle is the appropriate description of what takes place in the book of Job. I compare it to the battles that shaped the outcome of World War II.

On December 7, 1941, a sneak attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii brought the United States into that war. At the beginning of the conflict between Japan and the United States, it looked as though the war would be waged in the middle of the Pacific, around the Hawaiian Islands. But early on, events took a sudden turn. Without warning, the theater of battle shifted abruptly to the South

Pacific, several thousands of miles beyond Hawaii. Americans began to hear of islands with strange-sounding names like Guam, Guadalcanal, Wake Island, Luzon, and Bataan. In those remote corners of the earth, the greatest powers on Earth were locked in mortal combat. These islands became the arena for the great conflict between empires.

This is similar to what takes place in the story of Job. Here is a man going about his business, unaware that he has suddenly become the center of God’s attention—and Satan’s, too. Like tiny Guam or remote Wake Island, there is nothing special about Job, but his life becomes a battleground in the cosmic struggle between God and Satan, between good and evil. Job is ground zero, and Satan is about to begin his first major assault.

Tragedies Piled upon Catastrophes

In chapter 1 we see that, one by one, all the supports are yanked from Job’s life—one tragedy after another, any one of which would be nearly unendurable. First, his wealth was taken from him. Then all of Job’s oxen were stolen by enemy raids and his donkey herds were decimated. His sheep are killed in a storm. His vast herd of camels—true wealth in the world of the Middle East—were wiped out.

Finally comes the most heartbreakng news of all: Job’s seven sons and three daughters are together in one home, enjoying a birthday celebration, when a tornado strikes, demolishing the house and killing all of Job’s children at once.

While reeling from his losses, Job—a man of great faith and faithfulness to his Lord—seeks to respond in faith. “Naked I came from

my mother's womb," he says, "and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised" (Job 1:21).

Satan is taken aback by Job's response. He was sure that the massive assault he had launched against Job would be enough to destroy his faith. Job's continuing attitude of praise has dealt Satan a stinging setback. So Satan goes back to God and wants Him to change the rules of the game. Satan has decided to attack Job more directly and petitions God for the right to strike Job's own body. God agrees, and without warning Job is suddenly stricken with a series of terrible boils.

When I was younger, I experienced within an eighteen month period a series of boils on my body—no more than two or three at a time, and probably around twenty-five altogether. Since that time, I have had deep sympathy for dear old Job. Nothing is more aggravating than a painful boil that no medication can relieve. You can only grit your teeth and endure the agony until the boil heals of its own accord.

Consider how Job must have felt, being stricken with boils from the top of his head to the soles of his feet. As the pain drags on, his wife turns on him. In Job 2:9, she says, "Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!" Job has to suffer alone, yet he is determined to remain faithful to God.

Job's "Comforters"

Then comes the final test, when Job receives a visit from three of his friends: Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. At Job 2:11 the book

shifts its focus. We now are no longer looking only at Job, but at his controversy with his three friends.

Initially, Job's three friends seem to respond with genuine empathy toward his situation. When they first see him, they weep, tear their clothes, and cover themselves with ashes. Job is so disfigured by his suffering that they hardly recognize him. For seven days and seven nights, they sit with him, not saying a word, because they see how great his suffering is. If they had simply remained that way, silently present, Job would have felt supported and cared for.

But after seven days, these friends break the silence. They go on and on, talking and arguing, piling pious words and judgment onto Job's suffering, magnifying his pain.

From their limited human perspective, Job's three friends attempt to answer that same haunting question, "Why is there suffering in the world?" All three come to the same conclusion. With smug, dogmatic certainty, they agree that Job is afflicted because he has committed a terrible sin. So they proceed to argue with him, trying to break down his defenses and to get him to admit that they are right. Some comfort they are!

Now, it's true that God sometimes uses painful circumstances to get our attention when we have wandered away from Him. And it's true that when we violate the laws of God's universe (for example, by taking illegal drugs, engaging in promiscuous sex, or indulging in gluttonous eating habits), our bodies will have to pay the price in poor health and even intense suffering. But it is also true that bad things sometimes happen to people who have done nothing to bring it on themselves.

The problem with the argument of Job's three miserable "comforters" is that they stubbornly claim that sin is the only possible explanation for Job's sufferings.

Like a boxer who continues to beat on an opponent who's down for the count, Job's friends each take three rounds with him. Each presents three arguments, nine arguments in all, and try various approaches. First they try sarcasm and irony. Then they appeal to Job's honesty. Then they accuse him of specific crimes and misdeeds. Finally they act hurt and go away, miffed and sulking.

Their argument is that if God is just, then the righteous are always blessed and the wicked always suffer. Therefore, Job's pain is the direct result of his sin. It's a tidy, logical explanation—unless you are the one who is suffering. In his book *Disappointment with God*, Philip Yancey observes that Christians, like Job's friends, often feel that they must find some hidden spiritual reason behind suffering, such as:

"God is trying to teach you something. You should feel privileged, not bitter, about your opportunity to lean on him in faith."

"Meditate on the blessings you still enjoy—at least you are alive. Are you a fair-weather believer?"

"You are undergoing a training regimen, a chance to exercise new muscles of faith. Don't worry—God will not test you beyond your endurance."

"Don't complain so loudly! You will forfeit this opportunity to demonstrate your faithfulness to nonbelievers."

"Someone is always worse off than you. Give thanks despite your circumstances." Job's friends offered a version of each of these words of wisdom, and each contains an element of truth. But the book of Job

plainly shows that such "helpful advice" does nothing to answer the questions of the person in pain. It was the wrong medicine, dispensed at the wrong time.

(PHILIP YANCEY, *DISAPPOINTMENT WITH GOD*, 181)

At first Job is annoyed with these friends. Then he becomes angry. Finally, he becomes exasperated, replying to them with thick sarcasm. When they urge him to confess his sin, he responds that he can't confess sin that he is unaware of, and he can't think of anything he has done to offend God. Moreover, he no longer believes in justice, since their argument that the wicked always suffer simply isn't true. He points out that many notoriously wicked people actually prosper and flourish—a fact that hasn't changed in thousands of years.

At this point, we see Job's faith sagging under the crushing burden of his suffering. He says that he doesn't know what to do because God won't listen to him. He doesn't even have a chance to plead his case before God, because God hides from him. "If only I knew where to find him," he laments in Job 23:3–4. "If only I could go to his dwelling! I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments."

Finally, in a boiling rage of confusion and frustration, Job yells at his friends, expressing his terror of the Almighty. "He carries out his decree against me," wails Job, "and many such plans he still has in store. That is why I am terrified before him; when I think of all this, I fear him" (Job 23:14–15). Job once thought of God as a reliable Friend. Now his Friend has seemingly turned on him. He is disoriented. Up is down. Right is wrong. White is black.

Job no longer knows what to think about the God he has served all his life. The pain of his suffering is eating away at his mind.

Throughout Job's trial, he is totally honest. Whatever he withstands, whatever he feels, whatever he thinks, he simply lays out the truth of it with blunt candor. He dispatches the pat answers of his friends with the livid contempt those answers deserve. Stripped to his very soul, he cries out again and again with some of the deepest expressions of the human heart. Like Jacob when he wrestled with God's angel, Job is locked in a struggle with God. He is angry, he is afraid, he is confused and sick inside—but he never lets go of God.

At times we see that Job's wrestling with God is rewarded. A ray of light shines in his darkness. In Job 19:25–26, Job says, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God.” Out of this man's deep distress comes a cry that will be fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ. He is our Redeemer who will make it possible for us to transcend the corruption of death and to stand in the flesh and see God face-to-face.

Elihu—a misunderstood young man

After all of Job's so-called friends have taken a verbal whack at him, a fourth man, Elihu, the youngest of the group, clears his throat and begins to speak. Who is Elihu? I believe he is one of the most misunderstood people in all of Scripture—and I believe his words are the key to understanding the book of Job. This young man deserves closer examination.

The name “Elihu” means “My God is He.” Elihu is the son of Barachel (a name that means “God blesses”). Barachel was a Buzite—a citizen of the land of Buz. At the beginning of the book of Job, we see that Job lived in the land of Uz. The lands of Uz and Buz were named for two brothers who lived during the time of Abraham (see Gen. 22:21).

Young Elihu has kept his peace throughout the discussion between Job and his three “comforters” out of deference to the age of the other men. We also know that Elihu was angry. He was not only angry with Job for defending himself, but he was angry with Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar because they had condemned Job without evidence.

Some Bible scholars have taken Elihu's anger as proof that the young man was rash, impulsive, and quick-tempered—but I think that view misjudges Elihu. Throughout this long debate, Elihu has listened quietly and patiently. Elihu waits for a lull in the conversation before speaking. Only after Job and his three “comforters” fall silent does Elihu stand and speak. Despite his anger, Elihu speaks courteously and respectfully:

*“I am young in years,
and you are old;
that is why I was fearful,
not daring to tell you what I know.
I thought, ‘Age should speak;
advanced years should teach wisdom.’
But it is the spirit in a man,
the breath of the Almighty, that gives
him understanding.
It is not only the old who are wise,
not only the aged who understand
what is right.
Therefore I say: Listen to me;
I too will tell you what I know.*

*I waited while you spoke,
I listened to your reasoning;
while you were searching for words,
I gave you my full attention.
But not one of you has proved Job
wrong;
none of you has answered his arguments.
Do not say, ‘We have found wisdom;
let God refute him, not man.’
But Job has not marshaled his words
against me,
and I will not answer him with your
arguments” (32:6–14).*

Unlike the previous three speakers, Elihu’s tone is courteous. In verse 18, he says, “The spirit within me compels me.” I believe he refers here to God’s Spirit, the Holy Spirit, for in verse 8 he says, “it is the spirit in a man, the breath of the Almighty, that gives him understanding.” Elihu adds:

*“I will show partiality to no one,
nor will I flatter any man;
for if I were skilled in flattery,
my Maker would soon take me away”*
(32:21–22).

Elihu wants his hearers to know that he has no intention of showing any favor or disfavor. He only wants to speak according to the will of God, his Maker.

Some Bible commentators understandably regard Elihu as a brash young man, full of the arrogance of youth. Some think Elihu adds nothing to the conversation, but merely repeats the arguments of Job’s three “comforters.” Others dismiss Elihu’s words as a meaningless interruption, noting that God, when He enters the discussion at the

end of the book, seems to take no notice of Elihu at all.

I believe all of these views are mistaken. I don’t see Elihu as arrogant or impulsive. His message is distinctly different from that of the three “comforters” in several important respects. And I believe Elihu’s argument expresses the very core theme of the book of Job. Here are four important facts about Elihu that are often missed by Bible commentators:

(1) *God does not rebuke Elihu.* At the end of the book of Job, God rebukes Job’s three “friends” for their folly in all the things they said to Job:

After the LORD had said these things to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, “I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. So now take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and sacrifice a burnt offering for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly. You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.” So Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite did what the LORD told them; and the LORD accepted Job’s prayer (42:7–9).

God tells Job’s three “friends” that He is angry with them for speaking falsely of Him, and He tells them to offer a sacrifice and have Job pray for them. But God never addresses such a command to Elihu. Why not? Because Elihu is not guilty of speaking falsely of God, as Job’s three “comforters” are. The reason the Lord is not angry with Elihu is because Elihu spoke rightly.

(2) *Elihu's message occupies a prominent place in the drama.* He speaks for five chapters. Clearly, this is one of the major discourses in the book. If Elihu had spoken falsely at such length, God would surely have included him in the command to offer sacrifices and seek Job's prayers. The fact that God does not condemn Elihu's message seems to be a tacit endorsement. I believe God approves of Elihu's words as well as his courteous and compassionate spirit.

(3) *Unlike Job's three "comforters," Elihu is sensitive to Job's suffering.* Though Elihu has strong feelings, he controls his emotions and speaks sensitively to Job. This contrasts with the caustic, sarcastic tone of Job's three "friends."

(4) *Elihu claims to speak from revelation, not from age and experience.* This, I believe, is the most important distinctive that separates Elihu from the other three men. I'm reminded of the words of John Wesley: "At present, I am hardly sure of anything but what God has revealed to me." That is Elihu's position.

People often assume that age produces wisdom, but this is not always the case. I know some young people who are wise beyond their years and some old people are ridiculously foolish. Age does not necessarily guarantee wisdom. We who have been "young" for many decades like to think that it is our years and our gray hair that make us wise—but the truly wise know better.

In fact, one of the most profound truths we find in this passage is that *wisdom is something only God can give*. And God can give wisdom to the young as well as to the old. The Bible further tells us that the fear (reverence) of God is the beginning of

wisdom. So if we have true reverence for God and we speak from the wisdom God has given us, then we can be truly wise regardless of our calendar age.

Elihu plays a vitally important role in this story. God uses Elihu to answer Job's cry for an explanation of his suffering. Throughout Job's trial of pain and loss, God has been silent. Job has cried out for help, and no answer has been given. But God often chooses a surprising and unexpected way to answer our prayers. In this case, that answer comes from young Elihu.

Read the words of Elihu with care. If you read attentively, you'll see that, by the end of Elihu's discourse, his words sound similar to the words spoken later by the voice of God. I believe Elihu is truly speaking according to the Spirit of God. Job wanted to hear the message of God, and now at last he hears it—from the lips of wise, young Elihu.

The Answer of the Lord

In chapter 38, the Lord Himself answers Job out of the whirlwind. From the fury of the winds, God comes to him and says:

"Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me" (38:2-3).

In other words, "Do you want to debate with Me, Job? First, let Me see your qualifications. I have a list of questions. If you can handle these questions, then perhaps you're qualified to go head-to-head with Me in a debate." Then, in chapters 38 through 40, we find one of the most remarkable sections

in the Bible. God takes Job on a tour of nature and asks him question after question, such as:

“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? . . . Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place?” (38:4,12).

“Have the gates of death been shown to you? Have you seen the gates of the shadow of death?” (38:17).

“Can you bind the beautiful Pleiades? Can you loose the cords of Orion? Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons or lead out the Bear with its cubs? Do you know the laws of the heavens?” (38:31–33).

“Can you raise your voice to the clouds and cover yourself with a flood of water? Do you send the lightning bolts on their way?” (38:34–35).

“Does the hawk take flight by your wisdom and spread his wings toward the south?” (39:26).

“Can you pull in the leviathan with a fishhook or tie down his tongue with a rope?” (41:1).

The answer to all these questions is obvious—and humbling. The Lord paints a vast and finely detailed picture of the complex interconnected universe He has created, from Earth’s most delicate and beautiful life-forms to its most awesome and terrifying forces to the distant stars in their constellations. Clearly, only a superintellect could comprehend and direct the full range of creation in all its complexity and power. At the end of this display of God’s power and wisdom, Job in his

smallness can only respond by falling on his face before God:

“My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (42:5–6).

The essence of God’s argument is that life is too complicated for simple answers. If you demand that God give you simple answers to the deep questions of existence, you are asking Him to give you what you could never understand. Trying to take in so much truth would be like trying to take a sip of water from a gushing fire hydrant. So, as finite human beings in the presence of an infinite God, we can only trust Him. We can question Him, and He welcomes our questions—but we are in no position to argue with Him.

God does not exist for people. People exist for God. He is not a glorified waiter who waits for us to snap our fingers so He can ask, “May I take your order?” No, we are God’s instruments and we exist to carry out His purposes. Some of those purposes are so complex and transcendent that we cannot comprehend them on this side of eternity.

As the Book of Job draws to a close, we see what the apostle James referred to when he wrote:

You have heard of Job’s perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy (James 5:11).

In Job 42, God rebukes Job’s “comforters” and has Job pray for them—these stubborn, misguided, self-righteous blunderers who did more harm than good. God then restores

everything Job lost—and doubles it. Job had 7,000 sheep before; God gives him 14,000. He had 500 oxen and 500 donkeys; God gives him 1,000 of each. He had 3,000 camels; God gives him 6,000. He even replaces his sons and daughters. You might say, “But no new child can replace a lost child in a parent’s heart! Nothing could remove that grief!” And you are right.

Notice that Job had seven sons and three daughters before disaster struck—but God did not give him fourteen sons and six daughters afterward. God did not double the number of his offspring as He had doubled the size of his herds. Why? Because Job’s first ten children were not lost to him forever. They were in heaven with God, and Job would one day be reunited with them. That was the confidence and assurance Job expressed in 19:25–26, when he said, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God.”

Job had no doubt that he would survive death and corruption, and so would his children. Nothing, not even ten new children, can replace even one child who leaves this world too soon. The memories, the joys, and the sorrows remain for a lifetime in the heart of a bereaved parent. But Job knew his Redeemer, and he knew he would see his children again.

The account closes, “And so he died, old and full of years” (Job 42:17). The only answer we are given to the question of human

Comparison of Job’s Possessions Before and After His Trials

JOB’S POSSESSIONS BEFORE HIS SICKNESS	JOB’S POSSESSIONS AFTER HIS SICKNESS
7,000 sheep	14,000 sheep
500 oxen	1,000 oxen
500 donkeys	1,000 donkeys
3,000 camels	6,000 camels
	Replaces his sons and daughters

suffering is that our sufferings take place against a backdrop of Satan’s challenge to God’s government. This answer is given to us, the reader—but it was never given to Job while he lived.

At the beginning of the book you find God, Satan, and Job. At the end of the book, Satan has faded out of the picture. From the beginning to the end of the book, the camera has slowly zoomed in until there are only two figures framed in the lens: God and Job. This book is the story of a genuine, dynamic relationship between two friends, a stormy relationship filled with pain and anger as well as delight and joy.

God never lets go of Job, and Job never lets go of God. Their relationship emerges stronger than ever because of the suffering Job endures.

“I will come forth as gold.”

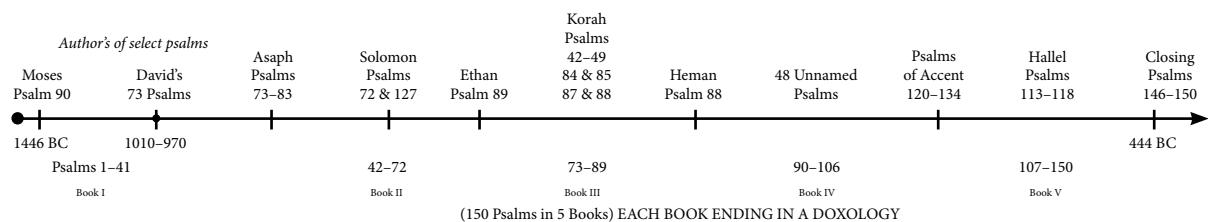
The deepest note in the book is struck, I believe, when Job says—in the midst of all his pain and desolation—“He knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold” (Job 23:10). That is the lesson of this book. Suffering may seem purposeless, yet there is a lesson for us in Job’s life and

in the lives of all who suffer persecution, loss, poverty, humiliation, cancer, multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer's disease, and on and on. Testing purifies us and reveals the gold of God's character within us.

In the New Testament, Paul rejoices, "We

know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). That is also the triumphant song of Job. It's a song of hope to live by.

May it be your song and mine as well.

Songs of a Sincere Heart

I once visited the home of a man I had been counseling. The door was open so I called out, but no one answered. Sensing that something was wrong, I went inside and discovered the body of this man. He had committed suicide. It was one of the most numbing shocks of my life to find someone I had known and prayed with—someone I'd been trying to help—dead by his own hand.

That night, I was so filled with grief and anguish that I couldn't sleep. Neither could my wife, Elaine. In that dark hour of desolation, we both turned to the Psalms and read them together. Nothing but the Psalms could comfort our hearts in that awful hour.

Through the centuries, this great collection of Hebrew poetry has pillowled the heads of millions of Christians in times of distress and heartache. It has also given voice to emotions of gladness, joy, and hope, as well as turning hearts toward God with its expressions of deep reverence and worship.

Every shade of emotion that surges in the human soul is reflected in the Psalms.

The Hymnbook of the Old Testament

The book of Psalms is the book of human emotions. No matter what mood you may be in, there's a psalm to give expression to that mood.

The Psalms contain exhilarating expressions of life's highs and joys. If you are happy and want to express your joy, try Psalm 66 or 92. If you are grateful and want to express your thankfulness to God, pray the words of Psalm 40. If your heart is full of inexpressible praise and love for God then turn to Psalm 84 or 116.

The Psalms also express the need of a soul in the valley of shadows. If you are troubled by fear and dread, read Psalm 23, 56, or 91. If you are discouraged, read Psalm 42. If you feel lonely, I suggest Psalm 62 or 71. If you are oppressed with guilt or shame, read Psalm

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter surveys the Psalms, the hymnbook of the Old Testament, and shows how the book of Psalms mirror the thematic structure of the five books of Moses. It also highlights and applies the most meaningful passages of the Psalms to our lives today. In the midst of our chaotic twenty-first-century lives, we need the peace and comfort of the Psalms as never before.

LEFT: Tower of David in Jerusalem

51 (which David wrote after his double sin of adultery and murder—see 2 Samuel 11 and 12); or read Psalm 32, a great expression of confession and forgiveness.

If you are worried or anxious, I recommend Psalms 37 and 73. If you are angry, try Psalm 13 or 58. If you struggle with bitterness and resentment, read Psalm 77 or 94. If you feel forsaken, immerse yourself in the comfort of Psalm 88. If you are struggling with doubt, dwell in the heart-lifting truths of Psalm 119.

These psalms were the hymnbook of ancient Israel. Many were written to be sung in public, which is why a psalm often begins with a phrase such as, “To the choirmaster.” Most people assume that David wrote all of Psalms, and indeed, he is the author of more than half of them. God gave this shepherd-king the inspired gift of capturing the varied and rich emotions of his experience and setting them down in lyric form. But many were composed by other writers.

Psalm 90 was written by Moses and Psalm 127 was composed by King Solomon. Others were written by a group called “the sons of Korah” who were charged with leading the singing of Israel. Psalms 50 and 73–83 were written by Asaph, a Hebrew choirmaster.

King Hezekiah wrote ten psalms: 120, 121, 123, 125, 126, 128, 129, 130, 132, and 134. When he was sick and at the point of death he prayed that God would spare him, and the Lord answered his prayer, granting him fifteen more years of life. In response, Hezekiah praised God and promised to go to the temple and sing the psalms he had written as an act of worship to the Lord:

*The LORD will save me,
and we will sing with stringed
instruments
all the days of our lives
in the temple of the LORD (Isa. 38:20).*

PSALMS: FOLK SONGS OF FAITH



“I like to think of the Psalms as ‘the folk songs of the Bible.’ I don’t know about you, but I love listening to folk songs—not just American folk songs, but the folk music of many cultures and lands. Folk music expresses the heart and soul of a people. The biblical folk songs called ‘the Psalms’ express not merely the heartbeat of ancient Israel, but of all people who worship the God of the Bible.

“Folk songs are commonly passed down by oral tradition and are intended for the people (or ‘folk’) of a specific community or culture. Folk songs aren’t intended to be expertly sung and played by professional musicians. They are to be shared by all of us common folk—even those of us who can’t carry a tune in a bucket! Folk songs are for everyone. This is as true of the Psalms as for every other folk music tradition.”

Ray C. Stedman
Psalms: Folk Songs of Faith
(Discovery House Publishers, 2006)

The Structure of the Psalms

Psalms is the longest book in the Bible, and contains 150 psalms. The psalms were composed over a span of a thousand years (from about 1410 to 430 BC). Psalms is actually five books in one, and divides into five sections, each with its own theme. The first four sections end with the words “Amen and Amen.” The fifth division ends with “Praise the Lord.” The five divisions of the Psalms parallel the structure of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible.

The first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) were designed by God to give us the five-step pattern of God’s workings. God always follows the same pattern, whether in His dealings with an individual, with a nation, or with the whole of creation. The Psalms follow the same five-step pattern, reflecting the reactions of the human heart to God’s pattern of working in our lives.

Book 1 of Psalms, the Genesis Section

The first book of Psalms contains Psalms 1 through 41 with its theme paralleling the message of the book of Genesis. It is the beautiful, poetic expression of the human heart’s deepest need. Psalm 1 begins with a picture of a perfect human being just as Genesis begins with man and woman in the Garden of Eden. Psalm 2 records human rebellion and is a powerful psalm that opens with the words:

*Why do the nations conspire
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth take their stand
and the rulers gather together
against the LORD*

and against his Anointed One.

*“Let us break their chains,” they say,
“and throw off their fetters” (2:1–3).*

These words of the psalmist describe human rebelliousness; Genesis provides the same description of humanity in the Garden of Eden. Throughout the rest of the first book of the Psalms you see the anguish of humanity’s separation from God, exemplified by such passages as:

*My soul is in anguish.
How long, O LORD, how long? . . .
I am worn out from groaning;
all night long I flood my bed with
weeping
and drench my couch with tears (6:3,6).*

In this section you also see the grace and mercy of God introduced. Here, God is depicted as a defender, a refuge, a righteous judge. God seeks straying human beings out in the darkness they have created for themselves, just as He did in the shadows of the garden after Adam’s sin. Just as the Lord called out, “Adam, where are you?” He also calls to us in our lostness and waywardness.

The first book of the Psalms is an expression of the human heart’s deep-seated longing for God—and of the first echoes of God’s answer.

Book 2 of Psalms, the Exodus Section

The second book of Psalms, Psalm 42 through 72, corresponds to the book of Exodus in the Pentateuch, which begins a new relationship between God and humanity. Exodus tells the story of Israel’s sorrow and bondage while in Egyptian captivity. It also

tells of God's great power in delivering the people from their captivity. The second book of the Psalms traces the same theme.

Psalm 45 is the psalm of God the King. It deals with His sovereign rule over humanity. Psalm 46 speaks God's deliverance and help in times of trouble. Psalm 50 extols God's strength while Psalm 51 reveals God's grace toward us in our deepest sin and shame. Psalm 72, the last psalm of this section, pictures God in His almighty, conquering power—power to free us from the captivity of sin.

Book 3 of Psalms, the Leviticus Section

The third book of Psalms, Psalms 73 through 89, corresponds to the book of Leviticus—the book that details the tabernacle of worship and reveals how humanity is to approach a holy God. Leviticus reveals the inner workings of the human heart: its need, its deep consciousness of its own sin, and its discovery of God's remedy. In Psalms 73 through 89, the same pattern is carried out.

Psalm 75 expresses our awareness of God's judgment in the inner heart. Psalm 78 revels in the light of God's unwavering love that He loves us with tough love and holds us accountable for our own growth and benefit. He is merciful, but He is also relentless in rooting out and destroying the sin in our lives—just as He mercifully but relentlessly purified His people, Israel. When we are ready to acknowledge our sin and agree with God's judgment concerning sin, He then deals with us in grace and love. Psalm 81 describes the new strength that God offers us, and Psalm 84 portrays the continual, bountiful provision that He offers us—just as He provided for the needs of ancient Israel.

Book 4 of Psalms, the Numbers Section

Psalms 90 through 106 make up the fourth book, paralleling the book of Numbers—the wilderness book—which highlights human failure. Throughout this section you will find victory alternating with devastating defeat. Just as God steps in and delivers the Israelites in the desert—working mighty miracles and ministering to their needs, such as feeding them with bread from heaven and opening the rock so that water would flow—Israel begins to murmur and complain, precipitating an episode of defeat. This same pattern is pictured for us in the poetry of the fourth section of the Psalms.

Book 5 of Psalms, the Deuteronomy Section

The fifth section, Psalms 107 through 150, corresponds to the book of Deuteronomy, which reveals our new resource in God. These psalms picture the person who has come to the end of his or her own devices and is ready to lay hold of the fullness of God. This final section of psalms contains nothing but thanksgiving and praise, from beginning to end. It sounds one triumphant note all the way through and draws to a close with a constant “Hallelujah, praise the Lord!” It is the expression of someone so full of joy that all he or she can do is shout praises to God.

Difficulty with the Psalms

Some Christians have difficulty with Psalms, especially those passages in which David cries out against his enemies or complains about sufferings and persecutions. Particularly troubling to many tenderhearted Christians are the so-called imprecatory

psalms, the psalms that speak bitter, scorching condemnation (called “imprecations”) against enemies. It’s understandable that people find these words disturbing.

It seems wrong and “unchristian” to call down God’s wrath upon our enemies, and to picture them being torn limb from limb and hung from the nearest lamppost. “Didn’t Jesus tell us to love our enemies?” they ask. “Why do these psalms sound so violent while the New Testament seems to be about love and forgiveness?”

I think we can understand even the most troubling of psalms if we remember what the New Testament tells us about the Old Testament. As the apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:11, “these things were written down as warnings for us.” If we put ourselves in the place of the psalmist we will see that the enemies he faced are the same enemies we face today, or as the New Testament tells us, “our struggle is not against flesh and blood” (Eph. 6:12).

Sometimes we forget who our real enemy is. We think that the person who opposes our plans, attacks our reputation, or exasperates us in some way is our enemy. No, people may hurt us, but people are not our true enemies. Our struggle is against the principles of evil, the philosophies of this world, and the spiritual forces that control the systems of this world. Above all, our struggle is against Satan and his forces.

And there is another enemy we face—not external, but internal. As Jesus said, “What goes into a man’s mouth does not make him ‘unclean,’ but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him ‘unclean.’ . . . For out of the heart come evil thoughts,

murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man ‘unclean’ ” (Matt. 15:11, 19–20). The flesh, with its innate bent toward sin, is also our enemy. And the flesh will war against our spirit as long as we live in these mortal bodies.

With these words of Jesus ringing in our ears, the severe language of Psalms makes perfect sense. We must deal severely with these enemies. Sin has no place in a Christian’s life. The ruthless imprecatory psalms are a picture of the way we must deal with the real enemies of the heart—Satan, the worldly systems he controls, and our own fallen flesh.

Psalms of Jesus

The deepest insight contained in the Psalms is that they reveal the work and the person of Jesus Christ. You may recall that on the road to Emmaus after Jesus’ resurrection, He said to the two grieving disciples, “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44). Although the character, grace, and truth of Christ are presented in every psalm, several special “messianic psalms” present a clear prophetic image of Christ. In the messianic psalms, we see specific episodes of His earthly life described in amazing detail—even though these psalms were written hundreds of years before His birth.

Psalm 2 pictures Christ as the man of destiny, the focal point of all history. The psalmist writes:

*I will proclaim the decree of the LORD:
He said to me, “You are my Son;
today I have become your Father.*

*Ask of me,
and I will make the nations your
inheritance,
the ends of the earth your possession.
You will rule them with an iron scepter;
you will dash them to pieces like pottery*
(2:7–9).

Psalm 22 records the Lord's anguish and takes you to the cross with its opening line, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It goes on to describe the gawking crowd around the foot of the cross, looking on Him whom they had pierced and numbering Him with the transgressors. It tells in detail how

His tormentors took His garments and cast lots for them. Most of all, this psalm pierces our hearts with its emotional description of the Lord's utter sense of abandonment by God. These words clearly prefigure the Messiah's death by crucifixion:

*They have pierced my hands and my feet.
I can count all my bones* (22:16–17).

This harrowing, heartbreaking account of the crucifixion is quickly followed by the culmination of the Lord's story—the triumph of His resurrection, the glory of His second

PSALM	MESSIANIC PROPHECY	NT FULFILLMENT
2:7	God declares Messiah as His Son	Matthew 3:17
8:6	All things placed under His feet	Hebrews 2:8
16:10	The resurrection	Mark 16:6–7
22:1	Messiah forsaken	Matthew 27:46
22:7–8	Messiah surrounded by mockers	Luke 23:35
22:16	Messiah's hands, feet pierced on the cross	John 20:25, 27
22:18	Lots cast for His clothes	Matthew 27:35–36
34:20	Messiah's bones unbroken	John 19:32–33, 36
35:11	Messiah accused by false witnesses	Mark 14:57
35:19	Messiah hated and persecuted	John 15:25
40:7–8	Messiah comes to do the will of God	Hebrews 10:7
41:9	Betrayal by a friend (Judas)	Luke 22:47
45:6	The throne of Messiah is forever	Hebrews 1:8
68:18	Messiah ascends to God's right hand	Mark 16:19
69:9	Messiah's zeal for God's house (cleansing the temple)	John 2:17
69:21	Vinegar and gall upon the cross	Matthew 27:34
109:4	Messiah intercedes for His enemies	Luke 23:34
109:8	Betrayer's function is given to another	Acts 1:20
110:1	His enemies put in subjection to Him	Matthew 22:44
110:4	Messiah is a priest after the order of Melchizedek	Hebrews 5:6
118:22	Rejected stumbling block becomes the cornerstone	Matthew 21:42

coming, and the righteousness of His future reign.

Other messianic psalms reflect the character and work of Christ and His coming reign as King over all the earth. Psalm 110, for example, clearly validates the deity of Christ—the great mystery that He is both fully human and fully God at the same time. And Psalm 118 symbolically describes Him as a stumbling block, rejected by people, yet used by God as the cornerstone of His redemptive plan on the day of the resurrection.

Prophetic Psalms and Their New Testament Fulfillment

The table to the right lists some of the most significant messianic psalms and their fulfillment in the New Testament. A comparative exploration of these psalms and New Testament passages would make a rewarding individual or group Bible study.

All the Psalms are designed to teach us how to worship God, how to have fellowship with God, and how to experience the fullness and richness of God. They teach us how to honestly offer up the full range of our emotions to Him. If you have a problem, don't hide it from God or yourself. Tell Him about it. If you are angry with God, say so. If you're resentful, bring it out in the open and resolve it. If you're happy and glad, praise Him. That's what worship is all about—the honest expression of your heart to God.

As Jesus said to the woman at the well in

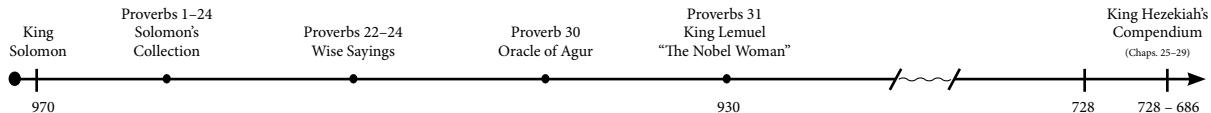
Samaria, “God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). God is looking for that kind of worshiper. If you can be honest before God—even with all your moods, sins, failures, pain, and questioning—you will find grace to meet all your needs.

There is an old story of a miser who put his trust in Christ late in life. After his conversion, one of his neighbors sustained a serious loss. When the born-again miser heard about it, his immediate reaction was, “My friend needs help and food for his family. I'll go to my smokehouse and get a ham and take it over to them.” But on the way to the smokehouse his old nature began to whisper to him, “Why give them a whole ham? Half a ham will be plenty.” He debated within himself all the way to the smokehouse.

Then he remembered that, upon receiving the grace of Jesus Christ into his life, he had resolved to crucify his old self and stand firmly against all the old traits and habits of his pre-Christian past. Suddenly he realized where the temptation to restrain his generosity came from: It was Satan who whispered, “Give him half a ham.”

“Look, Satan,” the old man said aloud, “if you don't pipe down, I'll give him the whole smokehouse!”

Where sin abounds, grace abounds even more. And that is the purpose of the Psalms: They are God's music, inspired and written to draw us to grace.

What Life Is All About

Some years ago, a man came into my study and told me a heartbreak story. Impatient with college and eager to escape his parents' home and get out on his own, he had left school and moved to San Francisco. There he experimented with drugs and promiscuity, hoping to find fulfillment in life.

For a while, every night was a party. But soon that lifestyle began to drag him down. He began mainlining heroin, a practice that he had once told himself he would never sink to. His experiments with hallucinogenic drugs gave him fantastic visions but left him full of fear and paranoia.

He soon became unemployable due to his drug habit and ended up as a procurer for prostitutes. He lived on the meanest streets of the city. Soon, nothing could dull the fear and shame he felt inside—not drugs, not sex. When he began feeling powerful suicidal impulses, he realized he needed to reach out for a power beyond himself.

God awakened this man to his need, and he took refuge at a downtown mission. He was detoxed and placed in a Christian program that enabled him to overcome his addictions. In the process, he turned

his life over to Jesus Christ. In our church, he found an accepting, caring community where his faith and Christian character could grow and mature.

The horrors this young man underwent are precisely what God, speaking to us through the book of Proverbs, wants to help us to avoid. The message of Proverbs is that life can never be fully understood nor fully lived except through a relationship with God. The complexities and perils of life are simply too big for us to handle by ourselves. In order to successfully navigate life, with all of its temptations, deceptions, and pitfalls, we need the timeless, dependable wisdom of God.

The Structure of Proverbs

This is a difficult book to outline. At first glance, the subject matter seems to change with every verse. But when you gain an overview of Proverbs, you begin to see that it is logically and helpfully constructed. Once

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter seeks to inspire the reader with a love for the wisdom contained in Proverbs, the guidebook to wise choices.

you note the major divisions of this book, you can easily recognize and follow its argument.

A Guidebook to Wise Choices

The book of Proverbs was written and compiled from about 950 to 700 BC. Proverbs begins with a brief preface in the first six verses and continues with a series of ten father-to-son discourses filled with practical exhortations on how to face the problems of life.

Beginning in chapter 10, we have a collection of proverbs from the wise king of Israel, Solomon. How did Solomon acquire his wisdom? Soon after becoming king, Solomon went to the hilltop altar at Gibeon to offer sacrifices to God. During the night, God appeared to him in a dream and said, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you” (1 Kings 3:5). And Solomon replied, in effect, “Give me a wise and discerning heart to govern Your people.”

God was pleased with Solomon’s request, and said, “Since you have asked for wisdom, and not for long life or wealth or the death of your enemies, I will give you a wise and discerning heart” (see 1 Kings 3:3–15). Because Solomon asked for the treasure of wisdom instead of riches or victory, God gave him all three. So the words of Solomon contained in this section, Proverbs 10 through 24, are the wisdom proverbs of the wisest king in the history of Israel.

The second collection of Solomon’s proverbs begins with chapter 25. These proverbs of Solomon were copied down at the direction of Hezekiah, the king of Judah, after Solomon’s death. The book closes with a postlude in chapters 30 and 31 containing the

words of two unknown individuals, Agur, son of Jakah, in chapter 30, and Lemuel, king of Massa, in chapter 31.

The book of Proverbs speaks to the human will, and is primarily concerned with the choices set before us in life. Someone has wisely said that “choices are the hinges of destiny” because our lives turn on the choices we make. To have a good life that is filled with satisfaction, abundance, and service to God, we must make godly, healthy choices. And the book of Proverbs is a road map to wise decision making.

Proverbs opens by telling us the title and author of the book: “The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel.” The theme of wise decision making is set forth clearly in the introductory paragraph:

For attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair; for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young—let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance—for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise (1:2–6).

In other words, this collection of wisdom is designed to meet the needs of people of all ages and stages of life, from childhood to youth to maturity. This is the guidebook for understanding what life is all about. It is practical, user-friendly, and is the key to unlocking the most baffling mysteries of life. Reading a proverb takes seconds; memorizing a proverb takes minutes; applying a proverb takes a lifetime.

The next verse gives us the password that unlocks Proverbs and the secrets of life, and summarizes the focus of the entire book:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline (1:7).

The Beginning of Wisdom

The book of Proverbs approaches life from the position that God has all the answers. He is all-wise and all-knowing. Nothing is hidden from Him. He understands all mysteries and sees the answer to all riddles. Therefore, the beginning of wisdom is to revere and fear God.

What does the “fear of the Lord” mean? That phrase, which is used often in Scripture, doesn’t refer to a cowardly, cringing sort of fear. God does not want us to live in terror of Him; He wants us to love Him, and as we read in 1 John 4:18, “Perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.”

The “fear of the Lord” is not the fear that God might hurt us but rather the fear that we might hurt Him! In other words, it is the fear that something we do might offend Him or grieve His loving heart. In this sense, “fear” really means reverence or respect, and it is this kind of loving, respectful fear that is the beginning of true knowledge and wisdom.

Notice: The fear of the Lord is not the end of wisdom. It is not all that is required for being wise; it is only the beginning. Once you have learned to fear and respect God, you still have to learn and experience so much to become mature, godly, and wise.

From Father to Son

Proverbs 1:8 marks the beginning of the ten discourses from a wise, loving father to his growing son. The proverbs begin with the child in the home, dealing with his first relationships, then move to the time when the child’s experiences broaden to include a wider spectrum of friends and influences. The wise father offers insight regarding the powerful influence that friends can have at this age. Clearly, the problem of peer pressure was as big an issue then as it is today. It’s vitally important for young people to know how to choose their friends wisely.

In chapter 3, the father’s counsel is directed toward a young man as he grows up and leaves home. When young people make their way into the city, entering college or the workforce for the first time, they are confronted with new pressures and temptations. Suddenly, they have the freedom to make choices where, as live-at-home teenagers, they were limited.

The father speaks delicately, yet frankly, about the pressures and perils of sex and how wrong choices can wreak destruction in a young person’s life. He also warns against unwise financial entanglements. The theme of this practical passage is summed up in two verses that all Christians, young and old, should commit to memory:

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own
understanding;
in all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make your paths straight
(3:5–6).*

This is a proven formula for the young man or woman who wants to find the secret of life, who wants to be an authentic success. I have never met a young person who didn't want to be successful (however he or she might define success). In my experience, no one has ever said, "My ambition is to be a skid-row bum." The path to true success lies in trusting the Lord with all your heart, whether you seek success in business, success in raising your family, success in the performing arts, success on the mission field or in some other form of ministry. When you trust in Him and acknowledge Him, He will make your paths straight.

Chapters 8 and 9 personify the two ways of life. Wisdom is seen as a beautiful woman, calling those who follow her to come away to the place of victory, achievement, and success in life. Folly, which is arrogant confidence in one's own foolish "wisdom," is personified as an evil woman—attractive, alluring, and tempting the unwary to wander into a trap of destruction and death.

The First Collection of Solomon's Proverbs

In chapter 10 we find the first collection of Solomon's wisdom expressed in pithy nuggets of practical advice covering every situation of life. This is a section that should be read again and again until its wisdom permeates our live and we have committed passages of it to memory, so that it will be available in times of pressure and decision-making.

This section of Proverbs is made up mostly of contrasts in which the writer sets two opposing paths, or worldviews, side by side to demonstrate the good and evil results of each. As you read this section note the antitheses, as

in Proverbs 10:17: "He who heeds discipline shows the way to life, but whoever ignores correction leads others astray."

This section also contains comparisons and similes that are powerfully descriptive and insightful. For example, Proverbs 11:22: "Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion."

What a vivid picture! Can't you just imagine a valuable gold ring with the light glinting off its polished surface like brilliant stars—affixed to the swill-dripping, mud-caked snout of an ugly old porker. Gold signifies value, but here is value misplaced. In the same way, a beautiful woman who misuses her womanhood and her beauty has not learned to place real value on the inward beauty of the spirit. She tragically underestimates her own worth and sells herself as an adornment for ugliness.

Other notable passages include Proverbs 12:16–22, a powerful discourse on the tongue—on how to use our speech for blessing God and others instead of for cursing, defaming, gossiping, lying, lashing out, wounding, and offending God and others.

Proverbs 13:24 is that well-known verse for parents, "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him." Remember, however, that the rod is for guidance and discipline—not for beating or destroying a child's spirit. Parents should always recall the words of Psalm 23:4: "Your rod and your staff, they comfort me." Whenever pain, in whatever form, must be inflicted on a child—whether corporal punishment, loss of privileges, time-out in a corner, or whatever—the child should always know that you have administered the rod of

correction in love, even in sorrow, not out of anger or revenge. The child should sense that when you say, “This hurts me more than it does you,” you really mean it.

Proverbs 14:12 calls us to recognize the limitations of our own understanding. How often I have seen the truth of these words validated in the lives of well-intentioned people: “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.” That’s why it’s so important to “trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding” (Prov. 3:5).

Many people spend hundreds of dollars every year on motivational books, tapes, and seminars in order to become successful. But the key to genuine success is found right in the book of Proverbs. For example, Proverbs 16:20 and 22: “Whoever gives heed to instruction prospers, and blessed is he who trusts in the LORD. . . . Understanding is a fountain of life to those who have it, but folly brings punishment to fools.”

In Proverbs 16:32, we find sound instruction for managing our emotions, such as impatience and anger: “Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city.” That verse is often quoted but seldom believed and put into practice. What a change it would make in our lives if we really understood that the person who is patient and self-controlled is a greater hero than Rambo, Hannibal, Lord Nelson, and Stormin’ Norman Schwarzkopf combined!

How do we build those qualities of patience and self-control into our lives? By asking God for maturity and by inviting the Holy Spirit to take control over our emotional lives. It

also helps if we ask trusted Christian friends to observe our lives and hold us accountable in these areas. Change and maturity rarely take place overnight. They happen as God gradually gains more and more control over each aspect of our lives. As Galatians 5:22–23 tells us, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control are among the fruit of the Spirit—evidences that God has taken up residence in us, and He is cleaning house.

Proverbs 17:28 tells us that “even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent,” or as someone has said, “It is better to remain silent and let everybody think you are a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt.”

Solomon’s psychological insight is truly amazing in its depth and applicability to everyday life. For example, Proverbs 19:3 tells us, “A man’s own folly ruins his life, yet his heart rages against the LORD.” I’ve seen the truth of this proverb proven again and again. We err, we blunder, we sin—then, when we reap the ruinous consequences of our own choices, we blame God! We ask, “Why didn’t God stop me? Why did God allow me to be tempted? Why didn’t God protect me from the consequences of my sin?” We make our own choices, yet we blame God for the harm we bring upon ourselves.

In Proverbs 20:27, we find another insightful statement regarding the nature of human life and the spirit: “The lamp of the LORD searches the spirit of a man; it searches out his inmost being.” A more accurate rendering of that verse would be, “The spirit of man is the LORD’s lamp; it searches out his inmost being.” The Holy Spirit is the light. We are the lamp. When the lamp of the human spirit holds the light of the Holy Spirit, He

searches the innermost part of our life and we truly begin to understand ourselves for the first time.

In Proverbs 22:6, we find yet another classic (but often misunderstood) bit of counsel for parents: “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.” I believe this should actually be translated, “Train up a child according to his way . . .” which means, discover your child’s unique character and abilities and bring him or her up in such a way that those beautiful God-given traits can be buffed and polished into precious, Christlike character. When those unique qualities are developed and brought out, then the child will grow to maturity and not depart from them.

As we said above, the proverbs beginning in chapter 10 are in the form of contrasting parallels—two opposing paths compared side by side. These parallels come to a close with Proverbs 22:16. Beginning with verse 17, Solomon switches to a different form of proverb. These are general discourses, two or three verses long, on various subjects such as child-rearing, relationships, getting along with neighbors, and even pre-Christian counsel to forgive instead of taking revenge: “Do not say, ‘I’ll do to him as he has done to me; I’ll pay that man back for what he did’ ” (24:29). Here in Proverbs, we find an early formulation for one of the most oft-quoted moral sayings in human history—the Golden Rule.

The Second Collection of Solomon’s Proverbs

Chapter 25 begins the second collection of proverbs of Solomon—the proverbs copied

and collected by the royal scribes of King Hezekiah. Verse 2 is a wonderful example: “It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings.” If you want to have a royal experience, I suggest you search out the glorious truths God has concealed in His Word. That is the glory of kings: to experience the thrilling adventure of discovering the riches hidden in the Bible.

Some of the advice in this section seems mundane but is ever so practical! For example, Proverbs 25:17: “Seldom set foot in your neighbor’s house—too much of you, and he will hate you.” Such advice is as fresh as any advice from the pen of Dear Abby.

Some of us let the gossip and hurtful behavior of others destroy our happiness, but Proverbs 26:2 says, “Like a fluttering sparrow or a darting swallow, an undeserved curse does not come to rest.” If someone says something nasty about you and it is not true, don’t worry about it. Nobody who matters will believe it—and those who do believe it don’t matter. That is just one of many helpful proverbs in chapter 26 on how to deal with troublesome people.

Verses 3 through 12 tell us how to respond to fools. Verses 13 through 16 tell what to do about lazy people. Verses 17 through 23 concern meddlers and how to deal with them. Hateful, vengeful people are addressed in verse 24. And in verses 25–28, we learn to watch out for smooth-tongued deceivers.

In Proverbs 28:27, we learn that no one is an island, that we are all connected across lines of class, race, and income. We should not shut ourselves off from the suffering and needs that surrounds us. Solomon observed: “He who gives to the poor will lack nothing,

but he who closes his eyes to them receives many curses.”

I’m not saying that you should give money to every panhandler on the street, since you might just be subsidizing drug abuse and idleness. But there are truly needy people—adults and helpless little children—and we must not close our eyes to them.

Agur and Lemuel, the Unknown Authors

Chapters 30 and 31 are authored by two men about whom we know nothing. Chapter 30 gives us the proverbs of Agur. He writes in a distinctly different style from the rest of Proverbs, grouping his sayings in a numerical way. His proverbs tend to begin with a structure like this: “There are three things that are never satisfied, four that never say, ‘Enough! ’ ” (30:15) and “There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand” (30:18). One of Agur’s proverbs that resonates with the cry of my own soul is this:

*“Two things I ask of you, O LORD;
do not refuse me before I die:
Keep falsehood and lies far from me;
give me neither poverty nor riches,
but give me only my daily bread.
Otherwise, I may have too much and dis-
own you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’
Or I may become poor and steal,
and so dishonor the name of my God
(30:7–9).*

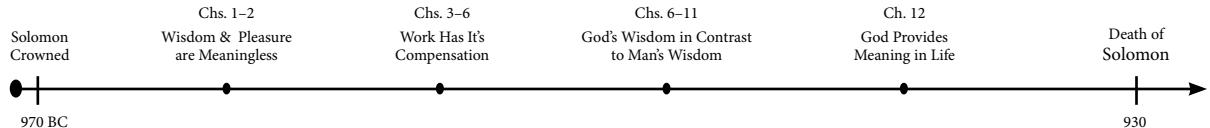
Though no one knows exactly who Agur was, his counsel is profound and practical, often making comparisons between spiritual issues and the created world.

Chapter 31 contains the words of King Lemuel concerning what his mother taught him about how to be a king. The epilogue, verses 10 to 31, closes the book of Proverbs on a beautiful note with a description of a virtuous, godly wife. Many feel this is King Lemuel’s description of his own mother—and what a woman she was! If you are a young woman looking for a godly example, I recommend this passage to you. If you are a young man looking for a model wife, I suggest you read it often as a reminder throughout your dating life.

The woman in Proverbs 31 is a picture of strength, intelligence, competence, business acumen, industriousness, glory, and beauty. She is an example of what God intended when He created Eve—a woman who was fashioned out of Adam’s rib to show (as someone has pointed out) that she is to be at his side—not on his back or under his feet! The woman of Proverbs 31 is a partner and companion to her husband, not his inferior or his slave.

This, then, is the book of Proverbs—an excellent book to read and reread on a regular basis. You might even want to read it through one month each year. The book of Proverbs is comprised of 31 chapters—a chapter a day in an average month. Try it, and the wisdom of its pages will seep into your soul and transform your life.

The Inspired Book of Error



The book of Ecclesiastes is unique in Scripture in that it is the only book in the Bible that reflects a human, rather than divine, point of view.

Ecclesiastes is filled with error, yet it is wholly inspired. This may seem confusing. After all, isn't divine inspiration a guarantee of truth? Not necessarily. Inspiration merely guarantees accuracy from a particular point of view: If it is God's point of view, it is true; if it is a human point of view, it may or may not be true. If it is the devil's point of view, it may or may not be true, for whenever Satan speaks, most of his statements are in error and even the truth he uses is intended to mislead.

Inspiration guarantees an accurate reflection of these various points of view. When the Bible speaks, it speaks the truth about God's truth, and it speaks the truth about the errors of human beings and of Satan.

Because Ecclesiastes reflects a human, rather than a divine, point of view, it is often misused and twisted out of context by the enemies of God's Word. Ecclesiastes is the favorite book of atheists and agnostics. Many cults love to quote

this book's erroneous viewpoints and give the impression that these words represent God's viewpoint on life.

In order to come to such a conclusion, however, one has to ignore what Ecclesiastes clearly states at the outset and repeats throughout the book: It draws its conclusion from appearances, from looking at the world from a human perspective. Every aspect of life this book examines is seen as "under the sun." That is where we human beings live.

God sees all of existence and all truth from what we might call a "beyond the sun" and "beyond the stars" perspective. But human beings view reality from a limited, horizon-level perspective, exclusive of divine revelation. We must live out our lives "under the sun," and that is the viewpoint expressed throughout most of Ecclesiastes.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter seeks to place Ecclesiastes in its proper perspective. People often quote from this book without realizing that it represents life from a human, not divine, point of view. Though Ecclesiastes is inspired by God, it is designed to show the futility of life from a purely human viewpoint.

The Author of Ecclesiastes

The book opens with this introduction (in the NIV Bible): “The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem.” Most other translations begin: “The words of the Preacher . . .” In context, I don’t think Teacher or Preacher are the best words to use in translation of the original Hebrew.

While the original Hebrew word can be translated in these two ways, given the context of Ecclesiastes, I think it could be more accurately translated as Debater, someone who argues a certain point of view. As you read Ecclesiastes you will see that it is composed of a series of arguments set forth from a human perspective. The Debater is Solomon, the son of David, king in Jerusalem—the wisest man who ever lived, according to biblical record.

Solomon was in an unusual position to undertake the investigations set forth in this



Wikimedia Commons

Painting of Solomon

book, because during the forty years of his reign there was peace in Israel. And since Solomon did not have to bother himself with military life, he had all the time he needed to pursue his inquiries into the meaning of life.

He also had all the wealth he needed, plus a keen, logical mind. With great resources of money, time, and intellect, he was free to discover what life is all about. Therefore, the value of Ecclesiastes is that it sets forth life from the standpoint of the natural person, apart from divine revelation.

“Vanity of Vanities”

As you read through the book you’ll notice that everything proceeds from Ecclesiastes 1:2: “‘Meaningless! Meaningless!’ says the Teacher. ‘Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.’”

Older translations of this passage, unfortunately, tend to be confusing to modern readers, using the term “Vanity of vanities!” instead of “Meaningless! Meaningless!” Hundreds of years ago, the average person understood vanity to denote “meaningless.” Today, however, we think of vanity as a state of being conceited and self-obsessed. Someone who spends a lot of time primping before a mirror is considered vain—that is, indulging in vanity.

This kind of vanity is illustrated by the story of the woman who once whispered to her pastor, “I must confess to you, Reverend Jones, that I struggle with the sin of vanity. Every day, I admire myself in the mirror for an hour.”

“My dear lady,” the minister replied, “that is not the sin of vanity you are suffering with. It is merely an excess of imagination.”

The original Hebrew word translated “vanity” in older English translations is properly translated in the NIV to denote emptiness, futility, and meaninglessness. The Debater has completed his survey of life, and gives this conclusion at the beginning of the book: Everything is futile, senseless, and meaningless.

He supports this conclusion with a series of arguments he has gleaned after sifting through the philosophies of life. Perhaps the most interesting thing about this book is that all the philosophies by which people have attempted to live are gathered together here. There is nothing new under the sun, the book says, and how true that is! Here we are, thirty centuries removed from the time this book was written, yet no philosopher has ever produced any ideas or belief systems beyond what the Debater presents in Ecclesiastes.

First we see what could be called the mechanistic view, a favorite among scientists of the past two centuries. This outlook interprets the universe as nothing but a great, grinding machine. The Debater, in his investigation of the processes of the universe, finds nothing but monotonous repetition. This is a remarkable passage, foreshadowing many of the discoveries of modern science. Ecclesiastes 1:6 states: “The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course.”

Scientists didn’t discover the circuit of the wind until centuries after this was written—nor did they understand the evaporation cycle of circulating waters when these words were set down in Ecclesiastes 1:7: “All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again.”

The Debater observes that the rivers run down to the sea, evaporate, come back up to the mountains again as rainfall, and run down to the sea again. The writer has discovered this in his observation of nature, and he says all this is meaningless repetition. He feels the utter weariness of this endless cycle.

So what is his outlook? The universe goes on and we are lost in the revolving, mindless gears of its machinery. This philosophy is prevalent today. It is the conclusion of reductionism—the belief that life can be reduced to mere mechanistic processes. The universe is a machine. We are machines. There is no soul, no spirit, no God. Humankind is a lonely little fleck in the midst of the great, vast, uncaring universe, a tiny speck without meaning.

“Just do it!”

In chapter 2 the writer examines the philosophy of hedonism: the pursuit of pleasure as the chief end of life. Live it up while you can, because it will all be over someday. Life is short—play hard. To these modern-day philosophers and advertising copywriters, the Debater of Ecclesiastes replies: “I thought in my heart, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.’ But that also proved to be meaningless” (2:1).

Novelist Ernest Hemingway lived the kind of life the Debater describes. He achieved fame and financial success in his early twenties, lived among the literary elites in Paris, hunted big game in Africa, watched bullfights in Madrid, fished for blue marlin in Cuba, and enjoyed an endless stream of whiskey and women. Yet Hemingway continually questioned the meaning of his own life. On July 2, 1961, he

took a shotgun down from the wall of his house in Idaho and ended his earthly existence.

Money could mask his pain. Sex could help him forget his pain. Alcohol could anesthetize his pain. But the pain was always there, underneath the momentary pleasures.

The Debater of Ecclesiastes goes on to itemize the pleasures of this life: the pleasures of laughter and the pleasures of gracious society. For a while, these experiences enabled him to forget the meaninglessness of his life, but in time, even laughter produced a weariness of spirit. The Debater tried to find meaning through acquiring possessions, as so many materialists do today. In Ecclesiastes 2:9–10, he wrote, “I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me. I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure.”

Yet, after giving himself to the accumulation of wealth and possessions, he comes to the conclusion that this, too, has brought only emptiness of spirit. “Live for today” seems like a great motto—until tomorrow comes. Materialism does not satisfy our deep longings.

So where did the Debater turn next? To the realm of ideas: the extremes and opposites of belief systems and ideologies:

*Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom,
and also madness and folly.
What more can the king's successor do
than what has already been done?
I saw that wisdom is better than folly,
just as light is better than darkness.
The wise man has eyes in his head,
while the fool walks in the darkness;
but I came to realize*

*that the same fate overtakes them both
(2:12–14).*

Wisdom is better than foolishness, he concludes, but ultimately both the wise and the foolish end up in the same place—the grave. If death overtakes both the wise and the foolish, what does wisdom gain you? In terms of the human perspective, a life lived “under the sun,” wisdom is meaningless. It makes no final difference.

In verse 17, the Debater reaches a shattering conclusion: “I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.” Pleasure. People. Possessions. The pursuit of wisdom. It’s all meaningless. In the end, the Debater hates his life, hates his toil, and surrenders to despair.

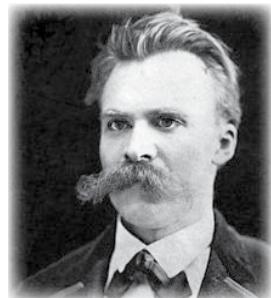
Existential Despair

In chapter 3, the Debater describes life from what we now call the existentialist viewpoint. Existentialism, as an organized school of thought, dates back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and is embodied in the philosophies of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and others. Yet existentialism is truly humanity’s oldest philosophy, and derives from an older philosophy called fatalism. Its adherents believe that life is fatal. No one gets out of this life alive, so live for the moment.

French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre wrote, “Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness, and dies by chance.” Friedrich Nietzsche expressed the existentialist view this way: “Regarding life, the wisest men of all ages have judged alike: it is worthless.” Pondering the existence



Martin Heidegger



Friedrich Nietzsche



Jean-Paul Sartre

of God, Nietzsche wrote, “Is man one of God’s blunders? Or is God one of man’s blunders?”

The influence of existentialism rose sharply at the end of World War II, when Europe was emerging from the smoking rubble of war. Everything that people had previously pinned their hopes on—the institutions of government and religion—had proven powerless to prevent the cataclysm of all-out war. Their hope shattered, people asked themselves, “What can we trust?” And they concluded that they could trust only their feelings and experiences from moment to moment.

That is where we find the Debater at this point in Ecclesiastes. He says, in effect, “I’ve tried to live as a fatalist, to live in the now, to experience my present existence, knowing there is no future, no meaning, no sense to it all. But I was empty.” He writes:

*There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under
heaven:
a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
a time to scatter stones and a time to
gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain,
a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw
away,
a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace
(3:1–8).*

The present passes. The next moment comes and change comes with it. We cannot remain in “the now.” All these events described by the Debater of Ecclesiastes eventually come upon us. And what do we have left? Do we have anything more significant, more enduring than this fleeting moment? If not, then existentialism leads us to despair.

We cannot live only in this moment; God did not create us to do so. Verse 11—one of Scripture’s most profound passages—tells us that we were made for nothing less than *eternity*. Solomon writes: “He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”

We can never rest with momentary explanations of our existence and the world

around us. We are made to look deeper into time, deeper into the workings of the world, deeper into our own souls, deeper into the mind of God. Eternity is in our hearts. God placed it there. The Debater saw all this. He knew that the events of life and death are inescapable. When life is over, all people—men and women, rich and poor, wise and foolish—face the same fate: All turn to dust.

Under the sun, from the human point of view, the future promises only futility and despair—so what's the use of living?

Everything Is Meaningless

In chapter 4, Solomon laments all the toil and oppression that he has seen in the business world: the envy and cutthroat competition, the exploitation of workers, the meaninglessness of trying to climb the ladder of success. His observations are as timely today as when they were written.

In chapter 5, he examines religion, and yes, even religion, he finds, is meaningless! Trying to live a good life and be a good person is meaningless! There's no practical value to it, no ultimate satisfaction. What's more, it's hard to tell religious and irreligious people apart! He observes that many religious people behave in unethical ways. They break vows to God. They oppress the poor. They are greedy and selfish. Religious formalism is empty and meaningless like everything else.

Chapter 6 reiterates Solomon's theme of the meaninglessness of riches and possessions. We spend all our efforts trying to feed ourselves, yet our hunger is never satisfied. The rich have everything they want and need, yet they still have cravings that can't be satisfied. What can you get for the person who has everything?

One who is unsatisfied, even with the wealth of a king, is no happier than a pauper. It all comes out to the same thing in the end.

In chapter 7, Solomon views life from the standpoint of stoicism—a cultivated indifference to events. Happiness, sadness, pleasure, pain, good fortune, tragedy; it's all the same. Accept the one without rejoicing and the other without complaining. Accept whatever happens to you with stoic indifference. As Solomon observes in Ecclesiastes 7:15, "In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: a righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked man living long in his wickedness."

Righteousness doesn't always pay, wickedness sometimes does, at least as judged by the evidence that we can observe "under the sun," at the human level of understanding. So, from a human perspective, not God's, the Debater concludes, "Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise—why destroy yourself? Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool—why die before your time?" (7:16–17).

In other words, aim for a happy medium. Stop beating your brains out trying to be good. Sure, it's okay to be good, but don't be too good. Live a little, sin a little, and don't worry about it. Don't be a fanatic. Avoid extremes. That's the "wisdom" of the world talking, not God's wisdom.

Chapters 8 through 10 and the first eight verses of chapter 11 are a connected discourse examining what might be referred to as the wisdom of the world or the commonsense view of life. In chapter 8, anyone approaching life from this point of view is encouraged to master the power structures of the world. He says, in effect, "Try to understand who is an

authority and who isn't, and do your best to be on the right side at the right time." That's a familiar philosophy, isn't it? You can find the same kind of thinking in the business and self-help sections of your local bookstore.

Solomon goes on to tell you what the self-help books won't: Even if you get what you want, even if you align yourself with the power structures of this world, if you get in good with the Big Boys and start winning advances, awards, raises, the corner office, and the key to the executive washroom, it's all meaningless.

In chapter 9, he examines the world's value judgments and points out they all come to the same thing:

*"I have seen something else under the sun:
The race is not to the swift or the battle to
the strong, nor does food come to the wise or
wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned;
but time and chance happen to them all"*
(9:11).

What difference, then, do worldly values make?

In chapter 10, he explores the inequity, unfairness, and uncertainty of life. Even a wise lifestyle can let you down. Sometimes, no matter how carefully and diligently we live, we end up at the bottom of the food chain. Slaves end up on horseback, while princes wind up walking off shoe leather. Fools climb to the top of the heap, while the wise end up underneath it. Despite your best efforts to live a good life, in the end life is not fair. In fact, life is meaningless.

In Chapter 11 Solomon talks about work ethic—the belief that success is largely just a matter of diligence. To get something out of life, you need to work hard and apply yourself. To be as happy as possible during

the brief, meaningless span of your existence, rejoice when you can, but don't expect the good times to last: "However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all. But let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many" (11:8).

You see? The Debater has proved his case. Everything is meaningless. Everything comes to the same thing: zero, naught, nothing.

But before you get too depressed, remember this: The entire book of Ecclesiastes, up to this point, has been written from a human perspective, not God's. From a human point of view, the Debater has summed up everything very well. Life lived apart from God comes to only one end: meaninglessness and despair.

But there is another viewpoint that hasn't been expressed yet. Stay tuned—for here comes the perspective that sees life from beyond the sun, not merely under it. Here comes the perspective of God.

A New Perspective

With the final chapter, Ecclesiastes 12, comes a shift in viewpoint, a recognition that life is highly significant when God is enthroned in a human life. This is Solomon's own true conclusion to all of his findings, and it begins with these words: "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, 'I find no pleasure in them'" (12:1).

Up to this point, we have been looking at life from a worldly, horizontal, under-the-sun perspective, and the conclusion that seems inescapable from the first eleven chapters of Ecclesiastes is that life is short, so live for today. The worldly philosophy Solomon has laid out for us is summarized (ironically, almost

satirically) in Ecclesiastes 10:19: “A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes life merry, but money is the answer for everything.” It sounds practical. It seems to make sense. But this is not God’s counsel. It’s the world’s counsel. It’s Satan’s counsel—and it’s a snare for the worldly, the arrogant, and the unwary.

God uses eleven chapters in Ecclesiastes to illuminate the folly of worldly thinking. He wants us to realize, whenever we see or hear people who live on the basis of “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die,” this is all that the world has to offer, apart from God. This is the logical conclusion of a life that has erased God from the picture.

How tragic, how blindly pessimistic. Such thinking denies the glory of our humanness and reduces us to animals. We are born, we eke out our squalid little pleasures amid the sufferings of this life, we operate on animal instincts of hunger and sex drive and self-preservation, until one day the truck with our name on it comes along, runs us down, and leaves us dead in the road. That is the gloomy worldview of a life lived without God.

Contrast this pessimistic view with what the writer says in the last chapter: “Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole *duty* of man” (12:13 emphasis added).

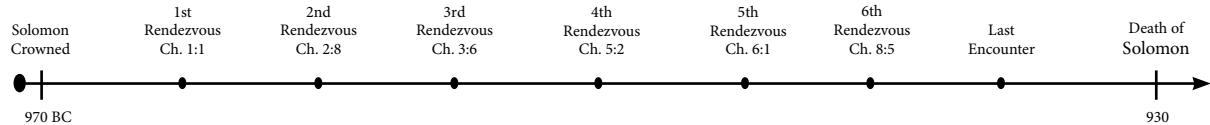
But wait—the word “duty” doesn’t belong there. It doesn’t appear in the original Hebrew text but was mistakenly supplied by a translator. Solomon does not say that fearing and obeying God is our *duty*. He’s saying that

this is “the whole of man.” This is what we were made for. This is our purpose in life.

If we fear God and keep His commandments, then we have finally found meaning. All is no longer “vanity of vanities,” no longer meaningless. Life is vibrant, exciting, exhilarating. This is the meaning we were meant to build our lives upon. In knowing Him, we find wholeness. In serving Him, we are doing what we were created to do. In receiving eternal life, we find true satisfaction.

The secret of living is to enthrone God in our lives. The sooner we learn this truth, the richer our lives will be. That is why chapter 12 emphasizes the importance of obeying God “in the days of your youth.” Thinking back on my own youth, I feel a great sympathy for young people today. They don’t want to waste their lives; they want their lives to *count* for something, to have *meaning*. That’s why the book of Ecclesiastes is such an important book for young people to understand. It knocks all the false props out from under us, then points the way to true significance and satisfaction in life.

I can testify that the Debater’s conclusion is true: Everything is indeed vanity and meaninglessness—*apart from God*. But if you place God at the center of your life, you will discover all that God designed you to be. The person who truly walks with God will never have lived in vain. All of life and even death itself will have meaning. Trust Him, worship Him, follow Him, love Him, and you will rejoice all the days of your life.

Love Song

The Song of Songs is regarded today as probably one of the most obscure books in the Bible. But it hasn't always been that way. Throughout the centuries, it has been one of the most read and loved books of all.

Before the Protestant Reformation the Song of Songs was frequently read, quoted, referred to, and memorized by various persecuted groups as the Albigenses, who fled the Catholic Church, and the Covenanters of Scotland, who were hunted like animals through the mountains and glens of Europe.

Like the other poetry books of the Old Testament, the Song of Songs is a book about deep yearnings that are expressed on both the surface level of the story line and a deeper symbolic level. The Song of Songs completes the five-book series of poetry books. Job, the first in the series, expressed the yearning cry of the human spirit for God, for answers, and for deliverance from suffering. The middle books of the series (Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes) expressed the yearning cry of the soul in its three respective components—the emotions, the will, and the mind.

Now, in the Song of Songs, we hear

the yearning cry of the body, the physical housing that God has given us—the yearning for love. The Song of Songs is a Middle Eastern love song—and it is frank in its description of romantic love. This book reveals all that our Creator intended for us in the God-given human experience of sexual expression.

Sigmund Freud got many things wrong in his analysis of what makes people tick, but he was right about one thing: sex permeates our lives, and it does so far more pervasively than we tend to realize. Sexual response and human love are more than just by-products of nerve impulses and glandular secretions. Our sexuality is intimately connected with every other aspect of our being—and that is how God made us. So the Song of Songs presents sex as God intended. Sexual expression not

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

In this chapter, we examine the Song of Songs, a love story that operates on two levels—the level of physical and sexual romance between a husband and his bride, and the level of the spiritual love relationship between Christ and His bride, the church. Neither level of meaning is more important or more “real” than the other. Both levels are equally valid—and each contains a wealth of insight and instruction for our lives today.

only involves physical urges, but the mind, emotions, and spirit. Our entire humanity is involved in every aspect of our sexual expression.

The Song of Songs presents our sexuality as it truly is, while avoiding the lascivious extremes of the so-called “Sexual Revolution” and the inhibitions of Victorian prudery. The book is candid, but never pornographic. Satan always seeks to take something God created and push it toward one unhealthy extreme or the other. He tries to make people feel that sex is “dirty,” or tries to provoke people to debase and exploit sex through advertising, entertainment media, and pornography. If he can drive our attitudes toward one extreme or the other, he achieves his goal of turning one of God’s purest and most exquisite gifts into something ugly.

God made sure that the Bible addressed sex as frankly and forthrightly as it deals with any other subject. So, first and foremost, the Song of Songs is a love song describing how a husband and wife delight in one another’s bodies. As you read through the Song of Songs, notice how beautifully, chastely, but honestly it approaches this subject.

The Story line

The writer of the Song of Songs is Solomon, the king of Israel. Within its pages, Solomon is probably recalling his romance with his first love, the wife of his youth. First Kings 4:32 tells us that Solomon wrote three thousand proverbs and over one thousand songs. This song, then, was his magnum opus, the greatest of all his many songs—and so he called it “the Song of Songs.”

This beautiful lyrical work, the Song of

Songs, is structured as a musical play. The characters in the play are: Solomon, the Lover and young king of Israel in all the beauty and vigor of his youth (the book was written near the beginning of his reign); the Shulamite woman, the Beloved; and the Friends. The story has a romantic fairy-tale quality. In fact, as you read it, you wonder if the Song of Songs wasn’t the inspiration for the tale of Cinderella (who is much like the Shulamite) and her Prince Charming (who resembles young King Solomon).

Because the Song of Songs is not a narrative, but a play written for several voices, the story line can be confusing unless you know who is speaking. The various parts in this play are conveniently marked off with subheadings in the New International Version so that it is clear who is speaking. If you do not have a Bible that contains such subheadings, you can distinguish the different speakers in this way: The bridegroom always refers to his bride as “my beloved,” and the bride calls the bridegroom “my lover.”

The play is set in Jerusalem. It’s the story of a young woman whose family evidently rented an excellent tract of land from King Solomon in the north country of Israel. The Shulamite woman is the Cinderella of the family—a simple country lass of unusual loveliness, forced to spend her days in hard physical labor. Though she has two brothers and two sisters, she is charged with tending the flocks and working in the vineyard. Spending her days in the open sun has given her a deep “California tan,” so she sings:

*Dark am I, yet lovely,
O daughters of Jerusalem,
dark like the tents of Kedar,*

*like the tent curtains of Solomon.
Do not stare at me because I am dark,
because I am darkened by the sun.
My mother's sons were angry with me
and made me take care of the vineyards;
my own vineyard I have neglected
(1:5-6).*

She watches the beautiful ladies of the court riding up in their carriages and envies them—yet she is willing to remain in her quiet, humble life. One day she looks up to see a handsome stranger, a shepherd, looking at her very intently. She finds his frank gaze disturbing, but he says to her, “All beautiful you are, my darling; there is no flaw in you” (4:7).

As soon as they fall deeply in love he has to leave. But before he goes he promises to return. Through the night, she dreams of him and yearns for him, remembering what he looks like and describing him to her friends.

One day there is great commotion caused by the announcement that the king, in all his glory, is coming to visit the valley. While the Shulamite girl is interested in this, she is not really concerned because her heart longs for her lover, the young shepherd. Then, to the amazement of everyone, the king sends his riders to the young woman’s house with the message that he desires to see her. She comes out, shy and afraid, to the royal carriage. When she looks inside she sees that the king is none other than her shepherd lover!

You may recall that, in the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon tells us that he undertook various journeys to discover what life was like on various levels. Apparently, he once journeyed in the guise of a simple country shepherd. Now, having revealed

himself to his beloved as the king, he carries her away to the palace, and they live (as the saying goes) happily ever after.

Throughout the book, a chorus of singers (the Friends, referred to in the text as the daughters of Jerusalem), ask certain leading questions from time to time, punctuating various events leading to the courtship, betrothal, and marriage of Solomon and the Shulamite. It’s interesting that the word “Shulamite” is the feminine form of Solomon. Therefore we could rightly call this woman “Mrs. Solomon.” Throughout the story, we read of their courtship, the strength and delights of their love, and even the techniques of their lovemaking.

The Language of Love

The language of the Song of Songs is poetic, lyrical, and figurative. As the woman and the man describe each other, you can sense the passion and the rapture of love in their words. Here is the language of love as she describes him:

*My lover is radiant and ruddy,
outstanding among ten thousand.
His head is purest gold;
his hair is wavy
and black as a raven.
His eyes are like doves
by the water streams,
washed in milk,
mounted like jewels.
His cheeks are like beds of spice
yielding perfume.
His lips are like lilies
dripping with myrrh.
His arms are rods of gold
set with chrysolite.
His body is like polished ivory*

*decorated with sapphires.
His legs are pillars of marble
set on bases of pure gold.
His appearance is like Lebanon,
choice as its cedars.
His mouth is sweetness itself;
he is altogether lovely.
This is my lover, this my friend,
O daughters of Jerusalem (5:10-16).*

Solomon describes his beloved in similar language:

*You are beautiful, my darling, as Tirzah,
lovely as Jerusalem,
majestic as troops with banners.
Turn your eyes from me;
they overwhelm me.
Your hair is like a flock of goats
descending from Gilead (6:4-5).*

You can see how figurative this language is. If a young man today described his beloved as having hair like a flock of goats, he would certainly be misunderstood. But in that culture, these were sweet-sounding metaphors. This is the language of love.

The book describes married love as God intended it to be. For two people to fully give themselves to each other—without inhibitions, for their mutual satisfaction—they must have a complete oneness that exists only in the safe enclosure of marriage. This truth is emphasized throughout the book by a threefold warning that the bride addresses to the unmarried young women—the chorus of Friends referred to as the daughters of Jerusalem. Three different times the bride, turning from her rapturous delight with her love, gives these young women the secret of sexual delight:

*Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you
by the gazelles and by the does of the
field:
Do not arouse or awaken love
until it so desires (2:7; cf. 3:5 and 8:4).*

In other words, do not rush love. Do not hurry into a sexual relationship before you are safe in the enclosure of a covenant relationship. Let love come first—genuine love between a husband and his wife, then let arousal and sexual ecstasy awaken. That is the secret of true satisfaction in sexual, romantic love.

It's disturbing to watch foolish parents encourage their children to mimic adult behavior in dancing, dating, and intimate touch as teenagers and even preteens. This behavior stirs up adult emotions and adult behavior in children who are not prepared to handle the responsibilities. Adolescents don't appreciate the consequences these feelings and behavior can bring. If you try to open the bud before it is ready to bloom, you destroy it. We are seeing the results of this folly in our own society.

God has ordained that the delights reflected here be a part of the experience of men and women in a marriage relationship, bound by a holy covenant. Throughout the Song of Songs we encounter pleas for chastity and purity in life until the time for marriage has come.

The Deeper Meaning

As you've surely guessed, however, we have not heard the deepest message of this song until we peer behind the surface story of romantic love and discover the allegory of this song. The deeper meaning is its expression

of the love relationship and the redemptive relationship between God and humanity, between Christ and His church.

The early Christians and even pre-Christian Jews recognized its allegorical significance. The preface to this song in one of the Jewish Targums reads: "This is the Song of Solomon, the prophet king of Israel, which he sang before Jehovah the Lord." The point of this preface is that Solomon wasn't singing a purely human love song. He sang this song as a prophet before Jehovah.

This was a song about Solomon's own relationship to his God, and the early church fathers also understood it in that light. It was because of this interpretation that the Song of Songs was such a comfort to the persecuted saints of the Reformation and post-Reformation periods.

With the hindsight of the New Testament to draw upon, the allegorical nature of this book becomes blindingly obvious. The love expressed in this book is the love of Jesus Christ for humanity and the rapturous love of redeemed believers for their Lord. The king who comes in the guise of a shepherd is King Jesus, the Good Shepherd, the Son of David. The Shulamite woman and bride, the beloved, is us—people who have been redeemed from the misery and sun-broiling drudgery of sin.

We didn't ascend to Jesus by our own efforts; He condescended to us, coming to us in the guise of a peasant, like one of us. He expressed His love for us on the cross, and He went away. One day He will return for us, to sweep us away to His splendid palace in the New Jerusalem. In the meantime, like the Shulamite, we yearn for His presence and eagerly await His coming.

After reading the Song of Songs, we gain an entirely new and magnified perspective on what the apostle Paul tells us:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless (Eph. 5:25-27).

It has been my privilege over the years to preside over many marriages. This experience has taught me that marriage is not the product of human society. It is not something that people invented after they began living together. Marriage goes back to the dawn of the human race. It is a God-given, integral part of human life. The physical act of consummating marriage is not the most significant aspect of the marriage but rather a picture of a deeper relationship, a spiritual and emotional bond between two people.

As you read of the rapturous delight that is exchanged between the bridegroom and the bride, you discover a magnificent description of what God intends for the relationship between Himself and the human race. This insight enriches our understanding of the great commandment, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37). In the Song of Songs, we have a picture of what God will perform in the heart and life of the person who loves Him with this kind of all-consuming love—a love that comes from the heart, the soul, and the mind.

Listen to these beautiful words of the bridegroom to the bride:

*"See! The winter is past;
the rains are over and gone.
Flowers appear on the earth;
the season of singing has come,
the cooing of doves
is heard in our land.
The fig tree forms its early fruit;
the blossoming vines spread their
fragrance.
Arise, come, my darling;
my beautiful one, come with me"*
(2:11-13).

The bridegroom speaks of the springtime of life, but it is not past; it lies in the future. One day this whole world will experience a

springtime like this. The Lord Jesus Christ will return at last to claim His waiting bride. He will greet His bride in words much like these. The springtime will come, the season of singing, the time when the earth shall blossom again and the curse will be lifted and the flowers will appear everywhere. And we will arise and go with Him.

This is a thrilling picture of what takes place in the life of the person who truly falls in love with the King, Jesus Christ, and enters into His springtime. The cold winter of loneliness and sin is gone—a time of singing has come!

The Promises of God

During World War II, an American pilot was flying near the Pacific island of Guadalcanal when he encountered a squadron of enemy planes. The enemy attacked him, and in the ensuing dogfight, his plane was hit and seriously damaged. Though he was uninjured, his plane was disabled and going down.

The pilot managed to nudge his plane away from the enemy-held main island to a tiny neighboring island not far away. He bailed out, his parachute opened, and he floated down toward the little jungle island. During his preflight briefing, he'd been told that some of the nearby islands were inhabited by cannibals.

His boots no sooner hit the sand when a group of islanders came running toward him. The island people surrounded him and took him back to their village. To his amazement, he discovered that a number of them spoke English—and they were not cannibals. They were Christians!

The pilot was an atheist. Though relieved not to be on the menu, he was convinced that when these islanders had converted to Christianity after being evangelized by missionaries, they had simply traded tribal myths for Christian myths. Since he had a long wait before being rescued, he had plenty of time to talk with the islanders about their beliefs.

One day, he noticed one of the

LEFT: Bedouin on Donkey

villagers sitting near a cooking fire, reading his Bible. "Do you believe the stories in that book?" the American asked condescendingly. "Why, in America we've learned that those are nothing but fables."

The villager pointed to the black pot over the cooking fire. "If it weren't for this book," he replied, "you would be in that pot."

God's Word is a powerful force for changing human hearts. As the writer of Hebrews observed, the Word of God is "living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12).

The purpose of the Old Testament is to prepare us to receive truth from God. Most of us begin our Christian experience by reading the New Testament, and that's understandable. But many, unfortunately, never get around to reading the Old Testament. Without a firm foundation in the Old Testament, we cannot fully grasp all the riches of the New Testament.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

The goal of this chapter is to present the prophetic books of the Old Testament as dependable and trustworthy. God has bound Himself to us by certain promises, and these promises are the foundation for our faith. Over thousands of years of human history God has always kept His promises, so we can believe everything He tells us in this section of His Word.

The Old Testament begins with the Pentateuch, Genesis through Deuteronomy. These five books that show the pattern of how God works in our lives.

Then come the historical books, Joshua through Esther. These books demonstrate the perils that confront us as Christians seeking to follow God's plan for our lives. They alert us to the spiritual forces that threaten us from without and undermine us from within, and they show us how to rely on God's power to win the spiritual battle.

Next come the poetical books, Job through the Song of Songs—five books that express the joys and sorrows of being human and show us how to experience a deep and rewarding friendship with God.

The Books of God's Promises

We now come to the last sixteen books of the Old Testament: the books of the prophets. In the prophetic books we discover the mighty promises of God. Just as a bride and groom make certain promises that bind them to each other, so God has bound Himself to us by the promises in this last section of the Old Testament. And just as a husband and wife are able to share themselves with each other because of the security of their marriage vows, God shares Himself with us as a result of the promises of the Bible. The better we understand God's promises, the more completely we can know and trust His nature and character.

The promises of God have earned the right to be trusted. They are sure and dependable, and are the foundation for our faith. Without them, we have no objective reason to trust the Bible. History shows that God has kept

all of His promises. As such, we can believe everything He tells us in His Word. Let's briefly survey the promises defined in each of these prophetic books:

The Promise of Isaiah

The book of Isaiah records numerous promises, but the foremost promise of this book—unquestionably one of the mightiest books in the Bible—is God's promise that He will cleanse and give mankind a new beginning. You see this promise in the very first chapter:

"Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool" (1:18).

This promise is repeated and expanded in the fifty-third chapter, which presents Isaiah's prophetic vision of the Messiah hanging on a cross, "pierced for our transgressions," and "crushed for our iniquities." Here is the promise of God's atoning grace: "by his wounds we are healed" (Isa. 53:5). I have come to deeply love this book, for it declares that whenever we are mired in weakness, sin, and failure, God is able to reach in, pull us out, and set us on the path of righteousness. The promise of Isaiah is the promise of grace and a new beginning.

The Promise of Jeremiah

The book of Jeremiah is, in many ways, a counterpoint to Isaiah. While Isaiah promises the grace of God, Jeremiah promises the absence of God! Did you know that God

promises to be absent from your life under certain conditions? This doesn't mean that He abandons us, but that our disobedience can cause us to lose a sense of His fellowship and communion with us.

The promise of Jeremiah foreshadows the New Testament promise that was delivered by the Lord Jesus to Jerusalem: "Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'" (Luke 13:35).

The Bible repeatedly reminds us that whenever we attempt, in our arrogant pride, to match strength with the Almighty, He will let us have our way. But He also allows us to experience the consequences—wandering into deeper and deeper darkness, misery, and desolation of spirit, exactly as Jerusalem was left desolate after its rejection of the Messiah. Jeremiah was sent to that bleeding city to declare to the people that their city was lost and they were going into captivity for seventy years.

But God never abandons us in our lost condition. Once we turn to Him with repentant hearts, the sweet promise of Isaiah becomes operative in our lives again—the promise of a new beginning.

The Promise of Lamentations

The book of Lamentations is the second of Jeremiah's two books. It contains the prophet's sorrowing reflections over the destruction of Jerusalem and the captivity of the Jews by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon.

The parallels between the prophetic ministry of Jeremiah and the ministry of the Lord Jesus are striking. This book of

Lamentations foreshadows the lamentation of the Lord Jesus as He wept, centuries later, over the same city. A few days before Jesus went to the cross, He stood on the Mount of Olives and looked out over the city. With tears streaming down His face, He cried out:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing" (Matt. 23:37).

Jerusalem, the city that had once rejected the prophet Jeremiah and ignored the Word of God, also rejected Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. The people of the city had missed the coming of their Messiah and Deliverer. Less than forty years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, the city of Jerusalem was once again destroyed, the temple razed, the walls knocked down, the Jewish people either slaughtered or dispersed into distant lands.

Amid the desolation of the first destruction of Jerusalem in Jeremiah's day, something good emerges. Each chapter of Lamentations reveals a lesson God wants to teach us about our experiences of pain, loss, and sorrow. The promise of Lamentations is that, even in our worst experiences, we can rely on the great faithfulness of God:

*Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness (3:22–23).*

His love and compassion never fails, even in the midst of destruction and desolation. The book of Lamentations is God's therapy for times of trouble.

The Promise of Ezekiel

The promise of Ezekiel is the promise of God's presence. This Old Testament book corresponds to Jesus' promise in the New Testament: "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (John 14:23).

The prophecy of Ezekiel begins with a remarkable vision of God. I have in my library an interesting pamphlet that attempts to explain the opening chapters of Ezekiel as a record of a UFO sighting—but this is a far-fetched notion. Ezekiel is not about a visitation from outer space but a vision of what God is like. It concludes triumphantly with a picture of the temple, where God is present with His people. The New Testament tells us that we are the ultimate dwelling place of God, and Ezekiel shows how God works in us to bring about His presence in the human heart.

The Promise of Daniel

Daniel is the great predictive book of the Old Testament, setting forth the promise of God's illumination of the human mind. It corresponds to Jesus' New Testament promise, given in John 8:12: "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." This is one of the greatest books for teenagers to study, because it presents the story of a teenager who stands for God in a hostile, ungodly environment—exactly what young people face in our society today.

The book of Daniel shows how God can use His people—including young people—as His instrument of blessing in society. God illuminated the mind of young Daniel so that he could see through all the deceptions and phoniness of the philosophy of his day, and God still operates the same way today.

The Promise of Hosea

Hosea is one of the most beautiful books in the Bible. It is a love story, but also the story of a broken marriage and of the heartache of unfaithfulness. Above all, it's a story about the persistence of God, the promise of God's determined redemptive action. The promise of Hosea links to the New Testament promise of Philippians 1:6: "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

It's a beautiful story about the wonderful grace of God amid the ugliness of human rebellion and sin. God tells the prophet Hosea to marry a harlot. When she leaves him and goes back to her adulterous trade, God sends him back to her again to take her to himself.

This woman leads Hosea through heartbreak and humiliation, yet God fills Hosea's heart with love for her, until finally she is won back and restored. It is an allegory of God's all-consuming love for the wayward nation of Israel in the Old Testament—and His love for us today. God sought us when we rejected Him, He redeemed us when we broke His heart, and He finally won us to Himself through His persistent, extravagant love.

The Promise of Joel

Joel shows how God is at work among the nations, shaping events and bringing

about His purposes so that even the tragedies we experience become part of the fabric of history that God is weaving.

If you are troubled by what is going on in the world, read the book of Joel. It corresponds to the New Testament promise of Romans 8:28: “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

The Promise of Amos

The promise of Amos is the promise of perfection, corresponding to Jude 24: “To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy . . .” The message of the book of Amos is that God will never downgrade His standards.

We want God to go easy on us, to leave well enough alone. “Lord,” we say, “look at the progress I’ve made. Isn’t that enough? Don’t try to improve my character any more. Just let me coast for a while.” But Amos comes along and says: “God will never be content until He has brought you in line with the absolute perfection of Jesus Christ.” The plumb line of God is the great theme of Amos.

The Promise of Obadiah

Obadiah is the promise of spiritual victory. It’s the story of two men, Jacob and Esau, who symbolize two walks in life. Jacob represents walking in the Spirit. Esau represents walking in the flesh. I often wish I could reach inside my heart, take hold of the evil there, and tear it out by the roots; Obadiah gives us encouragement for such times. The promise of this book links with the promise found in Romans 6:14: “Sin

shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.”

This book declares that the flesh always fails and the Spirit always triumphs. When we walk in the Spirit, we do not fulfill the lusts of the flesh. The book ends with these profound words: “The kingdom will be the LORD’s” (Obad. 21).

That is what we want for our own lives, isn’t it? We want the kingdom of our lives to be the Lord’s. We want Him to reign in our hearts, but we are His greatest obstacle. Obadiah shows us that God can overcome that too. The promise of Obadiah is the promise of victory over human flesh, human self-will, and human sin.

The Promise of Jonah

The book of Jonah receives more ridicule from scoffers than any other book in the Bible. Why? Because this is the “fish story” of the Old Testament. But, as someone has pointed out, this is also an encouraging book: If you are ever down in the mouth, remember Jonah; he came out all right! It’s important to remember that the central theme of Jonah is not a fish story, but is the promise of a second chance, the promise of God’s patience with us when we fail. We see evidence of this promise in Jonah 3:1: “The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time.” This is why the book of Jonah is such an encouragement to our faith—it shows God’s willingness to give us a second chance.

The book also demonstrates God’s patience and grace toward humanity through His dealings with the city of Nineveh. Through the prophet Jonah God told the city, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned”

(Jonah 3:4). Hearing this message, the entire city of over a hundred and twelve thousand inhabitants repented. God gave the people of Nineveh a second chance. In His patience with Jonah and with Nineveh, we see God's promise of grace, forgiveness, and patience.

The Promise of Micah

The prophet Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah. Both Micah and Isaiah ministered to the southern kingdom of Judah. Someone has called the book of Micah "Isaiah in shorthand." Micah summarizes many of the predictions and prophecies of Isaiah and even uses some of Isaiah's wording, which is not surprising, since these two prophets labored together.

The message of Isaiah is the promise of a new beginning. Micah's theme is the promise of God's pardon. Micah, by the way, is the favorite Old Testament book of many social activists because of one verse—Micah 6:8—a verse Adlai Stevenson often quoted as his favorite: "What does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

This sums up God's entire requirement of humanity. All He requires of us is justice, mercy, and humility. But who can do this? No one can meet the standard of perfection set by God. The message of Micah is that we can't accomplish even the minimum that God requires of us until we have received the pardon of God, until we have come to a place of dependence on Him, until we have placed our lives under the guidance and control of His Spirit. Only the God-controlled, grace-filled life can satisfy the perfect requirements of Micah 6:8.

The promise of Micah is the promise of God's gracious pardon.

The Promises of Nahum

The short book of the prophet Nahum gives us the promise of God's unchanging character. He is just and holy, and He demands justice and holiness. The books of Jonah and Nahum go together because both predict the destruction of Nineveh. In Jonah, the preaching of the prophet Jonah brings forth the repentance of the entire city, and so the city was spared. A hundred years later, however, Nahum issued his prophecy of the destruction of Nineveh, and it was fulfilled to the letter.

The combined message of these two books, Jonah and Nahum, is that God is patient, but He does not change. He can be trusted to do exactly what He says He will do. He reserves His judgment whenever people repent, but if they do not repent, His judgment will fall. That is the promise of the book of Nahum.

The Promise of Habakkuk

Few Christians are well acquainted with the book of Habakkuk, yet it's a fascinating book. In Habakkuk, we have the answer to that eternal question: "Why does God allow the innocent to suffer? Why does He allow evil people to have power and wealth while good people endure oppression and poverty?" Habakkuk—like Job of old—confronts the silence of God and demands to know, "Why?" God's response to Habakkuk gives us the theme for this book: God's promise of ultimate answers.

This book was one of the foundational documents of the Protestant Reformation.

It contains the phrase that struck fire in the heart of Martin Luther and set in motion the wheels of the Reformation: “the just shall live by his faith” (Hab. 2:4 KJV). This book is also the thematic basis for three great New Testament books: Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews. In each of these books, the phrase is quoted: “The just shall live by faith,” and each places a different emphasis on that phrase.

In Romans, the emphasis is on “the just.” In Galatians, it is on “shall live.” In Hebrews, it is on “by faith.” Together, these three books underscore the promise of Habakkuk: If we live by faith, God will one day give us the answers we seek.

The Promise of Zephaniah

The promise of Zephaniah, one of Scripture’s shortest books, is the promise of God’s jealous wrath. The tone of the book is dark and gloomy, and it speaks repeatedly of “the day of the LORD.” The wrath of God is the “flip side” of His love. As we see in Zephaniah and elsewhere in Scripture, our God is a jealous God. That doesn’t mean He is jealous in the way that we human beings are—that is, filled with unreasoning suspicion and obsessed with possessing and controlling another person. God’s love for us is a perfect love, and He hates anything that would damage His relationship with us.

When we say, “Lord, I want this,” and He knows that it would be harmful to us, He says, “No, you can’t have it.” This seems unfair to us, but it is really God’s holy, protective love for us.

God sometimes disciplines us by directly intervening in our lives or by allowing the natural consequences of our choices to occur.

At such times, we feel the heat of God’s wrath. Many people say that they can’t accept the idea of a God of wrath. But you cannot believe in a God of love unless you believe that He can also become angry. If God cannot be angry with those things that hurt the ones He loves, then God cannot truly love. The promise of Zephaniah is the promise of God’s jealous love and jealous wrath.

The Promise of Haggai

All of the prophets we have just surveyed wrote their books before Israel and Judah were taken into Babylonian captivity. The next three books—Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi—were written after Israel emerged from captivity. These last three books were written at about the same time as Ezra and Nehemiah, so the prophetic section of the Old Testament closes during the same era as the historical section.

The promise of Haggai is a promise of material blessing. This book reveals the link between the physical and the spiritual. Haggai was the prophet to the people who had forgotten God. They had abandoned the building of the temple while they had been busy building their own houses and focusing on selfish interests. Haggai was sent to remind them that those who behave selfishly will ultimately bring grief and destruction upon themselves. All material prosperity comes from God. Those who don’t put God first will see their prosperity fade. The promise of Haggai is a promise of God’s provision and abundance for those who place Him at the center of their lives.

The Promise of Zechariah

Zechariah is sometimes called “the Apocalypse of the Old Testament.” The term, Apocalypse, is another name for the book of Revelation. The book of Zechariah has many features in common with the book of Revelation. Zechariah begins with a vision of horsemen riding out to patrol the earth. It ends with the transcendent spectacle of the coming glory of God at the second coming of Jesus Christ. In this book we find the literal prediction that the Lord’s feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives and that the mountain will be split in half and a great valley formed. This is where the judgment of the nations will take place.

So Zechariah is intimately linked to John’s vision in Revelation. The promise of Zechariah is the promise of the encouragement and comfort of God through the dark days of the end times. If it seems as though the world is falling apart and that God is about to be defeated, read Zechariah. Victory is just around the corner!

The Promise of Malachi

The last book of the Old Testament is Malachi. These four brief chapters give us the promise of God’s light for our darkness. It reveals God’s answer to human failure and blindness. As the book opens, God asks Israel a series of questions, and Israel’s responses show a complete lack of awareness of God’s love, grace, and truth.

God says, “I have loved you.” Israel replies, “How have you loved us?” God says, “You place defiled food on my altar.”

Israel replies, “How have we defiled you?” God says, “Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.” Israel replies, “How did we rob you?”

This is one of the most discouraging moments of our lives—the moment we recognize our own blindness, hopelessness, and failure. It’s a depressing condition, a sense that we are always in the wrong and incapable of ever achieving God’s standards.

Malachi is a wonderful medicine for that condition because it shows God’s answer to the blindness of our hearts. It shows that God has taken the initiative to shine His light into our blindness and darkness.

The book closes with a magnificent view of the first coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, preceded by John the Baptist, and of what that coming will mean to the human race. Then the prophetic vision skips quickly to the Lord’s second coming: the dawning of the Sun of Righteousness, who comes with healing in His wings to bring God’s vision of glory to the earth. The promise of Jesus, of His saving power, and His light for our blindness and darkness—that is the promise of Malachi.

What Do You Do with a Promise?

God’s Word contains three thousand promises that are intended for our present, daily use. How many have you claimed? The answer to that question will largely determine your effectiveness, your satisfaction, and your happiness in the Christian life.

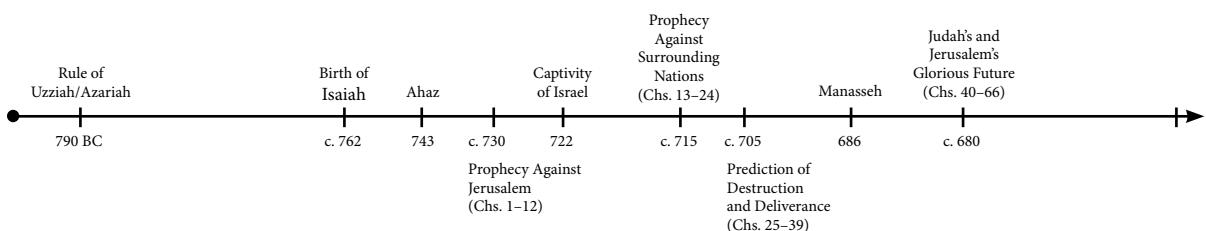
What do you do with a promise? Well,

you either believe it or reject it. There are no alternatives.

You might say, “I won’t believe God’s promise. I won’t reject it. I’ll just ignore it.” I’m afraid that option is not open to you. If you ignore His promises, then you reject them, because a promise demands a

commitment. If you ignore something, if you turn your back and walk away from someone, that’s rejection, isn’t it?

A promise must be believed or rejected. That is why I call this section of our Old Testament study “The Promises of God.”

The Gospel According to Isaiah

Isaiah was the greatest of the prophets and a master of language. If you enjoy beautiful, rolling cadences and powerful literary passages, you'll enjoy this book.

The book of Isaiah is found in the exact middle of the Bible and has often been called a "miniature Bible." How many books does the Bible have? Sixty-six. How many chapters does Isaiah have? Sixty-six. How many books are there in the Old Testament? Thirty-nine. In the New Testament? Twenty-seven. The book of Isaiah divides in exactly the same way. The first part of the book has thirty-nine chapters. There is a distinct division at chapter 40, so that the remaining twenty-seven chapters constitute the second part of this book.

The New Testament begins with the history of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ who came to announce the coming of the Messiah, and ends in the book of Revelation and the establishment of a new heaven and earth. Chapter 40 of Isaiah, which begins the second part of the book, contains the prophetic passage that foretells the coming of John the Baptist: "A voice of one calling: 'In the

desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God'" (Isa. 40:3).

John the Baptist said that he fulfilled this passage. Isaiah 66 speaks of the new heavens and the new earth, which is echoed in the New Testament book of Revelation. So you find here in Isaiah a remarkably close parallel-in-miniature to the entire Bible.

The book of Isaiah presents the most complete revelation of Jesus Christ to be found in the Old Testament, which is why it is sometimes called "the fifth gospel" or "the gospel according to Isaiah." The prophetic passages of Isaiah point clearly to Christ, even though they were written seven centuries before He was born. These startlingly clear prophecies, which have been fulfilled in multiple ways in the life of Jesus the Messiah, provide proof that the Bible is the divinely inspired Word of God.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

The goal of this chapter is to show that the surprisingly clear prophecies and salvation message in the book of Isaiah dovetail with the life and message of the Lord Jesus Christ. This chapter shows that Isaiah is truly "the gospel according to Isaiah."

LEFT: Gate outside the old City of Jerusalem

I like to picture the book of Isaiah as the Grand Canyon of Scripture: deep, vast, majestic, colorful, and layered with history. Visitors to the Grand Canyon are always astonished as they stand at the rim and look out over the silent canyon and see the winding silver thread of the Colorado River more than a mile below. You frequently hear a tourist exclaim, “How could a tiny thing like that river carve out a huge canyon like this?”

You get a similar impression as you look out over the vast expanse of the book of Isaiah. You immediately sense the grandeur and power of God. You sense the insignificance of humanity when compared with His might and majesty. You have to ask yourself, “How could Isaiah, a mere human being like me, write a book like this?”

The Source of the Book of Isaiah

We know very little about Isaiah. He lived during the reigns of four kings of Judah: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. His ministry occurred about seven hundred and forty years before Christ when Sennacherib, the Assyrian invader, captured the ten tribes that formed the northern kingdom of Israel. Judah, the southern kingdom, was plunged into idolatry toward the end of Isaiah’s ministry in 687 BC and the people of Judah were carried captive into Babylon in 587 BC.

Isaiah was a contemporary of the prophets Amos, Hosea, and Micah. Tradition tells us that he was martyred under the reign of Manasseh, one of the most wicked kings of the Old Testament (until Manasseh’s conversion in 2 Chronicles 33:11–13). According to this

GOD’S BULLDOZER



The Old Testament prophet Isaiah predicted that the message of John the Baptist would be like a great bulldozer, building a highway in the desert so that God would be able to come reach isolated human souls in the midst of the wilderness. “Every valley shall be raised up,” says Isaiah 40:4, “every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.” Without a road, you cannot drive out into the desert to help those who are wandering and lost. So John the Baptist was the highway-builder—God’s bulldozer—making a path in the desert with the message of repentance and forgiveness.

Repentance is the great leveler. It fills in the valleys and depressed places of our lives—the places where we beat ourselves down and torture ourselves with guilt—and it fills them in and lifts them up. It also brings down all the high peaks of pride that we stand on when we refuse to admit we are wrong. Repentance takes the crooked places, where we have lied and deceived, straightens them out and makes the rough places plain. Isn’t that beautiful imagery to describe the role of repentance in our lives?

Ray C. Stedman
*The Servant Who Rules:
Exploring the Gospel of Mark, Vol. I*
(Discovery House Publishers, 2002)

tradition, Isaiah hid in a hollow tree to escape Manasseh. The king's soldiers, knowing he was in that tree, sawed the tree down—cutting Isaiah in half. Some scholars feel that the reference in Hebrews to heroes of faith who were “sawn in two” includes the prophet Isaiah (see Heb. 11:37).

Isaiah is the human author of this book, and it is amazing to think that a person could write in such beautiful language and reveal such tremendous insights. But in the same way, when visitors to the Grand Canyon go down the long trail to the Colorado River, they are no longer amazed that a river could carve out the great canyon. They can hear the force of the current and sense the power of the river. The book of Isaiah is like that. Here is a man carried along by an amazing force, speaking magnificent prophecies as he is moved by the mighty Spirit of God.

As Peter observes, the prophecies of the Old Testament are not the product of human imagination but of God's own Spirit (see 2 Peter 1:20–21). Nothing less than divine inspiration could explain how Isaiah could speak and write as he did.

Here is a brief outline to help you catch a glimpse of the breathtaking panorama of this deep, rich book:

A Vision of the Lord

As you read through this book, you'll see that the prophet Isaiah was searching for something. Peter says he was searching for the salvation that was to come from God (see 1 Peter 1:10). It's interesting, then, that the name Isaiah means “the salvation of Jehovah.”

Isaiah lived during a time of national stress, when man's true, ugly nature was

readily apparent. As the book opens, Isaiah is livid over the rebelliousness of his nation. The obstinacy and disobedience of his fellow Israelites is beyond his ability to understand or tolerate. He angrily laments: “The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand” (1:3).

Even an animal knows where its bread comes from, but not Israel! His people wander stupidly and ignorantly. Isaiah is beside himself with frustration and amazement.

In chapter 6, God gives Isaiah a vision of His awesome purity and holiness:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the LORD seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory”
(6:1–3).

It's significant that this vision occurs in the year of King Uzziah's death, when the throne was vacant, because in his vision, Isaiah sees the throne as never vacant. As you read on, you find that God has power to shake the earth to its foundations. He is a mighty God, speaking in thunder and moving in strength. In the presence of God, Isaiah responds:

“Woe to me! . . . I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty” (6:5).

Isaiah wonders how a sinful human being can stand in the presence of such righteous Perfection. Where is salvation for a man of unclean lips who comes from a people of unclean lips?

In chapter 40, the prophet returns to the issue of the helplessness and unworthiness of sinful human beings in the presence of Almighty God. In a prophetic passage that points to the coming of John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah, Isaiah writes:

A voice says, “Cry out.”

And I said, “What shall I cry?”

*“All men are like grass,
and all their glory is like the flowers of
the field.*

*The grass withers and the flowers fall,
because the breath of the LORD blows
on them.*

Surely the people are grass.

*The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of our God stands forever”*
(40:6–8).

We human beings are like the grass. Isaiah sees that the human race is impotent, impermanent, and helpless, stumbling toward oblivion. But that, he soon discovers, is not the end of the story.

Woven throughout the book is the ever-growing revelation of God's love, of Jehovah's salvation, expressed in the Person who is to come: the Messiah, the servant of God. At first, the image of Messiah is dim and shadowy, but gradually the image grows brighter, clearer, and more detailed until, in Isaiah 52 and 53, the figure of Christ steps right off the page and fills the whole room.

Isaiah's image of the Messiah is not what

we, in our limited human imaginations, would expect. In Isaiah 52:13, we see that he “will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted,” yet in the very next verse we also see that “his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness.” The pre-Christian Jews must have been puzzled by these apparent contradictions.

How did God's exalted Servant come to be so horribly marred and disfigured? Why was He “despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering” (53:3)? Why was He “pierced for our transgressions . . . crushed for our iniquities” (53:5)? Why was He “oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth” (53:7)? And why was He “cut off from the land of the living . . . stricken . . . assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth” (53:8–9)?

It must have baffled ancient Jewish scholars to contemplate this image of the Messiah: not a radiant Messiah coming in might and power but a Messiah who “poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors,” a Messiah who “bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (Isa. 53:12). In this seemingly contradictory (yet divinely inspired) image, the prophet Isaiah saw how God's love would break the back of human rebelliousness and meet us in our hopelessness and need.

The “Revelation” of Isaiah

Ultimately, the prophet Isaiah peers beyond the dark centuries yet to come and sees the dawning of the day of righteousness,

when God's glory will fill the earth. Isaiah 61 announces the year of the Lord's favor, when Jesus is anointed by the Spirit of the Sovereign Lord to "preach good news to the poor . . . to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners" (61:1).

Chapter 62 proclaims a new name and a new peace and prosperity for Zion, the redeemed and holy people of the Lord. Chapters 63 through 66 announce God's day of vengeance and redemption, His gift of salvation, judgment, and hope. Also in chapter 65, we see an image of the new heaven and new earth that is also envisioned by John in the book of Revelation. Then this prophecy of Isaiah will be fulfilled:

He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore (2:4).

In both Isaiah and Revelation, you see two opposite characteristics of the Lord Jesus—His great power and His great humility—together. In Revelation 4:2, John tells us of a mighty vision of God, a vision of a throne shining in heaven. Then he says, "I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne" (Rev. 5:6). In these verses we see the throne and the Lamb, power and humility, a King and a Servant.

We see these same contrasts brought together in Isaiah. In Isaiah 6:1, we see "the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted." Then, in Isaiah 53:7, we see the Servant—who

is also the Lord!—"oppressed and afflicted," and "led like a lamb to the slaughter."

This is God's plan. He doesn't solve the problem of sin on earth the way you and I probably would, with warfare, scorching and scourging the wicked human race from the face of the earth. Here we see convincing evidence of God's declaration in Isaiah 55:

"My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (55:8–9).

God's method is to break through human rebelliousness not by might, not by power, but by love—a costly love that suffers and endures great pain and shame. When God comes to the human race as a suffering Servant rather than as a mighty conqueror, something beautiful takes place as the human heart responds, opening to God as the petals of a flower open to the sun.

Into that open heart, God pours His everlasting life.

The Kingdoms of Assyria and Babylon

While the first part of the book presents the threat of the king of Assyria, and the last part of the book describes the threat of the kingdom of Babylon, the middle part of the book, chapters 37 through 39, record the filling in this historical sandwich. Chapters 37 through 39 may be understood as an interlude bridging the space between Assyria and Babylon. These two nations—Assyria and Babylon—are in the world today and

ASSYRIAN AND BABYLONIAN INVASIONS OF ISRAEL



have been since before the time of Isaiah. It is remarkable how up-to-the-moment the book of Isaiah truly is! Where do we see these two kingdoms today?

The king of Assyria stands for the power and philosophy of godlessness. “Assyria” is the arrogant human assertion that there is no God; that we can live as we please, accountable to no higher moral authority. “Assyria” is the claim that we inhabit a mindless, materialistic universe that heedlessly grinds humanity to insignificant dust; that we can do nothing in this life except enjoy our time until we die. It’s the philosophy that might makes right and that man is accountable to no one but himself.

The Assyrian philosophy is still prominent in our own day. It is the root philosophy behind Communism and other materialistic “isms” in the world—but it is also a dominant philosophy in North America and the rest of

the Western world. Marvin Olasky, editor of *World* magazine and author of *Fighting for Liberty and Virtue*, once said, “Materialist philosophies that treat human beings as machines or animals possess the high ground in our culture—academia, the most powerful media and many of our courts.”

The second force we see in Isaiah is the power of Babylon. In Scripture, Babylon is always the symbol of apostasy, religious error, and deceit. Again, this philosophy is strong today. The voice from which we should expect guidance—the voice of the church itself—is often raised against God, against the inerrant truth of His Word, against the morality and godliness that is proclaimed in the Scriptures. Today, we hear churches and religious leaders rationalizing false doctrines, justifying and defending sinful lifestyles, and ordaining people into the ministry who, by

their own admission, engage in behavior that is biblically intolerable. We are living in the very times described in Isaiah.

The dominant characteristics of the human heart are rebellion and helplessness. I once read a newspaper account of a man who was stopped by a police officer for speeding. When the officer handed him the ticket, the man read it, tossed it back at the officer, threw his car into gear, and sped off. The officer jumped into his car and pursued the lawbreaker at high speeds. The man finally ran his car off the road and destroyed it, killing both himself and his six-year-old daughter who was in the car with him. What made him do that? Wasn't it the innate rebelliousness within a human heart when confronted by authority? The same rebellion lurks in us all; this man only took it to a fatal extreme.

People often say to me in counseling: "I know what I ought to do, but I don't want to do it." Why not? Because of rebelliousness and helplessness. It's reflected in the growing despair and futility gripping so many lives today, and the apparent meaninglessness of life. Twice in Isaiah, God offers His promise to a world enslaved by rebellion and helplessness—a promise of cleansing, forgiveness, and a new beginning:

"Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool" (1:18).

And:

"Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money,

come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost" (55:1).

God's message to humanity is not condemnation but grace and forgiveness. He calls to us, "Come! The salvation of Jehovah is available to all! It is a free gift, no strings attached!" And when we accept the gospel according to Isaiah, we discover the answer to our deepest need, the cure for the rebellion and helplessness of our lives, the victory over the Assyria and Babylon in our hearts, the freedom and fellowship that God intended each of us to experience with Him.

The First and Last "All"

Some years ago, one of England's Bible teachers had just finished speaking at a week long series of nightly evangelistic meetings. Following the meeting, he hurried to catch a train home. At the station, as he was about to board, a man ran up to him and asked to speak to him.

"Sir," the stranger said, "I was in the meeting tonight and I heard you say that we can find peace with God, but I didn't understand all that you said. Could you please stay and talk with me? I need your help!"

The whistle blew. The train would be pulling out of the station in moments. "I'm sorry," said the Bible teacher. "This is the last train tonight, and I mustn't miss it. But I will tell you what to do." He handed the man his battered King James Bible and said, "Take this Bible and go to the nearest lamppost. Turn to Isaiah 53:6. Stoop down low and go in at the first 'all,' then stand up straight and come out at the last 'all.' " Then he stepped onto the train as it began to pull away.

The man looked bewildered. "Where did you say . . . ?"

"Isaiah 53:6!" the teacher repeated, shouting over the clatter of the train.

The man watched the train pull away. Then, shrugging, he took the Bible to the nearest lamppost and opened it to Isaiah 53:6. He recalled the teacher's advice: Stoop down low and go in at the first "all," then stand up straight and come out at the last "all."

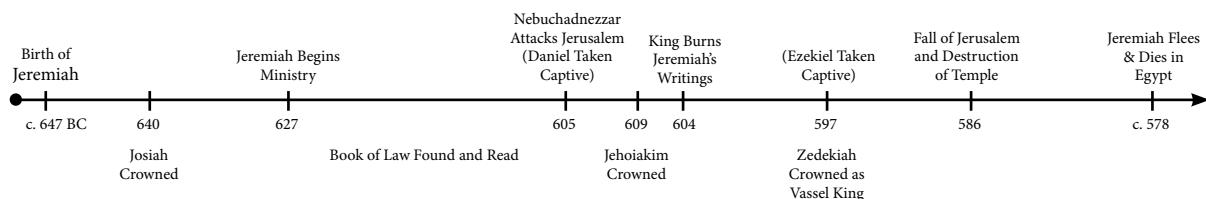
He read aloud, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way." Oh, that's the first 'all.' I see now. I need to stoop down low and go in at the first 'all.' I need to admit I have gone astray, that I've turned away from God and gone my own way."

Then he read further, "And the LORD

hath laid on him the iniquity of us all' Oh! Now I'm to stand up straight and come out at the last 'all.' That's it! All my sin has been laid on Him, and I don't have to carry that load anymore. I can stand up straight because He has taken all my sin away!"

The next night, the man returned to the meeting and handed the Bible back to the teacher. "Here's your Bible," he said. "Last night under that lamppost, I stooped down and went in at the first 'all,' and I stood up straight and came out at the last 'all.' "

That is the gospel according to Isaiah, the gospel story of the Old Testament—and it's the very same gospel we find in the New Testament. If you know the Messiah of Isaiah's gospel, you can stand up straight and come out at the last "all."

A Profile in Courage

During the German occupation of Denmark in World War II, King Christian X demonstrated defiant courage in the face of Nazi oppression. One morning, the king looked out his window, and saw the hated Nazi flag flying over a public building in Copenhagen. He called the German commandant and angrily demanded that the flag be removed.

The amused commandant refused. "We Germans do not take orders," he replied. "We give them."

"If you do not have it removed this instant," said the king, "a Danish soldier will take it down."

"Then he will be shot," snorted the Nazi officer.

"Fire away, then," said the king. "For I shall be that soldier."

The Germans removed the flag.

That is a profile in courage, the courage to stand up for a higher cause than life itself. There are many profiles in courage throughout the Old and New Testaments: men and women who took a courageous, costly stand for

God. One of the most courageous of all was the prophet Jeremiah.

The Prophet Hero

Imagine for a moment you are Jeremiah the preacher. You live during the last days of a decaying nation, in the time of evil King Jehoiakim. You preach to the nation and call your people to repentance but no one listens. You are threatened and opposed at every turn. You have no wife, no companionship, because the days are evil and God has told you not to marry. You feel abandoned and alone. Even your friends have turned away from you.

You wish you could quit but you can't. The Word of God burns in your bones, and you have to speak it regardless of the consequences. You love your nation and your people, but you see disaster looming. You see the enemy massing on the border, ready to

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

The goal of this chapter is to present the reader with a heroic picture of the courageous prophet Jeremiah, who lived in times like ours—times when the nation was crumbling due to moral decay and spiritual decline. The lessons of the life of Jeremiah are relevant and applicable to the times in which we live.

LEFT: Old City of Jerusalem

conquer your land and carry out the judgment of God—and you are powerless to prevent it. Instead of heeding your warnings of coming destruction, the nation turns on you and seeks to destroy you, God's messenger!

Now, perhaps, you understand the heroism of Jeremiah. Isaiah wrote more exalted passages and saw more clearly the coming of the Messiah. Other prophets spoke more precisely of future events. But Jeremiah stands out as a man of heroic courage with an iron determination to speak God's message regardless of the cost.

Jeremiah was the last prophet to Judah, the southern kingdom, as the nation was crumbling due to moral and spiritual decay. He lived about sixty years after the days of Isaiah, and continued his ministry in Judah after the ten tribes of the north had been captured by Assyria. Jeremiah's prophetic ministry began during the reign of Judah's last good king, the boy-king Josiah, who led Israel's last revival before its captivity. The revival under Josiah was rather superficial. The prophet Hilkiah had told Josiah that the people would follow him in his attempt to return the nation to God, but it was only because they loved the king—not out of a true love for God.

Jeremiah's ministry lasted from the middle of Josiah's reign, through the three-month reign of King Jehoahaz, the miserable reign of evil King Jehoiakim, and the three-month reign of Jehoiachin. Jeremiah continued to carry on God's work during the reign of Judah's last king, Zedekiah. It was at this time that Nebuchadnezzar returned, destroyed the city of Jerusalem, and took the nation into Babylonian captivity.

Jeremiah's ministry lasted about forty years, and during all this time the prophet never saw any sign that his ministry was even slightly successful. His message was one of denunciation and reform, and the people did not obey him. He was called to a ministry of failure, yet he never gave up. Despite the frustration of forty years of failure, he remained faithful to God and to his mission. He never wavered from his calling as God's witness before a dying and disobedient nation.



Judgment and Sorrow

Two themes permeate the book of Jeremiah. The first concerns the fate of the nation, which is judgment. The second concerns Jeremiah's sorrow over his people's disobedience.

First, Jeremiah repeatedly reminds the people that their first error was their failure to take God seriously. They didn't pay attention to what God had told them, but instead did what was right in their own eyes—not what was right in the light of God's revelation. As we read in 2 Chronicles 34, the nation had sunk so low that for many years, the law of Moses was completely lost. It had been tossed into a storage room in the back of the temple and forgotten.

Decades later, Hilkiah the priest was cleaning the temple and found the book of the law. He was astounded. For years, the nation had been completely without the Word of God, and suddenly the Word was rediscovered.

Hilkiah took the book of the law to King Josiah and read it to him. Hearing the words of the law, the king tore his clothes in grief and anguish over the years that the Law had been lost. He had the book read to the entire nation and made a covenant before the Lord to keep His commandments (2 Chron. 34:29–31). The rediscovery of the Word of God stimulated a great national revival led by Josiah. The rediscovery of God's Word is always the first step to revival and restoration.

It's a dangerous thing to lose contact with God's Word. When we shut our eyes and close our ears to God's voice and His Word, we end up on the perilous road of doing what is right in our own eyes. Many people, of course, do

what they know is wrong in the sight of God; that's bad enough. But it's just as dangerous to judge for ourselves what is right without consulting God's Word. Without an objective source as our yardstick, how can we properly determine what we should do?

The Bible is our moral and spiritual reality check. Without it, we become unrealistic and misguided, and our judgment is impaired. We easily find ourselves in the same state of decay and deterioration that characterized the people of Jeremiah's day.

In neglecting God's Word, the kingdom of Judah gradually adopted the values of the nations around them. They formed political and military alliances with godless nations, and soon they even worshiped foreign gods. Their idolatry and disobedience led them into internal strife, external threats, perverted justice, and moral disintegration. These were the conditions when Jeremiah came to call the nation to repentance—or judgment.

Throughout the book, Jeremiah issues clear and detailed prophecies, telling exactly how God would raise up a terrible and godless people who would sweep across the land and destroy everything in their path. They would be ruthless, breaking down the city walls and destroying the temple, taking away all the things the nation valued and dragging the people themselves into bondage. Thus would God judge Israel.

Jeremiah also makes clear that God takes no pleasure in dispensing judgment. He judges with a sorrowing, weeping heart. When God disciplines a nation or an individual, He does so because He is a God of love. He is a loving father who repeatedly instructs his erring children in the way of obedience but who

finally and reluctantly must correct them. We see His fatherly, sorrowing heart described in numerous passages, such as this one:

"I myself said,

*"How gladly would I treat you like sons
and give you a desirable land,
the most beautiful inheritance of any
nation."*

*I thought you would call me 'Father'
and not turn away from following me"*
(3:19).

Here we see that God is not so much enraged as He is wounded and grieved. The Lord is gracious and merciful, but when we trample His mercy underfoot He reaches the point where He must give us the discipline and judgment that we have been asking for. It is as if He is saying to us, "This is going to hurt Me more than it does you." Every loving father says that to his children sooner or later,

but no father ever meant it more sincerely than God the Father.

Jeremiah was one of the greatest prophets in the Bible, living during the darkest, most shameful days in the history of Israel and Judah. The nation has become characterized by idolatry, immorality, apostasy, and the degeneration of worship and faith. For forty years, Jeremiah proclaims God's judgment against the erring nation of Judah. He issues prophecies that foretell events of the near future and of future millennia. Jeremiah himself lives to see many of his prophecies come true, including the destruction of Jerusalem. He will later write his feelings about that destruction in the book of Lamentations.

Twelve Prophetic Sermons

Most of the book of Jeremiah consists of a series of prophetic sermons. The first, from Jeremiah 2:1 to 3:5, laments the willful sins of

TWELVE PROPHETIC SERMONS OF JEREMIAH		
Sermon 1	Jer 2:1–3:5	laments the willful sins of Judah
Sermon 2	Jer 3:6–30	coming judgment and destruction that will result if Judah does not repent
Sermon 3	Jer 7–10	Jeremiah's own grief over the nation's sin and details the nation's hypocrisy and idolatry
Sermon 4	Jer 11–12	nation's faithlessness in breaking its covenant with God
Sermon 5	Jer 13	Jeremiah uses a ruined sash, or belt, and wineskins to symbolize God's judgment
Sermon 6	Jer 14–15	coming judgment in terms of drought, famine, and war
Sermon 7	Jer 16–17	explains why he is unmarried and that disaster is looming because of the people's idolatry, sin, and disregard for the Sabbath
Sermon 8	Jer 18–20	compares God's power over Israel to a potter's control over clay speaks against the evil kings of Israel
Sermon 9	Jer 21–22	all-out attack on the false prophets of the nation
Sermon 10	Jer 23:9–40	contrasts the good people who have been exiled to Babylon with the evil leaders of Judah who remained behind
Sermon 11	Jer 24	
Sermon 12	Jer 25	peers into the future and foresees seventy long years of Babylonian captivity for Judah

Judah. The second, from 3:6 through chapter 6, warns of the judgment and destruction that will result if Judah does not repent. The third, chapters 7 through 10, expresses Jeremiah's own grief over the nation's sin and details the nation's hypocrisy and idolatry. The fourth, chapters 11 and 12, deals with the nation's faithlessness in breaking its covenant with God.

The fifth sermon, chapter 13, uses a ruined sash, or belt, and wineskins to symbolize God's judgment. The sixth, chapters 14 and 15, describes God's coming judgment in terms of drought, famine, and war. In the seventh sermon, chapters 16 and 17, Jeremiah explains why he is unmarried and that disaster is looming because of the people's idolatry, sin, and disregard for the Sabbath. When society is disintegrating, he says, it is better to be unmarried.

In his eighth sermon, chapters 18 through 20, God speaks through Jeremiah, comparing His power over Israel to a potter's control over clay. God is omnipotent, and the entire nation is as clay in His hands. He has the power to make, unmake, and reshape the Jewish nation. In this sermon, God tells Jeremiah to go to the potter's house and watch the potter working at the wheel. The prophet sees the potter making a clay pot; as the wheel turns, the pot becomes marred and broken. The potter squashes the pot into a shapeless lump and patiently begins shaping it the second time, after which it emerges in a shape that is pleasing to the potter.

This is one of a number of powerful word pictures that Jeremiah, inspired by God's Spirit, uses throughout this book. The potter and the clay symbolize not only God's power,

but His loving intent and His desire to make something beautiful from a broken life. He takes our brokenness and deformity, the result of our past sin, and remakes it according to the creative vision of His artist's heart.

Here, Jeremiah speaks not only a fateful prophecy of ruin and desolation but also of the hope and beauty of the coming days when God will reshape Israel. We can find comfort and encouragement in realizing that the word picture of the potter and the clay applies not only to the Jewish nation but to our lives as well.

In his ninth sermon, chapters 21 and 23, Jeremiah speaks against the evil kings of Israel. Then he predicts the coming of a righteous King, a righteous branch from David's family tree (23:1–8). This, of course, is a prediction of the righteous reign of King Jesus. Because His millennial reign is still in our future, Jeremiah is looking toward events that have not yet been fulfilled.

His tenth sermon, 23:9–40, is an all-out attack on the false prophets of the nation. His eleventh sermon, chapter 24, contrasts the good people who have been exiled to Babylon with the evil leaders of Judah who remained behind, comparing them to good figs and bad figs. In his twelfth sermon, chapter 25, Jeremiah peers into the future and foresees seventy long years of Babylonian captivity for Judah.

Later, when we study the book of Daniel, we'll meet the prophet Daniel who lived during the Babylonian captivity that Jeremiah foresees. In that book, Daniel reads Jeremiah 25 and discovers that Jeremiah had prophesied that the Babylonian captivity would last exactly seventy years. Thus, Daniel knew that

the end of the captivity was approaching, and he could look forward to seeing the nation restored.

In Jeremiah 25, the prophet looks beyond the time of captivity to the restoration of the people. Then his gaze leaps far beyond the events of the next seventy-odd years to a far-distant time, hundreds and even thousands of years ahead. He foresees the ultimate dispersion of Israel when the Jews were driven out of Palestine in the first and second centuries AD. He also foresees the final gathering of the Jews back into the land: the reestablishment of the state of Israel in 1948. He looks beyond even our own era to the days that will usher in the millennial reign when Israel—restored and blessed and called by God—will be the world's cultural, political, economic, and spiritual hub.

Jeremiah's twelve prophetic sermons are followed in chapters 26 through 29 by details of several conflicts that Jeremiah experienced: conflicts with his own people, the nation of Judah, and conflicts with the false prophets Hananiah and Shemaiah. In this section, we see Jeremiah's boldness and courage as he opposes the civic and religious leaders of Jerusalem, prophesying the coming destruction of the city. This is an act of defiance against Jerusalem's corrupt human authorities—and his defiance causes them to seek to kill him.

The New Covenant

In chapters 30 through 33, we come to an amazing and beautiful prediction of Jeremiah concerning the future restoration of Israel and Judah. Not only will the city of Jerusalem be rebuilt and refurbished, but God will make

a new and lasting agreement with the people of restored Israel. In Jeremiah 31, we read:

“*The time is coming,” declares the LORD,
“when I will make a new covenant
with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah.
It will not be like the covenant
I made with their forefathers
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them,”
declares the LORD.
“This is the covenant I will make with the
house of Israel
after that time,” declares the LORD.
“I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people” (31:31–33).*

While Jeremiah was being pursued and persecuted, he was led by the Spirit of God to write this shining vision of Israel's future restoration. In this vision, God promises to be their God and to walk among them and put away their sins.

Most significant of all, this passage contains the great promise of a new covenant to be made with Israel. This is the same new covenant spoken of so powerfully in Matthew, which our Lord Himself referred to when He gathered with His disciples the night before His crucifixion and instituted the Lord's Supper. After breaking the bread, which symbolized His broken body, He then took the cup and said, “This is my blood of the [new] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28).

The ultimate fulfillment of the new

covenant still lies in the distant future. God is fulfilling it today among the Gentile nations through His church (made up of both Jewish and Gentile believers). But the final fulfillment of the new covenant for Israel will not take place until the millennial reign of Jesus the Messiah.

In chapter 37, King Zedekiah, son of good King Josiah, is installed on the throne by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Unlike his father, Zedekiah had no regard for God. Though Zedekiah does not actively oppose Jeremiah and often listens to his words, he is a weak and cowardly puppet-king who lacks the will to stand up to the officials in his government who actively persecute the prophet.

First, Zedekiah tacitly allows Irijah, the captain of the guard, to arrest Jeremiah and throw him into a dungeon. Then, when the governmental officials (who supposedly owe their allegiance and obedience to King Zedekiah) approach the king, asking that Jeremiah be put to death, Zedekiah acquiesces, saying, “He is in your hands. . . The king can do nothing to oppose you” (Jer. 38:5). So the governmental officials have Jeremiah tossed into a cistern filled with slimy mud. Only a small amount of light trickles in from above, vaguely illuminating the cistern where Jeremiah stands covered in ooze.

When another royal official comes to Zedekiah and complains of the unjust treatment of Jeremiah, the cowardly king again changes course, sending thirty men to rescue Jeremiah from the pit. The king secretly has Jeremiah brought to him so that he can question God’s prophet about his own fate and the fate of the nation. The spineless

king swears Jeremiah to secrecy concerning their conversation.

Chapters 39 through 45 tell the grim story of the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonian invaders, just as Jeremiah had prophesied. In chapters 46 through 51, we have a series of prophecies against the various heathen nations and cities that oppose God and His people: Egypt, Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Edom, Damascus, Kedar, Hazor, Elam, and Babylon. In chapters 50 and 51, Jeremiah details the defeat and desolation that will ultimately engulf Babylon.

Jeremiah 52 sets forth the last days of Jerusalem: the capture and destruction of the city and the forced exile of its people to Babylon. Thus are the dire prophecies of Jeremiah fulfilled.

Battling the Specter of Discouragement

Throughout the book of Jeremiah, you see the prophet in a constant battle against discouragement. Who wouldn’t be discouraged in the face of constant persecution and failure? For forty long years, he labors and preaches but never perceives even the tiniest hint of success.

We can learn a great lesson through Jeremiah’s honest reactions to opposition and failure. In his public role as a prophet of God, he is as fearless as a lion. He confronts kings, captains, and murderers with ferocity and boldness. He looks them right in the eye and delivers the message of God, heedless of their threats.

But alone, Jeremiah is just a solitary human being like you and me. When he prays, he pours out the same prayer you or I would pray in that situation. He is honest

about his emotions of anger, bitterness, discouragement, and depression. He doesn't sugarcoat his feelings. He spreads it all out before the Lord—even his disappointment with God!—and says:

*Why is my pain unending
and my wound grievous and incurable?
Will you be to me like a deceptive brook,
like a spring that fails? (15:18).*

Strong words? Honest words? Absolutely. He is pouring out his true feelings. He has begun to wonder whether if he can truly depend on God. He is troubled by persecution, scorn, loneliness, and discouragement. He feels forsaken.

Some people would say, "I know the trouble with this man! Jeremiah has allowed himself to fall out of fellowship with God. His faith is sagging." That's a glib and superficial diagnosis—and it's the wrong diagnosis. Jeremiah is holding fast to God while wrestling with God. He's carrying on a relationship with God—a stormy relationship at times—but a living, dynamic relationship. As Jeremiah prays:

*You understand, O LORD;
remember me and care for me.
Avenge me on my persecutors. . . .
When your words came, I ate them;
they were my joy and my heart's delight,
for I bear your name,
O LORD God Almighty (15:15–16).*

This is a man who feeds on God's Word, who witnesses to God's truth, who publicly bears the name of God, the Almighty. Jeremiah is doing all the things that one should do in times of discouragement and depression. He prays. He meditates on

God's Word. He witnesses to others about the truth of God. He does all these things, yet he still feels defeated and discouraged. What is the problem?

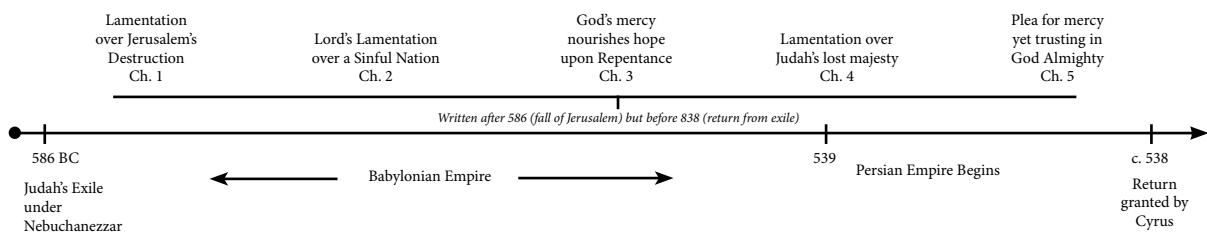
Simply this: Jeremiah forgot his calling.

He has forgotten what God promised to be to him. So God reminds Jeremiah that He called him to be a prophet, to speak His words. God didn't call Jeremiah to be successful. He didn't call Jeremiah to win a popularity contest. He called Jeremiah to be faithful and to be His representative, period.

Why should Jeremiah be discouraged? So what if he is rejected? So what if kings and captains oppose him? So what if he isn't successful in the eyes of the world? Jeremiah needs to concern himself with only one standard of success: God's standard.

If Jeremiah is faithful and obedient, if he speaks God's words with boldness and clarity, then it doesn't matter if those words produce results, from a human perspective. It doesn't matter if the people repent, if the nation turns back to God. Results are God's department. Obedience is Jeremiah's department. As long as he keeps in view the goal of obedience to God, he will be depression-proof. The same is true for you and me.

God is greater than our circumstances, our setbacks, our disappointments, and our opposition. He is bigger than anything and everything else in our lives. No matter how depressing life may seem, the God who calls us is the same great God who will sustain us. If we take our eyes off our circumstances and fasten them firmly on God, then we will be strengthened to rise and achieve true success—steadfast obedience to God.

God's Therapy

Bart Ehrman is one of America's leading Bible scholars. And he is a nonbeliever. He used to consider himself a "born-again Christian," but as he writes in his book *God's Problem*, he came to a point where he felt compelled to leave the Christian faith. He explains:

I did not go easily. On the contrary, I left kicking and screaming, wanting desperately to hold on to the faith I had known since childhood and had come to know intimately from my teenaged years onward. But I came to a point where I could no longer believe. It's a very long story, but the short version is this: I realized that I could no longer reconcile the claims of faith with the facts of life. . . . The problem of suffering became for me the problem of faith. . . .

If God is all powerful, then he is able to do whatever he wants (and can therefore remove suffering). If he is all loving, then he obviously wants the best for people (and therefore does not want them to suffer). And yet people suffer. How can that be explained? [Bart D. Ehrman, *God's Problem* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 3, 8.]

Bart Ehrman came to the conclusion that, confronted with the problem of evil and suffering, the believer must surrender his faith and become a nonbeliever. Is

there any other solution to the problem of evil? Jeremiah, in the book of Lamentations, shows us another solution—a solution that is rooted in, and consistent with, our faith in a loving and powerful God.

The Lamentations of Jeremiah . . . and Jesus

The full name of this book is "The Lamentations of Jeremiah." It is the second of Jeremiah's two books, containing the prophet's tear-stained reflections on the city of Jerusalem following its destruction by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the original Hebrew), there is a brief notation which states that Jeremiah uttered these lamentations as he sat on the hillside overlooking the desolate city.

As you read through the book of Lamentations, you get a strong impression of the foreshadowing of the Lord Jesus as He wept, centuries later, over the same city. In Jesus' last week before going to the cross, He

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter explores the lamentations of Jeremiah, revealing that it is possible to cling to God's grace, goodness, and faithfulness even in the midst of mind-numbing tragedy.

went to the Mount of Olives and looked out over the city. With tears streaming down His face, He cried out:

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing” (Matt. 23:37).

The same city that rejected the prophet Jeremiah and the word of God he preached also rejected Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, some six centuries later. The people of Jerusalem did not know the hour of their visitation, so they turned their backs on their Messiah and deliverer.

We see other parallels between Jeremiah's lamentations and the ministry of the Lord Jesus in such passages as:

Lamentations 1:12: “Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look around and see. Is any suffering like my suffering that was inflicted on me?” These words suggest the suffering of the cross and the indifference of those who watched the Savior die.

Lamentations 2:15: “All who pass your way clap their hands at you; they scoff and shake their heads.” This recalls the mockery of the crowd at the foot of the cross.

Lamentations 3:14–15: “I became the laughingstock of all my people; they mock me in song all day long. He has filled me with bitter herbs and sated me with gall.” This suggests the mockery and the bitterness of the crucifixion, when the soldiers offered

Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall. In the Bible, the term “gall” is used to refer both to a bitter plant and to the poisonous venom of snakes (see Deut. 29:18; Job 20:14; Ps. 69:21).

Lamentations 3:30: “Let him offer his cheek to one who would strike him.” This reminds us of the time Jesus was brought before Pilate for judgment and was struck by the soldiers.

So this little book captures the Lord's sorrow and agony. Jesus was, as Isaiah 53:3 tells us, “a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.” Those sorrows and sufferings are echoed here in the book of Lamentations.

An Intriguing Structure

There are twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet, beginning with aleph, the equivalent of our a, and ending with tau, the equivalent of our t. (The letter z, by the way, is near the middle of the Hebrew alphabet.) Lamentations is written in a poetic structure called an acrostic, a composition in which the initial letters of the lines, when read vertically, form a word, a phrase, or (as in this case) an alphabet.

Jeremiah used the acrostic form to list, in order, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The acrostic is formed in chapters 1, 2, and 4: each chapter consisting of twenty-two verses, and each verse beginning with one of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

Chapter 3 deviates from the pattern, consisting of sixty-six verses in triads. Each verse of a triad begins with the same letter of the alphabet, so that there are twenty-two groups of three: verses 1 through 3 begin

aleph, aleph, aleph; verses 4 through 6 begin beth, beth, beth; then gimel, gimel, gimel; and so forth to tau, tau, tau. Chapter 5 does not follow this acrostic plan, although it does have twenty-two verses.

These chapters have been written very carefully, according to the rules of Hebrew poetry. This is certainly an intriguing structure, but the real interest of this book is in its content.

A Hymn of Heartbreak

This is the kind of book you might read when sorrow comes into your life, as it does to all of us at times. As Jeremiah was looking out over Jerusalem, he saw its desolation and remembered the terrible, bloody battle in which Nebuchadnezzar had captured and ravaged the city, destroyed the temple, and killed the inhabitants.

Lamentations is a study in sorrow, a hymn of heartbreak. Each chapter deals with a particular aspect of sorrow. Chapter 1 describes the depths of sorrow, the loneliness, and the desolation of spirit that sorrow wreaks upon the human heart. The people have been vanquished and taken into captivity; the city has been torched and totally destroyed. Jeremiah writes:

*"This is why I weep
and my eyes overflow with tears.
No one is near to comfort me,
no one to restore my spirit.
My children are destitute
because the enemy has prevailed"*
(1:16).

Chapter 2 describes the thoroughness of judgment. Everything has been destroyed,

nothing is left. The beginning of this chapter describes the way Nebuchadnezzar's armies utterly devastated the city. Jeremiah, however, does not attribute this destruction to the armies of Nebuchadnezzar, but to the Lord. The Babylonian army was merely a tool in the hand of the Almighty.

In chapter 3, a long chapter of sixty-six verses, the prophet speaks of his own reaction, his personal pain as he contemplates a scene of utter devastation. He writes:

*I am the man who has seen affliction
by the rod of his wrath.
He has driven me away and made me walk
in darkness rather than light;
indeed, he has turned his hand against me
again and again, all day long.
He has made my skin and my flesh grow
old
and has broken my bones.
He has besieged me and surrounded me
with bitterness and hardship.
He has made me dwell in darkness
like those long dead (3:1-6).*

In chapter 4 we see the prophet's shocked disbelief as he recalls all that has happened. Anyone who has been through a traumatic, tragic loss knows these feelings. First, there is a sense of utter desolation. Then comes a deep personal pain. As the pain sinks in, the mind recoils in disbelief and denial: "This can't be happening!" That is the sense the prophet conveys in these words:

*How the precious sons of Zion,
once worth their weight in gold,
are now considered as pots of clay,
the work of a potter's hands! . . .
Those who once ate delicacies
are destitute in the streets.*

*Those nurtured in purple
now lie on ash heaps.
The punishment of my people
is greater than that of Sodom,
which was overthrown in a moment
without a hand turned to help her. . . .
With their own hands compassionate
women have cooked their own children,
who became their food
when my people were destroyed. . . .
The kings of the earth did not believe,
nor did any of the world's people,
that enemies and foes could enter
the gates of Jerusalem.
But it happened because of the sins of her
prophets and the iniquities of her priests,
who shed within her
the blood of the righteous (4:2, 5–6, 10,
12–13).*

In chapter 5, we see the utter humiliation of judgment, the shameful realization that Jeremiah's people have been thoroughly disgraced. "The crown has fallen from our head," he laments in verse 16. "Woe to us, for we have sinned!"

The Lessons of Sorrow

Amid all this desolation and depression, something good emerges. Each chapter reveals a crucial insight, a lesson God wants to teach us for our times of pain, loss, and sorrow. Throughout Scripture, we learn that God uses our pain and suffering to teach us life lessons and to make us more mature and Christlike.

As the apostle Paul writes, we can "rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Rom. 5:3–4).

And in Hebrews 5:8 we read of the Lord Jesus, "Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered." It is hard for us to grasp the fact that Jesus, who is God, had to learn obedience. This does not mean, of course, that Jesus was ever disobedient. Rather, the writer of Hebrews is saying that Jesus learned what human beings experience, what we suffer, and how hard it is for us to respond to our suffering in obedience to God. These are aspects of our humanity that can only be learned through the human experience of suffering and sorrow.

Philippians 2:7 tells us that Jesus emptied Himself of the power and rights of being fully God in order to identify with us. So He suffered. And if Jesus, the Lord of creation, did not exempt Himself from suffering, then why should we expect to be exempt?

Each chapter of Lamentations reveals one particular aspect of sorrow, one specific lesson of God's grace for our times of trial. This book is designed to teach us God's therapy during times of suffering and pain.

Lesson 1: God's Judgment Is Unerring and Unimpeachable

Chapter 1 focuses on the sense of desolation and abandonment in spirit we feel when we suffer. As Jeremiah looks out over the ruins of Jerusalem, he suddenly realizes that the devastation is a sign that God is right and His judgment is unerring and unimpeachable. So, in verse 18, Jeremiah writes, "The LORD is righteous, yet I rebelled against his command." That is the lesson of chapter 1.

Most of us are in the habit of blaming God, either directly or indirectly, for whatever

happens to us. Our attitude is, “I do my best. I try hard, and still these things happen. It’s not fair, and since God is in charge of justice, then it must be His fault that unfair things happen to me.”

But is God unfair? The apostle Paul states the truth of the matter: “Let God be true, and every man a liar” (Rom. 3:4). It’s impossible for God to be wrong. It’s impossible for human beings to be more just than God, because our very sense of justice is derived from Him. If not for God, we wouldn’t even know what justice and fairness are. It’s impossible for human beings to be more compassionate than God, for our feelings of compassion also come from Him. We cannot judge God.

Lesson 2: God Is Faithful to His Promises

In chapter 2, Jeremiah gains more insight into this truth. He sees how God has used the armies of Nebuchadnezzar to destroy Jerusalem. Is this mere cruelty on God’s part? No! Jeremiah realizes that this is God’s faithfulness to His own word: “The LORD has done what he planned; he has fulfilled his word” (2:17). If God says He will do something, He does it.

Four hundred years earlier, in Deuteronomy, God had promised that if His people would love Him and follow Him, He would open the windows of heaven and pour out blessing. If, however, His people forsook Him and ignored the prophets He sent to them, destruction would fall. God was patient, and He gave the people every opportunity to repent. But ultimately, God was faithful to His word.

We see evidence of God’s faithfulness to His word in the precise length of the

Babylonian captivity—seventy years. That is the length of captivity Jeremiah prophesied in Jeremiah 25:11, and that was exactly how long it lasted. What is special about the number seventy? Just this: In the Law that God gave to Israel through Moses, He required the nation to allow the land to rest every seventh year. They were not to plow the soil or use it. They were to let it rest, a practical principle of agricultural management and land conservation. During the sixth year, the Lord would bless them with a superabundance of crops so that they would have enough food to carry them through that seventh year.

But Israel never obeyed that command. They continued using the land from the time they entered it. In a sense they robbed God of seventy years of rest for the land. They used it continuously for 490 years, so God sent them out of the land and allowed the land to rest for seventy years.

God is faithful to His promises. Many people believe that God is so loving, so tenderhearted, and so indulgent that He just gives in at the least little pressure. He won’t really do what He says. He won’t really judge sin. He won’t really hold us accountable.

Those misconceptions about God were forever laid to rest by one of the greatest verses in the Bible: “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all . . .” (Rom. 8:32). Think of that: God did not spare His own Son. That is how unflinching He is in keeping His word.

Yet that verse ends in glory: “How will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” One side of this promise is as true as the other. Jeremiah learned that God is faithful by the thoroughness of judgment.

Lesson 3: God's Judgment Is the Work of Love

In chapter 3, where we read of Jeremiah's personal pain, we come to a tremendous passage. In the midst of a long recitation of his own grief and horror, the prophet says:

*Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion;
therefore I will wait for him."
The LORD is good to those whose hope is
in him,
to the one who seeks him. . . .
For he does not willingly bring affliction
or grief to the children of men (3:22–25,
33).*

This is one of the most beautiful passages in the Bible. Amid the horrors of judgment that people have brought upon themselves and their works, this passage reveals the compassion of God's heart. Judgment, as Isaiah says, is God's "strange" work: "The LORD will rise up as he did at Mount Perazim, he will rouse himself as in the Valley of Gibeon—to do his work, his strange work, and perform his task, his alien task (Isa. 28:21). God does not like to impose judgment. He does not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men. His mercies are fresh every morning.

In his own pain Jeremiah remembers that behind all the desolation of Jerusalem is the work of love. God destroyed Jerusalem because it was heading the wrong way. He destroyed it so that He could restore it later

and build it up again in joy and peace and blessing.

The Lord does not cast us off forever. He judges, and His judgment is grievous and painful. But through, below, around, and above it all is God's great love and compassion.

Lesson 4: God Never Disciplines Too Harshly

At the end of chapter 4, the prophet says:

*O Daughter of Zion, your punishment will end;
he will not prolong your exile.
But, O Daughter of Edom, he will punish
your sin
and expose your wickedness (4:22).*

The daughter of Zion is Israel. The daughter of Edom refers to the country bordering Israel that was always a thorn in Israel's flesh. The Edomites were related to Israel. They were the children of Esau, who is always symbolic of the flesh.

The prophet is saying, in effect, "God will set a limit to the punishment of His own. He never drives them too far. He never disciplines them too harshly. There is a limit to the punishment He imposes, and He will not prolong that punishment any more than is necessary. But be sure of this: He will expose and punish sin."

Lesson 5: God Is Not Limited by Time

Lamentations 5 brings us another flash of insight:

*You, O LORD, reign forever;
your throne endures from generation to
generation (5:19).*

Jeremiah discovers that though human beings may perish in sorrow, God endures. And because God endures, His great purposes and workings endure. God never does anything temporarily. Everything He does endures forever. Jeremiah sees that what God has taught him in his grief will have a practical use. Even if he were to die in the midst of his grief, God's purposes will endure. God is simply preparing for a work yet to come, hundreds and thousands of years hence.

God is not limited by time. He is eternal. His throne, His authority, endures to all generations. In practical terms, the prophet realizes that, after he has been through this time of grief, he will have learned a truth about God that he could not have learned any other way. He is now ready for anything. And in God's great purpose there will be an opportunity to use that strength.

I often think of the words of our Lord recorded in Luke 14, when He tells His disciples two parables about counting the cost. One involved the building of a tower: Who would begin such a large construction project without first sitting down and figuring up the cost to make sure that the job, once begun, could be completed?

In another parable, He tells of a king who went out to do battle with an army of ten thousand and met an opposing king coming against him with an army of twenty thousand. Jesus said, "Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will . . . ask for terms of peace" (Luke 14:31-32).

We usually interpret this to mean that,

before choosing to become a Christian, we should think it through and count the cost. But that's not what the Lord is saying. He is saying, "I, the Lord, have counted the cost. I don't begin to build, nor do I go out to do battle, without making sure I have what it takes to finish the job."

In this life, we are engaged in a great cosmic battle. God has landed His troops on a beachhead called Earth. You and I, and everyone else in His church, are camped before the gates of hell. We are carrying out His assault against Satan's stronghold, and God has promised that the gates of Satan's stronghold will not prevail against us, His church.

If He sends us against such a great foe—an enemy of inhuman cleverness and ruthlessness—He must be sure that we who follow Him are soldiers He can depend on. He wants soldiers who can withstand trials and hardships, who will not wilt and fold up in the heat of battle. He has counted the cost of this cosmic war, and He has sized us up; now we are going through His boot camp, learning the lessons to prepare us for the conflict ahead.

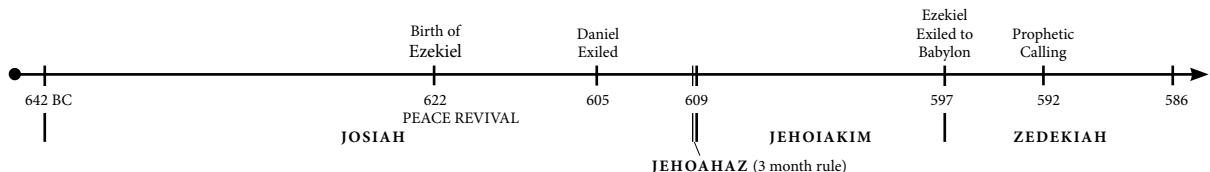
When we learn the lessons of sorrow, when we have been emboldened and empowered by the therapy of trouble, when we have learned how to grow stronger through heartache and desolation of spirit in this limited way, then we become soldiers He can depend on. Nothing can overthrow us. We are unconquerable in the battle for the subjugation and occupation of the universe.

What lies ahead for you and me? What battles is He even now mapping out in His heavenly war room? Isn't God preparing us

even now to do a mightier work in the future? Isn't He getting us ready to carry on a conflict that will extend to the uttermost reaches of this vast universe of ours? Of course He is. He never creates anything unless He intends to use it.

God can use even our pain and sorrow. As we face up to the lessons of this life, as we add our laments to the great lamentations of

Jeremiah, we grow deeper and stronger in the qualities that truly count in this life and the life to come: faith, courage, obedience. God never does anything without a purpose. Praise God, you and I are a part of His plan. Whatever our pain and grief today, we know that a day is coming when we will share in His final victory.

Flaming Wheels and Living Bones

The French philosopher Montaigne once observed, “Every man carries within himself the history of the world.” In other words, history is simply a record, inscribed upon the world, of what is already written in the confines of the human heart. The history of the world is only an extension of human life—and human life is a microcosm of the history of the world.

The book of Ezekiel demonstrates this principle by telling the story of not only Ezekiel, but also the story of the nation of Israel and the human race. In addition, it is also the story of your life and mine, which is why this book is so immensely important and practical for our lives today.

The prophet Ezekiel was a captive in the land of Babylon who had been carried away by the forces of King Nebuchadnezzar when Babylon conquered and captured the nation of Judah. Ezekiel was also the first of two great prophets of the captivity who prophesied during the first twenty or twenty-five years of the seventy-year period of Israel’s captivity (the other was Daniel).

The book begins with a tremendous

vision of God, because all life starts with God. The greatest fact in all of human existence is God. Anyone who wants to think logically about life must begin with God. That is, of course, where the Bible begins: “In the beginning God . . .”

The book of Ezekiel begins with a vision of God. If your heart needs to be set on fire by the revelation of the character and glory of God, read Ezekiel—the prophet who saw the glory of God.

Ezekiel’s Revelation of Christ

The book opens with the dramatic vision God gave to Ezekiel by the river Chebar in the land of Babylon:

I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north—an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter examines the dazzling visions and far-reaching prophecies of Ezekiel, the prophet who saw the glory of God. It is a powerful book that gives us glimpses into the invisible spiritual war going on all around us, the shape of events to come here on earth, and the glories of our eternal dwelling place in the heavenly city.

light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures (1:4–5).

These are among the strangest creatures described in Scripture. Each has four faces—the face of a man, the face of an eagle, the face of an ox, and the face of a lion. These four faces looked out in all directions.

After seeing the four living creatures, Ezekiel sees wheel-shaped objects. You may recall the words of the old spiritual, based on these verses: “Ezekiel saw the wheel, way up in the middle of the air; The big wheel ran by faith and the little wheel ran by the grace of God, a wheel in a wheel, away in the middle of the air.” Ezekiel saw the wheels turning, one wheel within the other. As he watched he also saw a firmament above, shining in splendor. Higher than the firmament, as he lifted his eyes, he saw a throne. Seated on the throne was a man.

You may have already noticed the profound similarities between Ezekiel’s vision

and John’s vision in the book of Revelation. John also saw four living creatures. He, too, saw a man on a throne (see Rev. 4:1–6). In both Ezekiel and Revelation we have visions of the greatness and majesty of God told in rich symbolic imagery.

It’s only natural to wonder what all of these symbols mean. Yet, as much as we would like to, we simply can’t interpret all of these symbols and images because there is a mystery to the person of God. Some of these symbols can be unlocked by comparing them with other passages of Scripture; others are more difficult and obscure. But one thing is sure: In even the most obscure of these symbols, we know that Ezekiel is glimpsing the immensity, authority, and power of God.

The four living creatures illuminate God’s character for us, as symbolized in the faces of the lion, man, ox, and eagle. Each face represents a certain quality in Scripture. The lion depicts sovereignty and supremacy—“the king of the beasts.” The man is the

picture of intelligence, understanding, and wisdom. The ox is the symbol of servanthood and sacrifice. And the eagle represents power and deity, soaring over all creation.

It’s significant that the four gospels in the New Testament present exactly these same qualities in their portrayal of Jesus Christ. He appears first in the gospel of Matthew as a lion, as the sovereign king.



Matthaus Merian’s painting of Ezekiel’s Vision

Next, in the gospel of Mark He is presented as a servant, the ox. In the gospel of Luke, He is the perfect man in His intelligence, insight, and understanding of life. And finally in the gospel of John, He is deity, depicted here as an eagle. These four symbols, taken together, reflect the character of Jesus Christ.

Even though Ezekiel, from his limited Old Testament vantage point, cannot fully understand the significance of all that he sees, we know from our New Testament perspective that he glimpsed the glory of God as revealed in the face of Jesus Christ. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:6, "God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."

In the first three chapters, God commissions Ezekiel as His prophet by disclosing to him a powerful, soul-shattering vision of His own glory and majesty. In these opening chapters, God instructs Ezekiel and gives him a mantle of responsibility.

Human Degradation

In chapters 4 through 24, Ezekiel moves through a series of prophecies dealing with the failure of the human race in general and the nation of Israel in particular. As the vision continues, Ezekiel sees the glory of God departing from the temple in Jerusalem, leaving the inner court and moving to the outer court (chapter 10), then rising and moving out to the Mount of Olives and toward the sky (chapter 11).

This prophecy was fulfilled when our Lord moved out of the temple, down across the Kidron Valley, up the side of the Mount of

Olives, and into the Garden of Gethsemane. And later, after the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, He ascended from the Mount of Olives and departed into glory.

In chapters 12 through 24, Ezekiel tells how God struggles with His people, how He seeks to win them and awaken them to the foolishness of turning their backs on Him. They go through experiences of heartache and punishment as God seeks to bring them to their senses and show them their need of fellowship with Him. Without Him, they are doomed to sink deeper into folly and degradation.

God charges the prophet to convey His message in various symbolic and dramatic ways. On one occasion, in chapter 4, God asks Ezekiel to lie on his left side for 390 days (more than a year!) and then to lie on his right side for 40 days; symbolizing the 390 years that God struggled to bring this nation to its senses and the final 40 years when judgment was imminent. God kept His hand back from judgment all those years, until at last He allowed Nebuchadnezzar's forces to come in, sack the city, desecrate the temple, and sweep the people away to the land of Babylon.

When human beings choose to disregard the God who created them, He must pronounce judgment. If we neglect God, who is essential to our being, and we refuse to respond to His love and grace, the only thing left for us is the consequences of turning our backs on Him.

Principalities and Powers

In this prophecy, Ezekiel pronounces judgment on both visible and invisible forces. He sees through the outer appearances of

people and nations to the spiritual forces that motivate and drive them. In chapter 28 we find a remarkable passage in which the prophet declares judgment upon the kingdoms of Tyre and Sidon. He speaks of the prince of Tyre and of a personage behind this prince—the king of Tyre.

Many Bible scholars have concluded that Ezekiel is talking about both the prince of the city—a ruling human being—and a sinister spiritual being that he calls the king of Tyre. This king symbolizes the principalities and powers mentioned in the New Testament—the world rulers of this present darkness who manipulate people and events on earth, producing the daily horrors we witness in our newspapers and on TV. The king of Tyre is a satanic power.

Chapter 28 also contains a passage that many Bible scholars believe represents the fall of Satan himself. This is one of only two passages in the Bible that describes the fall of Satan:

Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor. So I threw you to the earth; I made a spectacle of you before kings. By your many sins and dishonest trade you have desecrated your sanctuaries. So I made a fire come out from you, and it consumed you, and I reduced you to ashes on the ground in the sight of all who were watching (28:17–18).

The reason for Satan's fall is given in Isaiah 14, where the Prince of Darkness says "I will" five times. The will—whether a human will or a demonic will—is the source of sin and destruction whenever it is set against the good and perfect will of God. The defiant

statement "I will" is a statement of pride, and in Ezekiel 28, we see how God judges pride, the rebellious exaltation of the self above God and against God.

Dry Bones

Next, the prophet turns to the grace of God, which restores the dead to life. In chapter 37, Ezekiel relates the amazing vision of the Valley of the Dry Bones. He sees the bones join together at the command of God—yet there is no breath in them. It is only when God breathes on them that they come to life! This is a picture of what God intends to do with the nation Israel.

From God's viewpoint, Israel is a valley of bone-dry death. But a day is coming, says the Lord, when God will breathe upon this nation. Like those dry bones, Israel will receive new life, and God will use the nation of Israel as the cornerstone of His reestablished kingdom on earth.

In chapters 38 and 39, the prophet looks into the far-distant future, to the last attack upon Israel. In that battle, Israel's enemies will be met by heavenly forces. There, on the mountains of Israel, the godless nations will be judged, destroyed, and buried for all time.

Then, beginning in chapter 40, Ezekiel describes the restoration of the temple of the Lord's millennial kingdom. In this vision, the prophet is shown the temple in precise detail: The Shekinah glory of God returns to the Holy of Holies and is established there once more.

The book closes with a wonderful passage in chapter 47 describing Ezekiel's vision of God's throne. From beneath the throne comes the river of God, flowing majestically through

the temple, out the eastern side, down across the land, and gently spilling into the Dead Sea to heal its waters. It is a marvelous picture of the healing, cleansing, restoring Spirit of God in the day of the millennial kingdom.

A River of Living Water

The literal interpretation of Ezekiel is that it is a prophecy of Israel's restoration. But that does not exhaust the meaning of this book by any means. The entire story can be applied not only to Israel's history and future, but to our own lives in an intensely practical way. What God is doing on a large scale in the history of the world, He is also ready to do on the intimate scale of your life.

God wants to call the dry bones of your empty existence together and breathe life into your soul. He wants to reverse the process of disintegration in your life and heal you by the grace of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. God wants us to experience the abundant life every day.

Through this passage, God invites us to experience the glorious ideal manhood and womanhood that He intended for us from the beginning of creation. He wants us to rise up and walk in His power, alive and energized by the Holy Spirit, conquering His enemies by His arm of strength, demonstrating His power by the way we live our lives.

Finally, in chapter 47, we see a wonderful picture of God's restored temple—and we see it restored in the lives of human beings. In the New Testament, Paul says:

What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I

will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people" (2 Cor. 6:16).

God has chosen to make the human spirit a holy of holies where He can take up residence. The secret of a rich, full, satisfying life—a life of genuine excitement and continuing significance—is to live by the limitless resources of the Holy Spirit of God. The entire thrust of the book of Ezekiel is summed up in this passage:

The man brought me back to the entrance of the temple, and I saw water coming out from under the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was coming down from under the south side of the temple, south of the altar. He then brought me out through the north gate and led me around the outside to the outer gate facing east, and the water was flowing from the south side.

As the man went eastward with a measuring line in his hand, he measured off a thousand cubits and then led me through water that was ankle-deep. He measured off another thousand cubits and led me through water that was knee-deep. He measured off another thousand and led me through water that was up to the waist. He measured off another thousand, but now it was a river that I could not cross, because the water had risen and was deep enough to swim in—a river that no one could cross. He asked me, "Son of man, do you see this?"

Then he led me back to the bank of the river. When I arrived there, I saw a great number of trees on each side of the river. He said to me, "This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, where

it enters the Sea. When it empties into the Sea, the water there becomes fresh. Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live” (47:1-9).

What does this passage remind you of? I hear an echo of the Lord’s words from John 7, when He stood at the temple in Jerusalem:

On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.” By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive (John 7:37-39).

These streams of living water are the primary resource of the Christian life. This imagery deserves our deeper attention and exploration.

As the prophet Ezekiel watches, he sees a river of living water making its way past the altar, the place of sacrifice. One of the great truths that we need to learn as Christians is that we can never drink of the river of the Spirit unless we are willing to do so by way of the cross of Calvary. Jesus was sacrificed on the altar of Calvary, and we must be willing to crucify our own fleshly desires, sins, pride, and ambitions on that same altar. We cannot receive the water of life by our own efforts or our own righteousness. It pours from a fountain of Calvary.

Notice also the power of this river. It has quickly grown large enough to swim in, yet

there is no other river adding to it. No tributary streams are coming in. It is a gushing, mighty torrent of life that comes directly from God.

God leads Ezekiel into this revelation step-by-step: Five times in this passage, he says, “He led me” Is God leading you? Have you ever had that experience? Ezekiel is led one step at a time, and each step takes him into deeper and deeper water.

The first step is to the place where the waters are ankle deep—a picture of the individual who has experienced only a shallow sense of God’s grace and power in his or her life. This person is a Christian, but only a carnal Christian as Paul writes in Romans 8. Such a person has not learned how to live the Spirit-derived life—a life of obedience, trust, surrender, and peace. A lot of people want to wade ankle-deep into the grace of God. They don’t want to go in all the way.

Next the prophet says, “He . . . led me through water that was knee-deep.” You may have experienced “knee-deep” Christianity, the place of hungering and thirsting for God, the place of seeking His face. At this stage, a Christian is not satisfied with being merely born again, but hungers for something deeper.

As Ezekiel does go deeper he is led “through water that was up to the waist.” Now the waters of the Spirit are beginning to possess him. There is less of him and more of God’s grace. The King James Version uses the word loins, which are a symbol of power. Ezekiel has come to a place where his own power has been swallowed up in the waters of God’s power. He understands that it is “not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,” says the LORD Almighty” (Zech. 4:6) that one lives for God.

But Ezekiel has not gone as far as he needs to go. He has to take the final plunge into the river of God's life: "Now it was a river that I could not cross, because the water had risen and was deep enough to swim in—a river that no one could cross." Here is a man who is utterly committed. He's in over his head, he's going deep. He is swept along in the current of God's grace.

Notice how this river affects the land. As the prophet reaches the riverbank, he says, "When I arrived there, I saw a great number of trees on each side of the river." The land has become fruitful. The barrenness of the land has been healed. Everywhere the river flows the trees bloom and hum with life.

John sees the same river in Revelation: "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city." (Rev. 22:1–2). The river flows right through the middle of life. Have you found the river of the Spirit yet?

Until we have taken that plunge, life is nothing but a plodding, difficult path full of

frustration and spiritual defeat. But when we immerse ourselves in the mighty torrent of the river of living water, and the Spirit of God flows through us like a life-giving river, then the entire Christian life begins to make sense.

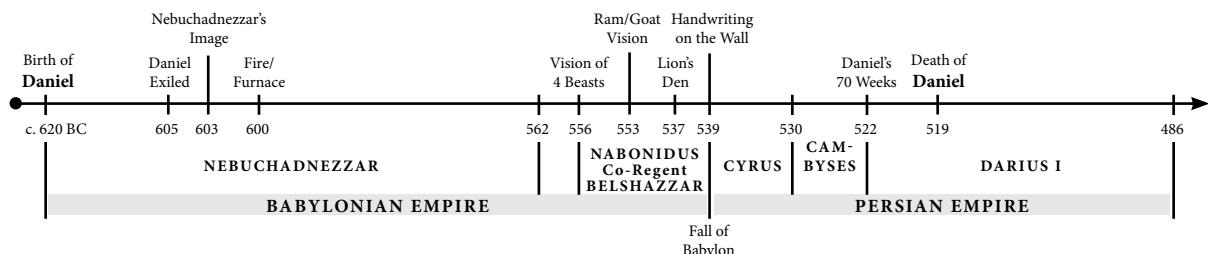
The prophet Ezekiel understood this and closes this visionary book with a description of the temple (which may ultimately symbolize the resurrection body, the new temple of God). Look at the last verse of the prophecy:

"The distance all around will be 18,000 cubits.

And the name of the city from that time on will be:

THE LORD IS THERE" (48:35).

May this be our goal: to become God's city, God's eternal dwelling place, God's temple through which His river of life flows. May we plunge ourselves fully into the river of His Spirit, immersing ourselves in the refreshing coolness of its life-giving depths, discovering its healing power for our lives today—and for the life to come.

On the Way to the Future

People are endlessly fascinated by Bible prophecy. The prophecies of Daniel and Revelation have been sensationalized into bestselling books and major motion pictures. They have been exploited (in grossly distorted form) in the headlines of supermarket tabloids. People want to know what the future holds—especially if the future is filled with events as bizarre and sensational as a science-fiction movie, as many of these books and films make it seem.

But biblical prophecy is serious business. God did not send visions to men like Ezekiel, Daniel, and John just to provide us with thrilling entertainment. God gave us the prophetic books of the Bible as guides to His program of history. They are meant to inform us about the future—but more than that, to instruct us for the present. God gave us these books so that we would know how to live today with tomorrow in mind. He gave them to us to sober us and ground us in His eternal perspective on both human and heavenly events.

The books of Daniel and Revelation have not yet been fulfilled. These two books, one from the Old Testament and

one from the New Testament, remarkably complement each other in their symmetry and harmony. The book of Revelation explains the book of Daniel, whereas the book of Daniel lays the basis for the book of Revelation. If you want to know God's program for the future, you must first understand the book of Daniel.

How to Understand Prophecy

Knowledge of the future can be a dangerous thing. Imagine what would happen if you possessed the ability to know what would happen tomorrow or next week. Think of the advantage it would give you in the stock market, in buying insurance, and in other practical matters of life.

But would you really want to know in advance all the sorrows and hurts that would

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter seeks to clear away the sensationalism that often surrounds Daniel's prophecies so that we can truly appreciate the life-changing instruction and eternal meaning of this great prophetic book. If you want to understand God's program for the future of the human race, and your own future, take time to understand the book of Daniel.

DANIEL: ACCURATE PROPHECY—AND ACCURATE HISTORY



No book of the Old Testament has been as mistreated and scorned by critics as the book of Daniel. Liberal commentators have questioned its authorship, claiming it wasn't written by the prophet Daniel but by an unknown writer who lived no more than 100 to 160 years before Christ. In addition, the prophetic content of the book has been denied and ridiculed. In many ways, it has been more viciously attacked than any other book in the Bible. . . .

But the liberal critics of Daniel have a number of problems. For example, if Daniel was written at around 100 BC, then the book of Ezekiel, which cites the prophecy of Daniel, must also have a late and spurious origin. Yet there is very good evidence that Ezekiel is much older than that. Also, recent archaeological discoveries confirm the accuracy of Daniel as a historical record.

For example, the discovery of an inscribed clay tablet called 'the Chronicle of Nabonidus' confirms Daniel's historical validity and dashes critics' claims that the kings named in Daniel's prophecy never existed. The Dead Sea Scrolls contain eight copies of Daniel, more than any other manuscript, which affirms the high esteem that was accorded the book by the strict Essenes who hid the scrolls. . . .

Jesus regarded the book of Daniel as a valid and true prophecy, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and accurate in every detail. . . . The word of our Lord is true, and so is the prophetic word He spoke to us through His servant, Daniel.

Ray C. Stedman

*What on Earth is Happening?—
What Jesus Said about the End of the Age*
(Discovery House Publishers, 2003)

come your way in life? Jesus had good reason for saying, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matt. 6:34).

God does not unfold the future to us in specific detail. He does not tell your individual future or mine. What He does show us in the prophetic books of the Bible is the general trend of events, the outline of His program, and the way His program is sure to end. Anyone who investigates prophecy in a careful, objective way will find helpful information about both future and present

events. We can understand the present only in light of God's prophetic program.

While unveiling the future in His Word, God has taken two precautions. First, He has clothed these prophetic passages in symbolic language and given them to us in figurative form. That's why we see such strange and frightening images in Daniel and Revelation—startling signs in nature, strange beasts with many different heads and horns sticking out here and there, images of shattering worldwide events, and more.

These prophetic symbols have always puzzled people. You can't just sit down with

Daniel or Revelation and read them like a novel. You have to study them, taking the whole of the Bible into account in order to interpret the symbols in these books. This is one of the “padlocks” God has placed on these books to keep the merely curious and sensation-seeking minds from unlocking the holy secrets of His future agenda.

A second precaution God has taken in Daniel, and even more especially in Revelation, is that He doesn’t introduce the prophetic section first. Instead, He brings us through six chapters of moral teaching. He wants to lead us into an understanding of the moral character He requires of us before the prophetic program can begin to make sense. To understand what the prophetic program means, you must first grasp the moral lessons of the first part of the book. There are no shortcuts.

After you grasp the first six chapters intellectually, you must integrate them experientially into your life. That’s the beauty of God’s Word: It can’t be understood by intellect alone, but must be understood by the entire being. You can sit down with prophetic outlines of Daniel and Revelation, draw charts of future events, and analyze eschatology and doctrine down to a gnat’s eyebrow—but unless you have incorporated the spiritual lessons of the first part of Daniel into your own life, you’ll find nothing in the rest of the book to enrich your life.

The Lord Jesus Himself made this clear during His Olivet Discourse when the disciples asked Him what the symbol of His return to earth would be. Jesus said, “When you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken

of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.” In other words, “Get out of the city of Jerusalem, because horrible things will happen there. If you stay in that city, great tribulation will be upon you” (Matt. 24:15-16).

Note that when the passage says, “let the reader understand,” it means, “Don’t read through the prophetic passages carelessly or superficially. You have to grasp the full import of Scripture if you are to recognize the abomination of desolation when it comes.” The world, in its superficial approach to truth will be uncomprehending when that day comes. People will cry, “Peace, peace!” when there is no peace, and destruction will come upon them. They will be swept away just as the people of Noah’s day were swept away by the flood. Jesus does not want us to be destroyed in our ignorance, so He encourages us to seek a real understanding—a practical, applied, and experiential understanding of the truths of Scripture.

The Structure of Daniel

This book easily divides into two sections. The first six chapters, which are devoted to moral and spiritual instruction, are a history of the prophet Daniel and his friends in the land of Babylon. It is a story of faith lived out in the fiery crucible of a hostile world.

If you find yourself struggling to live the Christian life amid the pressures, temptations, and persecutions of this non-Christian world, then the first six chapters of Daniel are must reading for you. If you work in an office surrounded by godless coworkers who continually take the Lord’s name in vain;

if your employer pressures you to commit unethical acts on the job; if your friends challenge you to compromise your faith or your morality; or if the law of the land says you cannot be a witness to your Lord or read your Bible—then the first six chapters of Daniel will guide and comfort you.

These chapters are especially valuable to teenagers who must stand against peer pressure and temptation, because they record the actions of a group of teenagers who were taken captive by King Nebuchadnezzar and carried off into the land of Babylon. As they began their career of faith, they did so with all the insecurities that are normal for teenagers in a hostile environment. Just as today's youth must stand against peer pressure, drugs, illicit sex, and occultism, these teenagers had to take a life-or-death stand against the king himself. Daniel and his teenage friends are perhaps the strongest, most encouraging role models in all of Scripture for today's youth.

Standing under Pressure

In chapter 1, three young men—Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (respectively renamed Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego by their Babylonian captors)—are pressured to change their diet. Ordinarily, diet would not be a particularly significant issue, but God had already instructed these young men as to what they could and could not eat. The foods God had told them not to eat were the very foods the Babylonians required them to eat as prisoners of the king of Babylon.

What could these young men do? King Nebuchadnezzar was an immensely powerful tyrant. The Bible records that no human king

ever had or ever would command as much authority as King Nebuchadnezzar.

What kind of character did this king have? Later in his reign, he demonstrates his absolute cruelty in killing the sons of Judah's king before their father's eyes—then had the father's eyes put out so that this horror would be the last thing he saw. Nebuchadnezzar had another man roasted slowly to death over a fire. This king was an expert in torture; his cruel imagination fueled his evil deeds. And Nebuchadnezzar's word was law. So Daniel and his three friends faced this moral test knowing they had to comply with the king's demands—or risk death by torture.

What could they do? Under such pressure, should they heed the advice, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do"? It's the same argument people use today: "Everybody else is doing it." What would be so wrong with eating a ham sandwich with the Babylonians? Especially if it would save you from torture and death? Who would know? Who would care?

Yet, laying their lives on the line, they chose to stand fast in honor of God. And God gave them the grace to maintain their stand despite that pressure. Daniel asked that he and his friends be given nothing but vegetables to eat, and after ten days, they looked healthier than those who had eaten the royal food.

As a result, Daniel and his friends were exalted and given positions of authority and responsibility in the kingdom of their captivity. The king found their wisdom and advice to be superior to that of the Babylonian magicians and enchanters. This turn of events reminds us of the way God exalted Joseph in Egypt when he maintained his integrity and obedience to God.

We'll see, however, that the pressure does not end for these young men. It continues and intensifies as we proceed through the book of Daniel.

A Troubling Dream

In chapter 2, we see part of the reason why God allows these young men to come under such intense testing. King Nebuchadnezzar dreams one night of a great image of a man with a strange body. The image had a head of gold, shoulders of silver, midsection of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of clay and iron. The next morning, the king calls in the wise men and orders them to tell him not only the interpretation but the dream as well. If they fail, they will be executed.

It's a brilliant test. The astrologers, soothsayers, and sorcerers claim to have supernatural power to discern mysteries and secrets. Well, if they truly have such powers, then they surely can tell the king's dream as well as interpret it. If they couldn't describe the dream, then they must be frauds. The so-called "wise" men couldn't come up with the king's dream—so they were condemned to death.

Though Daniel had not been asked to interpret the king's dream, he is considered one of the king's wise men, so he is under the execution order as well. Daniel asks the captain of the king's guard why he and the others are to be executed, and the captain explains the situation. Daniel pleads for the lives of the other wise men and asks to be brought before the king to reveal and interpret the dream.

The night before Daniel is set to appear before the king, he and his three Jewish

friends pray together, asking God for mercy and an answer to the king's question. Later that night, God reveals the king's dream to Daniel in a vision.

So the next day, Daniel appears before the king, reveals the dream, and interprets it—and he humbly gives God all the credit. "There is a God in heaven," Daniel said, "who reveals mysteries." When King Nebuchadnezzar heard Daniel describe and interpret his dream, he fell on his face before Daniel and honored him and his God. "Surely your God is the God of gods," said the king, "and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery" (2:47).

So once again, God's man came through, proving that he was willing to stand and obey God in spite of the threat of torture and death. God delivered Daniel because Daniel trusted in the invisible God who rules visible human affairs. That's the great lesson of the book of Daniel. As the young prophet expressed in his prayer of thanks to God:

"Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning. He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him" (2:20–22).

If you are intimately linked with the living God of the universe, you need not fear the wrath of kings. The same God who created the world is able to work out every situation and circumstance of your life, no matter how impossible it may seem. That same theme is repeated five different times through these first six chapters of Daniel.

Daniel's revelation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream has a profound impact on the king. The most powerful ruler on the planet is so awestruck that he is forced to humble himself before Daniel and acknowledge, "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery."

You may not realize it, but you are in exactly the same position today that Daniel was in so long ago! The world lives with the idea that there is no God or that if He does exist He has no real power. He doesn't do anything. He doesn't change history. He doesn't affect human lives. He doesn't enter into situations and make any difference. That's the world's philosophy.

But if you walk faithfully, if you obey what God says regardless of threats, temptations, or pressure, He will place you in a pivotal position. He will give you the privilege of opening the eyes of men and women to the fact that He exists, that He is active and involved in human events, and that *He must be reckoned with*.

This is the message of Daniel for your life and mine.

Tested by Fire

In chapter 3, we have the story of the fiery furnace. The young Hebrew men were commanded to bow down before the image Nebuchadnezzar had erected, a prideful creation of the image in his dream. Because Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar that the head of gold symbolized his reign, Nebuchadnezzar proudly commanded this statue be erected on the plain of Dura. It was as tall as a NASA booster rocket.

The king gathered the crowd, including these faithful young men, on the plain. All were ordered to bow down and worship the image. In order to "inspire" their worship, a great furnace was erected at the other end of the plain. All who refused to bow to the image would die in the fire. A band played a variety of instruments—horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes. At the first chord from the band, all the people were to fall down and worshiped the image.

As planned, at the sound of the music everyone fell to the ground and worshiped the image. Everyone, that is, except three men—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. When these young Hebrew men were brought before Nebuchadnezzar he ordered them to fall down and worship the image, but they respectfully replied that they could not:

"If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (3:17–18).

Notice that while they expected God to rescue them—they added, "even if He does not . . . we will not serve your gods." They decided entrust to their fate to God. They valued obedience to God above life itself. Whatever happened, even if it meant perishing in the flames, they would not worship the Babylonian gods nor the golden image Nebuchadnezzar has erected.

These young men had learned that it was better to be dead and obedient to God than alive and disobedient. An individual profits

more from walking with God and dying with God than by living apart from Him. God honored these men in a mighty way, taking them safely through the furnace.

The king ordered that the three men be placed in the furnace and that it be made seven times hotter. The fire was so hot that the soldiers who threw them in the furnace were killed. King Nebuchadnezzar looked into the furnace and saw not three but four men walking in the fire—unharmed—“and the fourth,” he said, “looks like a son of the gods.”

Nebuchadnezzar called to the three Hebrews and ordered them out of the furnace. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego emerged safe and sound, their skin not toasted, their hair not singed, and without even the scent of fire on them.

Again the king was moved to worship God. “Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego,” he said, “who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king’s command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way.”

And the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to even more responsible positions in the kingdom.

The Testimony of the King

In chapter 4 we witness the conversion of Nebuchadnezzar. Once again, the king dreams—and again Daniel reveals and

interprets the dream. The message of the dream is that the king will be driven into madness, and he will eat grass like cattle, and live with the wild animals—but his kingdom will be returned to him when he acknowledges God, renounces sin, and shows kindness to the oppressed.

Just as Daniel prophesied, the king went mad for seven years, eating grass in the field with the animals. His throne was preserved, but he acted like an animal. Why did God use this particular way of getting the king’s attention? Because He wanted to show what happens to human beings who reject fellowship with the living God: They become beastly and brutish.

When the king’s reason was restored to him by the grace of God, Nebuchadnezzar issued a statement of faith—his testimony of how God had humbled him, allowed him to tumble into madness, then brought him back to sanity. He concluded:

Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble (4:37).

Who brought the great king to his senses? God, of course. Yet God chose to use Daniel and his friends to win the heart of the greatest king of the greatest empire that the world has ever seen.

And He wants to use you and me to do great things for Him as well.

The Handwriting on the Wall

As chapter 5 opens, we see the luxury and licentiousness of the kingdom of Babylon. Yet

amid all this pleasure seeking and selfishness, Daniel (who has lived through three empires) is still the prime minister. In this chapter, God uses Daniel to make another crucial interpretation.

As the chapter opens, King Belshazzar, son of Nebuchadnezzar, throws a party. The king, his wives and concubines, and his guests defile the gold and silver chalices that had been taken from the temple in Jerusalem. They drink wine from them and use them to toast and praise their false gods.

Suddenly a disembodied human finger appears and writes on the plaster of the wall, frightening the king and his guests nearly to death. The king calls for his magicians and astrologers to decipher the handwriting on the wall, and Daniel is brought before him. Daniel interprets the inscription which reads: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PERES. It was a judgment on Belshazzar for his arrogance:

Mene: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.

Tekel: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.

Peres: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians." (5:26–28).

That night, God's judgment is carried out and Belshazzar dies; King Darius ascends to the throne.

This chapter bears out the thesis of the entire book: God is at work in human affairs, and anyone who sees beyond the visible to the invisible and acts accordingly will find that God provides all the strength and support that is required for success.

Daniel and the Lions

Chapter 6 is yet another demonstration of God's provision in seemingly hopeless circumstances; namely, Daniel's ordeal in the lions' den. In an effort to destroy him, Daniel's jealous rivals manipulate King Darius into issuing a decree forbidding anyone from pray to any god or king except Darius himself. They know it is a decree that Daniel cannot obey. In fact, Daniel seems to go out of his way to be "caught" praying, because he prays three times daily at his open upstairs window. Once discovered, Daniel's enemies report him to the king.

King Darius valued Daniel and when the accusations are brought to him, he tries to find a way to rescue Daniel. But Daniel's enemies slyly remind the king that, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, even the king cannot change his own decree.

So the king reluctantly sends Daniel to the den of lions with these words: "May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!" (6:16). Daniel was sealed up in the den with the lions, and the king spent the night unable to eat or sleep. At dawn, the king got up, went to the den, and called to Daniel—

And Daniel answered! He said, "O king, live forever! My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, O king" (6:21–22).

So Daniel is released and King Darius issues another decree—this time exalting Daniel's God as the one, true God.

The Prophetic Section Begins

The future-focused section of Daniel

begins in chapter 7 with a vision of four beasts. These four beasts cover the same period of time as the four divisions of the image that Nebuchadnezzar saw in chapter 2. That image had a head of gold, symbolizing the Babylonian kingdom; shoulders of silver, for the Medo-Persia kingdom; a trunk of bronze, symbolizing the Grecian empire; two legs of iron, representing the two divisions of the Roman empire; and terminating at last in a broken kingdom, characterized by feet of mingled iron and clay. This great prophetic passage outlines history from Daniel's day to a future that is still beyond our own day, to the very end of time and the return of Jesus Christ.

As the prophet watches Nebuchadnezzar's dream, he sees a stone—a stone that has been cut without the aid of human hand—strike the image on its feet and utterly demolish it. The fragments blow away on the wind like chaff, but the stone grows to become a great mountain that fills the entire earth (Dan. 2:34–35). This indicates that when the last kingdom is shattered by a divine agency (not of human hands), it will usher in the worldwide kingdom of God and the reign of Jesus Christ.

In chapter 7, then, the four beasts represent the same kingdoms—but from God's point of view. They are not mighty powers in God's sight. They are merely beasts growling and quarreling with each other. Daniel sees these nations struggling against each other, and their struggle culminates in the powerful reign of a single individual over the entire Western world.

In chapter 8 we see the movement of Western history. The ram and the he-goat

come together in battle—a picture, as we are later told in chapter 11, of Alexander the Great's conquest and the rise of the Seleucids' kingdom in Syria, in opposition to the Ptolemies in Egypt. These two families occupied the center of history for centuries after the time of Daniel—a mighty struggle between Syria and Egypt, with little Israel caught in the middle. The battle rages back and forth, and today Israel continues to be the most fought-over piece of real estate in the world. More battles have occurred in the land of Israel than in any other spot on the face of the earth, and the last great battle—the battle of Armageddon—will be fought in this region.

In the midst of this prophecy, in chapter 9, Daniel pours his heart out to God in prayer. The answer to his prayer, in the last section of the chapter, is one of the most remarkable prophecies in the Bible: the prophecy of the seventy weeks. This is the timetable of prophecy concerning the nation of Israel. It gives us a principle that has been called “the Great Parenthesis”—the scriptural interpretation proposing that God has interrupted His program for Israel and has inserted this present age in which we live between the first coming and the second coming of the Lord Jesus.

This indeterminate period, which has now spanned some 2,000 years, comes between the sixty-ninth week of years and the seventieth week of Daniel's prophecy. The seventieth week, a week of seven years, is yet to be fulfilled for Israel. As you read of this, you will see that this is what the book of Revelation and other prophetic passages call “the great tribulation,” the time of Jacob's

trouble. It lies ahead. It has been broken off from the other sixty-nine weeks and is yet to be fulfilled.

The Invisible Reality

Chapter 10 shines a light on the invisible reality that lies beyond this visible world. This is another great revelation of God's sovereign government in the affairs of humanity—and it is the explanation for the events of history. What causes the events that happen in our world today? Clearly, there are unseen forces at work, and these forces are starkly revealed to Daniel.

As the chapter opens, Daniel has gathered some of his friends together beside the Tigris River for a prayer meeting. He wants to seek God's will as he prepares to stir up his people to return to Israel. As they pray, something amazing happens:

On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, as I was standing on the bank of the great river, the Tigris, I looked up and there before me was a man dressed in linen, with a belt of the finest gold around his waist. His body was like chrysolite [a yellow-green gemstone], his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude (10:4–6).

Who is this amazing figure? We are reminded of the experience John the Apostle had on the isle of Patmos at the beginning of the book of Revelation:

. . . and among the lampstands was someone “like a son of man,” dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden

sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance (Rev. 1:13–16).

For both Daniel by the Tigris River and John on the island of Patmos a curtain had dropped—the curtain that separated them from the invisible spiritual kingdom with its unseen warfare. Daniel and John were able to actually see the One to whom they had been praying moments before. That Person was there all the time. He had not suddenly appeared. But He was invisible until the curtain dropped and their eyes were opened. I believe that it is unquestionably the Lord Jesus Christ who is revealed in both Daniel 10 and Revelation 1.

The prophet Daniel is being prepared to learn something remarkable from the man dressed in linen—a lesson in the mystery of prayer. The man says:

“Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia. Now I have come to explain to you what will happen to your people in the future, for the vision concerns a time yet to come” (10:12–14).

A second being now appears, an angel

sent to help Daniel, described only as “one who looked like a man.” He touches Daniel and helps him to his feet. The New Testament tells us that angels are “ministering spirits sent forth to serve those who will inherit salvation” (Heb. 1:14). They are at God’s beck and call, aiding His people and carrying out His will on Earth.

I once heard the story of a soldier in the Vietnam War whose life was saved when an enemy bullet was stopped by a copy of the New Testament and Psalms he carried in his pocket. The bullet passed right through the four gospels, Acts, the Epistles, and Revelation, stopping at Psalm 91—the passage that promises:

*You will not fear the terror of night,
nor the arrow that flies by day . . .
For he will command his angels concerning
you
to guard you in all your ways
(Ps. 91:5, 11).*

That was no accident. That was an angel. The invisible ministry of angels occurs continually, though we are unaware of their activity in our lives.

Daniel 10:2 tells us that Daniel spent three weeks fasting and praying. When the man in linen appeared, he said, “Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days.” In other words, God heard Daniel’s prayer on the very first day and sent an answer—but the answer Daniel sought was delayed while the man in

linen battled the demon-prince of Persia for three weeks.

The lesson here is that when we pray, the answer is on its way the minute we begin to ask. The answer may not arrive instantly because God is working out all the circumstances which must be altered in order for that prayer to be answered. But God answers prayer immediately. Prayer is not (as we generally think) the means of getting God to do our bidding. Rather, prayer is the means by which we enlist ourselves in the thrilling activity of God, in carrying out His agenda for the world.

God desires our involvement in His eternal plan. He wants us to ask Him to do what He says He will do—and He often will not do it unless we ask Him. That’s why James says, “You do not have because you do not ask” (James 4:2). If you ask, God will do what He has promised.

Though God’s answer to prayer is immediate, delays are possible. Why? In part, because we live in a fallen world, which is infested with fallen spirits—demons—who oppose God’s work. These evil spirits are related to the nations of the earth. Once we understand that the events we read about in the newspapers are being stirred by warring angels behind the scenes of history, the evil events in the world—from street violence to riots to terrorism to wars between nations—all become easier to understand.

As Paul tells us, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph. 6:12). That’s what the man in linen and the

angel tell Daniel: Behind the affairs of Earth is an invisible hierarchy of evil, which has authority over kingdoms. Without doubt, there are evil angels that have authority over the nations of our world today, stirring up trouble, seeking to thwart God's eternal plan.

Chapter 11 is one of the most remarkable chapters in the Bible. It records a prophecy that, for the most part, has already been fulfilled in detail. It foretells the struggle between the king of Syria ("the king of the North") and the king of Egypt ("the king of the South") that took place after Daniel's time. These historic events are described in great detail and cover two or three hundred years of history. A number of outstanding historical figures are predicted here, including Cleopatra, "the daughter of the king of the South" (11:5).

These two kingdoms, Egypt and Syria, fought back and forth over the course of about 130 years. Poor Israel was caught in the middle and became the battlefield of these armies. Jerusalem was captured and sacked by both sides from time to time throughout the conflict. To live in Jerusalem in those days was to be like wheat being ground up between two millstones.

God gives us this account of these kingdoms because of Israel's unwilling involvement. God is primarily concern about Israel, and for her sake He gives us this detailed prophecy which history has confirmed in every detail.

The Seventieth Week

We come to an interesting break in Daniel 11 where the angel says:

"Some of the wise will stumble, so that they may be refined, purified and made spotless until the time of the end, for it will still come at the appointed time."

"The king will do as he pleases. He will exalt and magnify himself above every god and will say unheard-of things against the God of gods. He will be successful until the time of wrath is completed, for what has been determined must take place" (11:35–36).

Here we begin the discussion of the seventieth week of Daniel, the tribulation period that is yet to be fulfilled—the last days, the ultimate arrangement of Earth's kingdoms just before the return of Jesus Christ. This passage predicts an invasion of Palestine and a counter-invasion from Egypt in the south, and then the meeting of two great armies in the land of Israel and the ultimate destruction of those armies among the mountains of Israel. This is the same event that is described in Ezekiel 38–39 and Joel 2.

The beginning of chapter 12 introduces the greatest event of history yet to be fulfilled: the second coming of Christ. This event is revealed in symbolic language and is described as follows:

"At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered" (12:1).

This is followed by a mass resurrection of the dead:

“Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt” (12:2).

Then comes the final judgment of God:

“Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. But you, Daniel, close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge” (12:3–4).

Many Bible scholars understand this to be an indication that as we near the last days, as described in this passage, the means of transportation, information, and knowledge will rapidly increase. Clearly, in this age of jet travel, mass media, and the Internet, we see the fulfillment of this prophecy.

The Clash of Good and Evil

In this final section, chapter 12, Daniel asks questions to the angel who has revealed these things to him. In return, he is allowed to understand that there are two great forces at work in the world: good and evil. You and I often hear people discussing current events, with newspaper commentators and others constantly pouring into our ears reports of terrible, frightening events. People often ask, “What is happening? What is going on in this world? Is the world situation getting progressively worse or progressively better?”

Some people make the case that humankind is progressing, that education is advancing, and that technology is making life

better and better. Others make an even more convincing case that advancing technology only gives us more advanced ways to kill ourselves, to take away our privacy and freedom, to complicate our lives and strip away our humanity.

Yet the book of Daniel makes it clear that we will never understand God’s Word and work until we accept the reality of the contest between good and evil—and the fact that evil forces war against God behind the scenes of history. As the man in linen tells Daniel:

“Go your way, Daniel, because the words are closed up and sealed until the time of the end. Many will be purified, made spotless and refined, but the wicked will continue to be wicked. None of the wicked will understand, but those who are wise will understand” (12:9–10).

Today evil is more widespread than it has ever been. Our current era, with two world wars during the past century, genocidal assaults on humanity, the spread of terrorism, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, is the most murderous, blood-drenched era in human history. The evil of our age is widespread and Satan inspired.

But against this dark backdrop, godliness and good stand out even more clearly. The righteousness of God, embodied in His people, lived out by their obedient witness, contrasts sharply with the immorality and evil of this age.

These two contrasting forces are at work in human society, and neither shall overpower the other until the end of the age. Both good and evil are headed for a final conflict. The Bible records in various passages that, at one

precise moment in history, God will directly intervene in human affairs. There will be a final and decisive clash between these two contrasting principles, good versus evil. Of that conflict, the man in linen says:

"From the time that the daily sacrifice is abolished and the abomination that causes desolation is set up, there will be 1,290 days. Blessed is the one who waits for and reaches the end of the 1,335 days.

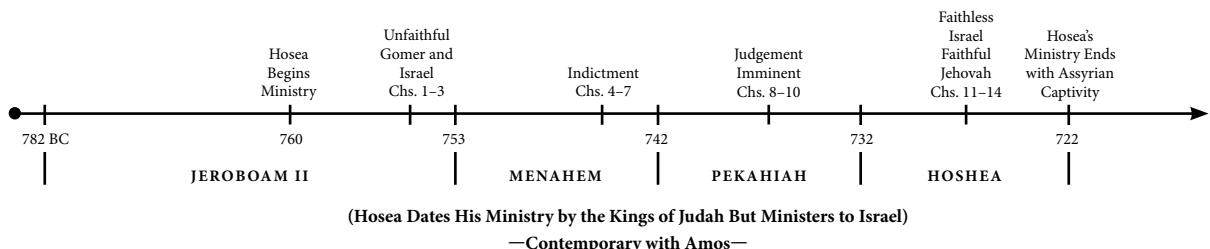
"As for you, go your way till the end. You will rest, and then at the end of the days you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance" (12:11–13).

Ultimately, every nation and every individual serves God. Some serve Him willingly—and some unwittingly and unwillingly. Even if a king renounces God ten times over, our God is sovereign. His eternal plan cannot fail. He works all events, all human choices, all satanic chaos into His purposes.

Nebuchadnezzar, Darius, Alexander, Cleopatra, Caesar, Herod, Caiaphas, Pontius Pilate, Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Khruschev, Saddam—none of these leaders could resist the will of God nor interfere with His agenda. The purposes of God roll irresistibly through time and space, encompassing billions of lives, including yours and mine.

The choice you and I must make is the choice between being willing tools in God's hand—or unwilling. We choose whether to receive the blessings of obedience—or the judgment that comes from rebellion? The good news of Daniel is that God is alive and at work in the affairs of people and nations. We need not fear evil men or evil nations. The lions cannot consume us, the fiery furnace cannot scorch us, tyrants cannot separate us from the love of King Jesus.

As we step into the last days that Daniel describes in this prophecy, may we step boldly and triumphantly in the strength of our God.

Love and the Unfaithful Bride

While in England some years ago, I met an Anglican clergyman who told me about his experiences during the Battle of Britain in World War II. “What bothered me most,” he said, “were the signs in the public squares regarding conscription. They read, ‘All persons must register for the draft except women, children, idiots, and clergymen.’ As a clergyman, I didn’t so much mind being included on that list, but I do wish they had at least placed me ahead of the idiots!”

This is where the prophet Hosea finds himself. He is a preacher whose audience is polite to his face but treats him with contempt behind his back. His message is greeted with snickers of derision. He is considered nice-but-harmless, on the same list with the idiots. That’s how people often treat preachers.

Hosea, however, is not the nice-but-harmless person everyone thinks he is. He is a towering figure in Scripture, and his story and message deserve our attention today, just as in his own day. Hosea spoke of judgment, of the disciplining of the nation of Israel, and warned that God would send the Assyrian nation to destroy the people. The people challenged him

and accused him of characterizing God as a vengeful and angry deity.

Hosea tried to explain God’s love to them—that genuine love is also a tough and disciplining love. This God of tough love wanted the people to see what they were doing to themselves. If the only way He could get them to listen was to make life hard for them, He would do so.

The people responded exactly as people respond today when they are told of God’s tough love. They blamed God and said, in effect, “If God is really a God of love, then why does He allow things to get in such a mess? How could a God of love ever send a ruthless enemy like the Assyrians down upon our land? If God really loves us, He will excuse our sins, not discipline us.”

Sounds familiar, doesn’t it? Clearly, the book of Hosea is a book for today.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

In this chapter, we examine the obedience of Hosea, who illustrates God’s love for unfaithful Israel by marrying a fallen woman. In this story, we also see the relationship between the Lord Jesus and His sometimes sinning and straying followers in the church, the bride of Christ.

LEFT: Mount Arbel

Hosea is the first of the twelve “minor prophets” of the Old Testament. They are called minor, not because their message is unimportant, but simply due to the length of their content. I avoid making a strong distinction between the major and minor prophets because I do not want to perpetuate the mistaken idea that these twelve short, but powerful books, are any less relevant than the other books of the Bible. Each has a powerful life-changing message for our fast-paced lives.

God’s Strange Command to Hosea

Hosea was a young preacher sent to the northern kingdom of the nation of Israel. He was a contemporary of the prophets Isaiah and Amos, and composed this book around 755 to 715 BC. Hosea lived, as we are told in the first verse, during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah—kings of Judah, the southern kingdom, and during the reign of Jeroboam, the son of Joash, the king of Israel.

Jeroboam was one of the wicked kings of Israel. As such, the nation was in a sad moral and spiritual state when Hosea preached. The people were too busy living hedonistic lives to give much thought to God. They didn’t think of themselves as rebellious people. Instead, they would probably say what most of us say: “My life is so busy. I’d like to have more time for God, but I’ve just got too much on my plate right now.” The spirit is willing but the flesh is ready for the weekend.

This is the cultural attitude confronting Hosea, so it’s not surprising that he’s discouraged as we meet him in the opening chapter. In his discouragement, he goes to God—and God gives him strange instructions.

It might have sounded something like this: “Hosea, I want you to get married.” Hosea, being a bachelor, probably perked up a bit upon hearing that.

Then God said, “I have a woman picked out for you.” When He mentioned her name, Hosea probably felt a surge of excitement because the woman God had told him to marry was Gomer, the most beautiful woman in Israel. Hosea was definitely interested.

But there was a catch. God then said to Hosea, “You need to know the whole story about this woman. After you marry her, she will be unfaithful to you. But I want you to marry her anyway.”

Hosea must have been puzzled by God’s strange command. God does inexplicable things at times, and we quickly discover that His ways are not our ways.

Meaningful Names

“Your wife will become a common street prostitute,” God went on to say, “but she will bear you three children—two boys and a girl. And when they are born I want to name them for you.” Hosea then began to understand a bit of what God was doing. He knew it was customary in Israel to teach by symbols, and that names are very important symbols. God often used the meanings of names to teach Israel certain truths. And now God was planning to use this prophet and his family as an object lesson for Israel.

At about the same time, Hosea’s friend Isaiah, down in the southern kingdom of Judah, was undergoing a similar experience. Isaiah also had two sons who were given significant names. The older boy’s name was (are you

ready for this?) Mahershahalhashbaz—a name that means “haste to the prey” or “haste to the spoil.” It was God’s prophetic way of telling the people of Israel that they were in deep trouble. The younger boy’s name was Shearjashub, which means “a remnant shall return.” That was God’s promise to Israel that, even though the nation was being taken into captivity, a remnant would come back. Through the names of Isaiah’s two sons, God gave Israel both a warning of trouble and a comforting promise that a remnant would return. In the same way, the names of Hosea’s sons would be significant.

In obedience to what God had told him, Hosea went courting. Gomer was attracted

to this young man and agreed to marry him. At first, their marriage was heaven on earth. Hosea loved this woman. You can’t read the prophecy without seeing that. They must have been wonderfully happy together.

Then they had their first child. It was a boy, as God had said. Hosea’s heart was filled to bursting, and he went to God for the name of the boy. God shocked Hosea by telling him the boy’s name should be Jezreel, meaning “castaway”—a name of shame in Israel.

In 2 Kings 9:30–37, you find the story of wicked Queen Jezebel, who is judged by God, thrown from a window, dashed to her death in a courtyard, and eaten by dogs. The name of that courtyard from then on was Jezreel,

a name of disgrace—and the same name as Hosea's firstborn son. The name Jezreel was a warning to the people to turn from their sin and abominable practices, or they would be "castaway." They would no longer be Israel; they would be Jezreel.

In time, another child was born to Hosea and Gomer—a daughter whom God named Lo-Ruhamah. The name means "not loved." Imagine naming your baby girl "not loved." The name signified that God would no longer have mercy and love for His people if they continued their stubborn rebellion. His patience was wearing thin. A time was coming when He would no longer offer mercy to them but would hand them over to invading armies.

When this little girl was weaned, Gomer conceived again and bore a third child, a boy whom God named Lo-Ammi, meaning "not my people." God was warning Israel that they were not His people. God had said He would name these children as a sign to His people, but there would come a day of restoration:

"I will show My love to the one I called 'Not My loved one.' I will say to those called 'Not My people,' 'You are My people'; and they will say, 'You are my God'" (Hos. 2:23). Even while God was pronouncing judgment, He was offering and demonstrating His love and grace.

A Story of Shame—and Redemption

After this there were no more children in Hosea's household. Gomer began to fulfill the sad prediction God had made when He told Hosea to marry her. What a heartbreak it must have been to this young preacher as he heard the whispers that circulated about

his wife. Perhaps his own children mentioned the men who came by the house when daddy was away. Soon the children were left uncared for while Gomer ran around with other men.

One day Hosea came home and found a note from Gomer: She was leaving him and the children to be with the man she really loved.

About this time, Hosea's preaching took on a new tone. He still warned of the judgment to come and that God would send the Assyrians across the land—but he no longer announced it with thunder. He spoke to them with tears. And he began to speak of a day when love would triumph at last, when Israel's bitter lesson would be learned, and the nation would turn back to God.

The unfaithful wife of Hosea became a vivid, shocking object lesson of what was about to take place in Israel. It unfolded something like this: As Gomer passed from man to man, at last she fell into the hands of a man who was unable to pay for her food and her clothing. It's as though her first lover gave her a mink stole, but this one made her clothe herself in rags from the city dump.

News of her miserable state came to the prophet Hosea and he sought out the man she was living with. He knew where he could find him, down at the local tavern. When he met this man, he asked, "Are you the man who is living with Gomer, daughter of Diblaim?" The man must have said, "If it's any of your business, I am."

"Well, I am Hosea," said the prophet, "her husband."

A tense moment followed. Then the man responded that he hadn't done anything wrong and didn't want any trouble. Hosea

replied, in effect, "Listen, I'm not interested in causing any trouble. But I know you need money. I want you to take this money and buy Gomer some clothing and see that she has plenty of food. If you need any more I will give it to you."

The man probably thought, "There's no fool like an old fool. If this sap wants to help pay her expenses, that's fine with me!" So he took the money and bought Gomer some groceries and went home.

You too may say, "What a foolish thing to do!" But who can explain the motives of love? Love has its own reasons that reason itself does not know. So Hosea acted on the basis of love. He probably watched from a distance to catch a glimpse of the woman he loved as she rushed out the door to take the groceries from this man's arms—the gifts of Hosea's own love.

We don't know how long this situation went on. But finally, word reached Hosea that the woman he loved was to be sold in the slave market. The man she lived with was tired of her and wanted to get some cash for her. The brokenhearted prophet wept before God, and God told him:

"Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes" (3:1).

We can picture the scene as Hosea goes to the marketplace. He sees his wife brought up and placed on the auction block. She is stripped and shamed before the crowd. The bidding begins. Somebody bids three pieces

of silver and Hosea raises it to five. Somebody ups it to eight and Hosea bids ten. Somebody goes to eleven and Hosea bids twelve. Finally, Hosea offers fifteen pieces of silver and a bushel of barley. The auctioneer's gavel bangs, and Hosea has redeemed his wife.

He takes her down from the auction block, clothes her, and lovingly takes her home. Then we read one of the most tender and beautiful verses in the Bible:

Then I told her, "You are to live with me many days; you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man, and I will live with you" (3:3).

He pledges his love to her again. She has fallen into the gutter of shame, disgrace, and poverty—but the steadfast, unconditional love of Hosea breaks her willful heart and raises her up again. From then on, Gomer is faithful to Hosea.

In the rest of the book, Hosea describes the effect of this story on the nation of Israel. God said to the people, "How can I give you up?" He reminded them of His love for them all those years, even though they had turned their backs on Him. It is a story of God's redemptive love for a people who had sold themselves into sin, bondage, poverty, and shame.

This is much the same story we read in the New Testament, in which Jesus comes and pays the price for our redemption. Why? So that He can take His bride, the church, down from Satan's auction block and out of bondage—and so that He may restore her to a place of honor and faithfulness.

The Prophecies of Hosea

We find some remarkable predictions in Hosea. Following the story line of the life of Hosea and his unfaithful bride, God says of the people of Israel:

The Israelites will live many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred stones, without ephod or idol (3:4).

That prophecy is still being fulfilled today. The people of Israel have lived many days—indeed, many centuries—withouth a king. Ever since the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 at the hands of General Titus of Rome, Israel has been without a king or a prince, without anyone who has the undisputed right to rule over Israel.

Israel also lives without sacrifice. When the Jews of the world celebrate the Passover supper, they remember the supper instituted in Egypt when Israel was delivered from the hand of Pharaoh. God told Israel that every time they ate the Passover they were to kill a lamb. But for two thousand years the Jews have never killed a lamb. Why not? Why do they offer a bone, a burned bone for a sacrifice?

God said that they would live many days without a sacrifice, and since the destruction of the temple there has never been a sacrifice in Israel, nor an ephod or idol. God predicted that they would live exactly as we see the nation of Israel living today: as a religious people but without giving themselves to idols. Then, after these days are ended, something exciting will happen:

The Israelites will return and seek the LORD their God and David their king. They

will come trembling to the LORD and to his blessings in the last days (3:5).

There is a parallel prophecy to this one at the close of chapter 5:

"I will go back to my place until they admit their guilt. And they will seek my face; in their misery they will earnestly seek me."

"Come, let us return to the LORD. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence. Let us acknowledge the LORD; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth" (5:15–6:3).

That is the hope of the Jewish people—the promise that the Messiah will yet come to them, revive them, and raise them up again.

Return to God

In the sorrowing, loving heart of Hosea, we see a picture of the sorrowing, loving heart of God. At the close of the book, we come to His final plea to Israel—and to you and me:

Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God. Your sins have been your downfall! (14:1).

We tend to blame God when we suffer the consequences of our own sin and error. But God deserves no blame for Israel's downfall—or ours. He is simply trying to get His people to see the truth. Israel needed to experience the pain of God's tough love, and so, at times, do we. The only thing that

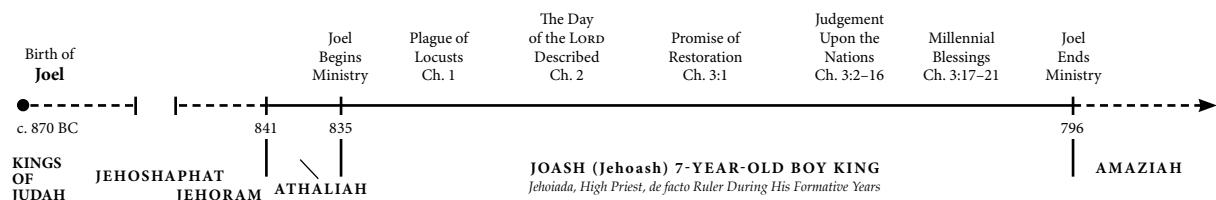
can relieve our suffering is to return to the comfort of God's merciful love. Like the father of the Prodigal Son, God eagerly awaits our return, wanting nothing more than to restore us to the blessings of being His children. But God cannot bless us or restore us until we come back to Him.

Can you see in this beautiful story all the elements of the eternal triangle? There is the Lover, our loving God. There is the beloved, the bride, the human heart, which is tragically prone to stray from God's love. And there is the seducer, the deceptive attractiveness of the world that tries to separate us from God's love. This is your story and mine, isn't it? So many times we try to satisfy ourselves with the lying idols of ego, pleasure, or materialism. Ours is a blindness

like Gomer's that cannot distinguish between lust and love.

But the Bible tells us how to break the triangle and restore the beautiful, faithful union God intended us to experience with Him. At Bethlehem, God entered the slave market where the whole human race had sold itself into bondage, prostituting itself, shaming itself in naked sin. At Calvary, the Lord Jesus paid the full price of our redemption, restoring us to a right relationship with Himself—a relationship of a beautiful bride to a loving husband.

Hosea is the story of God's love—a love that restores you and me. His love erases our shame and transforms us into the complete and beautiful beings He created us to be.

The Revelation of God's Hand

J. R. R. Tolkien's three-volume epic *The Lord of the Rings* is a novel of momentous events on a vast scale in a place called Middle Earth. The armies of powerful kings clash in horrific battles. Towering spiritual forces engage in a cosmic struggle of good versus evil.

Yet, when the book has ended, we learn that all the sweeping events of the story, including the fate of Middle Earth, hinged on the actions of the humblest, smallest creatures of all—a small band of three-foot tall—creatures called hobbits. The theme of this book is clear: Never underestimate the power of the smallest things.

The little book of Joel is only three chapters long and is often underestimated. That's tragic, because this is one of the most powerful books in the Word of God. Just as the fate of Middle Earth hinged on the actions of the little hobbits, the fate of our world hinges on the prophecies in the little book of Joel.

The Controlling Principle of Life

For centuries, people have searched for the principle upon which all the events of history turn. Long ago, the Greek philosophers concluded that

history moves in cycles. According to this cyclical view of history, a tyrant rises who seizes control of a nation and rules until that dynasty ends. Then control gradually passes to a ruling family or aristocracy. Gradually their power deteriorates until control passes down to the people in the form of a democracy.

But a democracy also eventually deteriorates and gradually yields to the breakdown of all authority, and anarchy ensues. Out of anarchy, a tyrant again seizes control, and on goes the cycle of history. That theory rings true. We see evidence in our own society that democracy is breaking down and paving the way for anarchy and the emergence of a new dictator of iron, perhaps the long-prophesied Antichrist himself.

Through the centuries, other people have contributed guesses about the controlling principle of history. Thomas Jefferson thought the principle was political, and when

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

In our examination of the brief but powerful book of Joel, our goal is to understand God's warning of coming judgment—including the "great and terrible day of the Lord"—and to apply the lessons of this warning to our daily lives.

he wrote the Declaration of Independence he incorporated that idea in the prologue—the belief that certain “unalienable rights” are naturally or divinely granted to human beings, and that to preserve these rights, governments are instituted among people. A good government, said Jefferson, does not grant these rights but defends the God-given rights the people already have. Jefferson felt that the forces that shape human history and form the nations of earth were political in nature.

In the late nineteenth century, Karl Marx dipped his pen into the acid of his own embittered spirit and wrote the imposing work that has dramatically influenced our troubled times. His idea was that the controlling force of history is economics: The need to meet the material demands of life shapes the course of history. He called this force “dialectical materialism”—the principle of materialism derived through the conflict of ideas and conflicting economic interests. Even after the collapse of Communism in the 1990s, many people, even in America, still called themselves Marxists and considered economics to be the driving force of life.

But the Bible says that all these beliefs are ultimately inadequate and flawed. The controlling principle behind human history is none other than God Himself. The hinge on which history turns is spiritual: God’s Spirit is at work among people, and you cannot understand human events if you do not recognize this fact.

God tries to win men and women to Himself by holding back the destructive forces in human events. But at last God’s patience reaches an end and there comes a

time—repeated throughout human history—when God says to both individuals and nations, “My Spirit shall not strive with man forever” (Gen. 6:3 NASB). And when He removes His Spirit—the controlling force of life—everything collapses. People are left alone to contend with the chaos they have chosen. That is the message contained in the three chapters of the little book of Joel.

The Day of the Lord

Joel was a prophet to the kingdom of Judah, the southern kingdom, and was probably a contemporary of Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos. We don’t know much about Joel except that he was one of the most visionary personages in the Bible. Joel saw far past our own day to the final stages of God’s dealings in human events.

The book opens with Joel’s call to the people to consider a tremendous thing that had happened in the land. He says:

Hear this, you elders; listen, all who live in the land. Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your forefathers? Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation (1:2-3).

Whenever I read those verses, I’m reminded of my days in the navy. Whenever the navy made an important announcement, it always began, “Now hear this.” And that’s the way Joel begins: “Hear this . . . ” His announcement concerns an event of immense importance—the great day of the Lord.

Back in World War II we talked about the coming of D-Day, and then V-J Day. We looked forward to the end of the war, to the day when

the struggle would cease and the horrors of war would end. Here in Joel we see that God has a day circled on the cosmic calendar, the day of the Lord. Joel was entrusted with the task of describing that great day to the people.

It's important to understand that, in a broad sense, what the Bible calls the day of the Lord is not just one event in human history. We will find in this prophecy that the day of the Lord is any event in which God moves in judgment that has been building up, cycle by cycle, toward the final and terrible day. The day of the Lord is the culmination of all judgment that Joel describes in chapters 2 and 3.

The great and terrible day of the Lord is that period described by the Lord Jesus Christ as a time when there will be tribulation as has never been seen since the creation of the world, nor ever will be. And it was given to

the prophet Joel to see across the intervening centuries of time to describe it and to illustrate it by events taking place in his own day, which was an invasion of locusts.

I was in Minnesota years ago during an invasion of grasshoppers—Insects very similar to locusts. I can still remember how the sky was literally darkened by the great cloud of these insects. I heard them descend into the field of standing grain, hitting the ground like hail. I heard the continual rattling, rustling sound of their wings. Within moments, every blade of grass, every bit of vegetation was gone, and the fields looked as if they had never been planted.

That's what happened in Israel. A locust horde descended upon the land and devoured every living thing. The crops were ruined and the result was famine.

Everyone in Judah was painfully aware of



Egyptian Locust

this event, but they didn't understand where it had come from. So Joel said to them, in effect, "God is behind this" (see Joel 1:10–15). This plague isn't just a freak of nature. It happened in obedience to the command of God, working through the natural laws that govern the earth. God's hand allows catastrophes like this to occur in order to make people aware of the spiritual background to life.

We need to wake up to the fact that God is speaking to us through the events of our lives. He wants to bless us but we will not listen. That's our problem! Has this ever happened to you? Has God ever allowed events in your life to awaken you to your need of Him? That is what God is doing in Joel 1.

A Vision of Invasion

In chapter 2, the prophet Joel leaps over the centuries to the last days, using the invasion of the locusts as a picture of the invasion of Israel by a great army in the last days. Only by examining the whole stream of prophecy together can we detect that Joel is speaking of the future. Anyone taking this book by itself would never notice any difference, except that the prophet is now describing an invasion

by an army of men instead of insects. In describing this event, Joel calls it the day of the Lord:

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming. It is close at hand—a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness. Like dawn spreading across the mountains a large and mighty army comes, such as never was of old nor ever will be in ages to come (2:1–2).

Does that sounds familiar? That is the language Jesus used: "Then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again" (Matt. 24:21).

Joel goes on to describe how the land will be scorched behind them as this great army advances. Fear grips the hearts of the people as they see this invading host drawn up for battle. Nothing can resist them. The earth shakes before them. The heavens tremble. And then we come to a significant passage:

The sun and moon are darkened, and the stars no longer shine (2:10).

In order to understand the prophetic passages of Scripture, we need to look for interpretational landmarks. Certain prophetic symbols occur again and again throughout various passages of prophecy, and these symbols serve as landmarks so we know where we are.

The darkening of the sun, moon, and stars is one of these landmarks. We see this same landmark in Jesus' great discourse on the Mount of Olives. He refers to a time when the sun shall be darkened, the moon will not

give light, but will turn to blood, and the stars will fall from heaven (see Matt. 24:29). We see this event in the books of Daniel, Isaiah, and Revelation, and described in several other places throughout Scripture. It always marks the same event in human history and serves as an interpretation landmark pointing to the last days before the great and terrible day of the Lord.

This section of Joel, then, seems to describe an invasion of Israel that is also foretold by the prophet Ezekiel in chapters 38 and 39, when a great army invades the land from the north and destroys everything, capturing the city of Jerusalem. But God promises that the northern army who attacks will be destroyed. The books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel all confirm this. Now Joel adds his voice to the chorus of prophets as God reveals the purpose behind this great invasion:

“Even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.”

Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing—grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God (2:12–14).

God offers grace in this passage because He does not delight in judgment. He never enjoys our pain. Rather, He seeks hearts that will listen to Him and open the door for the blessings He wants to pour into our lives. However, in order to get a person or nation to return to Him, God will permit harsh events

to occur—because these are the events that produce a repentant heart.

“Rend your heart and not your garments,” He says, pleading with us in His love. He doesn’t want us to simply make an external show of repentance. He wants us to change internally. But we don’t like to do that, do we?

We are like the little boy whose mother told him, “Sit down!” But he wouldn’t sit down. She said again, “Sit down!” And he said, “I won’t.” So she grabbed him by the shoulders and sat him down in the chair. He looked up at her defiantly and said, “I’m sitting down on the outside, but I’m standing up on the inside!”

God is unimpressed by our outward show. We don’t fool Him for a moment. He wants us to love Him and obey Him on the inside and on the outside, through and through.

God’s Restoration

After leaping over to the end days, the prophet Joel returns to the event of his day: the locust plague in the land. Joel tells the people that just as God will one day deliver His people and drive away the northern armies, so with the present catastrophe, He will restore the land from its barren condition and desolation:

The threshing floors will be filled with grain; the vats will overflow with new wine and oil.

[God says,] “I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten—the great locust and the young locust, the other locusts and the locust swarm—my great army that I sent among you” (2:24–25).

I will never forget the agony in the eyes

of a man I knew some years ago who had recently become a Christian. He told me, “It’s wonderful being a Christian, yet I can’t help feeling sad over the years I wasted and the things I missed during my old lifestyle. I feel sick remembering the terrible things I used to do. If only I’d had the sense to come to the Lord before I wasted so much of my life.”

Here was a man who felt he had allowed the locusts to eat up and waste the prime years of his life. But I had the joy of telling him, “Friend, our Lord says to us, ‘I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten.’” That verse was a great comfort to him.

God promises to make up for the barrenness of our former way of life. All we have to do is turn back to Him in sincere repentance. That is one of the most comforting promises in Scripture.

The Pentecost Prediction

Next, Joel leaps ahead again and writes the great passage that the apostle Peter quotes on the day of Pentecost, which is recorded in Acts 2. Here we see the Christians gathered together in the temple courts. Suddenly a rushing, mighty wind enters the place, tongues of fire appear over every head, and people begin speaking in foreign languages.

Immediately, a crowd made up of people from all over the world—Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Cappadocian, people from Pontus and Asia Minor, Phrygian, Pamphylians, Egyptians, Libyan, Romans, Cretans, and Arabs—gathers around the event. Each of these nationalities hears the Christians preaching the gospel and praising God in their own language. They have never seen or heard anything like it—and grope for

a way to explain it. Finally, they conclude that the Christians must be drunk. Then Peter stands and speaks:

“Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:” (Acts 2:14–16).

And here he quotes Joel 2:28–29:

“In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy” (Acts 2:17–18).

As we have already seen, the prophet Joel has witnessed and prophesied events well into the future, including the still-future invasion of Israel. Here, he sees something different, a mystery that is somewhat undefined to his vision. He says that Israel’s restoration will be followed by an indeterminate period when God will pour out His Spirit on all flesh, and they shall speak the message of God.

We can identify the day Joel is describing. It’s the day of the Spirit in which we live, the day that began on Pentecost when God first poured out His Spirit and continues to be poured out throughout this age. In Acts 2, Peter also quotes Joel concerning the sign of the end of that age:

“I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned

to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the LORD. And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved” (Acts 2:19–21).

That is Joel’s description of the end of the age, which commenced at Pentecost. Joel’s prophecy of Pentecost is the sign of the beginning of the present age. His prophecy of doom and judgment in the great and glorious day of the Lord is the sign of the end of this age. No one knows how long this present age will last, but during this time, God is pouring out His Spirit upon people around the world.

Plowshares and Pruning Hooks

In Joel 3, the prophet returns to the end times and beyond. All that he sees of the age of the Spirit is the great mark of the Spirit’s presence—but beyond that he sees that God will restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem:

“I will gather all nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. There I will enter into judgment against them concerning my inheritance, my people Israel, for they scattered my people among the nations and divided up my land” (3:2).

Jesus said, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him” (Matt. 25:31–32). And then the Son of Man will judge them and divide them, as a shepherd divides the sheep from the goats. Those who are righteous will be invited in to share the Father’s inheritance, while the unrighteous will be sent away. This is the valley of

judgment. In preparation for this coming judgment, God instructs the nations of the world with these amazing words:

Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare for war! Rouse the warriors! Let all the fighting men draw near and attack. Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears. Let the weakling say, “I am strong!” (3:9–10).

Did you know that the Bible says this? Many times you have heard these words from another Old Testament prophet:

He will judge between many peoples and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide.

They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

*Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore
(Mic. 4:3).*

Joel’s prophecy speaks of a time when plowshares will be beaten into swords. Micah’s prophecy says the opposite—swords will be beaten into plowshares. Joel’s prophecy comes first, and its fulfillment will come first. The nations will remain at war with each other until God finally tells them, “Beat your swords into plowshares and your spears into pruning hooks.”

There will be wars and rumors of wars, culminating in the final gathering of multitudes in “the valley of decision,” as Joel says in 3:14. Whose decision? Not our decision. Not the decision of nations or kings. The day of the Lord will be the day that God

makes His decision. God will enter the valley of decision and the multitudes of the nations will be gathered before Him. The entire world will be there on this judgment day. At the return of Jesus Christ in power and judgment, all the nations of the world will know that the Lord is God—.

And the city of Jerusalem will be the Holy City once more.

The Future Is in God's Hands

The final scene in Joel 3 is a beautiful one—a scene of peace, when the final battle has been fought and won, and the judgment of God has been handed down. It is at this time when all that was wrong will be put right, and the earth will be the Eden that God originally created it to be:

"In that day the mountains will drip new wine, and the hills will flow with milk; all the ravines of Judah will run with water. A fountain will flow out of the LORD's house and will water the valley of acacias" (3:18).

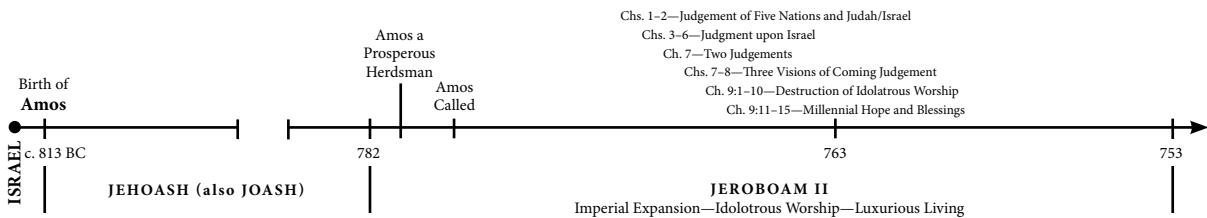
Water is always a picture of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, "Whoever believes in me, as

the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him" (John 7:38). He speaks of spiritual rivers of blessing to satisfy a person's thirsty soul.

Throughout the book of Joel, we have seen the hand of God—moving and shaping events, guiding His people, even clenched into a fist of war. Ultimately, we see God's hand at work as the hand of an artist, reshaping the world, sculpting it into a thing of beauty once more.

Joel shows us clearly that the future is in God's hands. If it were in our hands, we'd certainly make a mess of it. If it were in Satan's hands, we would be on our way to destruction. If it were determined by the blind forces of history, life would have no meaning.

The future of the human race is in God's hands. We have a choice: We can confidently place our hands in the outstretched hand of God, our merciful heavenly Father—or we can run from Him and turn our backs on Him. But even if we flee, we can never escape His hand. Someday, His hand will hold the gavel of judgment. If we have placed our hand in His, we need never fear that day.

God Doesn't Play Favorites

Coach Vince Lombardi became an American legend by spurring his Green Bay Packers football team to five NFL championships. One of his players was interviewed by a reporter who asked, “Is Coach Lombardi impartial and fair, or does he play favorites with his players?”

“Oh, Coach doesn’t play favorites,” the Packer said. “He treats us all like dogs.”

Well, God doesn’t play favorites, either—but He doesn’t treat us like dogs. He regards us as men and women of dignity and worth because we are made in His image. That is the message of Amos: the impartiality of God.

The message of Amos is an immensely practical and relevant message for our times—and it is distinct from that of any of the other prophetic books. Amos tells us that God does not play favorites; He makes no allowances for one person that He will not make for another as well. Anyone who is willing to fulfill the conditions of God’s promises will find God’s blessing poured out in his or her life, regardless of status, position, gender, race, or ethnicity.

In Amos, as throughout Scripture, we find ample proof that God’s ways

are not our ways. Whether we are rich or poor, powerful or powerless, the message of Amos confronts us with the fact that in God’s sight no one is higher or lower than anyone else. What an encouragement for those who struggle with feelings of unworthiness or inferiority.

Why Me?

The truths of Amos are very applicable in times of crisis, loss, or suffering. Our tendency in such times is to ask ourselves, “Why me?”

I’m reminded of a story a friend once shared with me. It happened in New York City, during a summer rush hour on the subway. People jammed the subway cars as the train moved out of the station, and one man—the last man to board—was squeezed in against the door, facing outward. As the subway train moved away from the station, the walls of the tunnel passed before his eyes, moving faster and faster. The hot, stuffy train swayed and

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This chapter unlocks the core message of the book of Amos—the message of God’s impartiality. It’s a message filled with lessons and implications we can apply to our lives today.

bumped—and the man became motion sick.

When the train pulled into the next stop, the door opened—and the man threw up on an unfortunate man who happened to be waiting to board the train. For several seconds, nobody moved. The sick man, the people on the train behind him, and the unfortunate man on the platform all stood and stared at each other in horror.

Then the doors of the subway car suddenly closed and the train move out of the station. Looking at the mess that covered his suit, the man on the platform wailed, “Why me?!”

The cosmos didn’t single this man out for punishment. It wasn’t because he had done anything to deserve it. He just happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. It might have just as easily happened to someone else—and then that other person’s question would have been, “Why me?”

If we see ourselves as being in some privileged position with God, then that is a reasonable question: “Why me?” But if God is completely impartial, then a more reasonable question emerges: “Why *not* me?” If bad things happen to some people, then why shouldn’t they happen to you and me as well? If God is impartial, as Amos tells us, then we shouldn’t expect to be exempt from suffering. We should expect bad things to happen to us, just as bad things happen to other people.

Amos, the Shepherd Prophet

The opening verse of Amos gives us the date and setting for the book, pegging Amos as a contemporary of the prophets Hosea and Isaiah. Amos, according to the indicators in this verse, is one of the earliest of the prophetic writers:

The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa—what he saw concerning Israel two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of Israel (1:1).

One unique feature of the book of Amos is that it was written by a man who was not a trained prophet. He was an ordinary person. He was, you might say, a “cowboy preacher.”

In chapter 7, Amos adds another personal note. Here is the reaction to his message as he came to the northern kingdom of Israel:

Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent a message to Jeroboam king of Israel: “Amos is raising a conspiracy against you in the very heart of Israel. The land cannot bear all his words. For this is what Amos is saying:

‘Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land’ (7:10–11).

That was the burden of the prophet’s message. God was going to judge the nation and the king, and send Israel into exile. Amaziah the priest responds by saying, in effect, “Don’t come to us. Go back to your hometown. Go back to the country you came from and prophesy down there.” But sturdy, rugged Amos, the blunt and countrified cowboy preacher, said, “I was neither a prophet nor a prophet’s son, but I was a shepherd” (7:14).

Now, in saying this, Amos doesn’t mean his father was not a prophet. He means that he has not been to the accepted school of the prophets. He says he is a rancher, a farmer, a cowboy who is simply going where God tells him to go and doing what God tells him to do.

Now you can see something of the opposition to the message of this man as he comes declaring the burden of the Lord in the land of Israel in the northern kingdom. The people find his message hard to accept.

The Travels of Amos

Amos delivers God's message in an interesting way. Comparing this account with a map of ancient Israel, you find that Amos goes around the boundaries of Israel in various directions, delivering a message

concerning all the neighboring nations.

He begins in chapter 1 with Damascus, in the northeast section above Israel (which we now know as Syria), and delivers a message that God has judged Damascus, especially for the people's cruelty.

Next he moves down the west coast to the ancient land of Philistia, or what is also called the land of Gaza. Again he reminds Israel that God has judged this land. Why, because the people have participated in slave trade.

Then he moves back up the coast to Tyre, on the northwest side of Israel. There he says

that God has judged Tyre because the people broke their agreements.

He continues on to the land of Edom, the ancient country of Esau, where he points out how God's judgment has fallen on that nation because of the people's unforgiving spirit and their hatred of Israel.

Amos then moves up the east side of Israel to the land of Ammon—what is known today as Jordan. Amman, the capital of Jordan, was also the capital of Ammon in the time of Amos. The prophet declares God's judgment against this nation because of its greed for the land that belongs to others.

As Amos travels south, he pronounces God's judgment on Moab because of their hatred of Israel.

Next, he comes to the southern kingdom of Judah. There he declares that because Judah has despised God's law, judgment has fallen on the nation. Finally, he journeys to the heart of the ten northern tribes of Israel, where he announces that God is going to judge them because of the corruption and injustice that was in their hearts.

Amos's message reminds me of a story of an old and overweight country elder who sat in church Sunday after Sunday, smiling and nodding as his pastor preached about such sins as swearing, drinking, and smoking. But one Sunday, the minister preached against the sin of gluttony—and the fat old elder was incensed. After the service, he stamped up to the preacher and said, "You have ceased to be a-preachin' and have started to be a-meddlin'!"

As you read the account of Amos, you can see that the people of Israel were quite untroubled as long as he was talking about the

sins of other nations. But when the prophet zeroed in on the sins of Israel, then he had ceased to be a-preachin' and had started to be a-meddlin'. The people said, "Go preach someplace else!"

This always happens when preachers are faithful to the message of God.

Walking and Talking with God

The rest of the book focuses on the northern kingdom of Israel. Beginning in chapter 3, the prophet points out that the people had enjoyed a privileged position before God:

Hear this word the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel—against the whole family I brought up out of Egypt: "You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth" (3:1-2).

The people of Israel were the ones God Himself had chosen among all the families of the earth. So the next words Amos spoke must have come like a hammer blow:

"...therefore I will punish you for all your sins" (3:2).

The very source of their pride—the fact that they had been chosen by God—was the reason God held them to a high standard and subjected them to judgment. They had received the light of the knowledge of God, and that knowledge creates responsibility. Privilege exposes us to judgment. As Jesus said, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Luke 12:48).

The people of Israel were chosen not because they were such wonderful people compared to any other race. God chose Israel because He had a purpose for this nation in His eternal plan—and the message of Amos was that the people of Israel were not living up to God's purpose for them. So they were about to be judged. They were going to be held responsible for the light God had given them.

This is what Peter means in the New Testament when he says, "It is time for judgment to begin with the family of God" (1 Peter 4:17). God always starts with His people and then moves out to others. The prophet Joel makes this principle clear: Just because we are people of God does not mean that His Word no longer judges our lives. On the contrary, God's Word increases our responsibility, so that we are likely to be judged even more severely, based on the responsibility we bear because of the knowledge we have received.

Amos describes the relationship between God and His people as two walking together:

Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so? (3:3).

Amos then describes God's talk with his people:

Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets (3:7).

These were the facts that marked the Israelites' peculiar relationship and privilege before God: They walked with God, they talked with God—yet even with these advantages, they had turned their backs on

God. For this reason, the prophet Amos says, God would send judgment.

Events Sent to Awaken Israel

In chapter 4, Amos shows the people how God has patiently tried to awaken them through five separate acts of discipline. For years, God has been trying to awaken them and halt their downward course. He had sent:

- Famine and drought (4:6–8);
- Blight and mildew to destroy the gardens and vineyards (4:9);
- Plagues (4:10);
- War (4:10);
- Fire and natural disaster—as in Sodom and Gomorrah (4:11).

All of these terrible things happened to the people. "Yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD" (4:11). Then comes the most ominous and frightening statement in the book of Amos—and perhaps in all of Scripture:

"This is what I will do to you, Israel, and because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel" (4:12).

Prepare to meet your God! The words send a chill of terror down our spines. Who of us is ready, according to our own righteousness, for such a meeting? How can we, who have accumulated such a load of sins and failures, ever hope to stand in the presence of the One who created time and space itself? His righteousness burns like a white-hot blast furnace at the heart of the universe. And so the prophet Amos tells us, "Prepare to meet your God!"

Thank God, we are clothed in the righteousness of Jesus and not in our own righteousness. Our eternal souls are saved and secure—yet we should do everything we can in this life to make sure that we never have to endure the discipline of God. We can rejoice in the fact that God's tough love draws us back to Him through the pain of harsh circumstances.

This is not to say that when bad things happen to us, it is always the judgment of God. No, bad things do happen to godly people, even while they are walking in fellowship with Him. But whenever pain comes into our lives, we should reflect and rededicate ourselves to godly living. Tragedies and brushes with disaster—a near-fatal accident, a cancer scare, a criminal assault, a fire, the death of someone close—these events awaken us from our spiritual sleepwalking, and force us to see life as it really is.

Amos—the Prophet of Social Justice

Amos is called the prophet of social justice because his message strongly demanded that people deal justly and compassionately with one another. He said:

You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine. For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts. Therefore the prudent man keeps quiet in such times, for the times are evil.

Seek good, not evil, that you may live.

Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is. Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts. Perhaps the LORD God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph (5:11–15).

These are powerful and thundering pronouncements against the social evils of Amos's day—and rightly so. God is always disturbed by social injustice. But what many seem to miss in this book is Amos's appeal to these people. He tells them to stop treating each other unjustly, but that isn't all he says. His core theme concerns how to stop doing these things, and we find it stated twice in this chapter:

This is what the LORD says to the house of Israel: “Seek me and live.” . . . Seek the LORD and live, or he will sweep through the house of Joseph like a fire (5:4, 6).

What is the answer to the wandering heart? The answer isn't just to clean up your life. It is to *seek the Lord* and live. Repent and return to God. Call upon Him. Ask Him to set you back on your feet and straighten out your life. That is God's appeal to us.

Social action, seeking justice, fighting racism, showing compassion to the poor—all these are good and worthwhile activities that God has commanded us to do. But they mean nothing if our hearts are not right with Him.

If we seek justice without seeking God first, we will simply become ideologues and demagogues, fighting for political causes while accomplishing nothing of eternal value in our own lives or the lives of others. But if we seek God first, desiring nothing more than to be obedient to Him, then justice and

compassion will naturally flow from our hearts. Then and only then will the words of Amos 5:24 become real in our lives:

*But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing
stream!*

The Restoration to Come

Amos closes his prophecy in much the same way that Joel and so many other prophets do: with a scene of beauty, peace, and glory. This scene reveals what God wants to produce in the world and in our lives. Amos writes:

"In that day I will restore David's fallen tent. I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be, so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name," declares the LORD, who will do these things (9:11-12).

These words are quoted in the New Testament in Acts 15:16–18, in the account of the first council at Jerusalem. As the Jewish Christian leaders wondered whether God would save the Gentiles without the law of Moses, James stood and quoted this verse from Amos. The statement that God will restore David's fallen tent is a prophetic picture of the coming of Christ, representing the house of David. James uses this passage to show that God, as He had promised through the prophets, would bless the world through Jesus.

Then comes this beautiful scene:

*"The days are coming," declares the LORD,
"when the reaper will be overtaken by the*

plowman and the planter by the one treading grapes. New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills. I will bring back my exiled people Israel; they will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them. They will plant vineyards and drink their wine; they will make gardens and eat their fruit" (9:13-14).

Compare Amos's statement that "new wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills," with the concluding image from the prophet Joel:

"In that day the mountains will drip new wine, and the hills will flow with milk; all the ravines of Judah will run with water. A fountain will flow out of the LORD's house and will water the valley of acacias" (3:18).

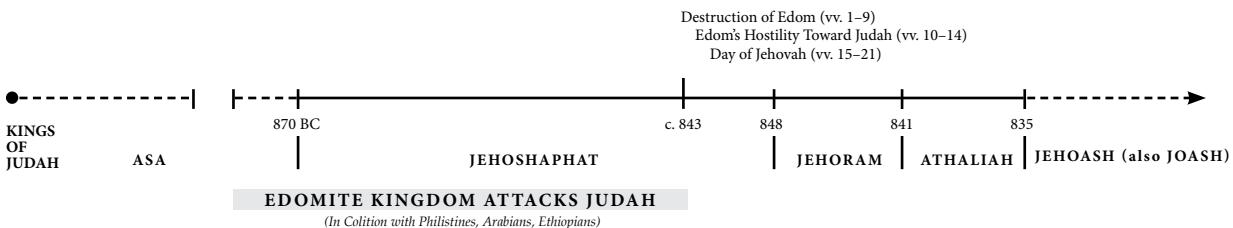
Both Amos and Joel depict a glorious millennial future when Israel will at last be restored to the land—and the land will flow with luscious, delightful splendor and goodness.

Here we see God's heart of kindness toward the human race. That's why He is often so angry with humanity, which is so bent on injustice, greed, and destruction. Human cruelty makes God angry because He wants us to be kind and compassionate toward one another.

The message of this book is that God is relentless in His pursuit of our absolute best. He will not compromise with our sin, our excuses, or our hypocrisy. The word of Amos to us is that we are dealing with a God of righteousness—yet He is also a God of patience, mercy, and love. He is totally impartial. He does not play favorites. If we seek Him, we will live—

truly live! We will enjoy the blessings He desires to pour into our lives. If we ignore Him, if we go our own way, then His message to us is the message of Amos 4:12—"Prepare to meet your God."

Whether we seek Him or avoid Him, we cannot escape Him. One day, we will meet our God. If we heed the call of Amos, we'll be able to meet Him confidently, because we will have sought Him with all our hearts.

Death to Edom!

The prophecy of Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament, consisting of a single chapter, just twenty-one verses—yet it packs a message for our lives that far outweighs its modest page count. Someone has said that less is more when it comes to getting your message across—and the prophet Obadiah validates that saying.

On one level, the book of Obadiah is a pronouncement of doom against an ancient and long-forgotten nation, the land of Edom. The Edomites had killed, captured, and exploited Jewish refugees who tried to escape the sword of their Babylonian conquerors. God had disciplined Israel by allowing Babylon to lead the nation into captivity. Though God disciplined Israel, He was angry with Edom for gloating over the sufferings of His people. So God, through Obadiah, issued this message of judgment against Edom.

Even though this message was written to an ancient people in a distant culture, diligent students of the book of Obadiah will find rich treasures of truth to apply to their own lives today.

A Tale of Two Nations—and Two Brothers

We know little about Obadiah except that he was one of the Minor Prophets—that is, his book is minor in length, though hardly minor in importance. Old Testament accounts of the days of Elijah and Elisha include a reference to a prophet named Obadiah, so some have assumed the author of this book to be the same man. The name Obadiah, however, was a very common one among the Hebrews and it is unlikely that this is the same prophet.

In the book, Obadiah mentions the day when Jerusalem was destroyed and captured by the alien armies—an event that occurs long after the time of Elijah and Elisha. Most Bible scholars believe that the author of this book was a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah, the last of the prophets before Israel went into captivity.

The name Obadiah means “the servant of Jehovah,” and he truly fulfills the role of

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Though the nation of Edom has long since disappeared, this chapter presents truths for our lives in the prophet Obadiah’s pronouncement of judgment against the Edomites. The struggle between Edom and Israel parallels the age-old struggle between the flesh and the spirit.

a servant: Obadiah comes, does his work, delivers his message, then fades into the mists of history.

The book of Obadiah tells the story of two nations, Israel and Edom. The nation of Edom was located south of Israel in a region now referred to as the Negev, or Negeb. The Israelites traveled through this ancient land as they escaped the slavery of Egypt and came into the Promised Land. When the Israelites passed through Edom, the Edomites persecuted them. They were Israel's enemies from the very beginning.

Obadiah also tells the story of two men. Every nation in the Bible is a lengthened shadow of its founder, and the two men behind Israel and Edom were twin brothers. I'm sure you recognize their names: Jacob and Esau. Jacob was the father of Israel, and Esau, his twin brother, became the father of the Edomites. In the story of these nations you also have the extended story of these two men.

Jacob and Esau lived in a state of perpetual

antagonism. We read in Genesis that even before they were born, they struggled together in their mother's womb (see Gen. 25:22–23). Struggle marked the lives of these two men, and the lives of their descendants, the nations of Israel and Edom.

Jacob was his mother's darling and Esau was his daddy's little man. Their lives were characterized by a sibling rivalry that continued for centuries after they died. From Genesis through Malachi, we see evidence of the struggle between Jacob and Esau, between Israel and Edom. In the book of Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, we read:

"I have loved you," says the LORD.

"But you ask, 'How have you loved us?'

"Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" the LORD says. "Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals."

Edom may say, "Though we have been crushed, we will rebuild the ruins."

But this is what the LORD Almighty says:

“They may build, but I will demolish. They will be called the Wicked Land, a people always under the wrath of the LORD” (Mal. 1:2-4).

What is so important about these two men and these two nations? That is what the book of Obadiah makes clear. In the struggle between Edom and Israel in the Old Testament, we see a parallel with a similar struggle that is described for us in the New Testament—the Christian’s struggle between the flesh and the spirit.

In Galatians 5:17, Paul tells us that the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh; they are opposed to one another. God always uses pictures so we can understand His truth more fully. The picture of Esau and Jacob, of Edom and Israel, represents for us the conflict between the flesh and the spirit.

This is a valuable key to Bible study. Once we learn to recognize the “interpretational constants” in Scripture—the symbols, images, names, and metaphors that consistently signify important truths—many hard-to-understand biblical concepts soon become clear. For example, certain symbols have a constant meaning wherever you find them in the Old and New Testaments: Oil is almost always a symbol for the Holy Spirit; wine symbolizes joy; leaven is always a picture of evil. And these two men,

Jacob and Esau, and the nations Israel and Edom, always symbolize the struggle between the spirit and the flesh.

The Problem of Pride

Why does God hate Esau? Obadiah tells us:

*The pride of your heart has deceived you,
you who live in the clefts of the rocks
and make your home on the heights,
you who say to yourself,
‘Who can bring me down to the
ground?’ ” (v. 3).*

The reference to “you who live in the clefts of the rocks” is a literal reference to the nation of Edom. If you have had the privilege of visiting the Holy Land, you may have gone into the Ma'an section of Jordan and visited the city of Petra, once called “the rose red city half as old as time.” Entry to this amazing city is through a narrow fissure, the Siq, that is only a few yards wide. It runs for a mile or more right through the rock and brings you at last into an open place where temples have



City of Petra

Wikimedia Commons

been carved out of living rock—giant temples with doorways twenty-five feet high or more. That was the capital of Edom.

The people of that city felt they were invulnerable because of these natural defenses. They lifted up their hearts in pride, and, as the Lord said (speaking through the prophet) the pride of their hearts deceived them. They thought that nothing could overthrow them, but God said it would be done. Just a few years after Jesus' death, the Romans came in and destroyed the cities of Edom and captured this "impregnable" fortress. It has been in ruins ever since.

The trouble with Esau is pride. The principle of pride is what the Bible calls "the flesh." Our pride wars against God's Spirit. The flesh is a principle that opposes God's purposes for humanity and defies what God is trying to accomplish. Every Christian has this internal struggle. Pride is the identifying mark of the flesh.

Proverbs 6:16 says, "There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him." Topping that list is a proud look—a look of arrogance. Everything else that follows is merely a variation of pride. This is the fallen nature that was implanted in the human race. All who are born of Adam have this congenital twist of pride, the independent ego that evaluates everything only in terms of whether it feeds the omnipotent self. For the proud, there's no room in the universe for rivals, least of all God.

That is the pride of the flesh. That is Esau. That is Edom. The Lord answers the proud in the book of Obadiah:

*"Though you soar like the eagle
and make your nest among the stars,*

*from there I will bring you down,"
declares the LORD (v. 4).*

Pride takes many forms—including violence. Whenever one person acts violently toward another, that is fleshly pride in action:

*"Because of the violence against your
brother Jacob,
you will be covered with shame;
you will be destroyed forever" (v. 10).*

The person who inflicts violent pain and injury on another person proudly believes that he or she has a right to do so—and the victim has no rights or dignity. Pride is rooted in selfishness and it strikes out against anything that dares to challenge its own supremacy.

I was once in a Christian home and I saw a woman with blackened eyes and bruises on her legs and arms because her husband had beaten her with his fists. This man was a Sunday school teacher! Where does this kind of violence come from? It comes from Edom. It is the pride of the flesh.

Another form of pride, says Obadiah, is indifference:

*"On the day you stood aloof
while strangers carried off his wealth
and foreigners entered his gates
and cast lots for Jerusalem,
you were like one of them" (v. 11).*

In March 1964, twenty-eight-year-old Catherine "Kitty" Genovese arrived home at her Kew Gardens apartment building. She had worked the late shift, and it was past three in the morning. A man approached her

out of the darkness, and began stabbing her repeatedly. She screamed out, “He stabbed me! Help me!” A neighbor opened his window and shouted, “Let that girl alone!” The attacker ran away, leaving Kitty Genovese wounded and staggering.

When no one came out of the building to help her, the attacker returned. She fought him, but he continued stabbing her, then sexually assaulted her, stole \$49 from her purse, and left her in the hallway of the apartment building. The assault lasted about half an hour. At least a dozen neighbors were aware of the attack and heard Kitty Genovese cry for help. Only after the attacker left did one of those neighbors finally call the police. She died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital.

When Obadiah says “you stood aloof,” he is saying, in effect, “You were like all those disinterested neighbors who stood at their apartment windows and watched when Kitty Genovese was tortured and murdered. Some closed their windows and stopped up their ears. Some said later, ‘I didn’t want to get involved.’ Your indifference is a form of pride.”

To be indifferent to the needs and hurts of others is to be supremely self-centered. “I am too important to get involved in someone else’s problems,” says this form of pride. “My life is too important. My time is too important. My agenda is too important. If others have a problem, well, it’s their problem, not mine.”

The pride of indifference causes a great deal of marital conflict. In my counseling experience, I’ve often heard the complaint, “She ignores me,” or, “He doesn’t care about my needs.” It often seems to happen within the first year or two of marriage: Indifference

seeps into the relationship, draining the romance and passion from the marriage, replacing it with selfish pride. During the courtship, a man and woman ask each other, “What are you thinking about? Tell me what you’d like. I’d do anything to please you.” After marriage, it’s, “Where’s my dinner? What about my needs? Don’t bother me!”

That’s Esau at work in the relationship. That’s the pride of indifference.

Next, Obadiah spotlights another form of pride:

*You should not look down on your brother
in the day of his misfortune,
nor rejoice over the people of Judah
in the day of their destruction,
nor boast so much
in the day of their trouble.
You should not march through the gates of
my people
in the day of their disaster,
nor look down on them in their calamity
in the day of their disaster,
nor seize their wealth
in the day of their disaster” (vv. 12–13).*

God charges Edom with the sin of gloating over the misfortunes of others—another manifestation of pride. Did you ever take satisfaction in someone else’s hurt? Perhaps you have thought, “He had it coming!” or “Serves her right!” Why do we find pleasure in someone else’s sufferings? Why do we delight in rubbing salt into open wounds? Why do we enjoy gossiping about the faults and failures of other people? It’s the Esau in us. It’s pride. It’s the flesh warring against the Spirit of God.

This is only a partial listing of the prideful

sins of Esau. This is why God says, “I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated.” The verdict of God against the pride of Esau—and against your pride and mine—is this in verse 3: “The pride of your heart has deceived you.”

The Trap of Pride

Pride has a way of working out its own destruction. Pride sets a trap—and then proceeds to spring the trap on itself. Here is what Obadiah writes:

*How Esau will be ransacked,
his hidden treasures pillaged!
All your allies will force you to the border;
your friends will deceive and overpower
you;
those who eat your bread will set a trap for
you,
but you will not detect it (vv. 6–7).*

Pride deceives us, tricks us, and blinds us to the danger around us. We don’t recognize it until it’s too late. With a sense of invincibility, we step onto the flimsy carpet that has been spread over the pit, never suspecting that our next step is our last. Everyone else sees the danger at our feet. Some are shouting to us, trying to wave us off—but we’re too prideful to listen: “They don’t know what they’re talking about. I know what I’m doing!”

Famous last words.

We all have this principle of the flesh lurking within us. It’s crucial that we deal with it, root it out of our lives—because Edom has no place in us. God will judge Edom, and there will be no escape for the proud. God is forever set against the prideful, those who live by the flesh instead of the spirit.

One of the grandsons of Esau was a man

named Amalek, whose descendants opposed the Israelites on their way into Canaan. In Exodus 17:14, God says to Moses, “I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.” That is what God is saying about the flesh. He will never make peace with it.

But for Jacob, a day of triumph awaits:

*“But on Mount Zion [a symbol for Jerusalem or Jacob] will be deliverance;
it will be holy, and the house of Jacob
will possess its inheritance. The house of
Jacob will be a fire
and the house of Joseph a flame;
the house of Esau will be stubble,
and they will set it on fire and consume
it.
There will be no survivors
from the house of Esau.”
The LORD has spoken (vv. 17–18).*

Why must God destroy Esau and the nation of Edom? Because Esau and Edom are equally ruthless. You cannot make peace with the flesh, because the flesh will never make peace with you. Try to appease Esau, try to compromise with Edom, and they will turn and destroy you.

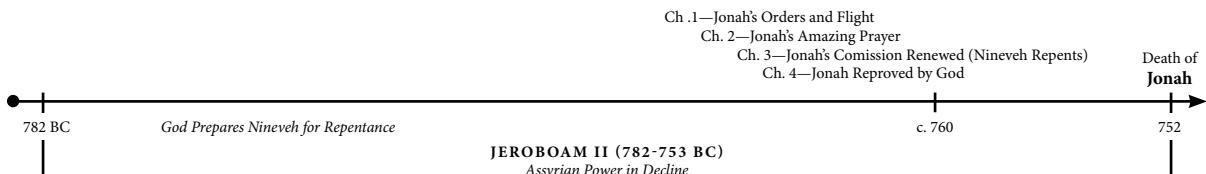
When you come to the New Testament, you find the same two principles—Edom and Israel, flesh and spirit—personified in the pages of the Gospels. In the last week of our Lord’s sufferings, He stood before Herod—and Herod, we are told, was an Idumean. Because Idumea is another spelling of Edom, we know that Herod was an Edomite, a descendant of Esau. Jesus stood before Herod. The representative of Jacob and the representative of Esau stood

face-to-face. King Herod the Edomite was proud, arrogant, and rebellious; he watched the cruel mockery of the soldiers as they stripped the Lord and dressed Him in His royal robes. King Jesus, the Spirit-filled Israelite, was humble and obedient; He went willingly to His death by torture, which was inflicted on Him at the hands of Herod. The Gospels say that Herod plied Jesus with many questions, but for the son of Esau there was no answer from the son of Jacob. They had nothing to discuss. Compromise was impossible.

God has nothing to say to the flesh—nothing except judgment.

In the end, it was humble King Jesus who broke free from the cross and the grave, and it was proud King Herod who ended his life in shame and exile, a prisoner of the chains of sin and arrogance with which he bound himself. The spirit was the victor. The flesh was defeated. Israel rose; Edom fell.

Israel or Edom, spirit or flesh—which side are you on? That is the central question of the short but towering book of the prophet Obadiah.

The Reluctant Ambassador

The book of Jonah is probably the best known, yet least understood, book in the Bible. The story of “Jonah and the Big Fish” has become a part of our folklore—a tall tale like the story of Paul Bunyan or the legends of Greek and Roman mythology. Most people are familiar with the story, but the book itself is regarded as a fable, a big “fish story.” Because of these attitudes, the true message of the book has been obscured.

Jonah was a real, flesh-and-blood man who lived in history. The book of 2 Kings refers to him as a historical prophet, as does Jesus in Matthew 12:40.

The theme of this story is found in the last two chapters of the book where you have Jonah going to Nineveh, as God had originally commanded, to proclaim the message He gave him. If you ask yourself, “Why did Jonah originally refuse to go to Nineveh?” you get very close to the heart of this book’s message.

You know how the story opens:

The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amitai: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”

LEFT: Jezreel Valley

But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD (1:1-3).

It seems that when you are trying to run away from God, you can always find a ship that will take you. But don’t expect smooth sailing! After Jonah boarded the ship to flee from the Lord, he soon found himself in the midst of a great storm. The sailors on the ship each called on their own gods—all but Jonah.

Finally, the sailors cast lots (the equivalent of rolling dice) to determine which person on the ship the gods were angry with, and the lots fell on Jonah. So they questioned Jonah and he admitted, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land” (1:9).

The sailors asked what they needed to

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this chapter is to help the reader see the familiar story of “Jonah and the Big Fish” through new eyes, so that the often-overlooked spiritual truths of this important book will become evident.

do to placate Jonah's God, and he said, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea, and it will become calm."

The sailors were reluctant to do so, and tried to row back to land, but the storm lashed the ship even harder. So the sailors prayed that God wouldn't hold them responsible for Jonah's death, and they threw him overboard. The sea went calm—and the sailors all became followers of the Hebrew God. And as for Jonah—

But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights (1:17).

The God of Mercy

In the second chapter, Jonah begged God to rescue him. On the third day, God

answered Jonah's prayer, and the fish vomited him up onto the shore. Jesus Himself said that the three days Jonah spent inside the fish symbolized the three days He would spend in the tomb before the resurrection: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matt. 12:40).

After Jonah washed up on dry land, God reminded him of his original assignment:

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you" (3:1-2).

God's command is stern. He has not changed His mind a bit, but He had finally



changed the prophet's mind. But why was Jonah so anxious to avoid his commission? Why did he not want to go to Nineveh? Why did he flee from God?

Some Bible scholars suggest that Jonah had such a primitive idea of God that he regarded Him as just a tribal deity, for Israel alone, that he thought God could not really be interested in Nineveh, and that if Jonah could get out of the land, he would get away from God. I think that idea is dashed by Jonah's own words.

When the sailors asked Jonah to identify himself, he said to them, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land" (Jonah 1:9). That does not sound like the description of a tribal deity to me. No, that's not why Jonah avoided going to Nineveh.

In fact, the answer is exactly the opposite: Jonah knew God too well. That's why he didn't go to Nineveh. Does that sound strange? In chapter 4 we read:

Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the LORD, "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (4:1-2).

Jonah knew exactly what God was like—gracious, compassionate, abounding in love—and that's why he wouldn't go to Nineveh. He didn't want Nineveh to have the opportunity to repent and be spared. He wanted Nineveh to be destroyed. Jonah hated the inhabitants of this cruel, evil city—a city that had often sent raiders into his own land, killing and plundering. Jonah wanted revenge, not mercy, for the godless Ninevites. So, to prevent God from showing mercy to his hated enemy, Jonah fled to Tarshish.

Here is amazing insight into God's character and proof that the God of the



Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are one and the same. From time to time, those who do not believe the Bible—primarily those who are educated beyond their intelligence—say that the God of the Old Testament was a vengeful, wrathful God, while the New Testament God is gracious and forgiving. In reality, however, Jonah admits:

That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity (4:2).

The vengeful, wrathful, fire-and-brimstone figure in this story is not God—it's Jonah! The judgment of human beings is always more harsh, more capricious, more angry than the judgment of God. God's

judgment is just and merciful. It was God—the God of the Old Testament—who invented grace and mercy and who always abounded in patient love.

So God recommissioned Jonah to go to Nineveh. But Jonah still didn't want to do it, yet he remembered his three-day ride in the belly of the fish. And he went.

The Response of Nineveh

So Jonah came at last to Nineveh, a vast city—so vast, in fact, that it took three days just to walk from one side of the city to the other. A day's journey was reckoned to be about twelve miles, so a three days' journey would be about thirty-six miles. That is a pretty good-sized city. In many ways, it was probably a cluster of towns and neighborhoods much like Los Angeles or New York City.

Nineveh was gathered around the banks

of the Tigris River and formed the capital of the great Syrian (or Assyrian) empire. Declaring God's message to such a huge city was going to take some time. So Jonah began a day's journey through the city, calling out that in forty days God would destroy the city.

Ordinarily that kind of a message would not get much of a reception. The Bible reports that when other prophets with a similar message were sent to wicked cities, they were laughed out of town—or worse. But an amazing thing happened:

The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh:

"By the decree of the king and his nobles:

Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish" (3:5–9).

And the people of Nineveh did exactly what God, through His reluctant servant Jonah, told them to do. So we read of God's response:

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened (3:10).

Why did the people of Nineveh listen to Jonah's message? Jesus Himself gives us a clue. In Luke 11, Jesus refers to this account and says, "As Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation" (Luke 11:30). Some Bible scholars feel that Jonah's features were changed by his experience in the whale's belly.

I recommend Harry Rimmer's *The Harmony of Science and Scripture*, in which he tells of an English sailor who fell overboard in the English Channel and was swallowed by a fish—a giant whale shark. A fleet of trawlers hunted the shark, killing it two days after the sailor was lost. When the shark's carcass was opened, they found the missing sailor alive, but without any hair and with his skin bleached white by stomach acids. Rimmer interviewed this man personally and corroborated his story.

If Jonah's face and body were affected in a similar fashion to this English sailor's, then Jonah must have looked like a walking demonstration of the judgment of God. You can be sure the people took Jonah seriously when he talked about God's coming judgment upon their city. He was living proof that God means what He says. And that is why the city repented, from the greatest to the least, and judgment of God was stayed.

The Anger of Jonah

You might expect the story to end in chapter 3, as the city repents in sackcloth and ashes. But the fourth chapter of Jonah shows us that the focus of this book is not on the city of Nineveh but on Jonah—and the heart of God. We read in this chapter that Jonah was angry with God. Why? Because God did

exactly what He said He would do, exactly what Jonah feared He would do: He spared the city of Nineveh. In fact, Jonah was so bitter toward God that he wanted to die.

After listening to Jonah rant and rave, after denying Jonah's demand that God slay him, God turned the tables on Jonah. He asked His servant a question:

"Have you any right to be angry?" (4:4).

Jonah didn't answer. He sat on the rim rock above the city and waited to see what God would do. We don't know how much time went by, but it must have been several days, because the first day, God prepared a plant. The plant grew up and covered Jonah's head, evidence of God's gracious provision.

On the second day, God prepared a worm that attacked and killed the plant. Then, when the sun came up, God prepared an east wind that blew the heat of the desert in upon Jonah. He sat there sweating and suffering until he was nearly fainting. Again, he asked that he might die, and again, God confronted him about his attitude:

God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?"

"I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die"
(4:9).

It's easy to accuse Jonah, but most of us have said something similar to God at one time or another: "Of course I'm angry with you, God. You're unfair. I don't like the way you're running things. You don't understand how I feel. You don't punish the evildoers. I have a right to be mad at you, God, because you aren't running things right."

Finally, God shows Jonah the folly of his attitude. In verses 10 and 11, He points out to Jonah that he is sitting there feeling sorry for himself and feeling sorry for a silly plant that he hadn't even planted or labored over. Why, then, did he not feel even the slightest twinge of compassion for the 120,000 people in the city of Nineveh who were so ignorant of spiritual things that they were like children, not knowing their right hand from their left?

At this point, the book abruptly ends. Why? Because it has taken us right where it was supposed to take us: into the very heart of God.

Most of us are too much like Jonah: We care about our own selfish wants and needs, our own agenda, our paltry possessions. With Jonah, it was a plant; with you or me, it might be a car, a job, a house, or something else. We care about *things*. We care about *self*. God cares about *people*, about living, throbbing, suffering human souls. God loved these Ninevites, even though Jonah hated them.

Who is your enemy today? Perhaps you would love to see God pour out His judgment on some evil world leader. Or on a cantankerous next-door neighbor. Or on the person who stole your car. Or on the drunk driver who took a loved one away from you. Or on the bossy Christian who makes life miserable for you at church.

But God loves that person, just as He loved the Ninevites. You want that person to suffer, but God loves that person. You may become angry and impatient with God for delaying His judgment, but God wants us to see all people the way He sees them. He wants us to take up residence in His heart and see the world through His eyes.

God has sent us to the world to declare the word of Jonah—a word of warning and a word of mercy. All around us are unsaved people. We may find them godless and disobedient. We may dismiss them from our lives as disgusting people, deserving damnation. But spiritually, they are like children, not knowing their right hand from the left. They are the objects of God's love, mercy, and compassion, and He wants to send us to them to tell them about His love.

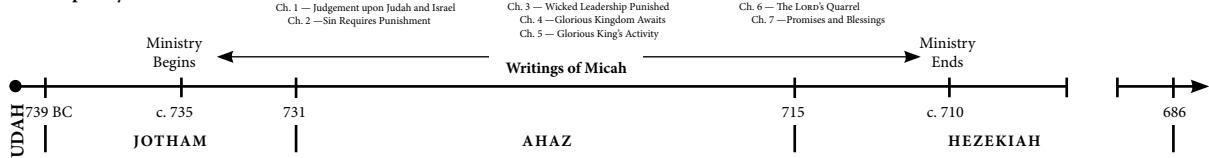
God has sent us to be a sign to our generation, just as He sent Jonah to be a sign to his generation. What is that sign? It's the sign of Jonah, the sign of resurrection, the sign of people who once were dead but have

been made alive in Jesus Christ. Our message is clear: We serve a God who can bring life from death, who can resurrect those who are swallowed up in the belly of a whale, swallowed up in sin and shame, swallowed up in depression and hopelessness.

Jonah ran from his calling. He was angry over the mercy of God. May we learn the lesson of Jonah's life. May each of us in obedience go where God wants us to go, say what He wants us to say, and do what He wants us to do. Instead of being angry over the mercy of God, may His mercy fill us with joy and a sense of triumph as we declare His message in our day.

Who Is Like God?

Contemporary with Isaiah



What's in a name?

In the Bible, names are often highly significant. The book of Genesis contains the story of a man named Methuselah—a famous name because Methuselah is the oldest man in Scripture (and presumably the oldest person who ever lived). When Methuselah was born, his father, Enoch, gave him a name that proved not only significant, but prophetic: in Hebrew, the name means, “When he dies, it will come.” Methuselah lived 969 years, and the year in which he died was the year of the Great Flood of Noah.

The book of Micah is yet another example of the significance of names in the Bible. The key to this little prophetic book can be found in the meaning of the prophet’s name. In Hebrew, Micah means “Who is like God?” or “Who is like Jehovah?” This is Micah’s repeated question. The book indicates that “Micah” was actually a nickname given to this prophet because his oft-repeated message was, “Micah? Who is like God?”

Godlikeness—a word that has been shortened to godliness—is the theme of Micah. Godlikeness is also the theme of Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians. It’s

LEFT: Area surrounding the Dead Sea

interesting and instructive to compare these two messages, Micah and Ephesians, side by side. By doing so, we see that the Old Testament and the New Testament complement each other; they speak with a unified, consistent voice.

Here again is proof of the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture. If we do not understand something in the New Testament, we can turn to the Old Testament for insight and clarification.

Micah was a contemporary of the great prophet Isaiah, and his book is similar in style. Sometimes, in fact, the book of Micah is called “Isaiah in miniature” because it is a concise presentation of essentially the same message.

Micah is divided into three parts. The first three chapters describe the failure of the nation. We hear this theme in many of the prophets, but in Micah we see that the Jewish nation has particularly failed to live a lifestyle of godliness. Chapters 4 and 5 contrast Israel’s

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

The goal of this chapter is to highlight the key theme of Micah—how to live a godly life—and apply this theme to the situations that arise in our everyday lives.

ungodliness with a vision of the One who is to come—the Godlike one. This is a prophetic section that looks forward to the coming of Christ, the Messiah. The last three chapters give us God's plea that the nation repent and return to Him.

The first chapter presents a magnificent picture of God striding forth in judgment against the nation of Judah because of the people's utter failure to be godly even though He provided them with everything it takes to be godly. This sounds familiar, doesn't it? Why are we not godly? We have all it takes, in the Holy Spirit, to be godly—yet we fall so far short.

So this book meets us right where we are. We are in the same boat with the people of Judah.

The Punster Prophet

In Micah 1:10–16, we encounter an interesting facet of the text that is difficult to appreciate in the English translation. These ancient prophets were punsters, and although some people say that a pun is the lowest form of humor, the Bible has many puns in it. The problem for us as English-speaking readers is that the puns are in Hebrew! If you could read the original Hebrew, you would see pun upon pun employed in the names of these cities mentioned by Micah.

Micah tells the city of Gath not to weep—and the name of the city means “weeping.” He tells Beth Ophrah (House of Dust) to roll in the dust as an act of repentance. He tells Shaphir (Beauty) that her beauty will be shamed. He tells Zaanan (Marching) that it will not march forth. He tells Beth Ezel (House of Neighbors) that it will end up being unprotected by its

neighbors. He tells Maroth (Bitter Town) that it will grieve bitterly. He tells Lachish (Horse Town) to harness the horses to the chariot and get ready to get out of town.

Chapter 2 goes on to picture the utter destruction of the people, including the rulers, prophets, women, and children. And in chapter 3 we find the reason for God's judgment against Judah.

Do you remember the story about the Greek philosopher, Diogenes? He went around the countryside carrying a lantern. Even in broad daylight he carried his lantern to arouse curiosity and provoke questions. People would ask, “Why are you carrying a lantern in the daytime?” Diogenes would reply, “I'm looking for an honest man.”

Like Diogenes, Micah has been tramping around the southern kingdom of Judah, searching for godliness. He looks among the rulers of the nation, but he finds only corruption, oppression, bribery, and injustice. Micah exposes the mess in Jerusalem, and he says that the reason for God's judgment upon His people is that those who have authority to act in God's stead have forgotten that they are responsible to God.

This indictment touches our own lives today. The New Testament reminds us that masters are to remember that they have a Master in heaven as well. God holds all authority accountable to Himself (see Eph. 6:9). Anyone who forgets this is using power only for personal advantage—and that is the behavior that corrupted Judah and brought the nation under God's judgment. The prophet sums it up for us:

Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes

for money. Yet they lean upon the LORD and say, “Is not the LORD among us? No disaster will come upon us” (3:11).

When you serve in a position of authority, whether in government, in a church, in a business or organization, or in your family, you represent God in that position. Paul declared, “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God” (Rom. 13:1). Forgetting the responsibility that

we have as leaders and authorities leads to corruption, oppression, bribery, suffering—and judgment.

A Vision of the Messiah

In chapter 4, we encounter a wonderfully exalted vision. Here, the prophet looks across the centuries—past the coming of Babylon, past the rise of the great eastern empire of Greece, past the Roman Empire and the days of the Caesars, past the Middle Ages, past the age of the Reformation and Martin Luther and John Wesley, and even past our own day. In his vision, Micah sees the coming of one who

is Godlike. This is one of the most beautiful messianic passages in the Scriptures:

In the last days

*the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established
as chief among the mountains;
it will be raised above the hills,
and peoples will stream to it.
Many nations will come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths."
The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
He will judge between many peoples
and will settle disputes for strong
nations far and wide.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against
nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.
Every man will sit under his own vine
and under his own fig tree,
and no one will make them afraid,
for the LORD Almighty has spoken
(4:1-4).*

This passage describes a scene yet to come. Nations today will never forget how to make war, never beat their swords into plowshares, never turn their spears into pruning hooks, until the coming of the One who rules in godliness. Micah's words describe a future world at peace. The words of Micah 4:3 are almost identical to the words of Isaiah 2:4, which speak of a time when people "will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears

into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore."

These words are inscribed on the pedestal of a bronze statue in the United Nations garden. The statue depicts a strong man literally hammering a sword into a farmer's plow, and it was a gift from the Soviet Union, presented in 1959—three years after Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev promised the West, "We will bury you." So much for dreams of world peace—at least until the Messiah Himself comes to impose His godly rule.

The rest of chapter 4 goes on to describe how Israel will be gathered but will ultimately defeat her enemies.

Chapter 5 opens with a new thought as the prophet says to Israel:

*Marshal your troops, O city of troops,
for a siege is laid against us.
They will strike Israel's ruler
on the cheek with a rod (5:1).*

This verse pictures the Assyrian army being gathered around the city. It is also a picture of the day when a greater Assyrian army out of the north will come against Israel. The reason they will come is given in the statement, they "will strike Israel's ruler on the cheek with a rod." This is a reference to the first coming of the Lord Jesus when He stood before Pilate and the rulers of the nation and they struck Him with a reed, placed a crown of thorns on His head, and mocked Him. They struck the cheek of the ruler of Israel (see Matt. 27:27–30).

Now the prophet suddenly sees where this ruler is to come from. This is one of the great

predictive passages of the Old Testament:

*"You, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of
Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times" (5:2).*

Remember when the wise men came from the East looking for the newborn king of the Jews (see Matt. 2:1–6)? They said to the rulers of Jerusalem, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?” And the chief priests said, “in Bethlehem.” How did they know? They knew because, seven hundred years before, the prophet Micah had written these words in Micah 5:2. The chief priests knew Messiah’s birthplace because it had been foretold in Scripture. Micah goes on to describe the One who comes out of Bethlehem:

*He will stand and shepherd his flock
in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD
his God.
And they will live securely, for then his
greatness
will reach to the ends of the earth
(5:4).*

Micah’s seven-hundred-year-long vision is 20/20. He sees the true nature of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, the God-man, the only godly person who ever walked on earth. He is the Godlike one, “whose origins are from of old, from ancient times” and whose “greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.”

God's Plea

In chapters 6 and 7, in a passage of incredible power and beauty, Jehovah turns to plead with His people and to show them the way of Godlikeness. The prophet Micah writes:

*Listen to what the LORD says:
“Stand up, plead your case before the
mountains;
let the hills hear what you have to say.
Hear, O mountains, the LORD’s
accusation;
listen, you everlasting foundations of
the earth.
For the LORD has a case against his
people;
he is lodging a charge against Israel”
(6:1–2).*

That sets the stage. Now God speaks, and this is what He says:

*“My people, what have I done to you?
How have I burdened you? Answer me.
I brought you up out of Egypt
and redeemed you from the land of
slavery.
I sent Moses to lead you,
also Aaron and Miriam.
My people, remember
what Balak king of Moab counseled
and what Balaam son of Beor answered.
Remember your journey from Shittim to
Gilgal,
that you may know the righteous acts of
the LORD” (6:3–5).*

How do the people respond to God?

*With what shall I come before the LORD
and bow down before the exalted God?
Shall I come before him with burnt
offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands
of rams,
with ten thousand rivers of oil?
Shall I offer my firstborn for my
transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my
soul? (6:6–7).*

God's answer is simplicity itself:

*He has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of
you?

To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God
(6:8).*

That is the answer, isn't it? That is the way to Godlikeness: to walk humbly with your God. After all, He is the only one who can

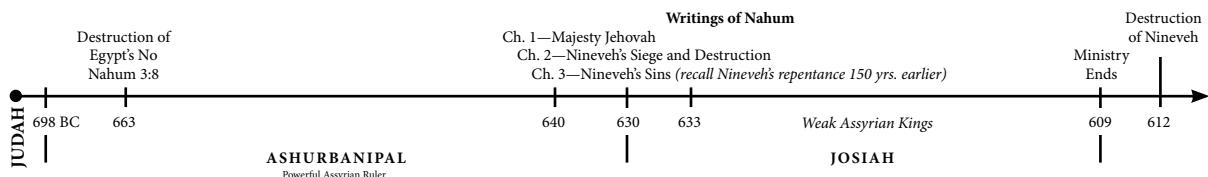
make us Godlike. But the Israelites failed to obey God, so in Micah 7, God warns them of approaching judgment. Once again, the Lord must wake up His people to their folly and sin.

Remember the meaning of Micah's name? "Who is like God?" This is the question, the meaning of Micah's name, that keeps ringing in our ears: Who is like God?

And the answer: Only the one who walks with the Messiah, Jesus the Lord. Only the one who patterns his or her life after the life of the Messiah. Only the one who acts justly (as He acted), shows mercy (as He showed mercy), and walks humbly (as He was humble).

Beneath the thundering of God's judgment, we hear the steady, insistent heartbeat of His love. In His mercy, He pleads with us. He waits for us to turn to Him for forgiveness and restoration. He wants to shape us and mold us to become the people for whom Micah was searching.

God wants to make us into people who are like Him.

The Terrible Wrath of God

When was the last time you heard a sermon preached from the book of Nahum? The fact is, many Christians have never heard the message of Nahum!

The book of Nahum is neglected and considered obscure because it is so short—and, frankly, because it is not the most entertaining book to read. Yet, every portion of Scripture is indispensable and has its own contribution to make to our spiritual growth and nourishment. As the apostle Paul wrote, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17). This little prophecy of Nahum is no exception.

This prophecy reveals certain aspects of God’s character more clearly than any other book of the Bible. The prophets unfold for us God’s divine attributes, and each prophet sees God in a different light. As you read through the prophets, therefore, you are seeing one facet after another of the character of an eternal God. These various aspects of God flash like facets of a diamond in the sunlight.

God’s Holy Anger

In this book, Nahum reveals the facet or attribute of God’s anger. No doctrine is quite as repugnant to people today as that of the anger of God. This is one doctrine many would like to forget. Some picture God as more of a Santa Claus than the Creator-Father-King-Judge He truly is. They cannot bear the thought of God having to discipline or punish someone. They want to reshape their image of God into something more genial, more warm and fuzzy, more . . . soft.

While it is true that our God is loving, patient, and merciful, we should never neglect the full range of God’s character. He is also a Judge, and judges must render verdicts and impose penalties or else they are unjust judges. He is a Father, and fathers must discipline or else they do not love their children.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

In this chapter, our goal is to shine a spotlight on one of the most neglected books of the Bible, the book of Nahum. In an age when many people want to soften and “tame” their image of God, Nahum makes sure we do not forget the full range of God’s character—including His anger.

So Nahum's task is to reveal this unpopular facet of our loving heavenly Father. And he does. The justice of God does not negate the mercy of God; both are authentic facets of His character. He is not a God of justice in the Old Testament and a God of mercy in the New, as some people mistakenly suppose. He is always the same, yesterday, today, and forever. Here in the prophecy of Nahum, it is the facet of the solemnity and towering majesty of God that flashes before our eyes. It is the same facet of His character that flashed before us in the book of Exodus, when the Lord thundered in awesome fury from the heights of Mount Sinai.

As we begin this book, it's important to know why God is angry—and with whom. This prophecy is directed against the city of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria—yes, the same city to which God sent the prophet Jonah. When Jonah preached in Nineveh, the city repented in sackcloth and ashes. God withheld His anger from the city, because every Ninevite, from the king to the lowliest citizen, turned to God and repented of his or her sins.

Nahum's prophecy, however, occurs about a century after the prophecy of Jonah. During the intervening years, Nineveh had sunk back into degrading, oppressive, and idolatrous practices. These were the same sins that had called forth God's warning of judgment in the time of Jonah.

The prophet Nahum was sent to minister to the southern kingdom of Judah at the time of the invasion of the Assyrian king Sennacherib. King Sennacherib, who came from the Assyrian capital city, Nineveh, invaded Israel during the lifetime of the

prophet Isaiah. It was from this great but godless city in the north that the armies of the Assyrians frequently came against the land of Judah and Israel. But God moved to protect His people, and He destroyed these enemies overnight (see 2 Kings 19; 2 Chron. 32; and Isa. 37).

Nahum means “consolation” or “comfort,” and as the Assyrian army was camped around the city of Jerusalem, God gave the prophet a message of consolation. Picture the scene as the city was besieged by the most ruthless army of that time. The Assyrians were known to have no conscience whatsoever when it came to burning, torturing, raping, pillaging, and destroying. They spared no one, even killing the children. But even though Jerusalem was surrounded by such enemies, God told the people through Nahum that He would destroy Nineveh, the proud capital of the Assyrians.

The book of Nahum divides into four sections, and each section is a unique description of the anger of God.

Section 1: God's Terrible Wrath

The first section could be characterized as a vision of God's terrible wrath, as we see described for us in chapter 1:

*The LORD is a jealous and avenging God;
the LORD takes vengeance and is filled
with wrath.*

*The LORD takes vengeance on his foes
and maintains his wrath against his
enemies.*

*The LORD is slow to anger and great in
power;
the LORD will not leave the guilty
unpunished.*

*His way is in the whirlwind and the storm,
and clouds are the dust of his feet.
He rebukes the sea and dries it up;
he makes all the rivers run dry.
Bashan and Carmel wither
and the blossoms of Lebanon fade.
The mountains quake before him
and the hills melt away.
The earth trembles at his presence,
the world and all who live in it.
Who can withstand his indignation?
Who can endure his fierce anger?
His wrath is poured out like fire;
the rocks are shattered before him
(1:2-6).*

The prophet envisions God in His anger, eyeing the hosts of Assyria. He has been patient, enduring their sins, giving them every opportunity to repent as they had done in Jonah's day. He has sent prophet after prophet, appealing to them to turn back to Him. Finally, God's patience is exhausted, and His anger comes to a full, rolling boil. Yes, He is slow to anger—but once that anger is aroused, it's a terrible thing to experience.

It is a dangerous thing to repent of one's repentance, as the Ninevites did. To forsake evil, then return to it is an act that provokes the anger of God. His anger is not a temper tantrum. It's not vindictive, petty, or needlessly

cruel. It is not capricious or unjust. It is not selfish. It is not random or chaotic. The anger of God is controlled but fearsome to behold.

In these six verses, Nahum uses all the Hebrew words for God's anger: jealous, vengeance, wrath, anger, indignation, fierceness, fury. What do these words mean?

God's jealousy is not like the selfish, petty, green-eyed monster of human jealousy. The jealousy of God is a burning zeal for a righteous cause, an overwhelming concern for the object of God's love.

His vengeance or retribution is not like the thirst for revenge that often consumes human beings. God's vengeance is rooted in justice and is an accurate assessment of what is right—and wrong. When God avenges, we know that His vengeance is proportionate, just, and true.

God's wrath, His dark and towering anger, is one of the most terrifying aspects of God's character—and it is rooted in justice and truth. The Hebrew word for wrath stems from a term that literally means "hot breathing." The wrath of God is hot and intense, and everything in its path is withered and burned away.

His indignation comes from another Hebrew term literally translated as "foaming at the mouth." God's indignation is not merely a stamped foot or an upturned nose. It is intense and frightening in the extreme!

Heat is a major component of God's anger. The word for fierceness in Hebrew literally means "heat," and the word fury means "burning."

Section 2: God's Personal Wrath

The second section, beginning with

Nahum 1:8, reveals that God's anger can be personal. The anger of God that we see in this section is directed against a single individual: Sennacherib, the pagan king and general of the Assyrian army who plotted to destroy God's people.

This passage parallels Isaiah 36 and 37, which describes the Assyrian army's siege of Jerusalem as they taunted and mocked Judah's ruler, King Hezekiah. Isaiah tells us that Hezekiah took the enemy's messages and spread them before the Lord, asking God to save the city. That night, we are told, the angel of death went through the Assyrian hosts and slew 185,000 soldiers (see Isa. 37:36). Nahum refers to this event in chapter 1:

This is what the LORD says:

"Although they have allies and are numerous,

they will be cut off and pass away.

Although I have afflicted you, O Judah,

I will afflict you no more.

Now I will break their yoke from your neck

and tear your shackles away" (1:12-13).

When the angel went through the camp, the Assyrian general was spared, and he returned to Nineveh. But while he was worshiping his false gods in the temple after returning from this engagement with Israel, he was murdered by his own two sons who stole the crown for themselves:

The LORD has given a command concerning you, Nineveh:

"You will have no descendants to bear your name.

I will destroy the carved images and cast idols

*that are in the temple of your gods.
I will prepare your grave,
for you are vile”
(1:14; see also 2 Kings 19:37; 2 Chron.
32:21; Isa. 37:38).*

Years before that event took place, God told the prophet Nahum that He would deal with this man in his own temple, in the house of his gods, and make his grave there. God's anger sought him out and struck him down.

We see from this section that God's wrath can be directed against an individual person. Many people find this hard to accept. They want to believe that God, being a God of love, is incapable of actually punishing people. They object to the idea that God's justice demands punishment for evildoers. God's love is greater than His justice, they say, and cancels out all punishment.

But, from a biblical point of view, this is a delusion. God singled out Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, for extreme punishment because his sins had reached to the skies like smoke from the cities he had destroyed.

Section 3: God's Thorough Wrath

Chapter 2 comprises a third section that reveals still another aspect of God's anger: He is thorough. God addresses Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, saying:

*An attacker advances against you,
Nineveh.
Guard the fortress,
watch the road,
brace yourselves,
marshal all your strength! (2:1).*

This is framed in a dramatic fashion, as though the watchman sees the armies of the Babylonians coming up to destroy the city of Nineveh. History tells us that the combined armies of Cyaxares and Nabopolassar, the father of Nebuchadnezzar, came up against Nineveh. God through Nahum relates what the scene will be like as these armies invades the city:

*The chariots storm through the streets,
rushing back and forth through the
squares.
They look like flaming torches;
they dart about like lightning (2:4).*

This almost sounds like a description of the Los Angeles freeway system! In reality, it is a predictive account of the battle Nahum foresaw raging in the streets of Nineveh as the Babylonians swarmed over the city. Nahum goes on to predict:

*The river gates are thrown open
and the palace collapses (2:6).*

The Greek historian Diodorus Siculus records how the city of Nineveh fell, saying:

There was an old prophecy that Nineveh should not be taken till the river became an enemy to the city; and in the third year of the siege, the river, being swollen with continual rains, overflowed every part of the city and broke down the wall for twenty stadia; then the king [of Nineveh], thinking that the oracle was fulfilled and the river become an enemy of the city, built a large funeral pile in the palace, and collecting together all his wealth and his concubines and his eunuchs,

burned himself and the palace with them all; and the enemy entered the breach that the waters had made, and took the city.

[Quoted by John McClintock and James Strong, *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, Vol. 7 (New York: Harper & Bros., 1883) 124.]

The Babylonian armies destroyed Nineveh exactly as Nahum prophesied. When Nineveh was destroyed, nothing remained.

Earlier in this century, you could have visited the vast site of Nineveh and would not have known that a city existed there. For miles around, you would have seen nothing but flat, deserted wilderness. Some years ago, archaeologists excavated in the area and unearthed shards and fragments that verify the existence of Nineveh on that site. Broken rubble is all that remains of this once-great city. It was lost for centuries, buried under the shifting desert sands.

This illustrates the thoroughness of God's anger and judgment. Nothing escapes. "Though the mills of God grind slowly," observed Friedrich Von Logau, "yet they grind exceedingly small."

Section 4: God's Irresistible Wrath

In the fourth section, Nahum chapter 3, God addresses Nineveh and warns that His anger is irresistible. The tone of this section is caustic and mocking:

*Draw water for the siege,
strengthen your defenses!
Work the clay,
tread the mortar,
repair the brickwork!*

*There the fire will devour you;
the sword will cut you down
and, like grasshoppers, consume you
(3:14-15).*

In other words, "Try as hard as you may, build your defenses as strong as you can—it won't do you any good. My anger is irresistible." When a nation or an individual becomes prideful and self-sufficient, God's judgment darkens like a storm cloud.

What is the message of Nahum for us today? We can derive both a national and an individual application. On the national level, we should be very concerned for a nation that increasingly rewards pride and worships at the altar of the self. We should worry about the increasing immorality and dishonesty that characterizes our society, our media, and our national life.

We should also avoid being complacent about the fact that Communism has fallen in many nations around the world. In the Bible, the Assyrians were not only the people who were actual enemies of Israel, but they were also a type of a people yet to come—a society that would threaten the peace of the earth and play an important part on the stage of world history in the last days. Many Bible scholars see the Assyrians of this and other Bible prophecies as a picture of Russia and its allied independent states. If you want an interesting study, compare Ezekiel 38 and 39 with this prophecy of Nahum. You notice that God says:

*"I am against you,"
declares the LORD Almighty (2:13).*

And when Ezekiel opens his great

prophecy against the king of the north, Gog of the Land of Magog, he opens with similar words:

"This is what the Sovereign LORD says: 'I am against you, O Gog, chief prince of Meshech and Tubal'" (Ezek. 38:3).

We don't know what the future holds for Russia. Today there are signs of political and economic confusion in that formerly Communist nation. Will Russia return to totalitarianism or become a fiercely nationalist, expansionist nation? We don't know. But the likelihood, according to Bible prophecy, is that Russia will regain her stature as a political and military force that will again threaten the peace of the world. Someday, according to these prophecies, Russia will again swarm down from the north to attack Israel—and will face the final judgment of God.

We should also heed Nahum's teaching about God's anger for the sake of our individual lives. We should not presume upon God's love. Instead, we should recognize that God's anger is a component of His love. If you are a parent, you know how you feel if anyone injures or insults your child or your spouse: You become angry! If you are not angry when you see injustices, then you do not truly love. Anger is an emotion of defense and protection toward those we love. We can even become angry with the person we love, when we feel he or she is engaging in self-damaging behavior. We become angry precisely *because* we love that person and want the best for him or her.

God's anger is much the same. It is

unleashed in the defense of those He loves. You cannot preach the love of God without preaching the wrath of God, because His wrath is a manifestation of His love. As Charles Spurgeon said, "He who does not believe that God will punish sin will not believe that He will pardon it through the blood of His Son."

How, then, can we escape the anger of God? Nahum gives us the answer in the first chapter of his book:

*The LORD is good,
a refuge in times of trouble.
He cares for those who trust in him (1:7).*

We need not face the wrath of God. No one who turns to God in trust will ever experience His wrath. He exercises His wrath only against those who reject His love.

Years ago, when my children were small, one of my daughters and I had a disagreement about her behavior. I spanked her (yes, I believe that spanking—administered in love and sorrow, not in anger—is biblical and effective). Afterwards, she remained defiant and unrepentant for a time—and I wondered what I should do. Should I punish her further, in an effort to break her stubborn will and bring her to repentance? I prayed for guidance.

Just then, her entire demeanor changed. Her anger and her will seemed to melt. She ran to me and threw her arms around my neck, told me she was sorry, and pleaded for forgiveness. Now, what was I to do? Continue to spank her? Of course not! She was no longer rebellious. Instead, she had taken refuge in me. She had placed her trust in me. She had come to me for forgiveness—and I freely gave it to her.

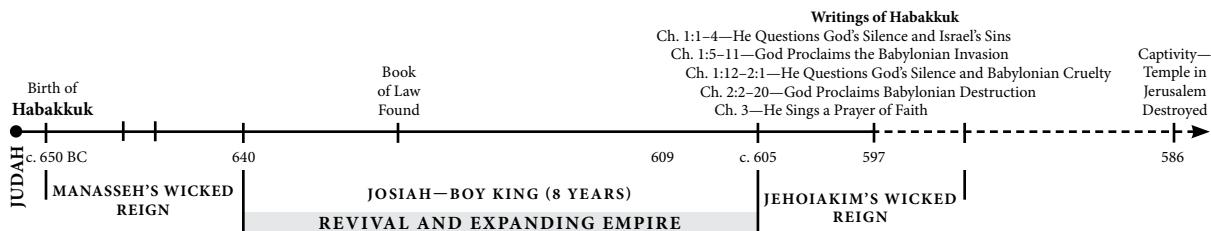
That's what a father's heart is like, and God is our heavenly Father. His heart of love is always open to those who take refuge in Him and who trust Him for salvation. They will never have to experience His wrath.

As the Lord Jesus put it, "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life" (John 5:24).

HABAKKUK

A Prophet for Our Times

CHAPTER 42



Habakkuk lived in an age much like our own and he struggled with one of the central questions of our age: Why does God allow bad things to happen? Habakkuk lived in a time of great national corruption, when crime, hatred, and division were on the rise, and when evil and immorality were flaunted openly and when ethical standards and family values were breaking down.

Looking at the injustice that permeated society in that time, Habakkuk questioned God. And the questions the prophet asked are the same questions that you and I ask of Him today.

In the opening lines of his book, the prophet looked out across the land and expressed his horror at what he saw:

The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet received.

*How long, O LORD, must I call for help,
but you do not listen?*

*Or cry out to you, "Violence!"
but you do not save?*

*Why do you make me look at injustice?
Why do you tolerate wrong?*

*Destruction and violence are before me;
there is strife, and conflict abounds.*

*Therefore the law is paralyzed,
and justice never prevails.
The wicked hem in the righteous,
so that justice is perverted (1:2-4).*

Here is a man who is disturbed about his nation. He sees everything going wrong. The people are living in wickedness. Civil unrest, rioting, violence, injustice, and oppression permeate the land. When issues of injustice are brought before the courts, the courts themselves are corrupt.

Habakkuk cries out to God, "Violence!" and hears no answer. He faces a problem common to us all—the problem of unanswered prayer. So in his bewilderment and pain, he cries out, "Lord, how long do I have to keep this up? When are you going to do something?"

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter finds practical and contemporary application in the timeless truths in the prophetic words of Habakkuk. The prophet lived in times much like our own, and he asks the same questions people ask today. He boldly approaches God with the tough questions of our existence—and he ends the book with resounding praise. Habakkuk is a book for our times.

God's Answer

Beginning in verse 5, God answers Habakkuk's questions. What follows is a dialogue between God and a single hurting human heart, the heart of Habakkuk. The prophet Habakkuk represents each of us. His questions are our questions. His pain is our pain. His perplexity is our perplexity. So the answers God gives Habakkuk are truly aimed at your heart and mine:

*"Look at the nations and watch—
and be utterly amazed.
For I am going to do something in your
days
that you would not believe,
even if you were told" (1:5).*

In other words, God says, "I have been answering your prayer, Habakkuk. You accuse Me of silence, but I have not been silent. You just failed to recognize My answer. The answer is so different from what you expect that you

will not even believe it when I tell you." Then God proceeds to explain His answer to the prophet Habakkuk in specific terms:

*"I am raising up the Babylonians,
that ruthless and impetuous people,
who sweep across the whole earth
to seize dwelling places not their own.
They are a feared and dreaded people;
they are a law to themselves
and promote their own honor.
Their horses are swifter than leopards,
fiercer than wolves at dusk.
Their cavalry gallops headlong;
their horsemen come from afar.
They fly like a vulture swooping to devour;
they all come bent on violence.
Their hordes advance like a desert wind
and gather prisoners like sand.
They deride kings
and scoff at rulers.
They laugh at all fortified cities;
they build earthen ramps and capture
them.*

*Then they sweep past like the wind and go
on—
guilty men, whose own strength is their
god” (1:6–11).*

Here is God’s answer to the prophet’s problem: He is preparing the Babylonians, also known as the Chaldeans. At the time that Habakkuk wrote, the Babylonians were not an important people. But God allowed them to rise up so he could use this evil nation to judge other evil nations.

At the time the prophet wrote, the nation that terrified and intimidated all other nations of the region were the Assyrians, whose capital was Nineveh. Assyria was the superpower of that day. Yet God decided to raise up this little nation that was just beginning to come to prominence in the affairs of the world—the nation of Babylon.

God said, in effect, “I am behind this. These people are strange, violent, and ruthless. They will be as powerful as any nation on earth has ever been and they will sweep through land after land, conquering everything before them. They will seem invincible. Their own political and military strength will be their god. And even though they do not know or worship Me, I will nonetheless control their destiny, and they will be the answer to your prayer.”

Now that is astounding, isn’t it? Habakkuk did not know what to make of this. A moment of silence interrupts the narrative as the prophet reflects. What has he gotten himself into? By seeking a solution to the Assyrian problem, Habakkuk’s prayers may have stirred up an even bigger problem—the Babylonians!

This is what bothers many people as they



Wall relief from Babylon

look at what is happening in the world today. This is what threatens the faith of many who view the problem of history. Why does God allow things to happen the way they do? Why does He permit such terrible events to occur?

Why has God permitted the terrors and atrocities of the Spanish Inquisition? The Black Death? Why does He permit the suffering caused by cancer, Alzheimer’s disease, and AIDS? Why did He allow the horrors of the slave trade? Why did He permit the Holocaust of World War II? What was God thinking of when the death-screams ascended to heaven from Auschwitz, from Pearl Harbor, from Bataan, from Dresden, from Hiroshima, from all the burning cities and sinking ships of a world at war? Why

did He permit the suffering of Vietnam, Bangladesh, Cambodia, the two Gulf Wars, Somalia, Bosnia, and 9/11?

A survey of non-Christian college students revealed the number one question on most students' minds: "Why would a loving God allow people to suffer?" For some of those students, the answer was simple—and fatalistic: "The answer is that there is no God. It's pointless to ask why a nonexistent being would allow suffering. You live and you die—and you never know the reason why. Don't try to figure it out. The point is, there is no point."

The poet William Cowper said, "God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform." And the ways of God are deeply mysterious to us. One thing that you learn about God after you live with Him for a while is that He is always doing the unexpected. It's not because He delights in puzzling us, but because the variety of His workings are so vast that our finite human minds can't grasp them.

What to Do When Your Faith Is Challenged

What do you do when you are confronted

FOUR SIMPLE STEPS WHEN YOUR FAITH IS CHALLENGED

- 1) Stop and think
- 2) Restate the things you know about God
- 3) Bring your knowledge of God to bear on the problem
- 4) Be patient

with this sort of a threat to your faith? Habakkuk offers four simple steps to revive our faith relationship with God when these and other questions assail us.

Step 1: Stop and Think. Avoid reacting emotionally to the problem. Don't let panic get the best of you. Use your God-given reason—and think.

Habakkuk approaches his questioning the same way: He stops and thinks about the problem. He reminds himself of God's nature. "O LORD," he asks, "are you not from everlasting?" (Hab. 1:12). The first thing he remembers is that God is an everlasting God. He is greater than the span of human events. He created history. He is from the beginning and is at the end. He is the God of eternity.

When the Chaldeans come, they will be trusting in their own might as their god. "Oh, yes," Habakkuk says, "but my God is not like that. My God is not one of these localized tribal deities. He is the God who governs all events." Habakkuk's approach begins with a willingness to pause and apply reason to the situation.

Step 2: Restate the Things You Know about God. Think about the nature of God Himself. Don't rush to resolve your dilemma immediately. Back away from the problem and begin with God. Go back to what you know about God and His character as it has been revealed to you in Scripture and by experience.

That is what Habakkuk does—he reminds himself that God is the self-existent and eternal One. Notice that he uses a special name for God. He says, "O LORD, are you not from

everlasting?" Whenever you find the word LORD in small caps as it is here, it is a translation of the Hebrew word for Jehovah (Yahweh or YHWH). Jehovah means "I am who I am," the name God revealed to Moses in Egypt. At that time God said to him, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Ex. 3:14).

Why did Habakkuk remind himself of God's everlasting nature? Because there were people in his day who said God was dead. Some people think the "God-is-dead" theology began with Friedrich Nietzsche in the late 1800s. In reality, "God-is-dead" theology has been around since Old Testament times, and it still pervades our society today. As Solomon has observed, there is really nothing new under the sun.

To counter this kind of thinking and to strengthen his own faith, Habakkuk goes back to what he had learned about God: God is self-existent and cannot die. It is impossible for a self-existent person to die. "I AM who I AM." In our own dilemmas of faith, we must do what Habakkuk did: Back away from the problem and begin with God.

Step 3: Bring Your Knowledge of God to Bear on the Problem. As you apply your biblical and experiential knowledge of God to the problem, you'll begin to see the problem more clearly. Habakkuk applies this principle by reminding himself of God's holiness:

*O LORD, are you not from everlasting?
My God, my Holy One, we will not die.
O LORD, you have appointed them to
execute judgment;
O Rock, you have ordained them to
punish (1:12).*

"My God, my Holy One," says the prophet, reminding himself of the holiness of God. What does holiness mean? I suspect that many of us use this word without any idea of what it means. To put it simply and accurately, holiness is wholeness or completeness. A holy person is a whole person. God is holy and He is whole. God is consistent with Himself. He is always what He is. He is never phony and never in conflict or in contradiction with Himself. That is holiness.

You can find this truth reflected throughout the Scriptures—the wholeness, consistency, and unchangeable quality of God. The writer of Hebrews says, "In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end" (Heb. 1:10–12). God, like His Son, Jesus Christ, is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

After the prophet reminds himself of this, he immediately adds these words, "We will not die." What does he mean? He is thinking of the fact that God has made a covenant with Abraham. God promised Abraham that he would be the father of a nation that would forever be God's people and that Abraham's nation would never be eliminated from the earth. The prophet reminds himself of that promise in the face of this awesome threat.

The Babylonians will roll across this land, and Habakkuk will soon see his own beloved Jerusalem conquered and his people led away into captivity. But he reminds himself that God's promise stands: His people

will not die. They will be chastised, but they will not be eliminated because God's faithfulness remains.

I pray that God will not have to use such drastic measures in our own society to awaken us to our spiritual and moral need—but I am not hopeful that we can escape it. As America becomes ever greedy, materialistic, and morally corrupt, the probability becomes greater and greater that this pattern will be repeated.

Step 4: Be Patient. Finally, if you have not come to an answer, patiently leave the problem with God and ask Him to show you the answer. Continue to act on the mustard seed of faith that you possess until God provides the answer. You will see your faith and trust in Him strengthened as you patiently wait for God to speak to your heart.

We see an inkling of this response in the prophet's words:

*Your eyes are too pure to look on evil;
you cannot tolerate wrong.
Why then do you tolerate the treacherous?
Why are you silent while the wicked
swallow up those more righteous than
themselves? (1:13).*

Habakkuk says, in effect, “I can see how You are raising up this cruel nation to punish my people, but I don't understand it. Despite the wickedness of my own people, they are not as bad as these Babylonians. You cannot tolerate evil. How, then, can You use an evil people to punish Your own people? God, I don't understand this.”

Habakkuk's mind could not wrap itself

around this huge problem—so he follows the fourth step: he leaves the problem with God. Now that's a wise thing to do. No human mind—not yours, not mine, not the prophet Habakkuk's—is capable of fully grasping the purposes of God. We reach a point where we must say, “God, I will patiently wait for Your answer.”

Most of us, unfortunately, lack that patience. “God,” we say, “I have to understand this problem right now! If You don't explain it to me, then maybe You just don't exist. If You don't explain it to me, if You don't make this problem understandable to my finite mind, then I refuse to believe in You.”

In humility, the prophet says, “I don't understand this, but You are mightier than I. All I can do is patiently wait for You to reveal Your truth to me.” Notice how he begins chapter 2:

*I will stand at my watch
and station myself on the ramparts;
I will look to see what he will say to me,
and what answer I am to give to this
complaint (2:1).*

Habakkuk says, in effect, “I'm going to leave the matter with God and wait for Him to take the next step. I'll stand my watch and do my job. Later, if God in His grace gives me the answer to the problem, then I'll be grateful. But that's up to God. I have gone as far as I can in my own strength and wisdom. All I can do now is be patient.” And God rewards the prophet's patience:

*Then the LORD replied:
“Write down the revelation
and make it plain on tablets*

*so that a herald may run with it.
For the revelation awaits an appointed
time;
it speaks of the end
and will not prove false.
Though it lingers, wait for it;
it will certainly come and will not
delay” (2:2-3)*

God is saying, “Habakkuk, the answer is coming. It won’t happen immediately, but continue to be patient and wait for it.”

By Faith

Then God goes on to state a principle that is quoted three times in the New Testament and forms the basis for the Reformation. God says,

*“...the righteous will live by his faith”
(2:4).*

These words are quoted in the New Testament in Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews. This is the idea that lit a fire in the heart of Martin Luther. God has designed us to live *not* according to our circumstances, *not* according to our own reasoning, but by *faith* in what God has promised.

The entire human race can be divided into two categories: those who live in dependence on God, and those who live in utter self-reliance. One of the saddest things that I have ever seen—and I have seen it all too often—is a Christian who has chosen to live by his or her own reasoning and strength—yet does so in the name of “Christianity.” We do this in so many ways.

We rely on studies, surveys, and polls to direct a church’s ministry. We exercise

political power, pressure tactics, and clever strategies rather than spiritual authority in an effort to bring about social change. We seek the input of experts and authorities instead of seeking the face of God in trying to expand the church and evangelize the world. We are not living by faith. We are living by sight, by our own human reasoning ability. That is not how the Word of God says we should live.

Read Hebrews 11 and examine the stories of the great men and women of faith who are listed there. These are people who changed their world, increased God’s kingdom, advanced God’s message, and healed human hurts—and they did it all by faith in the power of God alone. They didn’t hire consultants. They didn’t read books on marketing and management. They lived by faith—and in the process, by God’s power, these men and women of faith stopped the mouths of lions, subdued kingdoms, toppled thrones, won empires, and changed the course of history, to the glory of God.

The remainder of Habakkuk 2 reveals an interesting analysis of the Babylonians and what God plans to do with them. God says, in effect, “Habakkuk, don’t worry about the Babylonians; it’s true that I can’t tolerate evil, and it’s true that I am raising up this people to judge the nation of Israel—but be sure of this, I will judge the Babylonians in turn. The very thing in which they trust will prove to be their downfall. Their own gods will overthrow them.”

God goes on to pronounce five woes on the Babylonians—woe upon them for their thievery; woe to them for attempting to build a false foundation for themselves, piling up material “security” without regard to spiritual

FIVE WOES AGAINST BABYLON

- 1) Woe against thievery
- 2) Woe against false material security
- 3) Woe against violence
- 4) Woe against enslavement of others
- 5) Woe against idolatry

security in God; woe to them for building their cities out of blood, violence, suffering, and sin; woe to them for unjustly ruling and enslaving their neighbors; and woe to them for their idolatry, for saying to idols of wood and silver, “Come to life! Wake up!”

Lessons from History

In chapter 3, the prophet concludes the book with a remarkable prayer. He has seen his answer. The Lord is the God of history and everything is under His control. The problems of humanity can be solved only as human beings come into a faith relationship with God. Habakkuk prefaces his prayer with this invocation:

*The LORD is in his holy temple;
let all the earth be silent before him
(2:20).*

Then he prays:

*LORD, I have heard of your fame;
I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD.
Renew them in our day,
in our time make them known;
in wrath remember mercy (3:2).*

Habakkuk began this book by saying,

“Lord, why don’t you do something?” Now he says, “Lord, be careful! Don’t do too much! In your wrath, don’t forget to show mercy.” That is all Habakkuk has to say. There is no more philosophy, no more theology, no more arguing with God.

The prayer of Habakkuk in chapter 3 is one of the most remarkably poetic passages in all of Scripture. Read it, and you will see how the prophet is going back and remembering what God has done in the past. That is what convinces Habakkuk that God can be trusted. He rests upon events that have already occurred, events that cannot be questioned or taken away. God has already moved in human history.

And this is where faith must rest. We live by faith—but not *blind* faith. We believe in a God who has acted in space and time and has indelibly recorded His will in the progress of human events. The prophet looks back to God’s action in Egypt when Israel was in trouble and remembers how God moved in those days:

*God came from Teman,
the Holy One from Mount Paran. Selah.
His glory covered the heavens
and his praise filled the earth.
His splendor was like the sunrise;
rays flashed from his hand,
where his power was hidden (3:3–4).*

Remember how God hid His power from Pharaoh and then exploded forth in sudden acts of miraculous intervention? The prophet writes:

*Plague went before him;
pestilence followed his steps.*

*He stood, and shook the earth;
he looked, and made the nations
tremble.
The ancient mountains crumbled
and the age-old hills collapsed.
His ways are eternal (3:5–6).*

Habakkuk remembers how the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness and how in the land of Midian they trembled. He thinks of the crossing of the Red Sea and how God made a way through the waters. He recalls how God rolled back the Jordan River when the Israelites came into the land and how at the command of Joshua (by faith in the power of God) the sun and moon stood still in the sky.

This is the kind of God we have—a God who moves in human history to accomplish events that no human being ever could.

The Secret of Triumphal Living

As the prophet considers all this, his mind goes out to the greatness of God, and he concludes:

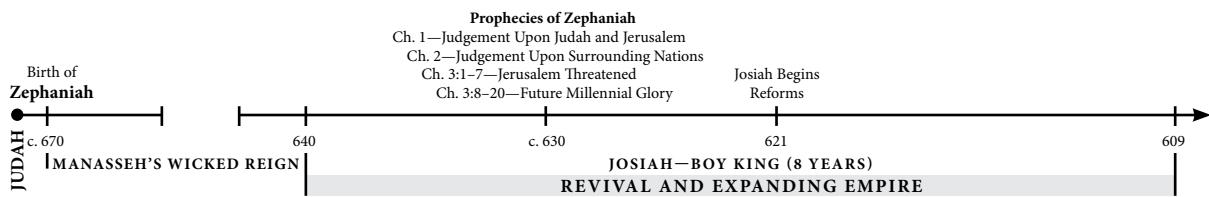
*I heard and my heart pounded,
my lips quivered at the sound;
decay crept into my bones,
and my legs trembled.
Yet I will wait patiently for the day of
calamity to come on the nation invading
us (3:16).*

Habakkuk sees the problem and knows calamity is coming. The horror of it grips him—but that is not all:

*Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.
The Sovereign LORD is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to go on the heights
(3:17–19).*

Have you discovered that kind of life? Habakkuk describes a quality of joyful, triumphant living, even in the midst of struggle and stress. That is the discovery Habakkuk has made, and it's the deepest, most practical truth we can learn as children of the living God. No matter what trials come our way, even if those trials won't be removed, still we can rejoice in the fact that our God is the great eternal Lord of the universe, and all things are ultimately under His control.

“In this world you will have trouble,” said Jesus. “But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

The Day of Wrath

If someone said, “You’re so judgmental,” would you consider it a compliment—or an insult?

The concept of judgment has fallen into disfavor in our times. Yet the fact remains that God—the God of the Bible—is very judgmental. While our culture insists that all issues should be viewed in shades of gray, in terms of moral relativism, God insists on viewing the world and the human race in very stark terms of black and white, evil and good, sin and righteousness, wrong and right, goats and sheep, hell and heaven.

As we come to the book of Zephaniah, we encounter a very judgmental prophet who speaks for a judgmental God. You’ll find no shades of gray in the book of Zephaniah, no compromise, no moral relativism. Although many books in the Bible deal with God as Judge, the book of Zephaniah presents the Bible’s most intense and concentrated treatment of this theme.

The Prophet of Judgment

Many people would like to rewrite the Bible and leave out all the distasteful references to God’s judgment. If such a

project were ever undertaken, the book of Zephaniah would practically cease to exist! We cannot simply edit out those parts of the Bible that do not suit our delicate sensibilities.

The Bible is God’s truth to us, His revelation of Himself, so that we can know Him and respond to Him realistically. In order to truly know God, we must know Him in His many dimensions. We must understand His vast love, His deep mercy, His all-encompassing forgiveness—yet these concepts can have little meaning to us until we truly understand His justice and judgment.

Some people make the mistake of thinking that the Old Testament presents a God of judgment while the New Testament presents a God of love. In fact, we find hundreds of references to the love and mercy of God in the Old Testament, while in the New Testament we see many references to

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

The theme of Zephaniah is judgment—a word that is not much in favor in our culture today. This chapter shows the reader why the issue of God’s judgment is more urgent today than ever before. In order to know God, we must know Him as He truly is—and that means we must understand how He intends to judge the world.

LEFT: Reconstruction of sacrificial altar

the justice and judgment of God. The Old and New Testaments testify in harmony to a richly multidimensional God who is both just and loving, judgmental and merciful. We see these facets of God's character eloquently expressed together in Zephaniah, the book of the day of wrath and judgment.

Old and New Testament Prophecy

The name Zephaniah means "hidden of the Lord." The prophet speaks as a representative of the remnant of faith—those relatively few people who remain true to God and faithful to His Word through the time of trouble that is to come upon the earth. God will watch over the people of His remnant to guard their faith during a future time of intense worldwide upheaval and persecution.

The book of Zephaniah is written about this future group of believers who live through the coming day of the Lord—the day of wrath. The prophet, then, is writing as a representative of the people of the distant future, people who would not be born for thousands of years.

In chapter 1, Zephaniah gives us the character of God's vengeance. It is not a pleasant passage. It begins after the prophet identifies himself as a great-great-grandson of Hezekiah, one of the kings of Judah:

The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah, during the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah:

"I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth," declares the LORD.

*"I will sweep away both men and animals;
I will sweep away the birds of the air
and the fish of the sea.
The wicked will have only heaps of rubble
when I cut off man from the face of the
earth," declares the LORD.
"I will stretch out my hand against Judah
and against all who live in Jerusalem.
I will cut off from this place every remnant
of Baal,
the names of the pagan and the
idolatrous priests—
those who bow down on the roofs
to worship the starry host,
those who bow down and swear by the
LORD
and who also swear by Molech,
those who turn back from following the
LORD
and neither seek the LORD nor inquire
of him.
Be silent before the Sovereign LORD,
for the day of the LORD is near.
The LORD has prepared a sacrifice;
he has consecrated those he has invited"*
(1:2-7).

Some people confuse "the day of the Lord" with "the Lord's Day." In the church, we often call Sunday "the Lord's Day" because Sunday—the day Jesus rose from the dead—is when Christians attend church and celebrate His resurrection. What the Bible calls "the Day of the Lord" is something else altogether—like the difference between a horse chestnut and a chestnut horse.

The day of the Lord is the day of the manifestation of God's hand of judgment in human affairs. Notice the personal pronoun throughout the passage: "I will sweep away everything. . . . I will sweep away both men

and animals. . . . I will stretch out my hand against Judah.” God is working through events in history, working through nations and armies and calamities of various sorts. His hand is hidden in the glove of history, but all the writers of Scripture agree that a day is coming when God will intervene directly in human affairs.

Jesus refers to this time in Matthew, where He speaks of a time of great tribulation:

“Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many

people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matt. 24:9–14).

As Jesus continues to describe these events, the fear-inspiring signs and horrors climax in these words:

“Then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened. . . .

"Immediately after the distress of those days 'the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'

"At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other" (Matt. 24:21-22, 29-31).

The apostle Paul speaks similarly of this time, using the specific phrase "the day of the Lord," in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6. Many other passages also refer to the Day of the Lord and they all agree on certain features of that time: It will be a time when people proclaim peace but prepare for war. It will be a time when people hold to a form of godliness but deny its power. It will be a time when people declare that the problems of life have been solved when in fact the world is in greater danger than ever before.

These conditions will usher in the day of the Lord.

The Day of the Lord Arrives

Hollywood has produced a number of science fiction movies that have attempted to show what the end of the world might look like, but they can't do justice to the horrific wordpictures of the prophet Zephaniah:

*"The great day of the LORD is near—
near and coming quickly.
Listen! The cry on the day of the LORD
will be bitter,*

*the shouting of the warrior there.
That day will be a day of wrath,
a day of distress and anguish,
a day of trouble and ruin,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and blackness,
a day of trumpet and battle cry
against the fortified cities
and against the corner towers.
I will bring distress on the people
and they will walk like blind men,
because they have sinned against the
LORD.
Their blood will be poured out like dust
and their entrails like filth.
Neither their silver nor their gold
will be able to save them
on the day of the LORD's wrath.
In the fire of his jealousy
the whole world will be consumed,
for he will make a sudden end
of all who live in the earth" (1:14-18).*

The mind recoils from this list of future horrors. Is it easy for God to speak this way? No. God takes no delight in human death and suffering. He does not delight in judgment. The prophet Isaiah calls judgment God's "strange work," His "alien task" (see Isa. 28:21).

God's heart delights in mercy. But ultimately, if His will is to be done, if humanity is to break free of the chains of sin and discover the glorious peace and freedom of the golden millennial age, then human rebellion must be judged. The entrenched evil of humanity must be fully and finally dealt with. That's why the coming day of the vengeance of our God is certain. His Word speaks clearly on this, throughout both testaments.

Chapter 2 traces the extent of God's

vengeance. In this passage God provides a list of nations that He will judge—and at first glance the list is puzzling. All of these nations have already disappeared:

*"I have heard the insults of Moab
and the taunts of the Ammonites,
who insulted my people
and made threats against their land.
Therefore, as surely as I live,"
declares the LORD Almighty, the God of
Israel,
"surely Moab will become like Sodom,
the Ammonites like Gomorrah—
a place of weeds and salt pits,
a wasteland forever.
The remnant of my people will plunder
them;
the survivors of my nation will inherit
their land" (2:8–9).*

In these verses, God pronounces judgment against Moab, Ammon, the Cushites, and the Assyrians. However, all of these ancient nations are gone, buried in antiquity. How then can they be destroyed at some future time, in the day of the Lord?

The answer is that these nations are used both literally and symbolically in the Scriptures. They were literally destroyed in the course of history, but they symbolize aspects of humanity that God will judge on the day of the Lord. Moab and Ammon, for instance, always symbolize the flesh of humanity—our self-willed reliance on our own resources. Ethiopia is a picture of stubborn, intransigent human nature: “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots?” the Scriptures say (Jer. 13:23). Assyria represents human arrogance and pride. God says He is against

all these rebellious qualities of human nature. In the Day of the Lord, these forms of human evil will be vanquished forever.

Chapter 3 makes it clear that God’s judgment will be worldwide:

*"Therefore wait for me," declares the LORD,
"for the day I will stand up to testify.
I have decided to assemble the nations,
to gather the kingdoms
and to pour out my wrath on them—
all my fierce anger.
The whole world will be consumed
by the fire of my jealous anger" (3:8).*

What does God seek to accomplish by destroying the nations of the world? Does He want to get even? No, God, the wise and loving Creator, would not destroy for the sake of destroying. He would only destroy for the sake of creating. See what follows this vision of destruction:

*Sing, O Daughter of Zion;
shout aloud, O Israel!
Be glad and rejoice with all your heart,
O Daughter of Jerusalem!
The LORD has taken away your
punishment,
he has turned back your enemy.
The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you;
never again will you fear any harm.
On that day they will say to Jerusalem,
"Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands hang limp.
The LORD your God is with you,
he is mighty to save.
He will take great delight in you,
he will quiet you with his love,
he will rejoice over you with singing"
(3:14–17).*

After the great and terrible Day of the Lord, God sets up a whole new order, a world filled with peace, joy, gladness, and singing. This is why God is dealing with the human race—so He might bring singing out of sorrow, service out of selfishness, salvation out of slavery. That is the consequence of God's judgment—not destruction but a new creation.

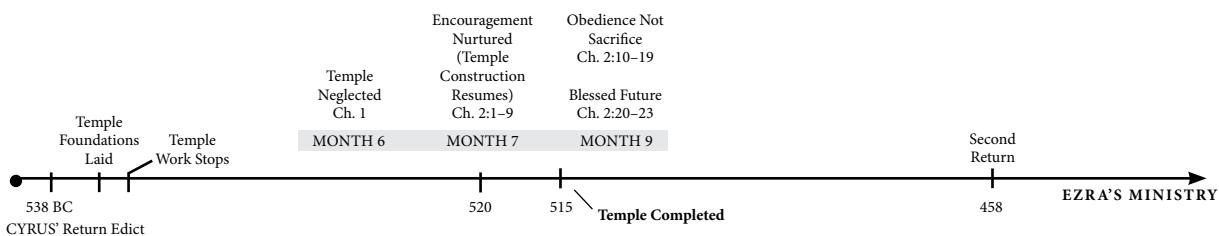
The references to Zion and Israel in this passage make it clear, I believe, that this is specifically a picture of God's care for the remnant of Israel through the tribulation and time of judgment. I do not believe that this section refers to the church, because I believe the church will be taken out of the world before these events occur. When the time of tribulation is past and God calls the remnant of Israel to Himself, they will sing the song of the redeemed. This passage is reminiscent of that beautiful passage in the writings of Solomon:

*"Flowers appear on the earth;
the season of singing has come,
the cooing of doves
is heard in our land" (Song 2:12).*

After the terrible destruction comes a time of the singing, which none but the redeemed can join in and sing. That is what God wants to produce in our lives—redemption, joy, and singing.

Judgment is coming upon the world, and it is coming in our own lives as individual believers. We all go through painful, purifying experiences. God takes the pain and darkness of our lives and uses it to bring about a new creative work within us. After the pain and purification comes singing. The justice of God cannot be turned aside—and neither can His love.

That is the sobering yet comforting message of the book of Zephaniah.

Encouragement for Builders

Mystery novelist Rex Stout considered himself a good amateur architect and builder. In the 1930s, he designed a fourteen-room house and built it with his own hands on a picturesque hill in Connecticut. Then he invited one of the world's great professional architects, Frank Lloyd Wright, to come give his opinion. He led Wright to the hill where the house stood, and Wright examined Stout's handiwork with a careful, practiced eye. Finally, Wright spoke. "Beautiful spot, Rex," he said. "Someone should tear this thing down and build a house here."

It is not easy to be a builder. People who set out to build something of lasting value need encouragement.

In the book of Haggai, we meet a group of people who were building a house—the house of God. As they built, they received a powerful word of encouragement from the greatest architect of all—the Architect of the Universe, God Himself.

Building the Lord's House

The theme of the prophecy of Haggai is "get busy and build the Lord's house." When the Bible talks about the Lord's

house, it does not speak merely of a building. In fact, the temple building itself is merely a symbolic picture of the true house of God. We, as Christians, are the "houses" in which God dwells, and when God talks about building His house, He is talking about building us up to be a fitting dwelling place for His Spirit.

In Haggai's day, before the New Testament was written and God revealed the true nature of His habitation, the people didn't know the temple was actually a symbol of a greater reality. The temple was called "the Lord's house," but it symbolized God's ultimate plan of making His dwelling place among His people.

When you read the prophecy of Haggai alongside the historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah, its meaning and context become much clearer. You may recall from those historical books that the Babylonians invaded

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

The message of Haggai is, "The time to build is now." When God calls you, don't procrastinate. In Haggai's time, people met with God in a temple made of stone. Today, God meets with us in human temples, and calls us to rebuild and renovate the temple of our lives. That is the key insight of this chapter.

Israel, sacked and pillaged Jerusalem, put out the eyes of the king, and carried the people into bondage for seventy years (the exact period of time the prophet Jeremiah had foretold). Toward the end of the seventy years, Daniel, who prophesied in Babylon, described how God moved to bring the people back to their homeland. They came first under Zerubbabel, who is mentioned in the opening verse of Haggai. Zerubbabel was descended from kings and was the captain of the remnant who returned from Babylon. Unfortunately, when the remnant came to Jerusalem, they found the city in ruins and the temple utterly destroyed.

Though still under the dominion of the Babylonians, the Israelites had permission from the king of Babylon to begin rebuilding the temple. They started working and managed to lay the foundation and a few rows of stones. It was a modest beginning for a smaller, more humble temple than the one originally built by Solomon. The work was difficult. In time, the workers began to lag, and the project slowed to a halt. For fifteen years, the project languished.

Then God raised up the prophet Haggai to speak.

In this book, Haggai delivers four messages to the people that were given within the space of about four months and concerned the building of the temple. While Haggai's immediate purpose in these four messages was to encourage the people, they also apply to you and me as the temple or dwelling place of God.

So we will examine the prophet's message on two levels—on the surface level as it relates to the reconstruction of the temple

in Jerusalem and on a deeper level of our individual lives today.

The First Attempt

Each of Haggai's four messages is dated by the calendar, and reveals an excuse given by the people for not working on the temple. The first message is contained in chapter 1:

In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest:

This is what the LORD Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come for the LORD's house to be built'" (1:1-2).

The prophecy was addressed to the civil governor and to the religious heads, Zerubbabel and Joshua, and in this verse the prophet repeats the excuse that the people gave for leaving the temple abandoned for fifteen years. They were saying, "The time has not yet come. There has been a mistake in calculating the seventy years that Jeremiah prophesied. There's no use doing anything now because God is not ready yet."

But read the answer that God gives to their excuse:

The word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"

Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways" (1:3-5).

In other words, God says, "Do you really

mean to tell Me that it's not yet time to get to work on My house? You've certainly wasted no time building houses for yourselves while My house remains in ruins." God resorts to irony, and His ironic words skewer their flimsy, hypocritical excuses. Obviously, they have put their own wants first and God's work second.

The people forgot something important when they made excuses for themselves: The very fact that they were back in the land *proved* that God's time had come and the seventy years were fulfilled. They had simply neglected God and His house while seeking their own comfort and convenience—and there is a price to pay for doing so:

This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the LORD. "You expected much, but see, it turned out to be

little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the LORD Almighty. "Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house. Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labor of your hands" (1:7-11).

It seems there was inflation in those days too! God told the people that all the labor they put out did not get them what they expected. "You are trying to become prosperous," God says in effect, "but prosperity eludes you. You are trying to satisfy yourself, but you never find fulfillment. There is always something missing."

Why did God thwart the people's efforts to become prosperous? Did He want to hurt them or punish them? Neither, God was trying to wake them up. He was trying to show them that there is an infallible

rule that runs throughout Scripture and throughout life: “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matt. 6:33). The way to have what you need in terms of physical food, material shelter, and the necessities of life is to devote yourself to advancing God’s work. That’s why you’re here. Your Father in heaven knows your needs, and He’s willing and able to supply them.

God has called us to build His house first—not a brick and mortar building but the body of Christ. Sadly, many Christians are just as hypocritical and full of excuses as the people of Haggai’s day. So Haggai asks: Why are you able to find time to advance your own interests, yet you spend so little time advancing the cause of God? Why do you excuse yourself from the work of building God’s house saying, “It isn’t time yet”?

Convicted by Haggai’s confrontational message from the Lord, the people picked up their tools and returned to the task of rebuilding the temple. They worked and worked—until their enthusiasm wore down and their backs began to ache. And as before, the work came to a halt. How long had they been working? Only three weeks.

The Second Attempt

Again, God speaks to Haggai and gives him a message for the people. In chapter 2, we read:

On the twenty-first day of the seventh month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: “Speak to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the

remnant of the people. Ask them, ‘Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?’ ” (2:1–3).

There must have been a few old-timers among them who remembered the original temple of Solomon. That temple had been an achievement of unparalleled splendor, built of quarried stone, paneled in intricately carved imported cedar, covered with gold, and furnished with carved statues of angels and designs of trees and flowers. The people of Israel could no longer obtain such materials, and they no longer possessed the artistic skill to recreate its furnishings. This new temple would be comparatively simple, humble, and plain in comparison. It wouldn’t hold a candle to Solomon’s original temple. So the people quit in discouragement.

But the Lord, speaking through the prophet Haggai, offered encouragement to the people:

“Now be strong, O Zerubbabel,” declares the LORD. “Be strong, O Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,” declares the LORD, ‘and work. For I am with you,’ declares the LORD Almighty” (2:4).

That is always God’s answer. “Work, for I am with you. Don’t worry about the fact that things don’t look as good as they ought to.” He goes on:

“This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.”

This is what the LORD Almighty says:

"In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land" (2:5–6).

When God says He will shake the heavens and the people and the earth, He is not speaking literally but figuratively. He means He is going to rearrange the whole historical picture:

"I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory' says the LORD Almighty. 'The silver is mine and the gold is mine,' declares the LORD Almighty. 'The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,' says the LORD Almighty. 'And in this place I will grant peace,' declares the LORD Almighty" (2:7–9).

In other words, "Don't worry about former glories, about silver and gold. I own the whole world, and all the silver and gold in the world belongs to Me. That isn't the kind of glory I have in mind. I'm going to fill this house with a different kind of glory, so that the splendor of the new temple will be greater than the splendor of the old."

These words were fulfilled centuries later when Jesus came into the temple, which by then had become defiled by money changers and thieves. Lash in hand, Jesus overturned the tables, drove out the money changers, and cleansed the temple. The Son of God Himself strode through the temple courts and made the Lord's house a house of prayer once again. He filled it with the glory of His teaching, saying things that people had never heard before. The words He spoke in the reconstructed temple of Jerusalem changed the life of the nation—

and changed the history of the world. By His presence, He filled the temple with a glory that has never ceased, a different kind of glory than the glory of Solomon's temple.

The builders became discouraged because they compared their work with the works of the past. But God told them not to hang on to the past. Instead, He said, "Keep working, I am with you. And when I am in your midst, you don't need to worry about the outcome. Whatever new work I do through you will be better than the old work."

The Third Attempt

Emboldened and encouraged by this new word from God through the prophet Haggai, the people went back to work. But after only two months, the people again fell down on the job:

On the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Haggai: "This is what the LORD Almighty says: Ask the priests what the law says: If a person carries consecrated meat in the fold of his garment, and that fold touches some bread or stew, some wine, oil or other food, does it become consecrated?"

The priests answered, "No" (2:10–12).

This was in accordance with the law of Moses. If you get into a situation where you do not know what to do, said Moses, go ask the priest to declare the appropriate principle. This is the same process we are to follow as Christians today. When we get into a situation that we don't know how to handle, we should go to the Word of God, find the principle that

covers the situation and apply it to the real-life situation. Haggai continues:

Haggai said, “If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled?”

Yes, the priests replied, “it becomes defiled.”

Then Haggai said, “So it is with this people and this nation in my sight,” declares the LORD. ‘Whatever they do and whatever they offer there is defiled.’

“Now give careful thought to this from this day on—consider how things were before one stone was laid on another in the LORD’s temple. When anyone came to a heap of twenty measures, there were only ten. When anyone went to a wine vat to draw fifty measures, there were only twenty. I struck all the work of your hands with blight, mildew and hail, yet you did not turn to me,’ declares the LORD. ‘From this day on, from this twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, give careful thought to the day when the foundation of the LORD’s temple was laid. Give careful thought’” (2:13-18).

What does God mean? If you read between the lines, you can see again what the people were saying: “Look, You said that the reason we were having such a hard time materially and financially is because we were lagging on the temple. We’ve been working on the temple for two months now, and life is still hard for us.” In other words, the people were impatient. They wanted instant results. They wanted God to reward them for their work on the temple. Does that sound familiar? Does that sound like anyone you know?

A couple once came to me for marital counseling. The husband complained, “We just can’t live together. She’s always exploding

and bawling me out about everything.” After talking with both of them at length, I found that the major problem in the relationship was that the husband paid no attention to his wife. Feeling neglected, she would take it for just so long—then blow up!

He agreed with that diagnosis and immediately began to make changes in his behavior. Within a day or two, however, he called me and said, “Well, I took her out to dinner last night and we had a great time. She enjoyed it so much I was sure you were right. But this morning she blew up at me again. The thing doesn’t work.”

I had to say to him what Haggai said to these people: “Do you think a behavior pattern that has taken years to build up can be changed overnight? You need to be patient. It will take time for you to prove that you have changed and for her to be able to trust that your old ways of relating to each other no longer apply.”

As Paul said to the Galatians, “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up” (Gal. 6:9).

The Fourth Attempt

Once again—on the very same day, in fact—the people needed another word of encouragement to spur them on toward completion of the project:

The word of the LORD came to Haggai a second time on the twenty-fourth day of the month: “Tell Zerubbabel governor of Judah that I will shake the heavens and the earth. I will overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms. I will overthrow chariots and their drivers; horses

and their riders will fall, each by the sword of his brother.”

‘On that day,’ declares the LORD Almighty, ‘I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel,’ declares the LORD, ‘and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you,’ declares the LORD Almighty” (2:20–23).

The Lord sends a special word of encouragement to the leader of the people while they are yet under the authority of Babylon. Though they are back in the land and building the temple again, they are still beset by many problems. Everywhere they look, they see signs that they are a subjugated people, living under the heel of a foreign power. They see chariots and soldiers in their streets, and they are weary and fearful after a lifetime in bondage. When will they ever be free?

God says, in effect, “Don’t worry. My program will reverse the whole order of things. I will destroy the power of this kingdom. I will bring their chariots to naught. I will break you free from bondage to these people. I will place a royal signet ring on the finger of your leader, Zerubbabel.”

Zerubbabel was of the royal line, the line of David, and though these words were not literally fulfilled in Zerubbabel’s lifetime, they were spoken of his descendant: Jesus of Nazareth. God gave His royal signet ring, His seal of authority, and placed it on the finger of Jesus, who will ultimately rule all nations of the world.

This is a word of encouragement in a day of darkness. It speaks not only to the people

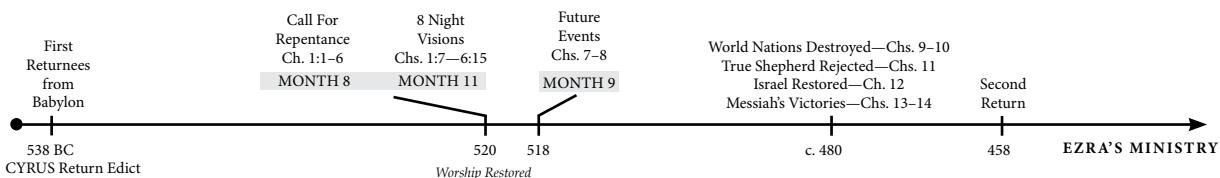
of Jerusalem as they build the temple, but it also speaks to us today, in our own age of darkness, as the events of the world lead us closer and closer to the climax of history, the day of the Lord. God wants us to know that today is the time for building. “Rise up and act now,” He says to us. “Do not wait. The work of God needs to be done today, not next year, not in ten years. *Build now.*”

You can help to build God’s house today by being a witness for Christ in your neighborhood, in your workplace, on your campus, or wherever you are. By serving in your church or going on a short-term missionary ventures around the world. Invite international students to spend a year in your home. Conduct seeker-friendly Bible studies in your home and invite friends and neighbors. Share your faith on your blog, or on Facebook page.

The possibilities are endless—but the opportunities will not remain open forever. So build now—before it’s too late.

Are you and I doing all that we can to build the house of the Lord? When the work of human hands has crumbled to dust, when all the great civilizations of history have passed from memory, only the house of God will stand. We are that house. We are God’s eternal work.

That is Haggai’s word of encouragement to us, God’s builders. So let us invest all that we are and all that we have in making ourselves a fitting and consecrated dwelling place for our God.

The Apocalypse of the Old Testament

The book of Zechariah has been called the “Apocalypse of the Old Testament,” meaning it parallels the New Testament book of Revelation (or apocalypse). The word *apocalypse* comes from the Greek word *apokalypsis*, which means “revelation.” The book of Revelation is actually part of a long tradition of apocalyptic literature characterized by rich allegorical symbolism and the prediction of future events. In this sense, Zechariah is a forerunner of Revelation. As such it’s helpful to study these two books side by side.

The theme of Zechariah is God’s program in history—which is also the theme of Revelation. The two books differ, however, in emphasis. In Zechariah, Israel is in the foreground of events and the Gentile nations are in the background. In the book of Revelation, the Gentile nations are in the foreground and the continuous thread that ties them together is the nation of Israel. We see Zechariah’s focus on the nation of Israel in the first verse:

In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Zechariah son of Berekiyah, the son of Iddo (1:1).

LEFT: Modern-day streets of Jerusalem

We usually read through these opening verses without considering their significance. But Hebrew names often carry a weight of meaning. In this passage, we have three significant names. Zechariah means “God remembers”; Berekiyah, his father’s name, means “God blesses”; Iddo, his grandfather’s name, means, “at the appointed time.” That is the theme of the book of Zechariah. It is a book of God’s encouragement and blessing to the people of Israel, delivered at God’s appointed time.

Zechariah, a contemporary of the prophet Haggai, ministered to the remnant who returned from captivity in Babylon. Although the people were back in Jerusalem rebuilding the temple and the city, they were still subjects of the Gentile nation of Babylon, and had little

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

In this chapter, we examine the prophetic message of Zechariah—a message that in many ways parallels the New Testament prophecy of the book of Revelation. Zechariah presents one of the most complete and detailed prophetic depictions of Jesus to be found in the Old Testament. God’s essential theme in Zechariah is a theme we can apply to our own lives today: “Return to Me, and I will return to you.”

hope for the future. These were dark times for the people of Israel.

Zechariah came to them in the midst of their depression with an announcement that Jehovah blesses and remembers at the appointed time. What an encouragement those names must have been.

The Structure of Zechariah

At the beginning of the first chapter we find a brief outline of the book. The outline is broken up in a dramatic way by the name of God, “the Jehovah of Hosts”—one of the unusual names of God. The name “Jehovah of Hosts” actually means “the God of the masses” or “the God of all the armies,” although the New International Version adopts the English phrase “LORD Almighty” to convey this thought. Whether the “hosts” referred to is an angelic army, human army, or the starry hosts of the heavens makes no difference. The Lord Jehovah is the sovereign God over all the hosts of earth and heaven. We find this name repeated three times in verses 2 and 3:

“The LORD [Jehovah or YHWH] was very angry with your forefathers. Therefore tell the people: This is what the LORD Almighty [literally, Jehovah of Hosts] says: ‘Return to me,’ declares the LORD Almighty [Jehovah of Hosts], ‘and I will return to you,’ says the LORD Almighty [Jehovah of Hosts].”

Three times that name is repeated, and each repetition marks one of the three divisions or sections of the book of Zechariah:

Section 1: “The LORD was very angry with your forefathers” (1:1–6).

Section 2: “Return to me” (1:7–6:15).

Section 3: “And I will return to you” (7–14).

Section 1: The Lord’s Anger

The first section is a brief overview of God’s case against His people, a statement of His displeasure with a rebellious people. This overview is as relevant to God’s people in the church today as it was to God’s people in Israel back then:

“The LORD was very angry with your forefathers. Therefore tell the people: This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Return to me,’ declares the LORD Almighty, ‘and I will return to you,’ says the LORD Almighty. Do not be like your forefathers, to whom the earlier prophets proclaimed: This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Turn from your evil ways and your evil practices.’ But they would not listen or pay attention to me, declares the LORD. Where are your forefathers now? And the prophets, do they live forever? But did not my words and my decrees, which I commanded my servants the prophets, overtake your forefathers?”

Then they repented and said, ‘The LORD Almighty has done to us what our ways and practices deserve, just as he determined to do’ (1:2–6).

Section 2: “Return to Me”

Beginning with verse 7, God reveals a remarkable vision to the prophet. The vision divides into eight scenes, all given to Zechariah on the same night, that fall into three major divisions. The three divisions are like three acts in a dramatic play. As we read them, we can imagine we’ve been invited to attend a performance in which God is the

author, Zechariah is the director, and we are the audience.

The vision covers the span of time from Zechariah's day through the present, extending to the coming of the Lord. The first act is made up of two visions. The first vision, Zechariah 1:8–17, is of a watcher astride a red horse, standing amid a grove of myrtle trees in a valley. Gathered behind the watcher are other riders on horses of red, brown, and white. The angel of the Lord interprets the vision: Israel is symbolized as a grove of lowly myrtles in a shadowed place in the valley. It's a time of despair and darkness for Israel now, but an unseen One stands among them watching, symbolically mounted in power on horseback and backed by other riders on horses, representing God's great resources to meet their needs in their hour of darkness.

The second vision, Zechariah 1:18–21, speaks of four horns and four workmen, or craftsmen. Horns—such as the horns of a ram or a bull—speak of power. In this case, they refer to foreign powers that have scattered the people of Israel. The craftsmen are divine agents, probably angels, whom God is sending out to terrify the nations. This is a picture of Israel's desperate need to return to God. Israel was discouraged at the display of powers and forces that opposed, oppressed, and scattered them. The people did not see the resources God had made available to them. They were unaware of the divine agents God had prepared to act on their behalf.

So the curtain falls at the end of act 1.

In Zechariah 2, the curtain rises on act 2, which is a single vision, an act in one scene. It's a vision of a man with a measuring line in his hand. As this man goes out to measure the

city of Jerusalem, the interpreting angel says to the prophet:

"Run, tell that young man, 'Jerusalem will be a city without walls because of the great number of men and livestock in it. And I myself will be a wall of fire around it,' declares the LORD, 'and I will be its glory within'" (2:4–5).

This beautiful description of the coming peace of Jerusalem is followed by scenes of the days of blessing that are to come upon Israel, all of which are to be literally fulfilled in the future. A casual glance at the headlines on any day of the week gives proof that those days have not yet come for Israel. But those days will come, because God has given His word on it.

God always promises blessing to those who return to Him. "Return to Me," He says, "and I will return to you." Come back to God, and blessing must flow, because God is the source of all blessing. If your life is empty, you need God, because only He can fill your life to overflowing. If you are a Christian and your life is empty, you need to return to God.

The man with a measuring line symbolizes the unlimited, measureless blessing that God is ready to pour out into the life of one who comes back into a relationship with Him.

Act 3 now opens with five more visions that act out for us how to return to God. The first of these visions—what I call act 3, scene 1—is found in Zechariah 3, in which Joshua the high priest is revealed standing before God. Opposed to Joshua is Satan, the Adversary. The people of Israel knew they had a powerful Adversary. They knew Satan was against them, opposing them at every

turn. But what they could not see was the advocate, the one who stood on their behalf and ministered for them.

In this moving vision, we see how Joshua is cleansed. His filthy garments are removed and he is clad in new, clean garments. “See,” God says in 3:4, “I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you.” Then we hear this prophecy, which looks ahead to the work of Christ upon the cross:

“Listen, O high priest Joshua and your associates seated before you, who are men symbolic of things to come: I am going to bring my servant, the Branch. See, the stone I have set in front of Joshua! There are seven eyes on that one stone, and I will engrave an inscription on it,’ says the LORD Almighty, ‘and I will remove the sin of this land in a single day” (3:8–9).

This is a prophecy of Jesus’ coming, the One who would be Jehovah’s servant, the Branch. The seven eyes of the stone speak of sinless perfection, and the inscription on the stone symbolizes the marks of the crucifixion. With this stone, the sin and guilt of the people will be removed in a single day. In that single day, blessing will flow out as God manifests His right and power to cleanse sinners without charging, accusing, or condemning them. Cleansing is the first step on the way back to God.

In chapter 4 we come to act 3, scene 2. Here we see what follows the cleansing work of God: the unleashing of the power of the Holy Spirit as revealed in the vision of the lampstand and the olive tree. These symbols depict the Spirit-filled life. Oil always refers to the Holy Spirit. And the image of the olive

trees continually dripping oil out of their branches into a lampstand indicates that the Lord continually supplies us with inner strength through the Holy Spirit and enables us to burn brightly in the midst of a dark generation.

Zechariah 5:1–4 contains act 3, scene 3—the image of a gigantic flying scroll with Scripture written on both sides and curses pronounced against thieves and blasphemers. It pictures God’s law going forth in Israel in the midst of corruption. The people of Israel were able to see the corruption all around them, but they could not see the law. So this is God’s encouragement in the hour of darkness: God was at work, imposing His judgment on lawlessness to destroy it.

The rest of chapter 5, is devoted to act 3, scene 4, in which Zechariah sees a woman in an ephah, or measuring basket. While the prophet and the angel watch, wings are given to this basket and it flies away to the land of Babylon. What does this strange thing mean? If you had a vision like that, you would wonder what you had been eating the night before! But the prophet knows that a meaningful vision has been given to him. As he meditates upon it, he understands the vision’s meaning because it contains terms that are used elsewhere in the Scripture.

The symbol of a woman in Scripture usually refers to a false religion or false church. Here, then, is the picture of the judgment of the false faith, the false church. John recognizes this symbol in the book of Revelation where a woman, representing a false religious system, is called Babylon the great.

In the final scene, act 3, scene 5, the

prophet sees four chariots, much like the vision in Revelation of the four horsemen who ride forth to bring judgment upon the world. The curtain comes down, then, on this great drama of redemption of the future. It is God's great symbolic play, the theme of which is, "Return to God." In it, we see that the way back to God is first by cleansing, then by the filling of the Holy Spirit, then by the putting away of evil in its various forms, and finally by the judgment of the entire earth.

Section 3: "And I Will Return to You"

Chapter 7 marks a new division in the book. We find God speaking in a different way. Instead of using visions, He speaks to the prophet in a direct address. The heart of this section is expressed in chapter 8, where the prophet announces:

This is what the LORD says: "I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the City of Truth, and the mountain of the LORD Almighty will be called the Holy Mountain" (8:3).

Here is a picture of God dwelling with His people. One day this is going to be fulfilled on the earth. In many ways, we see this prediction being fulfilled in the land of Israel. The reestablishment of the nation of Israel and the return of Jerusalem to Jewish control in our own lifetime has prepared the way for the rebuilding of the temple at its original site. Scripture has long predicted that the rebuilding of the temple, which was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, would be one of the first signs that God was about to restore Israel to its place among the nations.

While this prophetic section depicts events that are coming to pass before our own eyes, it also has a profound and practical spiritual application for our lives. The central message of this passage is that God is living with, and in, us. Because God is in us, a fountain of blessing pours forth from our lives, making us fruitful, effective, and a blessing to all we meet.

Chapters 7 and 8 communicate God's plea for the people to be honest and open before Him. It's another rehearsal of their failures in His sight and a reminder that while He is unfailing in mercy and grace, He is also unchanging in His standards. God always supplies what is necessary, but He never lowers His standards. The people react, as people often do, in three ways; first:

They refused to pay attention; stubbornly they turned their backs and stopped up their ears (7:11).

That is always the first step. They ignore God by pretending not to hear. Second:

They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or to the words that the LORD Almighty had sent by his Spirit through the earlier prophets. So the LORD Almighty was very angry (7:12).

In other words, the people deliberately disobeyed. Third and finally, they began to play the hypocrite. The people ask: "Should I mourn and fast in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?" (7:3). God replies, in effect, "What are you doing mourning and fasting? Are you making

these religious observances as an act of genuine worship—or simply as a religious show?” (see 7:5).

Do we not do the very same thing today? Do we not use these same evasions to avoid God’s will today?

Years ago, my wife told one of our daughters to put on a green dress. It was interesting to watch her response. First, she pretended not to hear. Second, after her mother repeated the request several times, she openly rebelled and said, “No. I don’t want to wear that dress.” Third, when it became clear that her mother was going to make her wear the dress, my daughter came up to her mother and said, “Mother, I want to wear the green dress, but it’s just too dirty,” which was not true at all. She followed exactly the same devious three-step strategy that is outlined here in Zechariah:

1. Pretend not to hear.
2. Deliberately disobey.
3. Act hypocritically.

Chapters 7 and 8 of Zechariah accurately portray the human heart in the very act of deception.

In chapters 9 and 10, God goes on to tell us the result of repeatedly turning a deaf ear to God’s voice: We lose our ability to see and hear what God is saying to us. In the midst of the passage, we encounter several amazingly precise glimpses of the coming of Jesus the Messiah, beginning with this prediction of Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday:

*Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion!
Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you,
righteous and having salvation,
gentle and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey (9:9).*

These words were literally fulfilled in the New Testament when our Lord sent His disciples to find a colt and a donkey, and rode the donkey in the streets of Jerusalem as the people shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! . . . Hosanna in the highest!” (see Matt. 21:1–11)

Without realizing it, the people of Jerusalem were fulfilling this prophecy of Zechariah, “Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you!” They did not recognize Him when He came in this remarkable way, fulfilling the prophecy with startling precision. That’s why Jesus wept over the city as He approached it, saying:

“If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you” (Luke 19:42–44).

That is what happens when God moves in our lives and we refuse to listen: We lose the ability to hear and see. May you and I never invite such judgment into our lives.

In chapter 11, the Messiah speaks again through the prophet:

I told them, “If you think it best, give me my pay; but if not, keep it.” So they paid me thirty pieces of silver.

And the LORD said to me, “Throw it to the potter”—the handsome price at which they priced me! So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the LORD to the potter (11:12–13).

How much did Judas contract for to betray the Lord? Thirty pieces of silver. According to the law if a slave was gored by an ox, the man who owned the ox could settle the whole matter by paying his neighbor thirty pieces of silver. Here the Messiah says to these people, in effect, “If you want me, say so. If you do not, give me my wages. What do you think I am worth to you?” And they weighed out for His price thirty pieces of silver.

Next, the prophet reveals the second result of an unrepentant heart:

The LORD said to me, “Take again the equipment of a foolish shepherd. For I am going to raise up a shepherd over the land who will not care for the lost, or seek the young, or heal the injured, or feed the healthy, but will eat the meat of the choice sheep, tearing off their hoofs.

“Woe to the worthless shepherd, who deserts the flock! May the sword strike his arm and his right eye! May his arm be completely withered, his right eye totally blinded!” (11:15–17).

In other words, if you refuse the true shepherd, God will allow you to have a false shepherd. The Lord Jesus stated this principle

to the spiritually blind Pharisees of His day: “I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not accept me; but if someone else comes in his own name, you will accept him” (John 5:43).

In a general sense, there are many false messiahs in the world, and if we refuse the true shepherd, Jesus, we risk being led into death and darkness by a false shepherd, by the Jim Joneses and David Koreshes and other false messiahs of our age. In a more specific sense, there is a single false shepherd, of whom Paul writes:

Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction (2 Thess. 2:3).

This man will come to Israel as their deliverer and be received as the Messiah, but he will turn out to be the anti-messiah, the Antichrist, the false shepherd who fills the vacuum left when the people reject the truth. As Paul later observes, “For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness” (2 Thess. 2:11).

The Beautiful Conclusion

In the last section, chapters 12 through 14, we have a beautiful picture of God’s loving protection in the lives of those who return to Him. God says that Jerusalem will be an immovable rock and that the nations will dash themselves against her in an effort to destroy her. In that day, God will pour out on Israel and the people of Jerusalem a spirit of prayer and compassion. Most important of all, they will see Jesus Himself—and they will

respond to Him in repentance and faith, as Zechariah predicts, speaking in the voice of the Messiah Himself:

“They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son. On that day the weeping in Jerusalem will be great, like the weeping of Hadad Rimmon in the plain of Megiddo” (12:10–11).

When Israel blindly refused her Messiah at His first coming, they never realized God would grant them a second chance and that they would receive the One they had pierced when He came again. His wounds on the cross are referred to again later in the prophecy:

“If someone asks him, ‘What are these wounds on your body?’ he will answer, ‘The wounds I was given at the house of my friends’” (13:6).

Then, in Zechariah 14:1–4, we have a description of the Day of the Lord, when all the nations gather against Jerusalem to do battle. It will seem as if all is lost and the nation of Israel is defeated—until the Lord Himself goes forth into battle. At that moment, the feet of Jesus the Messiah will stand on the Mount of Olives. This is a significant statement when compared with passages in the New Testament. The Mount of Olives was the place where, following His death and resurrection, Jesus stood and was taken up into heaven. An angel told the disciples:

“Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same

Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11).

Jesus will return in the same way and to the same place—the Mount of Olives—from which He was taken. This prediction dovetails with the prophetic words of Zechariah:

On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south. You will flee by my mountain valley, for it will extend to Azel. You will flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the LORD my God will come,

According to the early theologian Jerome, the translator of the Latin Vulgate Bible, “the weeping of Hadad Rimmon in the plain of Megiddo” refers to the fatal wounding of good king Josiah at Megiddo; see 2 Chronicles 35:20–27.

and all the holy ones with him (14:4–5).

Zechariah refers to the Mount of Olives as being split in two, causing the people to flee as from a great earthquake that occurred in the days of King Uzziah. The prophet makes reference to a fact that he could not have possibly known about when these words were written—the existence of an earthquake fault beneath the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. This fault is part of a network of faults along the Dead Sea Rift. The last great quake in that region occurred on July 11, 1927, and caused enormous damage to the city of Jerusalem

and to buildings around the Mount of Olives. Scientists believe a magnitude 6 or 7 quake takes place along that fault every two hundred years or so.

The prophet Ezekiel echoes the prediction of Zechariah, saying that in the day of the Lord, “there shall be a great earthquake in the land of Israel” (Ezek. 38:19). But after the shaking and splitting of the earth, the scene shifts. The concluding images of the book of Zechariah are images of peace, joy, prosperity, and the righteous reign of the Lord over the entire world:

On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half to the eastern sea and half to the western sea, in summer and in winter.

The LORD will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one LORD, and his name the only name (14:8–9).

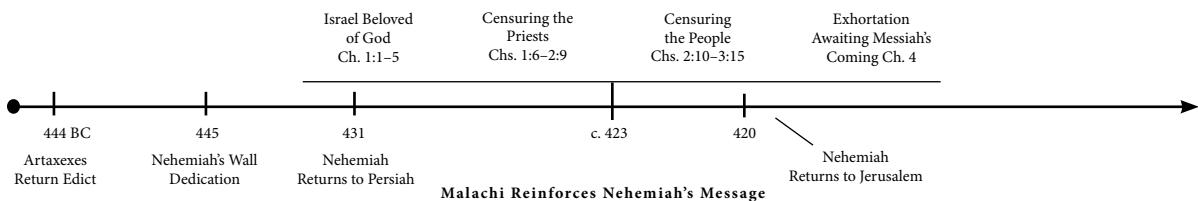
This scene pictures the glorious millennial reign of God on earth through His Son, King Jesus. The book closes then with these beautiful words:

On that day HOLY TO THE LORD will be inscribed on the bells of the horses, and the cooking pots in the LORD’s house will be like the sacred bowls in front of the altar. Every pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy to the LORD Almighty, and all who come to sacrifice will take some of the pots and cook in them. And on that day there will no longer be a Canaanite in the house of the LORD Almighty (14:20–21).

Every cooking pot will be a sacred vessel. Every commonplace thing will be holy to the Lord. What an amazing promise—and this promise applies to our lives right now!

When God is the center of your life, then every moment of your life, every commonplace object of your existence, is touched with the glory of His presence. What will be visibly true on some future day on earth can be vitally true in our lives today.

This is the message to us from the Apocalypse of the Old Testament, the book of Zechariah.

"I Have Loved You"

The Babylonian Exile began almost six centuries before Christ, and took place in two deportations, the first during the time of King Jeconiah, the second during the time of his successor, King Zedekiah. This forced exile lasted for seventy years, ending when the nation of Babylon fell to the Persian king Cyrus the Great, who permitted the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple.

The people did not come back from Babylon in one great big happy throng. Several groups straggled back, the first one beginning in about 535 BC. When these pioneers were allowed to return to their homeland, they found the city of Jerusalem desolated and in ruins. They began to lay the foundations of the temple, but construction soon lagged, and it was Haggai's ministry fifteen years later that spurred the project on toward completion. The temple reconstruction was completed during Zechariah's ministry, at about the same time that Ezra the priest led another group back from Babylon.

During their captivity in Babylon, the Israelites' entire way of life changed. Before, they had been an agrarian culture

of sheepherders. But in Babylon, they learned to be merchants and shopkeepers—which meant an urban lifestyle.

The last return from Babylon was accomplished under Nehemiah, who led a group back to Jerusalem in 445 BC in order to begin rebuilding the walls of the city. Shortly after Nehemiah finished this task, Malachi appeared on the scene.

Fascinating comparisons can be drawn between the book of Nehemiah and the book of Malachi. Nehemiah comes at the conclusion of the historical section of the Old Testament (Joshua through Esther). Following Nehemiah are the poetic books, and then the prophetic books. In the final prophetic book, Malachi, we come into the same era that is covered by Nehemiah.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

In this chapter, we adventure through the last book of the Old Testament, in which the prophet Malachi provides timely, relevant antidotes to the spiritual maladies that still plague believers today: moral and spiritual decline, neglect of worship and God's Word, lack of obedience and enthusiasm, a lax attitude toward ungodly ideas and practices, and religious corruption. Malachi's prophecy is a message of God's love, God's justice, and the hope of the Messiah.

As we have journeyed through the historical and prophetic books of the Old Testament, we've seen again and again that whenever a reformer, a prophet, or a godly leader has come to Jerusalem, he has encountered the Israelites in a heartbreakingly state of moral and spiritual decline. The people of Israel had neglected the faith, worship, and the reading of God's Word. Their enthusiasm for obeying God's law had dried up and blown away. They either cut corners in their observance of worship or disregard His law altogether. They ignore the Sabbath. They intermarry with people from idol-worshiping nations. The priesthood has become corrupt, and many have even turned to the worship of false gods.

We find this same situation in Israel when God raises up the last Old Testament prophet, Malachi. The time is approximately 425 BC, and Malachi steps onto history's stage with a message about God's love, justice, and the coming Messiah. Though Malachi spoke to the nation of Israel more than 2,400 years ago, his message is remarkably relevant to your life and mine today.

The message of Malachi rolled like thunder across ancient Israel—but when the last echoes of his words faded upon the air, a silence fell over Israel. Malachi was the last of the so-called Minor Prophets, and the last prophetic voice to speak to Israel until the coming of John the Baptist and Jesus. After Malachi, God would not speak to Israel again for another four hundred years.

“My Messenger”

Malachi's name means “My messenger.” Indeed, this last book of the Old Testament

concerns a messenger of God and the prediction of the coming of another messenger. A four-century gap separates the writing of Malachi from the events of the gospel according to Matthew, yet these two books are linked together in a remarkable way. We see this connection clearly in chapter 3, which begins with this prophecy: “See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me” (3:1).

As we discover in the book of Matthew, that messenger was John the Baptist. He came to prepare the way of the Lord and to announce the coming of the second messenger from God. Malachi announces the second messenger in the next phrase: “Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty” (3:1).

Note that phrase, “the messenger of the covenant.” The Lord Jesus, on the night He was betrayed, took wine and bread with His disciples. Holding the cup, He said, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28). The messenger of the covenant is the Lord Jesus Himself.

Malachi is the book that bridges the gap between the Old and New Testaments, the old and new covenants.

The Unrequited Love of God

The problem with the people of Malachi's day was that they had forgotten the great and central message of God. As we go back to the beginning of Malachi's prophecy, we see the prophet opens on that note:

An oracle: The word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi. “I have loved you,” says the LORD (1:1–2).

That is always the message of God's prophets: “I have loved you,” says the Lord. Amazingly, the people answer the prophet with the words, “How have you loved us?” This entire book contains a series of responses from the people to the statements and challenges of God. Seven times the people say, “How? How is this so? Prove what you are saying to us.”

As we go through the responses, we see how they reveal the state of the people's hearts. Here is an outgoing God, a loving God—yet He deals with a callous, indifferent, and unresponsive people. God says, “I have loved you,” and the people respond, “How

have you loved us? Prove it.”

So God replies: “Was not Esau Jacob's brother? . . . Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals” (1:2–3). He reminds them that He loved them even at the beginning of the Jewish race, in His selection of Jacob over Esau.

He says, in effect, “Look at history. Esau's history was disastrous and troubled, but Jacob's history has been blessed. I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau. If you want to understand My love to you, then look at the one who has not enjoyed My love. Look at Esau and see how different his story is from yours, even though Jacob and Esau were twin brothers.”

Does it bother you that God says, “Esau I have hated”? This statement troubles many people, but you find the explanation in the New Testament: “See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son” (Heb. 12:16). Esau despised his birthright and placed no value on spiritual matters. He treated God with indifference and trivialized the things that God regarded as valuable.

God didn’t choose to hate Esau out of spite or capriciousness. Esau chose estrangement from God, and God permitted Esau to make his choice. God responded to Esau’s choice with these words: “I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated.”

Now, if you had known these two men, you would probably have loved Esau and hated Jacob. Jacob was the schemer, the big-time operator, the supplanter, the usurper, the untrustworthy rascal. Esau was the big outdoorsman—a hearty, open, frank, confident man who boasted of his exploits as a hunter. Of the two, he appears much the better man—yet God says, “I loved Jacob because Jacob’s heart hungers for the deeper things of life; Jacob wants something more than what is on the surface.” That kind of intense spiritual hunger always pleases God.

God, through His messenger Malachi, goes on to charge the Israelites with a series of specific failures, and after each charge their response is, “What do you mean?”

God says the people had shown contempt for His name. The people ask, “How have we shown contempt for your name?” When you ask God a question, He is happy to tell you. So God replies that the sacrifices they had offered

to Him were polluted. “How have we polluted the sacrifices?” they ask. God replies they had sacrificed diseased and inferior animals on His altars. They had not given Him their best. They had given Him their leftovers—sacrifices that would be an insult to serve to anyone else.

Why is God insulted by their offerings? Not because He has a taste for prime filet mignon, but because He knows that when Israel gave Him the dregs of their sacrifices, it meant they are giving Him the dregs of their lives and worship as well. A defective sacrifice is a symptom of a defective attitude toward God. The people had been offering God their warmed-over religiosity in place of a genuine faith relationship. So God cuts through their excuses and hypocrisy and gets down to the real issue.

A relationship with the almighty Creator of the universe should be a highly charged, thrilling experience. Where has the excitement gone? What has happened to these people? Israel had concluded that God was only interested in ritual, that He would be content with something less than authentic love. In essence they ignored the Great Commandment: “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:5; cf. Matt. 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27).

God loved these people, yet He was a lover scorned. The people had not reciprocated His love. Instead, they patronized and offended Him. Their love for Him had died. Have you ever loved someone who would not love you back? Have you experienced unrequited love during courtship? In your marriage? As the parent of a rebellious child? Then you

know that this is one of life's most painful experiences. And God felt that pain—the pain of unrequited love.

If you want a relationship with God, it must be a genuine *love* relationship. God doesn't want your empty rituals. He wants your love. Nothing else will please Him.

“I Hate Divorce”

In chapter 2, God charges that the hypocrisy of the people had become malignant. Like a cancer, their lack of love toward God was spreading and turning others astray. Moreover, they had failed in their moral standards and begun to intermarry with the godless tribes around them. They had forgotten that God called them to be a special and distinct people.

God was not concerned, as some might think, that the Jewish bloodline or genetic heritage might be diluted; God is not a racist. He created all the races and loves all people equally. His concern was that by intermarrying with other tribes, the Jews would become morally and spiritually polluted by the false religions and false values of the surrounding world. He was concerned that faith and obedience to God—which is the central organizing principle of the Jewish culture—would be diluted as more and more nonbelieving people were blended into the Jewish nation.

Another sign of the moral decay in the nation was the fact that divorce had become prevalent throughout the land:

Another thing you do: You flood the LORD’s altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your

offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, “Why?” It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.

Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth.

“I hate divorce,” says the LORD God of Israel, “and I hate a man’s covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,” says the LORD Almighty.

So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith (2:13–16).

I have often heard this passage—especially the line “I hate divorce”—quoted as an indictment by self-righteous Christians against divorced people. It has been used to treat divorced people as second-class citizens in the church. But that is not the intent of this passage.

God says, “I hate divorce,” not, “I hate divorced people.” Throughout the book of Malachi, we hear God’s love expressed over and over—and this statement of God’s hatred against divorce is in reality one of His strongest statements of love! God hates divorce because it brings pain and suffering to families and because it is an act of vow breaking and faith breaking. God links divorce with violence, so that the act of divorce is seen as a kind of “nonviolent domestic violence” when it is perpetrated by one spouse against an unwilling, innocent partner.

Divorce has many causes. It may happen because of the selfishness or immaturity of one or both partners. Adultery by one partner

may be the cause. It may be that one partner is a believer and the other is not (perhaps the believing partner came to Christ after the marriage took place); nonbelievers often want out of a marriage in which a spouse witnesses about Christ and demonstrates the convicting evidence of a changed life. Whatever the problems in a marriage (short of abuse or domestic violence), I always encourage couples to find ways to heal the relationship and avoid divorce.

But it takes two people to keep a marriage together, and if one is completely unwilling, then the other person is an innocent victim of the divorce. Even if a Christian is divorced because of his or her own sins or failings, he or she should not be denied grace and forgiveness. Yes, God hates divorce—but the reason God hates divorce is because He loves people, all people, including divorced people.

Moral Confusion

Next, God says the people make Him weary—and again, this is an indictment with powerful relevance for the church today:

You have wearied the LORD with your words.

"How have we wearied him?" you ask.

By saying, "All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and he is pleased with them" or *"Where is the God of justice?"* (2:17).

Our society endorses all manner of evil, calling it good. It's bad enough that moviemakers and rock stars extol the "virtues" of obscenity, rebelliousness, and lawlessness—but today many educators, politicians, sociologists, judges, and psychologists are equally at fault. They say

that obscenity and pornography are "healthy." They tell us that sex outside of marriage (whether heterosexual or homosexual) is "normal." They excuse criminals, saying that these individuals commit crimes because society doesn't understand them.

We live in a culture today that calls evil "good" and good "evil." And the problem is getting worse not better. Much of the immoral behavior that parades across our TV screens today would have been unthinkable just ten or twenty years ago. The book of Malachi speaks to the moral confusion of our own day. Moral chaos always result when people offer anything less than a fervent love for God, when they think that ritual and external trappings will satisfy the loving heart of the Eternal.

Another issue raised is a question that we often hear today: "Where is the God of justice?" God says that the people of Israel have said, "All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and he is pleased with them." In other words, "This is a free country. God doesn't judge sin anymore. You have no right to impose your morality on me. There aren't any moral standards. Everything is relative. You have your truth and I have my truth—there is no objective truth! There is no God of justice who determines what is right and wrong, so no one has a right to judge my behavior."

We think this rebellious, amoral attitude is something new, invented in our own century. But this kind of thinking was old even before Christ was born.

The Promised Messiah

In Malachi 3, we come to the great

prophecy of the coming Messiah. Malachi lifts his eyes and sees that the heart of the people is so hardened that they cannot be awoken even by these incontrovertible charges from God. They are unaware these things are happening in their own lives, because they have nothing to measure them against. So the prophet, looking across four centuries of time, says:

“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty.

But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years (3:1–4).

In other words, “The Lord will send Someone to wake you up and tell you the truth. He will be a refiner’s fire. He will burn through all the hypocrisy and superficiality of your religiousness. Like strong soap, He will cleanse you and set things right. You will be able to recognize Him because a messenger will go before Him to prepare the way, and then He will suddenly come to His temple.” Of course, this promise was powerfully fulfilled in the New Testament.

Following this is another series of charges in which the Lord speaks again about the people’s lives. He appeals to them:

“Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you,” says the LORD Almighty.

“But you ask, ‘How are we to return?’ (3:7).

You may remember this was a major theme in Zechariah: “Return to Me, and I will return to you.” The people respond by asking, “How shall we return? We haven’t gone anywhere. We are serving You in Your temple. We bring the proper sacrifices and offerings and we go through the rituals, just as You commanded. What do You mean, telling us to return to You?”

This response indicates the blindness of their hearts. They do not realize that though the outward form is right, their hearts were far from God.

Next, God talks about a subject that is uncomfortable for many Christians. He accuses the people of robbing Him:

“Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.

“But you ask, ‘How do we rob you?’

“In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the LORD Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it” (3:8–10).

These verses are often wrenched from their Old Testament context and used to establish a legalistic pattern of bringing all the offerings into the church as the storehouse. Notice the verse is addressed to Israel, not

the church, and should be interpreted within the limits of the system under which Israel lived in the Old Testament.

Yet there is a broad principle here that is applicable to our lives today: We should never take all that God has blessed us with and use it for our own advancement. Giving to God is an essential part of the Christian life. He says, “When you do spend all the blessings I have given you on yourself, you are robbing Me. You are stealing from Me the right to use you to advance My cause.”

Our Purpose in Life

We exist to advance God’s cause. Some Christians perform all sorts of religious obligations, devote time and money to ministry activities—yet they never advance God’s cause even one inch. Why? Because many of us use religious activities to advance our own self-centered agendas. We may write hundreds of Christian books, we may preach to millions on television, we may initiate scores of ministry programs in the church, but someday we will have to stand before God and be judged—and His judgment may be, “All your life you have robbed Me of My right to live My life through you. All your life, you lived by your own religious agenda, not Mine.”

That’s why the appeal of the New Testament is to present our bodies as living sacrifices to God. That’s why we are here. If anyone wants to know, “Why am I here? What is my purpose in life?”—this is it! There’s nothing that confers more significance on a human life than service to God’s cause—and nothing that denotes a wasted life more than God’s assessment, “You have robbed Me.”

Body Life in the Old Testament

Next, God turns a spotlight on a faithful remnant in Israel. No matter how bad things get in the world, God’s searchlight will always find the faithful remnant:

Those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name.

“They will be mine,” says the LORD Almighty, “in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him. And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not” (3:16–18).

Notice the two marks of those who were faithful in the day of apostasy. First, they talked with one another. This does not mean that they just had a conversation. It means they opened up to each other, shared with one another, encouraged each other, and confessed their sins and prayed for one another. They experienced the kind of close community and fellowship that I call “body life.”

Second, they honored the name of God by meditating on His name. So here we see the two dimensions of biblical faith and of the lifestyle of body life: the horizontal level of relating to each other at a deep level of communion, and the vertical level of relating to God and meditating on Him at a deep level of worship. The horizontal and the vertical—we need both dimensions if we are to grow in faith and in our ability to please God.

What does it mean to honor and meditate upon the name of God? The name of God stands for all that He is, just as your name stands for all that you are. You sign a check and all that you are is laid on the line, up to the face amount of that check. Your name is what gives value and meaning to that check far beyond the value of the paper and ink it is made of. It's the same way with God's name.

When we honor His name, we honor all He is, all He says, and all He does. We meditate on His character and His attributes. We seek to make His life a part of our lives, His qualities a part of our makeup.

Over the years, floods of books and seminars have claimed to tell us what is wrong with the church, analyzing its weakness and presenting some gimmick to solve the problem. But quick fixes do not last. The true weakness of the church is that we have lost our ability to honor and meditate on the name of God. We focus on programs and projects and fail to focus on Him. Take away all the trappings of a church—its buildings and staff, its committees and commissions, its programs and budgets, its philosophy of ministry and church-growth strategy, its experts and consultants—and if you have nothing left but a bunch of committed people who can focus on the name of God, you have not lost a thing!

That's what this age needs to hear again.

"Over the years, floods of books and seminars have claimed to tell us what is wrong with the church, analyzing its weakness and presenting some gimmick to solve the problem. But quick fixes do not last. The true weakness of the church is that we have lost our ability to honor and meditate on the name of God."

Jesus, the Sun of Righteousness

In Malachi chapter 4, the prophet again lifts his eyes to the future and sees Jesus the Messiah—but this time he is not looking merely four hundred years into the future to the first coming of Christ. He is looking far into the future, across the great reaches of the centuries, beyond our own time, to the second coming of Christ, when God's program will be fulfilled:

"Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire," says the LORD Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings" (4:1-2).

Now that is one cause with two effects. The Sun of Righteousness shall rise. And those who refuse Him will burn, but those who receive Him will be healed. It is the same Sun, but it has a different effect on different people, depending on their relationship to that Sun.

This promise is followed by another promise regarding the reappearance on earth of the prophet Elijah:

"See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse" (4:5-6).

Matthew 17 describes a scene in which the disciples of Jesus are troubled by this very prophecy (this is the link between Malachi and Matthew that I mentioned earlier). “Why,” they ask, “do teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?”

Jesus gives them this twofold reply: Elijah will come, He says, and “will restore all things”—a reference to the return of Elijah in the future, just before the close of God’s program in human history. But He goes on to add that “Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him. . . . Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist” (Matt. 17:10–13).

When the angel announced the coming birth of John the Baptist it was a clear reference to Malachi 4:5–6, “He will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17).

Many people identify the two witnesses mentioned in Revelation 11 as Elijah and Moses. Whether or not these two witnesses are literally Elijah and Moses returned to earth in

bodily form is a matter of speculation. What is clear, however, is that in some remarkable way, God intends to supply a ministry like Elijah’s before the return of the Lord Jesus in power and judgment.

It is significant, I think, that the last word of the Old Testament is the word curse. This word is not a prediction. It is a warning. This book of prophecy begins with, “I have loved you,” says the LORD.” It ends with a warning that if this message of love is not received and accepted, a curse will result. Now compare the last word of the Old Testament with the last word of the New Testament. Leaving out the final salutation, it is the name of Jesus: “Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:20).

Jesus is God’s answer to the curse. He has redeemed us from the curse of the law by sending His son, who took our curse onto Himself. So the answer of God to this curse is grace and love, bringing us into the light and the knowledge of Christ. All of the blessings wrapped up in the name of Jesus become ours when we place our trust in Him and believe on His name.

Between the Testaments

Four hundred years of silence.

That's the period of time that separates the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi, from the first book of the New Testament, Matthew. From a human perspective, four centuries is a long time. Entire civilizations rise, decline, fall, and are forgotten in less time than that.

Four hundred years is roughly the same span of time as the entire history of the United States of America—from the founding of the first colonies in Massachusetts and Virginia, through the Revolutionary War and the Civil War, and right up to the present day.

During the four-hundred-year interlude

between Malachi and Matthew, it was as if the heavens were silent. No voice spoke for God, no prophet came to Israel, no Scriptures were written.

This does not mean, however, that no Hebrew

history was recorded in all that time. During the period from 400 BC to New Testament times, a body of literature was produced that came to be called “the Apocrypha,” from the Greek *apokryphos*, meaning “hidden.” From the earliest centuries of the Christian church, books in the

Apocrypha have been accepted as Scripture, especially in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint.

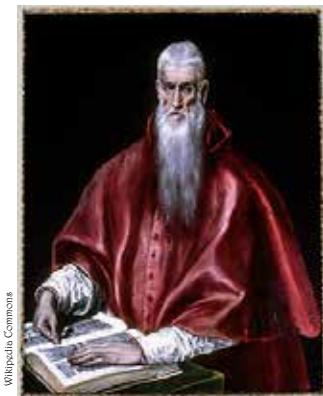
When the early church father Jerome (ca. AD 347–420) translated the Septuagint into Latin, for the Vulgate edition of the Catholic Bible, he expressed doubts about the validity of the Apocrypha. The high councils of the Catholic Church, however, overruled his doubts. As a result, the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Bibles contain the Apocrypha to this day.

The Apocrypha was never included in the Old Testament of the early Hebrew Christians and was not accepted as inspired Scripture by the Reformers such as John Calvin and Martin Luther. It was also excluded from the Authorized (King James) Version of 1611.

As a collection of historical texts, the Apocrypha sheds interesting light on the period of Hebrew history during the gap between the testaments. Because this was the period during which Jewish culture was strongly influenced by Greek (Hellenistic) ideas, the Hellenization of Israel can be clearly seen in the works of the Apocrypha. In fact, the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, is a result of the Hellenistic influence.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter answers the questions: What is the Apocrypha? And how can we know if the books of the Apocrypha are the inspired Word of God or not?



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St. Jerome, by El Greco

Interesting clues to certain Hebrew institutions during New Testament times, such as the Pharisee sect of Judaism that arose in the second century BC and the Sadducee (or Zadokite) party that arose in the first century BC, can also be found in the Apocrypha. Both of these groups are crucially important in all four gospel accounts of the life of Jesus. They also figure mightily in the story of that hardened Pharisee-turned-Christian-missionary, the apostle Paul.

The apocryphal books in the Septuagint (not included in the Scriptures of the non-Hellenistic Jews) were:

- *Tobit*, which recounts the life of the righteous Israelite named Tobit who lived in Nineveh during the time of the exile (a book of edifying historical fiction);
- *Judith*, the story of an Israelite heroine who kills an Assyrian general (a book of edifying historical fiction);

BOOKS OF THE SEPTUAGINT

Tobit
Judith
Wisdom of Solomon
Sirach (or Ecclesiasticus)
Baruch
I Maccabees
II Maccabees
Additions to Esther
Song of the Three Young Men
Susanna
Bel & the Dragon

- *Wisdom of Solomon*, a wisdom book similar to Proverbs and Ecclesiastes;
- *Sirach* (Ecclesiasticus), another wisdom book;
- *Baruch*, an add-on to the book of Jeremiah, supposedly written by Jeremiah's assistant;
- *First & Second Maccabees*, two epic historical works describing the revolt of a Jewish rebel army, the Maccabees, against the oppressive Greek Seleucid occupation during the period from 175 to 134 BC.

Also included in the Apocrypha are fragmentary texts that are appended to accepted, inspired Old Testament books—these include additions to the book of Esther (which appear in the Septuagint and Roman Catholic versions as Esther 10:4–10), the Song of the Three Young Men (inserted at the end of Daniel 3), the story of Susanna (which appears as Daniel 13), and the story of Bel and the Dragon (which appears as Daniel 14).

The Apocrypha makes interesting and informative reading, but a careful examination of these books, comparing them with the accepted books of God's Word, strongly indicates they do not belong in the canon of Scripture, because they do not fit with the overarching themes of God's Word.

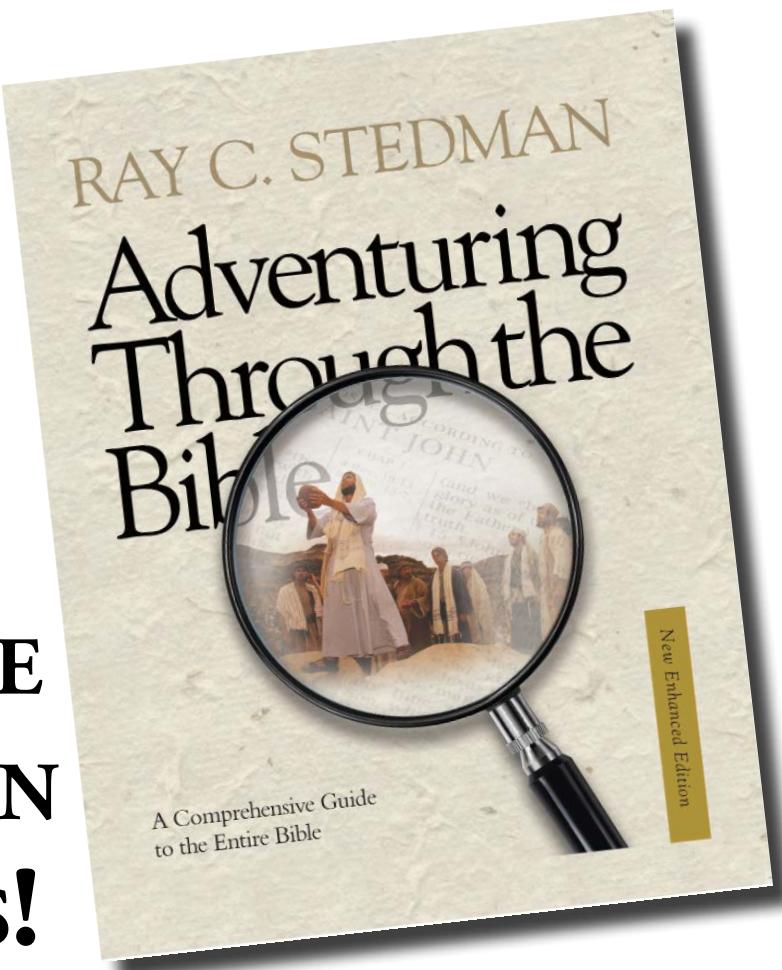
If you work your way through the Old Testament, book by book, as we have been doing, you see clearly that every page of every book points clearly to Jesus, the coming

Messiah. You do not, however, see Jesus clearly, if at all, in the Apocrypha.

Perhaps that is one reason Jerome felt compelled to question the validity of the Apocrypha so many years ago. In any case,

I am persuaded, as are virtually all other Protestant Bible scholars, that whatever historical or literary value the Apocrypha contains, they are not the inspired Word of God.

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