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Ministries®

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UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

# OLD TESTAMENT

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AN OVERVIEW OF KEY  
PEOPLE, PLACES, & THEMES

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Excerpted from *Understanding the Bible: Old Testament*

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# UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

# OLD TESTAMENT

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# INTRODUCTION

**F**or many, the Old Testament can seem historically confusing and filled with strange customs. While the stories of Abraham, Moses, David, and maybe a few others might be familiar, it's easy to lose sight of how the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament fit within the grand story of the Bible and what each teaches.

The story of the Old Testament begins at creation and ends about four hundred years before the birth of Jesus Christ. Its primary setting is Palestine, but its events take place in a variety of locations—the palaces of Egypt and Babylon; the deserts of Sinai and Arabia; the mountains of Ararat, Nebo, and Carmel. Although its primary emphasis is on the Jews, its story involves many peoples of the world: Egyptians, Hittites, Babylonians, Canaanites, Syrians, and a host of smaller groups. It tells of migration, military campaigns, political intrigue, and romance. It has heroes and villains; servant girls and queens; prophets and poets; judges, priests, and kings.

Why read the Old Testament? Once you begin to read and study it, you will discover that it is filled with great riches:

- The Old Testament provides the foundation for the whole Bible. Both the Old and New Testaments are equally part of the Bible. Both tell us about God. Both inform us about basic truths we need to know. But without a grasp of the Old Testament, the New Testament cannot be fully understood or appreciated; and without the New, the Old is left incomplete.
- The Old Testament tells us about Jesus Christ. We cannot fully know about Christ and His purpose for coming into our world without studying the Old Testament. It tells us about Him in word pictures and types. It predicts His coming. It puts His

## NARRATIVE BOOKS

17

Genesis  
Exodus  
Leviticus  
Numbers  
Deuteronomy  
Joshua  
Judges  
Ruth  
1 Samuel  
2 Samuel  
1 Kings  
2 Kings  
1 Chronicles  
2 Chronicles  
Ezra  
Nehemiah  
Esther

## WISDOM & POETRY BOOKS

5

Job  
Psalms  
Proverbs  
Ecclesiastes  
Song of Solomon

## PROPHETIC BOOKS

17

Isaiah  
Jeremiah  
Lamentations  
Ezekiel  
Daniel  
Hosea  
Joel  
Amos  
Obadiah  
Jonah  
Micah  
Nahum  
Habakkuk  
Zephaniah  
Haggai  
Zechariah  
Malachi

ministry into focus. It gives graphic previews of His sacrifice for sin. It goes beyond today to tell us of His judgment of the world and His coming kingdom of peace. In fact, the Old Testament tells us so much about Jesus that some Bible teachers have said Christ can be seen on every page.

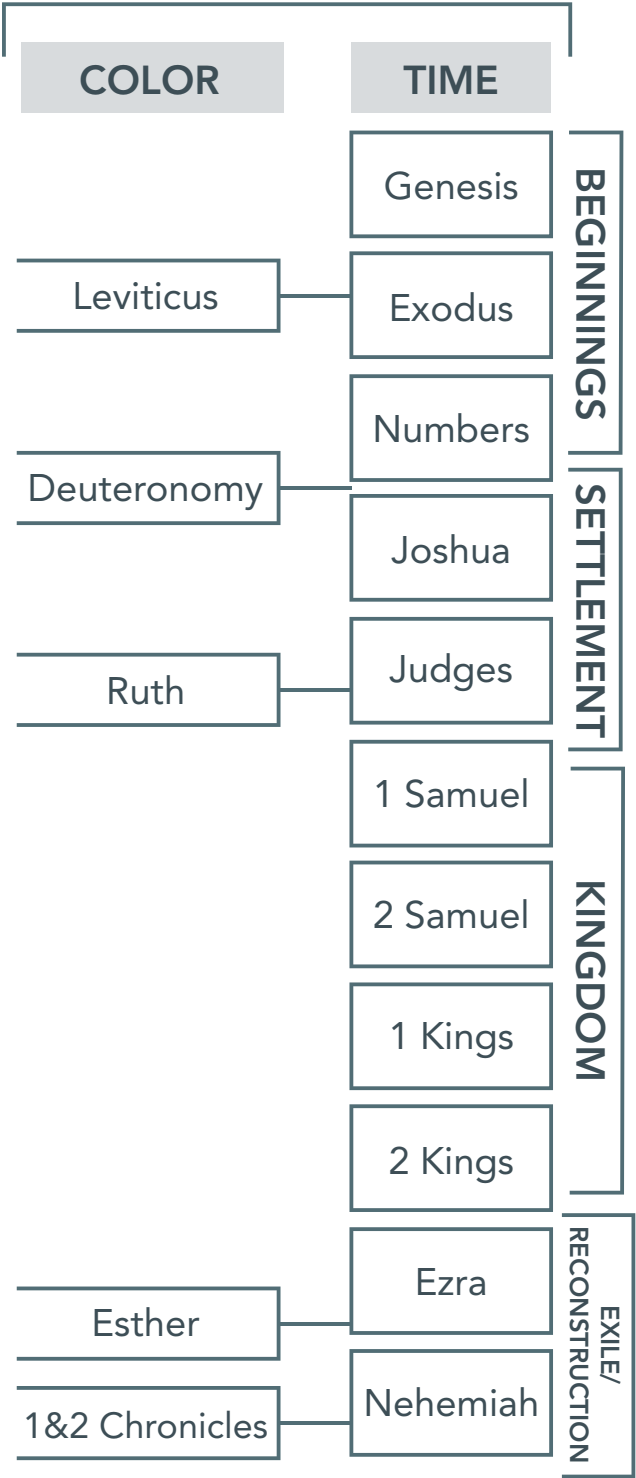
- The Old Testament provides the foundation for faith in Christ. Jesus's sacrifice on the cross on our behalf and His victory over death for our benefit are the fulfillment and completion of Old Testament promises. The church, born in the New Testament, is built on the unshakable foundation of the Old Testament.
- The Old Testament helps us to know God. It tells us who He is and shows His character in its record of His mighty deeds. It lets us know Him personally through the experiences and relationships of others who walked with Him. It reveals His will and spells out the kind of person He wants us to be.

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**The Old Testament was written over a period of about a thousand years (ca.1400–400 BC) by about thirty different authors. Its historical record extends from creation to the return of the Jews from exile in Babylon. The thirty-nine books of the Old Testament may be divided into three major sections: *Narrative* books, *Wisdom/Poetry* books, and *Prophetic* books. It's important to understand that the books that make up the first half of the Bible are not arranged chronologically but by their genre, or style, of writing.**

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# NARRATIVE



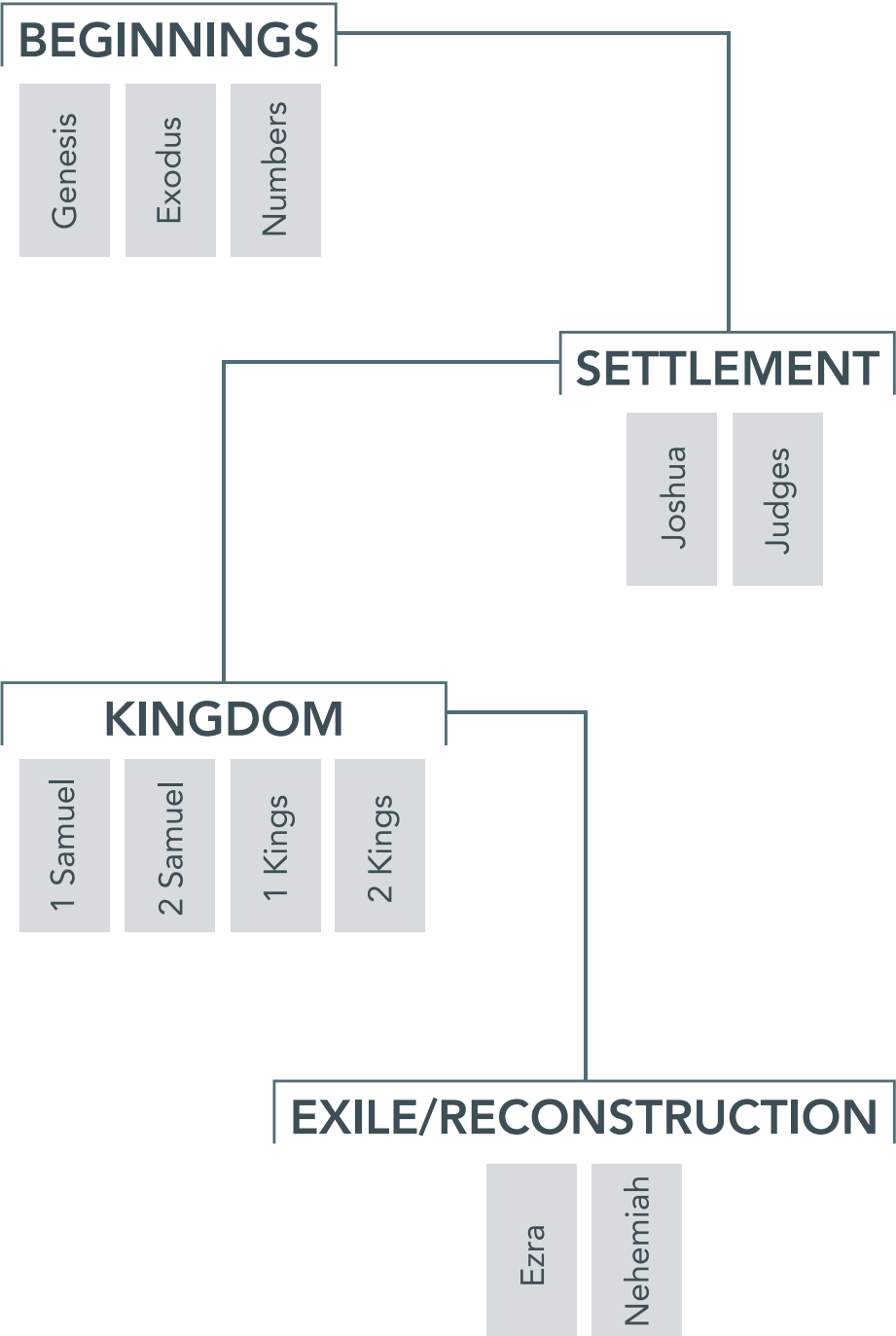
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The first seventeen books of the Old Testament—Genesis to Esther—tell the story of God’s work from creation to around four hundred years before the birth of Christ. These books make up Israel’s Narrative, or historical, books. Following these seventeen books is a second section of writings composed of five wisdom and poetry books: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon (Songs). These books are called Israel’s Poetry and Wisdom, writings. A final section of writings, called the Prophetic books, are made of a collection of seventeen other books.

Even though all seventeen Narrative books *contribute* to the story of the Old Testament, only eleven of them *move* the story forward. The other six books include important events that add details to the main plot. If you’ve listened to a storyteller who consistently digresses and lets the story get bogged down with too much detail, you can appreciate the difference between books that keep the story moving and those that add details that are important but don’t contribute to the story’s progress.



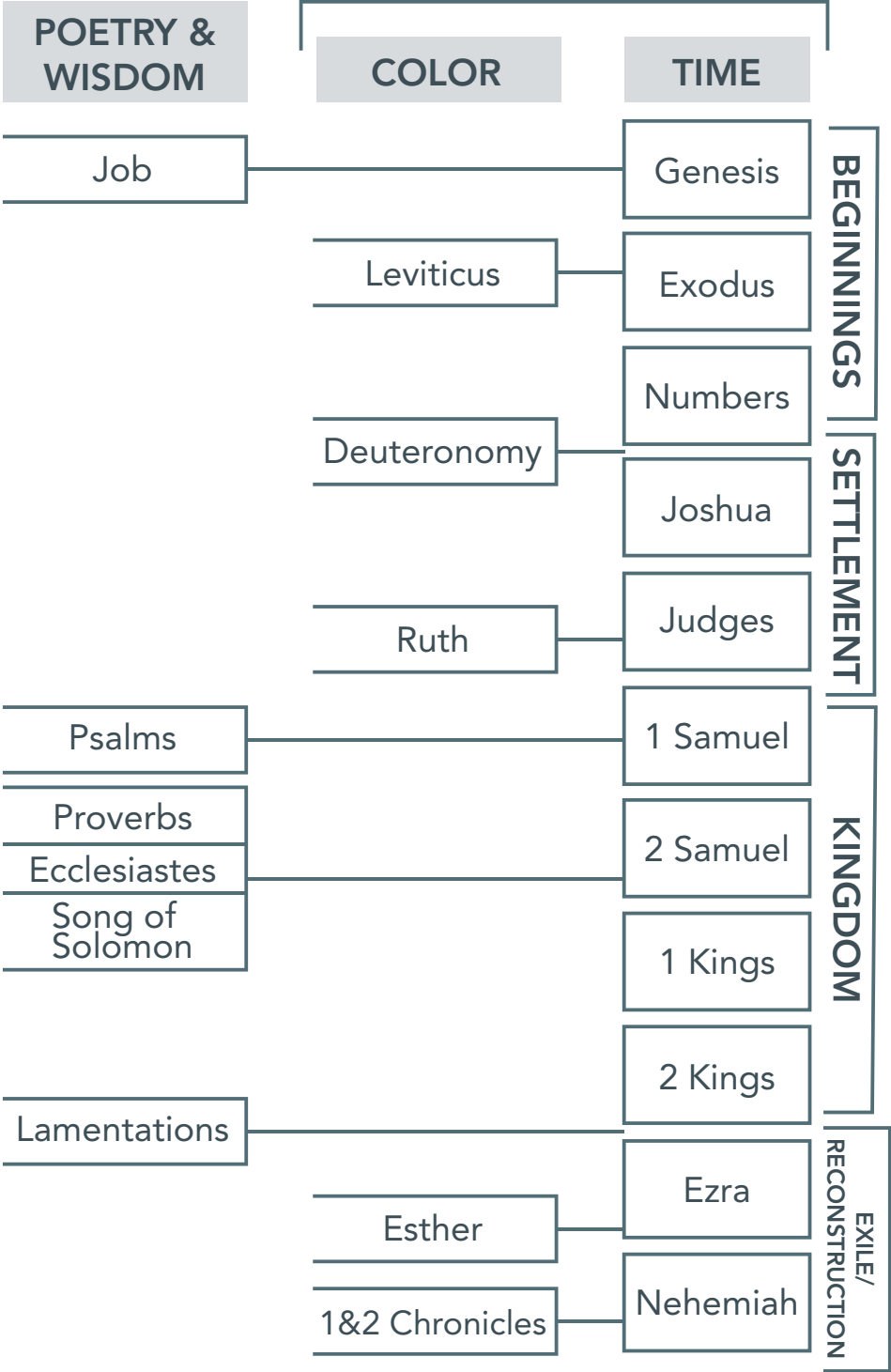
# THE OLD TESTAMENT'S FOUR ERAS



We call the eleven books that *move* the story forward “time” books; and those that add commentary, or extra details, to the story are called “color” books. The eleven “time” books are spliced together like a movie reel. One book picks up the story where the previous book stopped. But periodically the story needs elaboration or explanation. It’s almost as if the Grand Storyteller said, “Hold on here. There’s some important information we need to add to the story, but I don’t want to slow the narrative down with too much detail.” Rather than stop the story, God just added another book that gives us the details. For instance, Exodus is a “time” book. It moves the story forward. It tells us about the events at Sinai where Moses received God’s Law. These 613 laws were essential to Israel’s life and needed to be recorded for them—and for us. But Exodus is a narrative. It’s a story. So Moses didn’t list and describe all those laws in Exodus. He put them in a separate book called Leviticus, which adds essential details to the story of Sinai. The book of Leviticus provides “color” to the events recorded in Exodus. But it doesn’t advance the story chronologically and could bog readers down so they never finish the story Moses tells us regarding Israel’s exodus from Egypt and the events at Mount Sinai.

The events recorded in the seventeen Narrative books cover four major time periods, or eras: Beginnings, Settlement, Kingdom, and Exile/Reconstruction. The Beginnings era includes the time books of Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers and the color books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. The time books of Joshua and Judges and the color book of Ruth describe the Settlement era. The events of the Kingdom era are recorded in the time books of 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. The Exile/Reconstruction era, the fourth and final period of Old Testament history, includes the time books of Ezra and Nehemiah and the color books of 1 and 2 Chronicles and Esther.

# NARRATIVE



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Like the color books, the five Wisdom and Poetry books and seventeen Prophetic books add important details to the Old Testament's story, but don't advance the plot. The Poetic books provide insight into Israel's wisdom, poetry, and worship. Except for the book of Job, which many believe occurred during the time of Genesis, the Poetic books are placed during the Kingdom period of Israel's history.

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# MAJOR PROPHETS



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graph LR; A[MAJOR PROPHETS] --- B[Isaiah]; A --- C[Jeremiah]; A --- D[Ezekiel]; A --- E[Daniel]; F[MINOR PROPHETS] --- G[Hosea]; F --- H[Joel]; F --- I[Amos]; F --- J[Obadiah]; F --- K[Jonah]; F --- L[Micah]; F --- M[Nahum]; F --- N[Habakkuk]; F --- O[Zephaniah]; F --- P[Haggai]; F --- Q[Zechariah]; F --- R[Malachi];
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A diagram showing the classification of biblical prophets. It is divided into two main categories: Major Prophets and Minor Prophets. The Major Prophets are listed in a vertical column on the left, and the Minor Prophets are listed in a vertical column on the right. Each category is represented by a large, light gray rectangular box with the category name in bold, black, uppercase letters. To the right of each category box is a vertical list of the names of the prophets, each in a smaller, light gray rectangular box. The names are in black, uppercase letters. The boxes are connected by thin black lines, forming a bracket-like structure for each category.

Isaiah

Jeremiah

Ezekiel

Daniel

# MINOR PROPHETS

Hosea

Joel

Amos

Obadiah

Jonah

Micah

Nahum

Habakkuk

Zephaniah

Haggai

Zechariah

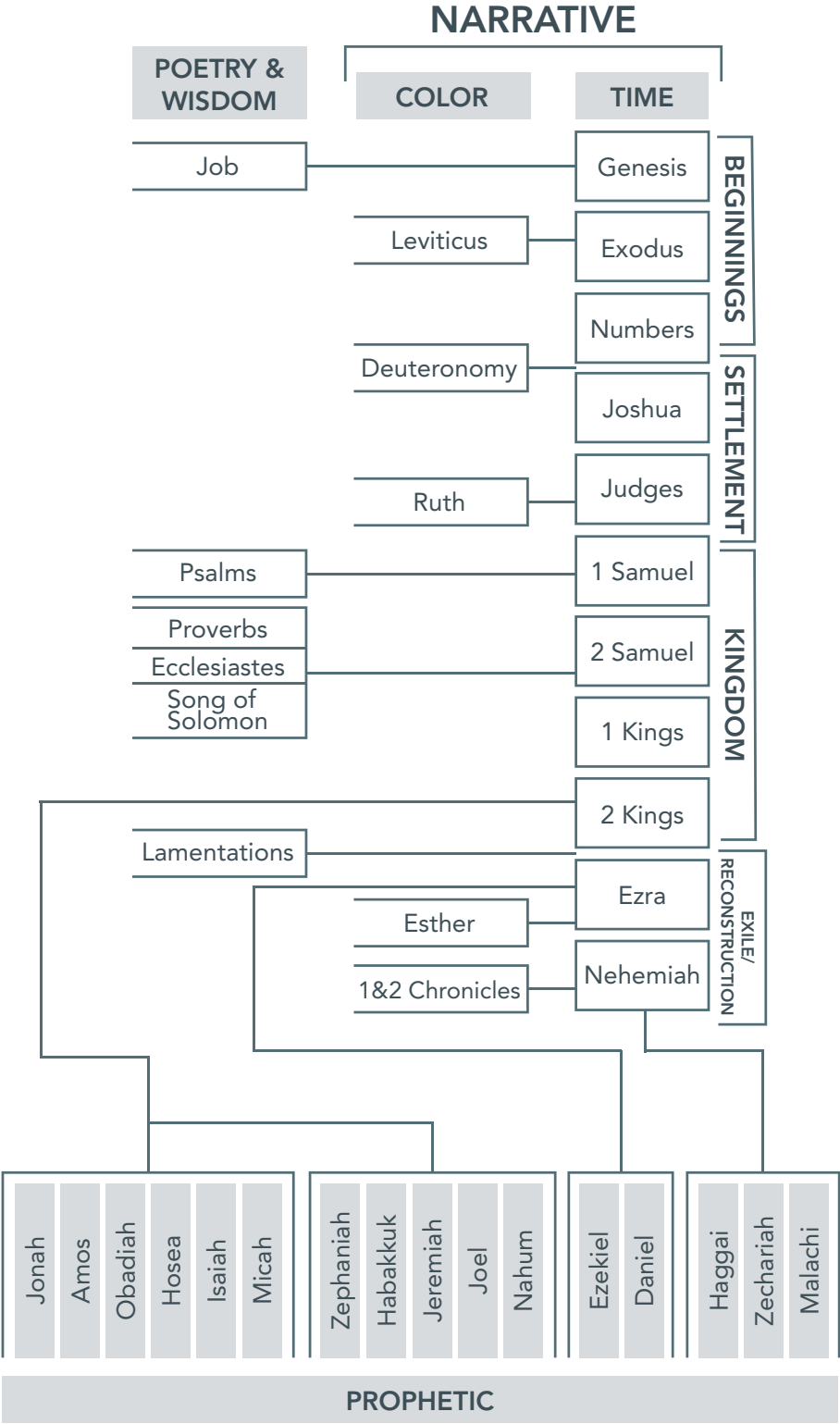
Malachi

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The Prophetic books contain warnings from God through a particular prophet to Israel and her neighboring nations about their sin. They speak of future judgment, as well as hope and restoration. They promise the coming of a Messiah who would bring salvation to Israel and the world. And though their messages were intended for a particular people at a different time, they continue to speak volumes to our world today.

There are two categories of writing prophets: the Major Prophets and the Minor Prophets. The terms “major” and “minor” do not refer to the importance of the books but to their length. Books classified as Major Prophets (i.e., Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel) are longer in length than those that make up the Minor Prophets.

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The events recorded in the Prophetic books generally occurred during the historical periods of the Kingdom and Exile as noted in the chart to the left.

With the above understanding of how the Old Testament is structured, the book you hold in your hand will provide an overview of each of the thirty-nine books that make up the Old Testament and include an introduction to the book, its key verse(s) and theme(s), the major people and places encountered in the book, and a general application of the book's message for today. This book will serve as a handbook to the Old Testament, allowing you to quickly gain important information about a book and obtain a high-level understanding of its meaning and purpose.

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# GENESIS

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## *Overview*

**G**enesis, the book of beginnings, is foundational to the rest of the Bible and to our lives as believers.

The first section of the book presents four major events: the creation of the universe, the rebellion of our first parents, God's judgment through a worldwide flood, and man's continued sinfulness at Babel.

The second, and larger, section of Genesis primarily tells the stories of four men and God's dealings with, through, and sometimes in spite of them. These colorful men are Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

Throughout Genesis we see a mighty God who seeks to bless His creation and His people.

### *What Does It Say?*

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Genesis is the book of beginnings. In these pages we are introduced to the dawning of the universe. God the Creator speaks into existence the celestial bodies, the order and beauty of vegetable and animal life, and, as the pinnacle of His handiwork, human life. We see the beginnings of sin, judgment, redemption, and worship. We also witness the birthing of God's chosen people, the nation of Israel.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis reveal four major events: (1) creation, (2) the fall, (3) the flood, and (4) the rebellion at Babel. From these events we discover God's remarkable design for history and for our lives. We also see the roots and fruits of the human race's rebellion against God's design. The remainder of the book (chapters 12–50) focuses on the lives of four men: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. We begin to discern that God is pursuing the redemption of His people through sacrifice and faith.

Genesis is loaded with fascinating characters and intriguing places. First among the colorful individuals are Adam and Eve, whose choice to rebel plunged all their descendants into a fierce battle with sin. Their children, Cain and Abel, provide us with a dramatic interplay between pleasing God and incurring His wrath. Noah and his family survived God's judgment of a worldwide flood. Beginning with chapter 12, God selected a man named Abram (later changed to Abraham) from whom He would birth a nation. When they were well past the age for bearing children, Abraham and his wife, Sarai (later changed to Sarah), finally bear a son whom they name Isaac. Isaac and his wife Rebekah have twin sons, Esau and Jacob, with the younger (Jacob) receiving the birthright and blessing. Jacob (whose name is changed to Israel), fathers twelve sons who eventually become the twelve tribes of the new nation. Next to last of those sons is Joseph, who is sold into Egypt as a slave.

These are merely the most prominent people and places. Others that add considerably to the drama include Enoch, Lamech, Lot, a mysterious man named Melchizedek, Hagar, Ishmael, the crafty uncle Laban, Rebekah, Rachel, a courageous woman named Tamar, and Potiphar and his wife.

The places within Genesis are no less captivating. They range from the pristine garden of Eden to the wicked and cursed towns of Sodom and Gomorrah. Also significant is Babel, the city of rebellion and confusion, out of which Babylon emerges. From Abraham on, our attention is focused on the Promised Land, also known as the land of Canaan. The region of Moriah is where Abraham nearly sacrificed his only son. Paddan Aram is the location where Jacob goes to find a wife and stays for twenty years. Jacob met God at two significant spots: Bethel (the "house of God") and the Jabbok River. Egypt plays a prominent role especially toward the end, as the descendants of Israel find a new home there.

# *Key Verses & Themes*

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## **CREATION**

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Genesis 1 describes God's activity in creating the world. He hovers, speaks, names, forms, fills, delights in, and sanctifies His creation.

## **THE FALL**

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Genesis 3 records Adam and Eve's disobedience against God. Tempted by the serpent to doubt God's goodness, they violate God's command.

## **COVENANT**

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Genesis records a couple of significant covenants that God made with His people. The first is with Noah in Genesis 9. The second, in chapter 15, is made with Abraham. The covenant with Abraham is repeated to Isaac and Jacob.

## **BLESSING**

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Genesis 12:3: "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

## *Why It Matters*

Every book of the Bible ultimately ought to evoke a sense of worship. In Genesis we are introduced to a God who delights in His own creation, especially in the creation of a man and a woman, yet He is a God who reacts violently when there is rebellion. Yet while He is absolutely sovereign and holy, He is also eager to extend mercy. This mercy is more than merely shrugging off evil. It is mercy in which God actually seeks to enrich sinful but broken people.

In addition to describing some of God's attributes, Genesis also makes it clear that God has a purpose in all that He does, and He invites men and women to join Him in that plan. A question for the reader is: "Am I walking with God in His purpose or am I stubbornly resisting His agenda?"

We also see in Genesis that God can be trusted. He is a faithful, promise-keeping God. In the face of horrible odds, Abraham believed that God would provide a son . . . and laughter broke out as a child named Isaac was born. Joseph trusted God in the midst of horrendous abuse, and eventually, under God's hand, he witnessed a phenomenal orchestration of events. God's Book is full of promises to His children. Are you resting in what God has said today?

# EXODUS

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## *Overview*

**T**he book of Exodus recounts several highly significant events in the story of the nation Israel. First, God redeemed His people out of their slavery. He accomplished this deliverance through the mounting tension of the ten plagues and the escape of the people through God's opening of the Red Sea. Second, once free from Egypt's clutches, God gave His law to Moses on Mount Sinai. The law told the people what He wanted them to do and how He wanted them to worship Him.

Exodus begins with the people of Israel making bricks in Egypt. It closes with the same people constructing a beautiful tabernacle where God Himself would dwell among them. Exodus demonstrates that God is the God who delivers His people from bondage.

### *What Does It Say?*

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The book of Exodus records two major events in Israel's life as a nation. The first is God's deliverance of Israel out of Egypt. After roughly four hundred years of captivity in Egypt, God's chosen people "exit" through a miraculous and dramatic series of events. The second major event is God's revelation of His law. God met with Moses on top of Mount Sinai and revealed His designs for this infant nation. In Exodus, we see God redeeming His people and then expressing His desire for how they should live as redeemed and grateful people.

Chapters 1–18 depict Israel's exodus from their bondage in Egypt, while chapters 19–40 record God's instructions regarding their life and worship. Woven throughout these two activities of God we discover Israel grumbling, testing God, and committing idolatry.

The primary human character in the book of Exodus is Moses. Early in the book, we are introduced to this character as an infant and watch him mature past age eighty. Moses is a man who struggles with God, with the pharaoh, and even with the Israelites. However, he proves to be a great man and a great leader.

Other significant characters include Aaron, Moses' older brother. Aaron serves as Moses' spokesman and support. We also gain glimpses of a young man named Joshua, who also assists Moses. The pharaoh looms throughout the first fourteen chapters as the dark and sinister tyrant who stands in the way of God's plan.

Other individuals who play a part include the Hebrew midwives; Jethro, Moses' father-in-law; Pharaoh's magicians; Moses' sister Miriam; and the two skilled workers Bezalel and Oholiab.

Among the significant places found in Exodus are Egypt (the place of bondage), the Red Sea (through which the people of Israel escape from their captors), and Mount Sinai (the location where God revealed His will for them).

### **REDEMPTION**

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Exodus 6:6: “Therefore, say to the Israelites: ‘I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.’”

### **OBEDIENCE**

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Exodus 19:5-6: “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

### **WORSHIP**

---

Exodus 25:1-2, 8: “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Tell the Israelites to bring me an offering. You are to receive the offering for me from everyone whose heart prompts them to give. . . . Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them.’”

## *Why It Matters*

The thrilling account of the Israelites' deliverance ought to inspire us to reflect on the redemption we have in Christ and the revelation we have in the Bible. Have you experienced God's deliverance from sin in your life? If so, are you grateful for God lifting you out of the kingdom of darkness and placing you in His kingdom of light? (1 Peter 2:9).

Following His redemption of Israel, God desired and expected their obedience. Yet several times, they stubbornly chose to disobey. Where do you find difficulty in responding obediently to God? Where do you grumble against God? Where do you "test" Him? (Exodus 17:7).



# LEVITICUS

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## *Overview*

**T**he book of Leviticus is Israel's worship manual. It showed the people how to approach God, obey Him, and serve Him. The first part of the book focuses on sacrifices as the way to God. The New Testament explains that "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22). The second part of Leviticus emphasizes sanctification, the need for the people to be set apart in order to serve God. This section describes sanctified people as those who hate sin and love obedience, and who celebrate God's goodness and salvation.

Leviticus centers on God's holiness. That concept occurs over eighty times in the book. Because God is holy, He wants His people to be holy. Because God is holy, He deserves our worship.

### *What Does It Say?*

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Leviticus records God's instructions concerning Israel's worship. At the end of the previous book (Exodus), the people of Israel were constructing the tabernacle in which God would take up residence. With such a holy God in their midst, they needed to know how to worship, serve, and obey Him. Leviticus lays out the various sacrifices, purification procedures, and holy days and feasts for the people. Also included are the qualifications and guidelines for the priests who would mediate between the people and their God.

The book of Leviticus points us to the holiness of God. Chapters 1–17 focus on sacrifice as the only way to approach God. Chapters 18–27 concentrate on sanctification, being set apart for God and His purposes.

Being a book that focuses more on instruction than stories, Leviticus has few characters. Moses remains center stage as the recipient of God's instructions. Aaron and other priests are naturally prominent in this book of worship. Two of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, meet with death after offering unauthorized fire.

In the same way, Leviticus has little focus on geographical places. The only specific location mentioned is Mount Sinai, where Israel is camped. The book does, however, look ahead to when they will be in "the land."

## *Key Verses & Themes*

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### **SACRIFICE**

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Leviticus 1–7 specifies the various sacrifices that were acceptable to God. The following chapters (8–17) detail some of the specifics (when, how, why, etc.) regarding those offerings.

### **HOLINESS**

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Leviticus 11:44: “I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy.”

Leviticus 20:7-8: “Consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am the LORD your God. Keep my decrees and follow them. I am the LORD, who makes you holy.”

### **DAY OF ATONEMENT**

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Leviticus 16 describes the sacred Day of Atonement when “Atonement is to be made once a year for all the sins of the Israelites” (v. 34).

## *Why It Matters*

The book of Leviticus emphasizes God's demand for holiness. He requires absolute perfection. Does God's holy character draw you closer to Him? Or does it repel you? Does His holiness draw you toward deeper worship?

When we fail to achieve God's holy standards, however, we are not left without hope. We can still gain access to Him, but as Leviticus makes clear, only through sacrifice. Amazingly, God accepts the death of a substitute as payment for the penalty of sin. What are you presenting to God in order to be accepted? Your activities? Your "good deeds"? Attempts to do better next time? Or, as Leviticus notes, the death of another as your substitute?

# NUMBERS

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## *Overview*

**T**he book of Numbers reveals what happens when people fail to trust and obey God. It is the tragic story of a nation poised to enter a fruitful land God has promised them. Because of fear and unbelief, they refuse to enter it. The first section of Numbers tells about the generation that drew back and who ended up wandering in the wilderness. The second section of Numbers centers on their descendants. They are preparing to enter the Promised Land, the land of Canaan.

Numbers ends with that second generation poised to enter the land, but it closes with nothing settled. The reader is left with the question: Will they trust God and take the land or will they too draw back?

### *What Does It Say?*

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The book of Numbers covers the wilderness wanderings of the nation of Israel. In fact, the Hebrew title appropriately means “in the desert.” After their stay at Mount Sinai, God wanted Israel to enter the Promised Land. However, they failed to trust God and refused to take the land. As a judgment from God, they wandered in the desert for nearly forty years.

Numbers focuses on two distinct generations. The first generation and their disastrous rebellion is the focus of the first twenty-five chapters. They are carefully “numbered” and prepared to take possession of the land of Canaan, only to reject God’s promptings. The second generation is the focus of chapters 26 through 36. They too are numbered and prepared, being reminded of their ancestors’ failure. The book closes with Israel camped on the Jordan River across from the Promised Land, again poised to enter.

The central character in the book of Numbers, as in Exodus and Leviticus, is Moses. He serves as God's voice to the grumbling and rebellious children of Israel. Moses' brother Aaron also plays a significant role, primarily as the leader of the priests. Caleb and Joshua stand out as courageous men willing to trust God, and they are rewarded accordingly. A fascinating character by the name of Balaam emerges in this book. He is summoned by a foreign king to curse Israel but can only respond with blessings.

Significant places include Mount Sinai, the starting point in this book. A location called Kadesh in the desert of Paran is where the Israelites camped while waiting to see if they were to enter the Promised Land. The land of Canaan is entered only briefly by twelve men but still looms large throughout Numbers as the ultimate goal. The dominating place in the book, however, is the desert. A number of different deserts are mentioned, emphasizing that this was truly a desert experience for Israel.

## *Key Verses & Themes*

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### **BLESSING**

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Numbers 6:24-26: “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.”

### **DISOBEDIENCE**

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Numbers 14:22-23: “Not one of those who saw my glory and the signs I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times—not one of them will ever see the land.”

### **WORSHIP**

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Throughout this book, despite the repeated rebellions by the people, attention is given to Israel’s worship of God.

## *Why It Matters*

Numbers presents two strange bedfellows: God's wrath and His blessings. The focal point of the book is God's extreme displeasure over the Israelites' refusal to trust and obey (chapter 14). Their penalty was years of wandering around the desert. How do you experience God's displeasure? What does discipline or chastening look like? Has God ever placed you in a "desert" in order to shape you (as he did Moses), to discipline you (like the Israelites), or for some other reason?

Another major thrust of this book is that God deeply desires to enrich His people. He even instructs the priests how to ask God to bless! (6:22-27). Because of God's leading, a strange man (Balaam) can only utter blessings rather than the curses he was hired to pronounce. What blessings from God's hand are you aware of today? If you are not experiencing His riches, is there something that might be getting in the way?



# DEUTERONOMY

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## Overview

**T**he book of Deuteronomy is a recasting of God's laws for a new generation about to enter the land of promise. Israel was camped just to the east of Canaan, preparing to enter it. Moses delivered a series of messages designed to impress upon the people that they must obey God. He reminded the people of God's character and how He blesses those who obey and punishes those who do not.

Structurally, Deuteronomy reflects the treaties of that day. These treaties established the relationship between a king and his subjects. Deuteronomy serves as a renewal of a treaty or covenant between Israel and their sovereign king.

### *What Does It Say?*

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Deuteronomy means "second law." This is the second giving, or repetition, of the law. A new generation stands poised across the Jordan River from Jericho, ready to take possession of the land of promise. This book records a series of messages given by Moses to establish them in God's design and desire for their lives. In these farewell talks, Moses urges the people to remember God's dealings with Israel (both blessing and judgment), to underscore in their minds the importance of obedience and to look ahead with the fear of the Lord.

Deuteronomy is the renewing of the covenant between God and Israel. The covenant had previously been established at Mount Sinai but had been violated through distrust and disobedience. The result was God's judgment on the nation. Moses wants the people to enter the land recommitted to walking with God and receiving God's richest blessings.

Moses plays the dominant human role in this book. Deuteronomy records his farewell messages and, at the end, records his death. The focus of the book, however, is the audience, the people of Israel. They are reminded and challenged as they prepare to enter into the land God is giving to them.

The stage for Deuteronomy is “the desert east of the Jordan.” As such, the Jordan River serves as the conspicuous marker between the old era and the new. It is on the doorstep of the land that Moses’ messages are delivered. Within those messages Moses looks back to significant places, such as the Red Sea, Kadesh Barnea, the desert, and the land of the Amorites. Notably, Moses also looks ahead to two mountains, Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, where all the blessings and the curses of the covenant would be recited. Deuteronomy closes on Mount Nebo, where Moses was allowed to see the Promised Land before dying.

## *Key Verses & Themes*

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### **OBEDIENCE**

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Deuteronomy 8:6: “Observe the commands of the LORD your God, walking in obedience to him and revering him.”

### **LOVE**

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Deuteronomy 6:4-5: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”

### **REMEMBER**

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Deuteronomy 32:7: “Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders, and they will explain to you.”

### **COVENANT**

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Deuteronomy 7:9: “Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments.”

## *Why It Matters*

A pair of grand old hymns, “Trust and Obey” and “More Love to Thee,” embody the essence of Deuteronomy. Above all, this book stresses the importance of obedience to what God has commanded. In what area of life is it most difficult for you to obey God? What is God asking you to do today?

However, Deuteronomy also makes it clear that God is not interested in mere rote obedience. He desires obedience that springs from a heart of love. Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:4-5 when asked to name the greatest commandment of all (Matthew 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27). Do you love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength?

Deuteronomy also emphasizes the parents’ role in teaching their children to love God and walk with Him (for example, see 6:4-9). If God has blessed you with children (or grandchildren), what might be a creative way you can capture their imaginations with God’s Word?

# JOSHUA

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## Overview

Joshua is a book of conquest. It describes how Joshua led the people of God into the land that God had promised them. It details a series of victories first in central, then southern, and finally in northern Canaan. Those victories gave the Israelites control over most of the land. The narrative then describes the division and allotment of the conquered land among the twelve tribes of Israel. The book closes with Joshua's final addresses to the people. In these addresses he renews the covenant and calls the people to serve God wholeheartedly. In short then, the book of Joshua describes the beginning of how God fulfilled his promise to Abraham: "To your offspring I will give this land" (Genesis 12:7).

### *What Does It Say?*

The book of Joshua takes the story of Israel's history on from the death of Moses, through the seven-year-long conquest of the Promised Land, to the death of Joshua. It tells us about the miraculous crossing of the Jordan, the God-empowered conquest of the land, and the sin that crippled the forward movement of the people. It goes on to describe the division of Israel's new home into allotments for each tribe.

Many years after the division of the land, Joshua comes to the end of his long life. He does not pass on leadership to a single person, as Moses had passed the torch to Joshua. As his last official act, Joshua calls the new nation, and especially its many leaders, to renew their commitment to the covenant with God. God will be faithful to the covenant. Will they as well?

The key human character is Joshua, the author of the book and principal leader of Israel during this period of history. As a younger man, Joshua had been Moses' chief aide. He had climbed with Moses up Mount Sinai when Moses received the Law from God and he was one of the twelve spies who did surveillance on the Promised Land before the first aborted attempt to enter. Joshua was Moses' handpicked successor to lead Israel.

Other notable characters include Achan, whose sin after the raid on Jericho brought defeat for Israel in their next battle. Rahab was a prostitute in Jericho who helped Israel take the city. She trusted the power of Israel's God and became a faithful follower.

Significant places include the Jordan River, which the people crossed to enter the land. Jericho and Ai were the first and second cities conquered in the land. Another important site is Shechem, the city where Joshua gathered the people for his final address.

### **CONQUEST & FULFILLMENT**

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Joshua 21:43-45: “So the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their ancestors, and they took possession of it and settled there. The LORD gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their ancestors. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the LORD gave all their enemies into their hands. Not one of the LORD’s good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled.”

### **FAITHFULNESS TO THE COVENANT**

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Joshua 23:15-16: “But just as all the good things the LORD your God has promised you have come to you, so he will bring on you all the evil things he has threatened, until the LORD your God has destroyed you from this good land he has given you. If you violate the covenant of the LORD your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, the LORD’s anger will burn against you, and you will quickly perish from the good land he has given you.”

## *Why It Matters*

Joshua is a dramatic real-life illustration of the faithfulness of God and the consequences of sin, as we read, for instance, about the dramatic victory at Jericho followed by the shocking defeat at Ai. What was the difference between Jericho and Ai? It was sin. When we stand with God, we can confidently do all He directs us to do. When we stand alone, in unconfessed sin and disobedience, we have only our own strength to lean on.



# JUDGES

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## *Overview*

**J**udges is a book about the apostasy that provoked God's punishment. Yet it also is a book of God's grace. When God's people cried out to Him as they were being punished, God raised up leaders, the judges, to throw off foreign oppressors and restore the land to peace.

Judges opens with Israel's failure to obey God, who had commanded them to purge the newly conquered land of all its evil occupants. As a result, the Israelites soon fell under the influence of these very people, adopting their false gods and their evil ways. This began lengthy periods of trouble for Israel, punctuated by God's gracious deliverance through the judges.

Judges depicts frustrating cycles of sin, repentance, and deliverance, followed by another cycle of sin, repentance, and deliverance. The book closes with two vile stories that illustrate how low the people had fallen both in their religion and in their morals.

### *What Does It Say?*

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Judges is a book about Israel's fickleness, God's faithfulness, and several courageous leaders. It is also a book of history, continuing the story begun in Genesis. During the period following Joshua's death, known as the period of the judges, God's people began to grow in disobedience. But with disobedience came distress, particularly from foreign invaders. God had said His people would have peace in obedience. But they weren't obedient, so they didn't have peace. When their distress got intolerable, they would cry to the Lord. And each time they cried out, God sent a deliverer, like Deborah, Gideon, or Samson, to lead them out of oppression. But, after a short period of peace, the people would return to their evil ways and begin the cycle again.

There are three common phrases in this book: "The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD"; "But when they cried out to the LORD, he raised up a deliverer"; and "Once again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD."

The central characters in this book are the judges. These men and women administered justice and settled disputes, but they also ruled the people for God and were mighty deliverers. Judges 2:16 reads: “Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders.”

Among the most noteworthy judges were Deborah, who led the defeat of Canaan; Gideon, who delivered the people from the Midianites; and Samson, who is famous for his hair but saved the people from the oppressive Philistines.

The storyline of Judges takes place mainly within the boundaries of Israel. Among the major oppressor nations encountered in Judges are Moab, southeast of Israel, across the Dead Sea; Midian, due south of Israel and east of the Red Sea; and Philistia, a very close neighbor of Israel to the west.

## *Key Verses & Themes*

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### **APOSTASY**

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Judges 3:7: “The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD; they forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs.”

### **THE CONSEQUENCES OF SIN**

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Judges 2:20-21: “Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel and said, ‘Because this nation has violated the covenant I ordained for their ancestors and has not listened to me, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died.’”

### **APPEALS TO GOD**

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Judges 4:3: “They cried to the LORD for help.”

### **THE LORDSHIP OF GOD**

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Judges 8:23: “But Gideon told them, ‘I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The LORD will rule over you.’”

## *Why It Matters*

It is not uncommon for Christians to see themselves in the book of Judges, but not as one of the great and mighty judges, saving the people from their oppressors and pointing them back to God. Sadly, we sometimes can relate more with the people, who genuinely called on God only when there was no other way out.

God may well bring you under severe trial to provoke that genuine cry of need. But as soon as the relief has arrived, what will you do? Will you continue in genuine devotion to God, or simply wait for the next disaster?

# RUTH

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## *Overview*

**T**he book of Ruth provides an intimate glimpse into the private lives of a faithful family during the period of the judges.

Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi, were widows. Naomi was also childless because of the deaths of her sons, including the husband of Ruth. Ruth met Boaz, a relative of Naomi, while gleaning grain in Boaz's field. Boaz proposed to marry Ruth and redeem both Ruth and Naomi. Redemption was an Israelite custom that provided security to a relative's widow and carried on the deceased relative's line.

In the story's final act, Ruth and Boaz were married. As the curtain closes, we learn that Obed, the couple's new son, will become the grandfather of King David, from whom will come the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of the entire world.

### *What Does It Say?*

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The author of this book focuses on Ruth's unswerving and selfless devotion to her desolate mother-in-law, Naomi, who has suffered the death of husband and sons.

Ruth is a Moabite girl who had married into this Israelite family while the family was living in Moab. When Naomi returns to Israel, Ruth comes with her, choosing to adopt Israel and Yahweh as her own, rather than remain in the land she knew.

Chapter 1 reveals Ruth's loyalty to Naomi and to Yahweh, the God of Israel, as she moves with Naomi to Israel. Chapter 2 takes Ruth to the grain fields of Boaz, a relative of Naomi, to glean food for the table of Naomi and Ruth. There, Boaz shows great kindness to Ruth and in chapter 3 promises redemption for Ruth and Naomi. He will marry Ruth and provide full care and security for Naomi as well. Chapter 4 records the redemption ceremony, as Boaz goes to the town gate to carry out the business of becoming a kinsman-redeemer. As the story closes, we learn that the marriage of Ruth and Boaz has produced a son, Obed, who will become the

## *What Does It Say? (cont'd)*

grandfather of David, the greatest king of Israel and the head of the family from which the Messiah would one day come.

## *Faces & Places*

This little book opens with an Israelite family living in Moab outside the borders of their own nation. Moab is southeast of Israel and across the Dead Sea. Though the story takes place during the period of the judges, there apparently was relative peace between Israel and Moab at this time.

Ruth is the primary character, with Naomi and Boaz playing large supporting roles. Ruth is a Moabite girl who has married into an Israelite family. Naomi is her mother-in-law, while Boaz is a relative of Naomi's deceased husband. Naomi's husband, Elimelech, and two sons, Mahlon and Kilion, are briefly mentioned in the opening verses. Orpah, Naomi's other daughter-in-law, chooses to remain behind in Moab and has no continuing role in the story. As the curtain closes, one last character is introduced: Obed, the newborn son of Ruth and Boaz, and the grandfather of King David.

### **REDEMPTION**

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The Hebrew word in its various forms occurs twenty-three times. One example is found in Ruth 4:14, “The women said to Naomi: ‘Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer.’”

### **DEVOTION & LOYALTY**

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Ruth 1:16-17: “But Ruth replied, ‘Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.’”

## *Why It Matters*

It is difficult to read the story of Ruth and Naomi without asking yourself about the meaning of true loyalty and devotion. How often do we really see it? How often do we really exercise it? How often do we really give up ourselves for love of another over the long haul, not just in a passing moment or for a special event? Carefully consider passages like 1:16-17; 2:11-12; and 3:10.

We find at the close of this book that Ruth becomes the great-grandmother of King David. Ruth is a foreigner, a Moabitess, by blood and birth, yet God blesses her and brings the line of Israel's Messiah through her womb. God is concerned with faithfulness to Him and not where we came from.

It is also striking to realize that the story of Ruth takes place during the period of the judges, a time of persistent war and strife. The very fact that the inspired record of this little story of love was given by God to us reminds us of God's intimate concern in the humble affairs of our life. While the world is falling apart around us, God cares about our personal details.



# 1 SAMUEL

## *Overview*

**T**he book of 1 Samuel revolves around three men—Samuel, Saul, and David. The first seven chapters of the book focus on Samuel, recounting his birth, his youth, and his calling as the last of the great judges of Israel. The next eight chapters focus on Saul, who was appointed the first king of Israel but who abused his power—a problem common to many leaders who are not submissive to God.

The final and longest section of 1 Samuel, chapters 16–31, focuses on David. David was anointed king long before he began his reign, but he waited for many years for God to place him on the throne. David served King Saul as a loyal servant but then had to flee for his life because Saul became jealous of him. At the close of 1 Samuel, Saul and his sons die in battle against the Philistine army. As 2 Samuel opens, David finally starts his reign as king.

### *What Does It Say?*

The book of Judges ends with these words: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.” First Samuel, which continues the record of Israel’s history, is about the establishment of the kingship in Israel. It begins with the life of Samuel, who would not become a king but would become God’s emissary to anoint Israel’s first king, Saul, and second king, David.

It is interesting that only the birth of Samuel is recounted, not those of Saul and David, especially since the companion volumes of 1 and 2 Samuel are primarily about the life and reign of these two kings. Samuel was God’s spokesman to guide the kingship until his death in chapter 25.

Chapters 1–7 are about Samuel’s early life. We also read about the havoc God brought upon the Philistines when they invaded Israel and stole the ark of God. Samuel emerged as judge, leading Israel to repentance and deliverance from their Philistine neighbors.

## *What Does It Say? (cont'd)*

In chapters 8–15, Israel has rejected God as their sovereign and chooses instead to have a human king. They want to be like the other nations. God instructs Samuel to anoint Saul as king and warns the people what will happen when Saul ceases to rule for God and begins to rule for himself, which he will certainly do.

Chapters 16–31 focus on David, who is anointed king by Samuel some fifteen years before he will actually begin to reign. David lives and serves in Saul's household and must run for his life as Saul's jealousy and paranoid fear continue to grow. First Samuel closes with the death of Saul and all his sons in battle with the Philistines.

## *Faces & Places*

It should be no surprise that the first significant character in 1 Samuel is Samuel himself. Samuel was the last great judge of Israel and one of its first prophets. Samuel's birth (see 1:20) was an answer to the heartfelt prayers of his mother, Hannah.

Saul was the first human king of Israel. Though he began his reign with humility, he soon became proud and deliberately disobeyed God. When God removed him from the throne, David became the second king of Israel. First Samuel tells of David's life before his reign began.

An additional character of note is Eli the priest who raised Samuel as a young child in the temple of God.

Among the important places mentioned in 1 Samuel are Ashdod, Gath, and Ekron. These Philistine cities had the misfortune of being hiding places for the ark of God when it was stolen from Israel. God wreaked havoc on each city as long as the ark was there. The Philistines finally returned the ark, and the men of Israel brought it to Kiriath Jearim, where it remained until David delivered it to Jerusalem in 2 Samuel 6:2-3.

## Key Verses & Themes

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### KINGSHIP

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First Samuel 8:7: “And the LORD told him [Samuel]: ‘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.’”

### OBEDIENCE

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First Samuel 13:14: “But now your kingdom will not endure; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him ruler of his people, because you have not kept the LORD’s command.”

First Samuel 15:22: “But Samuel replied: ‘Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.’”

### COVENANT

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While the term *covenant* does not appear in the passage, 1 Samuel 11:12–12:25 is an impassioned exhortation to the people by Samuel to keep their covenant with God.

## *Why It Matters*

First Samuel tells us much about what God had in mind when He instituted human leadership. Leadership is always to be leadership “under God” and not “under the leader.” Saul led Israel for himself, while David led Israel for God. That was the difference. Leadership is a stewardship, not an ownership.

As you read this book, also notice God’s plan for David. He chose and anointed young David long before his reign would ever begin. He chose the most unassuming son of Jesse to become Israel’s greatest king. He protected David through all of Saul’s hatred and threats. To every Christian, God tells us we were chosen before the creation of the world (see Ephesians 1:4) and that every crash and turn in our life is under His watchful care (see Romans 8:28). David’s unusual-looking life is really a picture of ours, laid out for us to learn from.

# 2 SAMUEL

## Overview

**T**he book of 2 Samuel picks up Israel's story where 1 Samuel ended. After Saul's death, the people recognized David as their new king, first by the tribe of Judah in chapter 2, and then by all the remaining tribes in chapter 5. Chapters 6–10 depict the success and glory of David's reign and recount his faith and his glorious victories over Israel's enemies.

But David falls into sin. In chapter 11, he commits adultery with Bathsheba and has her husband, Uriah, killed in battle. That ugly episode began the decline of both David's family (chapters 13–14) and his kingdom (chapters 15–20).

Chapters 21–24 close the story with God's gracious restoration of David and his kingdom.

### *What Does It Say?*

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel are two halves of one book. Second Samuel tells the story of David's reign as king over Israel. It records David's acceptance as king, first by Judah and then by all the tribes. David then rises to great prominence, bringing prosperity and power to the kingdom of Israel. The borders of Israel are extended and justice is the norm within the entire land. It is a great day for the people of God. And God promises David that a king from his line would reign forever (2 Samuel 7).

But there is a tragic side to the story as well. Two chapters (11–12) tell of David's adulterous affair with Bathsheba, his murderous attempt to cover the crime, and his heart-wrenching repentance before the prophet Nathan. And eight full chapters (13–20) describe the problems David had with his son Absalom. The book comes to a close with some final reflections on David's long reign as the king of Israel.

David, Israel's second king, is the main character of this book. God sends the prophet Nathan to help David and to rebuke him when David falls into sin with Bathsheba, an attractive married woman living in view of David's palace rooftop.

Many chapters of the book revolve around Absalom, David's favorite son. Absalom leads a rebellion against his father and attempts to become king himself. The plot is defeated and Absalom is killed, and David's favorite son is lost.

Joab is David's general, the leader of David's mighty military power, and also the man who personally killed Absalom, bringing great sorrow to David.

### **THE DAVIDIC COVENANT**

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Second Samuel depicts David as the true (though not entirely perfect) representative of the ideal theocratic king: a king who would genuinely rule for God. In the course of David's reign, God makes him a promise. Israel will always have a king from David's family. David's throne will be established forever.

Second Samuel 7:12-13: "When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever."

Second Samuel 7:16: "Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever."

## *Why It Matters*

The cost of sin is very high indeed! David's sin with Bathsheba (chapters 11–12) and his leniency with his wicked sons (13:21; 14:1, 33; 19:4–6) and insubordinate general (3:29, 39; 20:10, 23) had a tremendous cost to David's family and to the nation under his stewardship. Sometimes it is easy to see the connection between sin and its results, and sometimes it is not. But there are results.

Paul tells us that the stories of the Old Testament have been written for our example (1 Corinthians 10:6). Perhaps we would be well advised to look at our lives and ask which of our problems can be related to our sin.



# 1 KINGS

## *Overview*

**T**he book of 1 Kings continues the story of Israel, starting with the ascension of David's son Solomon to the throne. Eleven chapters tell about the reign of Solomon, describing his great wisdom, his impressive building projects, and, at the end of his life, his great folly. He did what was evil in God's sight and followed other gods, the gods of his foreign wives. That folly proved to be his undoing and the undoing of the entire kingdom. At Solomon's death, the kingdom divided in two—ten tribes in the north called Israel, and two tribes in the south called Judah.

The second half of 1 Kings, chapters 12–22, describes the kings of these Northern and Southern Kingdoms. The chapters note the reign of thirteen different kings, many whom turned their backs on God.

In chapter 17, God sends the prophet Elijah to warn the wicked kings about the great cost of their disobedience. The rest of 1 and 2 Kings contains the story of their response.

### *What Does It Say?*

First Kings takes us deeper into the story we left at the close of 2 Samuel. David comes to the end of his life, and he transfers the throne to Solomon, his son. From there, 1 and 2 Kings together move through four centuries of Israel's history, from Solomon to the fall of Israel (722 BC) and Judah (587 BC).

In 1 Kings we experience the golden era of Solomon's reign, read about the breakup between Israel and Judah (the Northern and Southern Kingdoms) that occurred when Solomon died, and learn about the first group of kings over the newly divided kingdoms and the rather dramatic life of Elijah, the prophet God assigned to confront one of the very worst of them.

First Kings is a book of kings, and there are a lot of them. The first half focuses on King Solomon. Adonijah, David's fourth son, was never really a king, but attempted to steal the throne that was eventually given to Solomon. Jeroboam rebelled against Solomon and became the first king of the Northern Kingdom. In an interesting episode from Solomon's life, the Queen of Sheba paid him a royal visit.

The prophet Elijah occupies several chapters of the book. Elijah lives during the reign of Ahab, a particularly evil king of the Northern Kingdom. Ahab's wife, Jezebel, was so evil that even her name seems to be associated today with all things bad.

Jerusalem, the center of Solomon's kingdom, remained the capital of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The Northern Kingdom placed its capital in Samaria. When Jeroboam established his separate kingdom, he set up worship centers to compete with Jerusalem at Bethel and Dan.

### **DIVISION OF THE KINGDOMS**

First Kings 11:11-13: “So the LORD said to Solomon, ‘Since this is your attitude and you have not kept my covenant and my decrees, which I commanded you, I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates. Nevertheless, for the sake of David your father, I will not do it during your lifetime. I will tear it out of the hand of your son. Yet I will not tear the whole kingdom from him, but will give him one tribe for the sake of David my servant and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen.’”

### **OBEDIENCE/DISOBEDIENCE OF THE KINGS**

First Kings 15:11: “Asa did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, as his father David had done.”

First Kings 16:30-31: “Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him. He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him.”

## *Why It Matters*

Solomon probably never really meant to depart from the path God had set for him. He probably never intended to walk away in disobedience. But he began to compromise, particularly to social and cultural pressures and to the attainment of personal wealth and glory. And before he knew it, his family was filled with pagan wives and his kingdom was filled with sin.

First Kings carries on a theme that will run through the entire Old Testament: We are not to play with sin. That was the message of the prophets. Be true to God. No compromise.

# 2 KINGS

## *Overview*

**T**he book of 2 Kings continues without interruption the story begun in 1 Kings. As the book opens, the ministry of Elijah is passed to his capable disciple, Elisha, whose prophecies of word and act are the topic of chapters 1–8. Chapters 9–17 recall the kings of the Northern Kingdom, Israel; the Southern Kingdom, Judah; and the eventual fall of the Northern Kingdom to the ruthless Assyrian army. Chapters 18–25 continue the history of Judah’s kings, until the Southern Kingdom falls to the crushing power of Babylonia.

Many of the people of Judah were carried as captives into Babylon, yet God continued to care for His people. The very last verses of the book give a glimmer of hope that God’s nation will one day be

### *What Does It Say?*

The Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah had gone their separate ways in 1 Kings. This book tells what their ways were like and where their ways took them. The Northern Kingdom went wrong from the beginning and found itself overwhelmed by the Assyrian army in the year 722 BC. God removed them from the land and into exile. The Southern Kingdom had periods of obedience and devotion to God, and it had periods of disobedience and rebellion against God. As the rebellion grew deeper and habitual, God brought Babylonian invaders to wipe out Jerusalem and carry the people of the Northern Kingdom into exile as well. The collapse of Jerusalem happened in 586 BC.

It is interesting to note that the author does not give the most space to the most politically powerful kings of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, but to the kings who most notably affirmed or denied the covenant Israel had with God. Obedience is the issue, not political or economic power.

Elisha, the companion and disciple of the prophet Elijah, becomes the chief prophetic spokesman in 2 Kings. Elisha's ministry is highlighted in the first eight chapters.

Eighteen kings from Judah and eleven kings from Israel are mentioned in 2 Kings. Noteworthy names include Hezekiah and Josiah from Judah, two kings who moved the people toward God. King Manasseh of Judah is known for the opposite, moving the people toward evil.

Assyria is the nation God used as the tool to bring punishment upon the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Babylon was God's instrument to deal with the disobedient Southern Kingdom of Judah. Both these powerful kingdoms were located to the north, between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

### **DOWNFALL OF THE KINGDOMS**

Second Kings 17:22-23: “The Israelites persisted in all the sins of Jeroboam and did not turn away from them until the LORD removed them from his presence, as he had warned through all his servants the prophets. So the people of Israel were taken from their homeland into exile in Assyria, and they are still there.”

Second Kings 23:27: “So the LORD said, ‘I will remove Judah also from my presence as I removed Israel, and I will reject Jerusalem, the city I chose, and this temple, about which I said, “My Name shall there be.”’”

## *Why It Matters*

What is important to God? It is interesting to note that in 1 and 2 Kings, while a great many kings come and go across the pages, only a few are selected for more detailed treatment by the author. What criteria did the author use to decide who would be given more ink and who would be given only passing mention? It was not what you might expect. The author passes quickly by some of the most politically and economically powerful kings in Israel's history.

The most words in 1 and 2 Kings go to the kings who moved the people toward obedience or toward faithfulness in significant ways. Obedience, faithfulness, loyalty, devotion—these are the priorities with God.



# 1 CHRONICLES

## *Overview*

**T**he book of 1 Chronicles and its companion 2 Chronicles are historical records that cover the same period of the nation's history described in 2 Samuel through 2 Kings. The perspective, however, is quite different. While 2 Samuel through 2 Kings describe the events of history, 1 and 2 Chronicles serve as a divine commentary on that history.

It begins with genealogies tracing Israel's heritage from creation to the Israelite nation with its twelve tribes. Special emphasis is placed on the line of King David.

Chapter 9 lists the families of Israel, which have returned from exile in Babylonia. This is the author's primary audience. He wrote this book to encourage those weary settlers.

The book's largest section (chapters 10–29) describes David's reign over the nation when it was in its glory.

### *What Does It Say?*

In the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles is a religious history of the nation of Israel, and the kings are evaluated based on the standard of worship. Do the kings lead their people to God?

After nine chapters of genealogies, which focus on David as the ideal king, the remaining twenty chapters focus on the reign of David. He is presented as the ideal king. There is no mention of his sin with Bathsheba, his rebellious son Absalom, or the tragic sorrows of his life. The book was designed to encourage the returning remnant of Israel to a pure worship of the Lord and to remind them of the glory to which their land could return.

David, king of the united kingdom of Israel, is the clear center of attention in 1 Chronicles. King Saul is briefly mentioned in chapter 10 only to record the event of his death. Solomon is introduced in the final chapter, preparing the way for his starring role in 2 Chronicles.

As part of the grandeur of David's reign, many supporting players are mentioned. Chapters 18 and 26 list several government officials, including his army general Joab. David's "mighty men" are listed in chapter 11. The priests, temple singers, gatekeepers, army leaders, and other players in David's rule are laid out in chapters 23–27. Though David is the star, few other books have such a supporting cast.

Significant places include Jerusalem, which David captures from the Jebusites in chapter 11. It will become the capital of Israel and the site of God's temple. David brings the ark of God to newly captured Jerusalem from its previous home in Kiriath Jearim, some 10 miles west of the new capital city.

### **THE DAVIDIC COVENANT**

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First Chronicles 17:11-14: “When your days are over and you go to be with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for me, and I will establish his throne forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. I will never take my love away from him, as I took it away from your predecessor. I will set him over my house and my kingdom forever; his throne will be established forever.”

### **HOPE**

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The remnant of Israel had returned from exile to a devastated land. And they had rebuilt a temple far less glorious than the one that had been destroyed. They were a discouraged people. This book was written as an encouragement to hope through worshiping the God who is our hope. The Davidic covenant (see above) was the centerpiece of that hope.

## *Why It Matters*

The book of 1 Chronicles was not written to provide Israel with a recorded history. That was recorded in several other places, including the books of 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. First Chronicles (along with 2 Chronicles) was written to bring hope to the people through the pure worship of God. It was designed to keep the people attentive to God to see His grandeur and glory and what He will do with a people who are obedient.

But it is hard to lead people to a place when they aren't following. The prophets of God certainly knew this all too well. Are you on your way to a closer devotion to God? Or has your path diverted elsewhere?

# 2 CHRONICLES

## Overview

**T**he book of 2 Chronicles begins where 1 Chronicles ended. Chapters 1–9 chronicle the reign of Solomon, with six of the nine chapters describing the construction and dedication of the great temple Solomon built.

The rest of the book describes the reign of Judah’s kings up to the fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. It gives special attention to the kings who patterned their lives and reigns after David. The highest commendation a king could receive was “he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, just as his father David had done” (2 Chronicles 29:2).

### *What Does It Say?*

Second Chronicles begins with these words: “Solomon son of David established himself firmly over his kingdom, for the LORD his God was with him and made him exceedingly great.” The most significant of Solomon’s works was building the temple to God in Jerusalem. The author allocates six chapters to this task (chapters 2–7) and only two (8–9) for everything else about Solomon, including his death.

Chapter 10 begins the account of all the remaining kings of Judah until the kingdom fell to the Babylonians in 586 BC. No kings from Israel are mentioned at all. The focus is on David’s line, to whom was given the Davidic covenant and the future hope of Israel.

The book closes with the fall of Jerusalem and a clear ray of hope. The king who rules over the fallen exiles commands those who wish to return to do so and rebuild their temple!

The main character in 2 Chronicles is Solomon, the third and last king of the united kingdom. After his death, the kingdom was divided into the Northern Kingdom of Israel, led by Jeroboam, and the Southern Kingdom of Judah, led by Solomon's son Rehoboam.

Jeroboam is one of the few northern kings mentioned in this book, and that is only to explain the breakup of the united kingdom. Kings from the rebel Northern Kingdom are mentioned only when their actions directly relate to the kings of Judah. The remainder of 2 Chronicles mentions only the kings of Judah. Nineteen kings follow Rehoboam to the throne of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. All of them are from the line of David, as promised by God. Noteworthy kings of Judah include Asa, Jehoshaphat, Joash, Hezekiah, and Josiah.

The vast majority of the book takes place in Jerusalem, the capital of Judah. The temple is built in this city upon Mount Moriah, where the Lord had appeared to David (3:1). Mount Moriah is another name for Mount Zion and is also the place where Abraham took Isaac to sacrifice him to the Lord.

### **THE TEMPLE OF GOD**

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Second Chronicles 7:1: “When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple.”

### **HUMBLE REPENTANCE**

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Second Chronicles 7:14: “If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”

### **COMMITMENT TO OBEDIENCE**

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Second Chronicles 34:31: “The king stood by his pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the LORD—to follow the LORD and keep his commands, statutes and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, and to obey the words of the covenant written in this book.”

## *Why It Matters*

When 2 Chronicles was first written, the audience was the remnant that had returned from exile, resettled the land, and rebuilt the temple. This book, along with 1 Chronicles, taught these people lessons from the past (the glorious times of obedience and the distressing times of sin), illustrated God's faithfulness in the present (He had delivered them out of exile and they were back in their land), and looked forward to God's fulfillment of promises in the future (the covenant with David would yet be fulfilled in a glorious Israel).

What is true for the remnant is also true for you. Though the historical context is different (you are not an ancient Israelite returned from exile in Babylon), you do have a past, a present, and a future. What have you learned from the past about walking with God? How is God presently showing His faithfulness? As for the future, are you fixing your hope on what God will do or what you might be able to squeeze out of this world? Take a moment to check out 1 Peter 1:13. The hope of Israel's future is also yours.



# EZRA

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## Overview

**A**fter seventy years of exile in Babylonia, some of God's people began to return to their land and resettle it. The book of Ezra tells about this return. It happened in two phases, separated by about sixty years.

The first group of nearly 50,000 Israelites traveled back to Israel under the leadership of Zerubbabel. Chapters 1–6 describe these people and their work to rebuild the temple of God in Jerusalem.

In chapters 7–10, Ezra, a priest and a direct descendant of Aaron, led more people out of exile and back to Israel. While Zerubbabel's primary task was to rebuild the temple, Ezra's primary task was to rebuild the people, preparing them to worship and obey the God to whom they belonged.

### *What Does It Say?*

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Ezra is a fascinating book about the remnant of Israel that returned from the Babylonian captivity. The book begins with the edict from Cyrus king of Persia that made it possible to return to the land and rebuild the temple. This edict is one of seven official documents or letters included in Ezra, all written in Aramaic except this first edict from Cyrus.

After the edict, the author (probably Ezra) gives a remarkably detailed record of all those who returned, including totals! The book tells the story of the work of two special men: Zerubbabel and Ezra. Zerubbabel returns first to the land and leads the rebuilding of the temple. Ezra returns next and works to reform the people. The book is divided into two halves around these two men: (1) Zerubbabel and the temple and (2) Ezra and the people.

Cyrus king of Persia is mentioned in verse 1 and a number of other times throughout the book. Cyrus defeated the Babylonian empire in 539 BC and established the Persian Empire in its place. His new policies called for the release of Israel back to its land. Other later Persian kings mentioned in the book are Darius, Xerxes (son of Darius), and Artaxerxes.

Zerubbabel, who led the first group of people back to the land, was the grandson of King Jehoiachin of Judah before the fall of Jerusalem. Zerubbabel became governor of Judah and led the people in rebuilding the temple.

Ezra was a teacher and priest among the exiled Jews in Babylon. He returned to the land to carry out the task of encouraging the people to obey the law of God. He taught the people God's laws, and they turned to God again with new joy.

Although the storyline takes place in Jerusalem, the kings of Persia play a significant role. The Persian Empire covered a great territory ranging from Greece to India and from Egypt to the Black Sea.

### **THE TEMPLE**

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Ezra 1:3: “Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them.”

### **THE REFORMATION OF THE PEOPLE**

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Ezra 7:10: “For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.”

Ezra 10:1: “While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of Israelites—men, women and children—gathered around him. They too wept bitterly.”

## *Why It Matters*

The “so what?” of Ezra (as with any book of the Bible) is helped by placing yourself into the life situation of the book. The original readers of Ezra were exiles who had returned under Zerubbabel and Ezra but who were struggling in their relationship to God. Ezra encouraged these people to be involved in genuine worship and to remind them to fulfill their covenant obligations because of God’s mercy to them. In chapters 9–10 we see the proper response of the people to their sin. Ezra wanted his original readers to have the same attitude of humble repentance and intentional obedience which believers of all times should have.

# NEHEMIAH

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## *Overview*

**S**ome thirteen years after the second group returned with Ezra, Nehemiah led a third and last group back to Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile. Nehemiah's main concern was the safety of God's people. There was no wall surrounding the city of Jerusalem, and that left the people defenseless against their enemies.

Chapters 1–6 of Nehemiah describe the drama of this rebuilding project that was hindered by frustrating opposition and several obstacles. In chapters 7–13, Nehemiah and Ezra worked together to reform the people spiritually and morally so that the restoration of Jerusalem, the spiritual and political center of Israel, would be complete.

### *What Does It Say?*

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Nehemiah, while still in Persia, became gravely concerned for the situation in Jerusalem. He sought permission from his employer, the king of Persia, to return to his own land and direct the people in rebuilding a wall of protection around Jerusalem. When permission was granted, Nehemiah returned. Upon arrival, he set out to inspect the existing wall—largely destroyed in the Babylonian invasion—and make plans to rebuild.

Nehemiah exhorts the people to rebuild, despite persistent opposition from within and without, and with the help of God they rebuild the city wall in an incredible fifty-two days. Nearly one hundred years from the start of the resettlement, the wall was finally in place.

Nehemiah, the book's central character, was a Jewish cupbearer to the king of Persia, Artaxerxes. A cupbearer enjoyed the unreserved confidence of the king, for it was his duty to see that the king was not poisoned by food or drink. As the book opens, Nehemiah is serving the king in the Persian city of Susa.

Three men who opposed Nehemiah were Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem. Sanballat was governor of Samaria, a people to the immediate north of Judah who fiercely opposed the reemergence of Israel. Tobiah was an Ammonite, from the neighboring land of Ammon, which lay immediately east of Judah. The precise identification of Geshem is more difficult, but he was probably an influential leader of a northern Arabian confederacy encompassing territory from southern Palestine to northeastern Egypt. He may have feared Israel's potential impact on his trade routes to the north.

Ezra the priest also appears in this book. This is the same Ezra in the book by his name.

### **REBUILDING THE WALL**

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Nehemiah 6:15-16: “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.”

### **PRAYER**

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Nehemiah 4:9: “But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.” (See also 1:4-11; 2:4; 6:9.)

## *Why It Matters*

Nehemiah has come to be known as the Bible's management guide. It is filled with sound principles for leadership and bringing a seemingly impossible project to completion on time, within budget, and according to specification—the dream of any good project manager, whether constructing a missile or building a family.

But within these principles comes a specific challenge: to do what God has placed before you, even when the odds are against you, and even when the people are against you. Nehemiah accomplished in fifty-two days what had not been accomplished in ninety-four years since the first exiles returned. He did it by knowing that God had called him to the task and by knowing the God who called him. His task was bathed in prayer and persistence. When the job was done, we read that Nehemiah's opponents “lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God” (6:16).



# ESTHER

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## *Overview*

**A**fter the exile, many Jews remained in Babylonia and did not return to their native land. The Persians had conquered the Babylonians. Esther is a fascinating drama about a plot to exterminate the entire Jewish nation in the days of the Persian king Xerxes. It is a story filled with intrigue and suspense.

In the opening two chapters, Esther, a Jewish girl, is elevated to queen of Persia. In the chapters that follow, Mordecai, the cousin of Queen Esther, uncovers a plot by Haman, a leader in the king's government. If Haman's plot succeeded, it would have meant the virtual end of the Jewish people. Esther showed great courage by subverting the plot. In the end, Haman was killed and Mordecai, a Jew, was lifted up and honored by the Persian king and his people.

An odd thing about this book is that though God is clearly at work in every aspect of the drama, He is never mentioned. His veiled sovereignty protected and prospered His people.

### *What Does It Say?*

One of the fascinating features of the book of Esther is not what it says, but rather what it doesn't say—at least not explicitly. There are no explicit references to God anywhere in the book. God is at work everywhere in the story, but He is not on center stage. He stands behind every scene, silently working to carry out His purposes for Esther and Mordecai and all the people of Israel.

God had disciplined His people by sending them into exile for a time of testing, purging, and introspection. He would also preserve them in exile against all threats of extermination. Esther is a story of preservation. Evil Haman is intent on eliminating God's people and elevating himself. But God turns the tables by elevating a Jewish girl to queen of Persia and bringing Haman to humiliation and death.

The story of Esther takes place in the Persian city of Susa, the same city in which Nehemiah later served a different Persian king.

Esther is the key character in the book by her name. Esther is a Jewish girl who becomes queen of Persia. She was an orphan brought up in Susa, Persia's capital city, by her cousin Mordecai. After Esther and Mordecai thwart the plans of Haman to destroy the Jews, Mordecai becomes the king's chief minister. Haman had been chief minister before the tables were turned.

### **TEN FEASTS**

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There are ten feasts that occur during the course of the story (1:3-4; 1:5-8; 1:9; 2:18; 3:15; 5:1-8; 7:1-10; 8:17; 9:17; 9:18-32).

### **THE FEAST OF PURIM**

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The story of Esther is commemorated in the Jewish feast of Purim. Esther 9:28: “These days should be remembered and observed in every generation by every family, and in every province and in every city. And these days of Purim should never cease to be celebrated by the Jews, nor should the memory of these days die out among their descendants.” (See also 3:7; 9:24, 28-32.)

### **PROVIDENCE**

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Esther 4:14: “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?”

## *Why It Matters*

In writing this book, it appears that the author has deliberately held back from mentioning God or describing any religious activity. He probably does this as a literary device to heighten the fact that God controls and directs all the seemingly insignificant coincidences that make up the plot and result in deliverance for the Jews. This is particularly evident in chapter 6, the critical turning point in the story, where all sorts of “coincidental” events occur to bring the story to its happy ending.

The book of Esther becomes a convincing reminder of God’s providential, behind-the-scenes attention to every detail of life. Review the book of Ruth for a similar illustration of God’s personal care, where, in the midst of the turbulent period of the judges, the story of God’s care for Ruth and Naomi testify to His ability and readiness to attend to our every need.

Do you believe God is working for your benefit in all things? (See Romans 8:28.)

# JOB

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## Overview

**T**he book of Job is a part of the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament, but it stands alone in its form and theme. The subject is as relevant today as it was in Job's time. If God is just and good, why does He let righteous people suffer?

Job was a faithful follower of God, yet he lost nearly everything: his possessions, his family, and his health.

While Job never learned the reasons for his suffering, at the end of his ordeal he was given a new understanding of God. And as a result, he gained a new perspective on himself, his suffering, and God's power and sovereignty.

### *What Does It Say?*

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Job records one of the best-known examples of undeserved suffering. All of a sudden, with no warning or discernible reason, Job suffered the loss of all his material wealth (which was very great), all his children, and his health. His wife gave him no support and suggested he simply curse God and die. A circle of Job's (so-called) friends come to help, but their logic drives them to condemn Job rather than console. They find it rather obvious that Job's hidden sin has brought this suffering from God.

Job cannot agree with them, for he knows of no sin from which to repent. Job asks God to answer his cries and to explain this awful life he has been cursed with. The book comes to a dramatic close when God does speak to Job. God offers no explanation to Job, no clever solution to the dilemma. He simply confronts Job with the fact that He is God. And Job willingly submits to the righteousness and the wisdom of God.

This book is named for its central figure, Job. We know that Job was a man of outstanding righteousness as well as tremendous wealth.

The three friends with whom Job dialogues for most of the book are Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. We know little about these men other than what is revealed in this book. Eliphaz, from the town of Teman in the land of Edom, is apparently the oldest of the three friends and acts as their leader (42:7). Elihu is a fourth counselor and is younger than the other three.

The location of Job's home is stated in the opening verse as the land of Uz. Uz is a large territory east of the Jordan River that includes Edom in the south and the Aramean lands in the north.

### **SOVEREIGNTY**

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Job 38:1-3: “Then the LORD spoke to Job out of the storm. He said: ‘Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me.’”

### **SUFFERING**

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Job 2:7-9: “So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. Then Job took a piece of broken pottery and scraped himself with it as he sat among the ashes. His wife said to him: ‘Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die!’”

### **SUFFERING AS A RIGHTEOUS PERSON**

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Job 19:25-27: “I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!”

## *Why It Matters*

The book of Job speaks to the issue of human suffering. Most people have at one time in their lives asked the question, “Why is there suffering in the world?” or, more to the point, “Why does a good, all-powerful God allow suffering to occur?” Questions related to the topic of suffering are common but difficult to answer. In Scripture, there are three general reasons given as to why suffering exists. The first applies to all of humanity, while the second and third pertain only to believers.

First, there is suffering because our world exists in a fallen state. Genesis 3 tells us that as a consequence of Adam and Eve’s rebellion against God, sin entered into the world resulting in people living for their own gain rather than the betterment of others. Selfishness, disease, even natural disasters are all the result of living in a fallen world (see Romans 8:21). Second, suffering can be experienced in a believer’s life to bring glory to God. Job 1 tells us that Job had done nothing wrong to deserve the loss of his family and property. The suffering he experienced was allowed by God to demonstrate Job’s faithfulness to God in all things. Third, suffering can also be the result of God’s correction in a believer’s life. The author of Hebrews tells us that the Lord corrects those who are His (Hebrews 12:6).

Regardless of why we suffer, God has graciously offered the hope of eternal life through the redemptive work He accomplished in Christ, which will one day restore our fallen world to its original state.



# PSALMS

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## *Overview*

**T**he book of Psalms is actually five books compiled into one. These divisions are original and have not been added by modern-day editors. At the end of each of the five books, such as in 41:13 and 72:18-19, there is a doxology, a fitting close to each book.

Psalms is an Old Testament hymnal that expresses the whole range of human emotions, from dark depression to high-spirited joy. Written by David, Korah, Asaph, and several anonymous authors, these songs were sung in the temple worship of ancient Israel.

Psalms is the most often quoted and diverse book of the Old Testament.

### *What Does It Say?*

The book of Psalms is the best-loved book in the Old Testament. It contains 150 poems to be set to music for worship, both privately and in public worship services. The book's magnificence and significance are evident from the fact that of the 283 times the New Testament writers quote the Old Testament, 116 of those quotes are from the Psalms.

It is difficult to summarize what the psalms say. They cover the spectrum of human experience with God and with man. In short, they reflect the realities of life expressed in poetry, one of literature's most expressive forms. The psalms speak of love and hate, fear and security, danger and safety, pain and joy. There are confessions and repentance, demands for justice, pleas for mercy, declarations of loyalty, and expressions of devotion to God and His Word.

W. E. Gladstone has said, "All the wonders of Greek civilization heaped together are less wonderful than is this simple book of the Psalms" (quoted in Henry H. Halley, *Halley's Bible Handbook*, 24th edition [Zondervan, 1965], p. 248).

In the titles given to the psalms (which are from the original composition), King David is credited with seventy-three of the 150 psalms, Asaph wrote twelve, the sons of Korah wrote eleven, Solomon wrote two, Moses wrote one, Ethan wrote one, and fifty psalms are anonymous. (We cannot be fully certain of all these numbers, since the Hebrew word translated *of* can also mean *for*. So a psalm *of* David, for instance, could be a psalm *for* David.)

Asaph was a priest who headed the service of music. The sons of Korah were a guild of singers and composers. Solomon was the son of David who followed David to the throne. Moses was the same Moses who led the Israelites out of Egypt. Ethan was a priest.

## *Key Verses & Themes*

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### **WORSHIP**

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Psalm 150: “Praise the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens. Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness. Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with timbrel and dancing, praise him with the strings and pipe, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals. Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD.”

### **MESSIANIC PROPHECY**

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Psalm 22:1: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Psalm 22:18: “They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.”

## *Why It Matters*

Among the many striking features of the Psalms is the piercing honesty of the writers before their God. There is no holding back of emotions or tactful rephrasing of feelings. They know that God knows them. They know there is no need to hide. In fact, they are keenly aware that there is no hiding possible (see Psalm 139)—physically, mentally, or emotionally.

When you come to God (and in your every moment walk with Him), it is helpful to remember that He is always there and fully ready for your honesty.

# PROVERBS

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## *Overview*

**P**roverbs is a book of wisdom, intended to give the reader a skill for handling life. It does so by the repetition of wise sayings.

The opening chapters give the foundation for the entire collection of proverbs. Wisdom starts with the fear of the Lord.

Beginning at chapter 10, there are several collections of sayings that describe the way wise people live. Chapters 10–22 contain proverbs written by Solomon, while chapters 23–31 include proverbs from a circle of wise men other than Solomon. Together with Solomon, these wise men of Israel present about 900 proverbs to guide us in a life of wisdom under God.

### *What Does It Say?*

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The purpose of Proverbs is set down in the opening verses, which begin: “The proverbs of Solomon . . . for gaining wisdom and instruction; for understanding words of insight; for receiving instruction in prudent behavior, doing what is right and just and fair.” In short, this book of Proverbs sets out to teach us how to live a life of wisdom. The bottom line is this: The fear of the Lord is both the beginning and the essence of all true wisdom.

Solomon and the other contributors cover a wide variety of life issues and challenges. Heavily treated topics include a comparison of the wise and the foolish, the righteous and the wicked, and the sluggard and the hard worker; the wise use of the tongue; and the family.

King Solomon, the son of David, is the primary author of these proverbs. Other authors include Agur son of Jakeh (chapter 30) and King Lemuel (31:1-9). Neither of these men is mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. Lemuel's sayings contain several Aramaic rather than Hebrew spellings that point to a non-Israelite background. The proverbs in chapters 25–29 (see 25:1) were copied and compiled by the men of Hezekiah, one of the righteous kings of the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

## *Key Verses & Themes*

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### **WISDOM & FOLLY**

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Proverbs 10:8: “The wise in heart accept commands, but a chattering fool comes to ruin.”

Proverbs 1:7; 2:5; 9:10: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.”

### **THE RIGHTEOUS & THE WICKED**

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Proverbs 10:3: “The LORD does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked.”

### **LAZINESS & HARD WORK**

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Proverbs 10:4-5: “Lazy hands make for poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth. He who gathers crops in summer is a prudent son, but he who sleeps during harvest is a disgraceful son.”

### **THE TONGUE**

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Proverbs 10:19: “Sin is not ended by multiplying words, but the prudent hold their tongues.”

### **THE FAMILY**

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Proverbs 10:1: “A wise son brings joy to his father, but a foolish son brings grief to his mother.”

## *Why It Matters*

J. Paterson has summed up the purpose of Proverbs like this: “To subtract from the number of fools and add to the number of the wise” (quoted in A. K. Helmbold, “The Book of Proverbs,” Merrill C. Tenney, editor, *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 4 [Zondervan, 1976], p. 917). Proverbs, then, is a handbook for the wise and the would-be wise.

There is no end to its application, for wisdom is, in short, the appropriate application of truth. Read it, pray over it, absorb it, live it.



# ECCLESIASTES

## Overview

**E**cclésiastes, another example of Wisdom Literature, gives us the personal observations of a man who calls himself the “Teacher,” traditionally believed to be Solomon. His lifelong observations have led him to this conclusion: Life without God is futile, meaningless, without purpose, and empty. In a phrase, it is a vain pursuit.

Chapters 1–6 demonstrate this vanity, the meaninglessness of our efforts on earth apart from God. But in chapters 7–12, the Teacher reveals what he has learned, giving us a series of lessons on practical living. As he draws his teaching to a close, he offers his summation: “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind” (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

### *What Does It Say?*

In this unusual and sometimes difficult book, the author declares everything “meaningless,” a vain pursuit. This includes toil (1:14; 2:11, 17; 4:4, 7-8), wisdom (2:15), righteousness (8:14), wealth (2:26; 5:10; 6:2), prestige (4:16), pleasure (2:1-2), youth and vigor (11:10), life (6:12; 7:15; 9:9), and even the future after death (11:8).

The toil of man produces nothing of lasting value, especially when driven by improper motives. Man’s wisdom and righteousness do not guarantee success. Wealth is lost at death and often before. Prestige does not last. Pleasure is illusive. Youth and vigor come and are gone. Life is but a fleeting moment, and all go to the grave—the wise and the fool, the rich and the poor.

But, in spite of this, life should not be abandoned or filled with despair. Rather, receive life as a glorious gift to enjoy. And live it to the fullest in complete trust in God.

The one person specifically mentioned in this book is the “Teacher,” who’s cited as the author in the book’s opening line. The teacher is described as the son of David and king in Jerusalem. Evidently the book is ascribed to King Solomon.

### **MEANINGLESSNESS**

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Ecclesiastes 1:2: “‘Meaningless! Meaningless!’ says the Teacher. ‘Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.’”

### **UNDER THE SUN**

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The phrase “under the sun” occurs twenty-nine times in the book. (The first occurrences are 1:3, 9.) The book views life from a secular, earthly perspective: how life is lived “under the sun.” It examines man’s reasoning and actions apart from the Spirit of God and divine revelation.

## *Why It Matters*

Many people can relate to the theme of meaninglessness and vain pursuit described in this unusual book. As confusing as the book may be, there is something in it that has a familiar ring—perhaps all too familiar.

The purpose of this book should serve as a wake-up call for Christians to gain a divine and not an earthly perspective on life. Ecclesiastes demonstrates the complete emptiness of that which is “under the sun” apart from that which is above the sun, that is, God’s Word, God’s Spirit, and God’s salvation.

How do we live with and through the many injustices, enigmas, and hidden traps of life? Don’t try to figure it out. Enjoy life under God, with complete trust in Him, and with a view to your eternal judgment and eternal future.

# SONG OF SOLOMON

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## Overview

**S**ong of Solomon is a book about human love. It is a frank presentation of human sexual love without being titillating.

The book describes the loving relationship between a young woman and her lover and, later, a bride and her bridegroom. Delicately, the poet evokes intense sensual awareness. The song is a masterpiece of romantic literature. It expresses marital love as the strongest, most unyielding and invincible force in human experience. It is also a picture of God's love for His people.

### *What Does It Say?*

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The title of this book in the Hebrew text is "Solomon's Song of Songs." It is a song by, for, or about Solomon. The phrase "Song of Songs" means the greatest of songs (see Deuteronomy 10:17, "God of gods and Lord of lords" and 1 Timothy 6:15, "King of kings"). The book itself is a wonderful expression of words of love between a lover and his beloved.

Two messages seem to come through in this book (and there is debate among scholars as to which is primary). The book is an inspiring testimony to the highest and best of marital love between man and woman, including a God-given endorsement for the pleasure of marital sex. Song of Solomon can also be read as an allegorical expression of God's intimate love for His bride, His people. Using New Testament language, the church is the bride of Christ. The love and adoration between Christ and His church is expressed through the poetry of this book of romance.

There are three characters in this book of poetry. There is the lover, who is Solomon, king of Israel. There is the beloved, who is the object of Solomon's love and becomes his wife. And there is an unnamed group of friends who interject their remarks from time to time.

(For your assistance, the translators of the NIV Bible have inserted notations throughout the book to indicate where each of the three parties is probably speaking.)

### **LOVE**

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Song of Solomon 1:4b: “We rejoice and delight in you; we will praise your love more than wine.”

### **LOVE OF THE BRIDEGROOM FOR THE BRIDE**

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Song of Solomon 4:9: “You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride; you have stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace.”

### **LOVE OF THE BRIDE FOR THE BRIDEGROOM**

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Song of Solomon 1:16: “How handsome you are, my beloved! Oh, how charming! And our bed is verdant.”

The word *beloved* occurs thirty-two times in the book.

## *Why It Matters*

Virtually everyone who studies this book in depth agrees that the culmination of the Song of Solomon is found in 8:6-7, “Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot sweep it away. If one were to give all the wealth of one’s house for love, it would be utterly scorned.”

In these words, the unsurpassing power and value of love is expressed. It is the love that draws man and woman together. It is true love. It would do us well to ponder the impact of this kind of love on the beloved—the one who receives it—and on the lover—the one who sacrifices self in order to give it.



# ISAIAH

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## *Overview*

**T**he book of Isaiah is the first of seventeen books in the section of the Old Testament called the Prophets. Isaiah can be divided into two major parts, with a historical narrative about Hezekiah, king of Judah, in between.

Isaiah served in Judah before the captivity. The first section exalts the righteousness, holiness, and justice of God. It is also a book of condemnation against those who had been unfaithful to God. A dark cloud of judgment is cast by Isaiah's prophecies over Judah, Judah's neighbors, and the whole world. All have gone their own way against God.

The final section is a book of comfort. The faithful God will keep His promise to His people. A Messiah will come to God's people and turn them to faith and bring them salvation.

Isaiah is a book about Jesus Christ, the Messiah, who is to come.

### *What Does It Say?*

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The book of Isaiah can be thought of as two books in one: a book of judgment and a book of comfort.

Chapters 1–39 (the book of judgment) is a message of rebuke against Judah for breaking the covenant. It also contains judgment against the nations, including such nations as Assyria, Philistia, and Babylon. There is occasional mention of the promise of restoration, which is the primary theme of book two. Book one closes with judgment executed through the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the people of Judah.

Chapters 40–66 (the book of comfort) is a message of deliverance and restoration. It describes the coming of the victorious God of Israel who will regather and renew God's people and destroy her enemies. It speaks much of the coming Savior and Israel's King who will reign in great glory.

Isaiah is often thought of as the greatest of the writing prophets. Isaiah, whose name means “the Lord saves,” lived in Jerusalem during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah.

When King Sennacherib’s Assyrian army threatened Jerusalem, King Hezekiah prayed earnestly and the threat was removed (37:6-7). Jerusalem was later attacked and destroyed by the Babylonians. Cyrus the Persian, who would later unite the Medes and Persians, conquered Babylon in 539 BC (41:2). In 538, Cyrus issued a decree allowing the Jews to return home. This deliverance is a preview of the great salvation from sin through Christ (52:7).

### **JUDGMENT**

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Isaiah 5:25: “Therefore the LORD’s anger burns against his people; his hand is raised and he strikes them down. The mountains shake, and the dead bodies are like refuse in the streets. Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised.”

### **SALVATION**

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Isaiah 53:6: “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

### **THE SERVANT OF THE LORD**

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Isaiah 42:1: “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations.”

## *Why It Matters*

One principle theme of the book of Isaiah is the Servant of the Lord, often known as “the Suffering Servant” (see chapters 42–53). This Servant is a man who gave himself up for the salvation of His people. This Servant is the Lord Jesus Christ.

As you read about the wrath of God that is revealed against sin in the first part of this book, meditate on the curse that is justly applied to your life for your rebellion and disobedience of God’s perfect law. And as you read about God’s grace in the second part of this book, remember that His grace can be applied to you because someone else received God’s justice in your place. Christ died for you. Isaiah 53:6 says, “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

# JEREMIAH

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## *Overview*

**I**n the years before the complete collapse of Judah under the mighty Babylonian army, Jeremiah prophesied to the people and their leaders about the judgment they were about to experience. These prophecies are recorded in the book that bears his name.

Jeremiah's word to the kingdom of Judah was not so much a warning to repent and avert disaster, as a declaration of the judgment that would soon be upon them. They were about to reap what they had sown.

Jeremiah proclaimed this God-sent message of destruction for over forty years. As one might expect, he was not well received or well treated. This book, in one sense, becomes Jeremiah's autobiography, telling of his opposition, beatings, isolation, and imprisonment.

### *What Does It Say?*

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Jeremiah was the primary prophet to the Southern Kingdom of Judah during the dark days leading to her destruction by the Babylonian army. Jeremiah is known as the "weeping prophet" because of his personal distress over the sins of the people and the sins of their leaders. He was called by God to shine a bright light on this evil situation.

Jeremiah did not actually call Judah to repentance in hopes of turning away the judgment of God. Jeremiah, rather, prophesied about the judgment that was going to come. In fact, when the army of Babylon was breathing down the neck of Jerusalem, ready to attack and destroy, Jeremiah told the king to give up and the people to surrender. God's judgment had arrived. There was no escape.

As is common in the prophetic books of judgment, there is a glimpse of future hope for Israel revealed at the end. Jeremiah pens four verses to close his book reminding us that God has not abandoned His people.

Jeremiah was a man called by God to prophesy concerning the doom of his own beloved nation. He carried on this ministry for over forty years, while suffering tremendous personal sacrifice for doing so. Jeremiah began his ministry in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah king of Judah and continued it through the destruction of Jerusalem during the reign of Zedekiah, the last king of Judah prior to the exile.

The Northern Kingdom of Israel had long since been destroyed by the Assyrians, so Jeremiah's prophetic ministry was restricted to the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

### **THE FALL OF JUDAH AND JERUSALEM**

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Jeremiah 21:4-5: “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I am about to turn against you the weapons of war that are in your hands, which you are using to fight the king of Babylon and the Babylonians who are outside the wall besieging you. And I will gather them inside this city. I myself will fight against you with an outstretched hand and a mighty arm in furious anger and great wrath.”

### **THE HUMAN HEART**

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Jeremiah 17:9: “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”

## *Why It Matters*

There are two vital issues that should not go unnoticed in this book about a rebellious people and their certain judgment. First is the fact that judgment does come. Its final execution with all its force may be put off and put off and put off, as God waits patiently for repentance (see 2 Peter 3:3-13). But wrath will come, if repentance does not.

A second vital issue to recognize is that of the human heart. Judgment finally fell upon Judah. God finally stopped waiting for repentance because the collective hearts of the people had hardened to the point of no return. Their hearts had become like stone: immovable and unmoldable. They were “beyond cure” (Jeremiah 17:9). Only judgment was left for the people of Judah.

The writer of Hebrews warns us not to risk this same hardness of heart (Hebrews 3:13). He warns us not to become hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. Sin does that. It hardens our hearts against God.

When you read Jeremiah, notice how frequently he speaks of the heart. And look to your own heart and ask: Is my heart responsive to God or growing hard?



# LAMENTATIONS

## Overview

**L**amentations was written by Jeremiah as a lament over the destruction of Jerusalem. While the book of Jeremiah looks ahead to the destruction, Lamentations looks back in mourning over what has come to pass.

Lamentations is a masterful piece of literature. It is designed as five lament poems. The first four laments are alphabetic acrostics, using each of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Though Lamentations shows passionate emotion, it was composed with studied care.

In the book's third (and middle) lament there is a clear hope for the future: "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" (Lamentations 3:22-23).

### *What Does It Say?*

This second book written by Jeremiah is a dirge or funeral song sung over the wasted remains of Jerusalem. The book of Jeremiah looked forward to the coming destruction. The book of Lamentations looks back and mourns.

In this short book of five chapters, Jeremiah describes Jerusalem's miserable situation. "All the splendor has departed from Daughter Zion," Jeremiah writes in 1:6, "in weakness they have fled before the pursuer." He describes the anger of God against His people and he contrasts Judah's glorious past with their present desolation: "How the gold has lost its luster, the fine gold become dull!" (4:1).

But this carefully constructed literary masterpiece of mourning has its light of hope in God. In chapter 3, the literary center of the dirge, Jeremiah recalls the great love of God and calls the people, even in exile, to place their hope in God. "The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD" (3:25-26).

The center of attention in this book is the desolated city of Jerusalem, the capital of all Israel during the united kingdom and the capital city of Judah after the kingdom had split in two. The lament is written in the first person, expressing the great sorrow of Jeremiah, who had prophesied for over forty years of the destruction that had now come upon them.

### **THE CONSEQUENCES OF HOPE**

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Lamentations 2:17: “The LORD has done what he planned; he has fulfilled his word, which he decreed long ago.”

### **MOURNING**

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Lamentations 2:11: “My eyes fail from weeping, I am in torment within; my heart is poured out on the ground because my people are destroyed, because children and infants faint in the streets of the city.”

### **MERCY**

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Lamentations 3:22-23: “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.”

### **HOPE**

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Lamentations 3:25-26: “The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.”

## *Why It Matters*

Have you ever noticed what moves a person to tears? Have you ever thought about what moves you to tears? Does sin and rebellion against God move you? Do the consequences of sin in the lives of other people move you? How about injustice, war, and poverty? Do these move you to tears? They did Jeremiah.

Many of us are prone to mourn because things aren't going our way. But the book of Lamentations is a picture of a man who grieved with God. The things that make God grieve brought tears to Jeremiah.

Jesus was the same way. As He anticipated yet another destruction that was to come on Jerusalem for their sin, He stood overlooking the city and mourned for her: "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, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate" (Matthew 23:37-38).

Do you see the world through the eyes of God? If you do, you will find yourself more and more like Jeremiah and Jesus, mourning over sin.

# EZEKIEL

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## *Overview*

**E**zekiel is a book of prophecies given before, during, and after the siege and destruction of Jerusalem. It was written by the prophet Ezekiel entirely in the first person (except for verses 2-3 of chapter 1).

Ezekiel is a book about the sovereignty of God. Over sixty-five times we read: “Then they will know that I am the LORD.” It is God’s intention that His power and sovereignty be known and acknowledged. Chapters 4–24 teach that God will be revealed in the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. Chapters 25–32 teach that the nations likewise will know God through His judgments. And chapters 33–48 promise that God will be known through the restoration and spiritual renewal of Israel.

### *What Does It Say?*

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The book of Ezekiel is a book of prophecy that revolves around the life and ministry of the prophet. It begins with Ezekiel’s call to ministry in chapters 1–3. Ezekiel had been taken to Babylon in the first wave of exiles before the full destruction of Jerusalem that would be coming soon. With his call to prophesy, he became a “street preacher” among the exiled Jews for twenty-two years. He was called by God to be a “watchman for the people of Israel” (3:17).

In his task as “watchman,” Ezekiel warns of the coming destruction of Jerusalem. This destruction would be God’s judgment on the sins of the people. He also spoke to the surrounding nations, telling them of God’s judgment on their sins as well. But Ezekiel also spoke of the faithfulness of God to one day restore the land and His people and bring glory to himself in the fulfillment of His promises.

In 597 BC, King Jehoiachin of Judah surrendered Jerusalem to the Babylonian army and was taken into exile. (The city would later rebel and be destroyed in 586 BC.) The Babylonians carried away 10,000 of Jerusalem's leading citizens (see 2 Kings 24:14), including the young Ezekiel, who was a priest (Ezekiel 1:3) and was soon to become a prophet.

Israel's leaders also play a dominant role in this book, because much of the blame for the sinful state of the people is placed directly on their shoulders. The foreign king who brings God's judgment upon Jerusalem is Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon.

While the prophetic images are of Jerusalem, Ezekiel makes his prophecies from the land of Babylon.

## *Key Verses & Themes*

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### **SIN**

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Chapters 8 and 9 are a vision of Jerusalem's sin. An example of this is Ezekiel 8:6: "And he said to me, 'Son of man, do you see what they are doing—the utterly detestable things the Israelites are doing here, things that will drive me far from my sanctuary? But you will see things that are even more detestable.'"

### **RESTORATION**

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Ezekiel 36:24-26: "For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."

### **GLORY**

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Ezekiel 44:4: "Then the man brought me by way of the north gate to the front of the temple. I looked and saw the glory of the Lord filling the temple of the LORD, and I fell facedown."

## *Why It Matters*

Ezekiel, like many other books of the Old Testament, gives dramatic evidence of God's power and presence among His people. God had been personally dwelling with His people in the temple at Jerusalem. But because He was now turning the city over to Babylon, He would remove the presence of His glory from that place. You can read the remarkable description of God's glory departing from the temple in chapter 10.

There will come a day, Ezekiel tells us, when God's presence will never again depart. God will actually come to dwell within the people themselves, and not merely in a building among them. Ezekiel 36:26 prophesies of a day when God will put His Spirit within His people, transforming their hearts and cleansing their sins.

This is what God does to everyone who comes to Him in faith for salvation. Jesus and Peter call it being "born again" (John 3:3; 1 Peter 1:23). When you were saved, God sent His Spirit to live within you. The apostle Paul exhorts Christians to remember this fact: "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you?" (1 Corinthians 6:19).

God removed His glory from the temple in Jerusalem before He gave it over to Babylon. God has placed His glory in you, a temple of God, and will never depart.



# DANIEL

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## *Overview*

**T**he book of Daniel is probably best known for the Bible stories “Daniel and the Lions’ Den” and “The Fiery Furnace,” where Daniel’s three friends were thrown when they would not bend to the pressures of society and worship a false god.

But there is much more to this book than inspiring stories, for Daniel unravels much of God’s plan for the future of the world. Chapters 2 and 7 describe and interpret two great visions of the future kingdoms of the world and assure us that only God’s kingdom will reign forever. The final section of Daniel (chapters 8–12) contains visions of Israel’s future. Though they will suffer much tribulation, they will finally see redemption in the coming of their Messiah.

### *What Does It Say?*

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The book of Daniel presents the reader with a wide sweep of prophetic history. Through the visions and dreams presented in Daniel, we see the great kingdoms of this earth laid out before us. First will be the Babylonian Empire, ruled by King Nebuchadnezzar. Next will come the Persian Empire, then the Greek, and finally the Roman Empire. This last worldwide empire will be crushed by God himself, and the kingdom of God will rule on the earth forever.

Daniel is also a book about the faithfulness of Daniel and his three friends in the face of evil influence and persecution. As we wait for God’s kingdom to rule over the earth, our allegiance—like that of Daniel and his friends—is to belong fully to the King of the coming kingdom of God.

Daniel, along with his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, were young men from the Jewish nobility in Jerusalem. They had been exiled to Babylon in the first wave of the Babylonian captivity. Daniel 1:1-7 introduces these four young men.

Three kings from the land of captivity are characters in the book. Nebuchadnezzar was the king who first placed these four Jewish men into civil service. Belshazzar followed him as the new king of Babylon. At the death of Belshazzar, Darius the Mede took over the kingdom.

The entire story takes place in the land of Babylon, much of it in and around the royal palace.

### **SOVEREIGNTY**

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Daniel 5:21: “The Most High God is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and sets over them anyone he wishes.”

### **THE KINGDOM OF GOD**

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Daniel 2:44: “In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever.”

### **FAITHFULNESS/LOYALTY**

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Daniel 3:16-18: “King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”

## *Why It Matters*

Do you ever need reminding that God is in control? Daniel was written to help you remember. It was written to show how God is in control of the heavens and the earth, that He directs the forces of nature, that He directs the destiny of nations, and that He cares dearly for His people. It is a book that displays the power of God in all its glory.

Sometimes people will ask the question, how big is your God? The God of Daniel personally directs the rise and fall of worldwide kingdoms. He decides who will reign and when they will reign and when their reign will end. And He declares that one day all the fuss will be over when He will set up His own kingdom on the earth and rule forever. If you need a refresher course on the size of your God, Daniel will help remind you.

# HOSEA

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## *Overview*

**H**osea is the first of twelve “minor” prophets that close the Old Testament canon. These books are not minor in significance, but rather minor in size. They are all relatively short.

Hosea begins with a real-life story and ends with a message of reality—God is faithful whether we are or not. In the opening chapters of the book, God directed Hosea to marry an immoral woman and be loyal to her, even in the midst of her continued adultery. The prophet’s difficult marriage serves as a symbol of his prophetic message: God’s love for His bride, Israel, is everlasting.

### *What Does It Say?*

At the beginning of this book, Hosea is commanded by God to marry an adulterous woman named Gomer who would be an unfaithful wife to Hosea. His marriage was to be an object lesson for Israel, the adulterous kingdom that had been unfaithful to God. As with the story of Hosea, the story of God and Israel is one of one-sided love.

Hosea continues to love his wife in the midst of her consistent and ugly adultery. Gomer bears him three children, all given names as signs to Israel: Jezreel (“God scatters”), Lo-Ruhamah (“not pitied”), and Lo-Ammi (“not my people”). Gomer will eventually be wooed back by Hosea’s love into a faithful marriage.

After the picture of his marriage, Hosea turns his attention directly to Israel’s sin and applies the illustration. Israel has rejected the great love of God and will reap the fruit of her adultery. But because of God’s endless love, He will eventually save and restore His wayward people.

The principal characters in this book are Hosea, his wife Gomer, and the three children from their marriage: Jezreel, Lo-Ruhamah, and Lo-Ammi.

Nothing is known of Hosea outside of this book, but based on the kings listed in 1:1, he must have prophesied for at least thirty-eight years. He is the only one of the writing prophets to come from the Northern Kingdom.

Hosea prophesied to the Northern Kingdom of Israel and frequently mentions the capital city of Samaria.

### **THE SIN OF THE PEOPLE**

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Hosea 4:1-2: “Hear the word of the LORD, you Israelites, because the LORD has a charge to bring against you who live in the land: ‘There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.’”

### **THE LOVE OF GOD**

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Hosea 3:1: “The LORD said to me, ‘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.’”

## *Why It Matters*

In Hosea's prophecy, we are introduced to the immeasurable love of God through an illustration that nearly anyone can understand and appreciate. Hosea, whose name means "salvation," shows us the love of God that persists through all our unfaithfulness. God's love cannot be broken by our stubbornness. Once we are His, He will never let us go.

Hosea's prophecy also confronts us with the foolishness of sin. While our loving God waits for our return, we wander about in pursuit of something else, but to no satisfaction. And all the while what we really desire and what we really need has been waiting for our return. He has always loved us, even in our sin.



# JOEL

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## Overview

**T**he book of Joel uses the power of illustration to make its point. The Southern Kingdom of Judah had just experienced a massive locust plague followed by a drought, both devastating the agricultural base of Israel. The opening section of Joel describes these twin disasters. But with all of their destructive power, they are merely a foretaste of the wrath to come at the day of the Lord.

In the second and final section of Joel, we again find the grace of God: He will not utterly destroy His people. Rather, He will bring salvation to everyone who calls on the name of the Lord.

### *What Does It Say?*

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The people of Judah had experienced a plague of locusts and a severe drought that had devastated the land. In the book of Joel, these twin disasters are used by the prophet as living illustrations of the wrath God would bring to the people for their persistent violation of the covenant. As bad as the locusts and the drought had been, they were a mere foretaste of what was to come.

Joel announces that the destruction will come due to disobedience and exhorts the people to repentance and prayer. Restoration will come to God's people, but only after judgment and repentance.

The two players in the book of Joel are Joel himself and the people of Judah. Little is known about Joel, since he is not mentioned outside this book with the exception of Acts 2:16. There are twelve other men named Joel in the Bible, but none of them can be properly identified as the prophet Joel, writer of this book.

Since Joel is addressing the people in the Southern Kingdom of Judah, it is not surprising to see a particular focus on Jerusalem. This great city, the capital of Judah, is directly mentioned six times in the book's three chapters.

### **REPENTANCE**

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Joel 2:12-13: “‘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.”

### **THE COMING OF THE SPIRIT**

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Joel 2:28-29: “And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.”

### **THE DAY OF THE LORD**

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Joel 2:31: “The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.”

## *Why It Matters*

How powerful is God? Consider the destructive power of the most ferocious tornado, the awesome blast of an exploding mountain (picture Mount St. Helens), or even the atomic explosion at Hiroshima. All are merely a drop in the bucket compared to the wrath of God to come at the great and dreadful day of the Lord. Joel makes his point to the people of Judah, and we would do well to hear the lesson. The power of God is indescribable, and so will be His judgment of sin.

But Joel also reminds us of the mercy of God to all who call on Him. In fact, “Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved” (Joel 2:32). As you read Joel, realize the power and might of God and His ultimate judgment of sin. Realize also His mercy and grace to those who come to Him for salvation. Choose to come and stay with Him.

# AMOS

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## *Overview*

**A**mos spoke for God to the rebellious Northern Kingdom at the height of its prosperity and self-assurance. He begins by pronouncing judgment on the nations that border Israel and describes their fate under God's wrath. To the indictment of these pagan neighbors, Israel would give a hearty "amen."

But, without a pause, Amos continues, adding Israel to the list of nations under the condemnation of God. Four chapters lay out the case against Israel: her perversion, her injustice, her arrogance, and her hypocrisy. Israel too would be judged and found wanting.

The book closes with a note of hope. God will fulfill His promise to David. David's line and reign will once again come to Israel.

### *What Does It Say?*

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When the prophecies in this book were delivered to Israel, the land and people of Israel were experiencing great prosperity. They were at a high point in their economic and political life. But they were at a low point in their relationship with God. In fact, they were no better than the pagan nations around them. Amos tells them so.

In the first two chapters, Amos lays out the sins of the pagan nations. Notice that the indictment of each nation begins the same way: "For three sins of Damascus, even for four, I will not relent. Because she . . ." Amos then describes the charges against the nation. He charges Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab, and then, without missing a beat, charges Judah and Israel as well. The clear message is this: Judah and Israel are just like the other nations. And they too are under condemnation.

## *What Does It Say? (cont'd)*

Amos next lays out the detailed case against Israel, focusing attention on the social and economic injustice of the people. He announces their coming exile and describes visions of divine retribution. The judgment section of the book ends with these words: “For I will give the command, and I will shake the people of Israel among all the nations as grain is shaken in a sieve, and not a pebble will reach the ground. All the sinners among my people will die by the sword, all those who say, ‘Disaster will not overtake or meet us’” (Amos 9:9-10).

But because of God’s covenant with David, there will be restoration for the land and God’s people. The book ends with the sure hope of God’s faithfulness to restore David’s reign and establish his kingdom forever.

## *Faces & Places*

The prophet Amos, the author of this book, is identified in the first verse of the book as “one of the shepherds of Tekoa.” Evidence seems to indicate that Amos was not a professional prophet who earned his living from this ministry. Rather he earned his living from his flock and a sycamore-fig grove (1:1; 7:14-15).

In chapter 7, Amos brings charges specifically against one of Israel’s evil kings, Jeroboam. Amaziah, a priest in Israel’s corrupt religion, comes to Jeroboam’s defense and orders Amos to stop prophesying in Israel and return to Judah. Of course, Amos stays and continues to prophesy.

Amos cites two key centers of the Northern Kingdom: Bethel and Samaria. Bethel was one of the primary religious centers of the kingdom, and Samaria was the political capital.

## *Key Verses & Themes*

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### **SOCIAL JUSTICE**

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Amos 5:24: “But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!”

### **JUDGMENT**

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Amos 3:1-2: “Hear this word, people of Israel, the word the LORD has spoken against you—against the whole family I brought out of Egypt: ‘You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins.’”

### **COMPLACENCY**

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Amos 6:1, 4-7: “Woe to you who are complacent in Zion, and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria, you notable men of the foremost nation, to whom the people of Israel come! . . . You lie on beds adorned with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves. You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments. You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph. Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile; your feasting and lounging will end.”

## *Why It Matters*

There is something potentially frightening in Amos, and it is something every Christian needs to face. It is exactly what Israel needed to hear. Amos brought to Israel a warning against spiritual complacency. Israel did all the “religious” things (see 5:21-23). But they did none of the God-pleasing things. They play-acted their religion very nicely. But they did not follow God. They forgot about love, justice, mercy, and compassion. They forgot about obedience to the covenant. They forgot about servanthood and humility and sacrifice of themselves for the blessing of others. In effect, they created their own self-serving religion. They were so blinded with pride they could not see the deceit in their heart. And Amos came to show it to them and call them to repentance.

Read Amos and ask if he is speaking to you. Paul reflects Amos as he writes, “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?” (2 Corinthians 13:5). Is there evidence that Christ is in you?



# OBADIAH

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## *Overview*

**O**badiah is just one chapter in length and consists of a prophecy against the nation of Edom. Edom was a particularly unfriendly neighbor to the southeast of Israel.

Edom had a long history of hostility against Israel, and it delighted in the devastation other foreign powers brought upon the nation. However, their hostility to God's people would ultimately bring God's wrath. Obadiah's message to Edom was simply this: Edom will be destroyed but Israel will be delivered. God's kingdom will triumph.

### *What Does It Say?*

Obadiah is a prophecy against Edom, Israel's neighbor to the southeast. Edom had been hostile toward Israel from the very beginning of Israel's existence. And since the Edomites were related to Israel through Esau (verses 6-12), their hostility was especially objectionable. And not only had Edom exercised violence against Israel, they had also gloated over Israel's devastation by other foreign invaders.

In this little book, Obadiah announces the coming destruction of Edom for her arrogance and ill treatment of Israel. In the day of the Lord, Edom, as well as all of Israel's enemies, will be judged and destroyed. There will be deliverance for Israel, and God's kingdom will be established forever.

The prophet behind this book is Obadiah, whose name means “servant (or worshiper) of the Lord.” His prophecy is directed against the Edomites, those who populate the land of Edom across the southern border of Israel. Attention is drawn to Mount Zion in Jerusalem, which will be delivered through God’s intervention.

### **JUDGMENT OF EDOM**

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Obadiah 1:10: “Because of the violence against your brother Jacob, you will be covered with shame; you will be destroyed forever.”

### **PRIDE**

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Obadiah 1:3: “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?’”

### **THE KINGDOM OF GOD**

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Obadiah 1:21: “Deliverers will go up on Mount Zion to govern the mountains of Esau. And the kingdom will be the LORD’s.”

## *Why It Matters*

There are a surprising number of “So whats?” in this small book written to a pagan nation thousands of years in the past. There is, for instance, a lesson about pride and deception in verse 3. Edom’s heart was so proud that it did not have the humility required to look at itself and see the truth. Are you sometimes too proud to examine your life with full honesty?

Edom was self-absorbed, gloating over its high position and the low position of its neighbor. It found satisfaction in putting others down. Edom can become a picture of what God hates in human behavior.

And this little book of Obadiah reminds us that God will vindicate His own people at the coming day of the Lord. This theme is echoed throughout the New Testament as we are instructed to wait patiently in the midst of trouble for our blessed hope from heaven. In one place, Paul writes: “God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you” (2 Thessalonians 1:6-10).

# JONAH

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## *Overview*

**T**he book of Jonah is known for the story of the prophet Jonah who was swallowed by a large fish. But that fascinating incident is merely one piece of a much larger drama.

In the first section of this book, Jonah was called by God to carry out an assignment. He was to warn Nineveh to repent or be destroyed by God. Nineveh was a dangerous enemy of Israel, and Jonah had no interest in warning the enemy.

In the final section, Jonah was compelled to fulfill his mission because God had compassion on his enemies. In hearing Jonah's call to repentance, Nineveh repented and Jonah was left to observe the grace of God in action.

### *What Does It Say?*

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This book tells the story of the prophet Jonah and a mission from God Jonah desperately wanted to avoid. God commissioned him to preach to the people of Nineveh, an evil, hated, and feared enemy of Israel. Jonah was commanded to preach a message of repentance, calling the people to turn from their sins and avoid the destruction that would come if they did not. Jonah himself preferred they be destroyed, and so he didn't want to bring the warning. In fact, since Nineveh was to the northeast, Jonah ran west and headed to Tarshish, the farthest western point in the known world of Jonah's day.

While en route on a sailing ship to Tarshish, God produced a violent storm to stop Jonah's escape. Jonah ends up in the belly of a fish and then back on the land, reluctantly ready to do what God said. Much to his disappointment, Nineveh listened to his message and repented. Nineveh would not be destroyed. And Jonah was taught a lesson about God's grace to all the nations.

There is only one main character in this short book, the prophet Jonah. He probably ministered as a prophet sometime between 800 and 750 BC, during a time of relative strength for Israel and great disdain for the surrounding powers, like Assyria, whose capital is Nineveh.

Nineveh, the great city to which Jonah was sent, is northeast of Israel on the banks of the Tigris River. Tarshish, the city to which Jonah tried to flee, is probably in present-day Spain. Nineveh and Tarshish were about as far apart as any two cities in the known world, and that was to Jonah's liking!

### **THE COMPASSION OF GOD**

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Jonah 4:2: “He prayed to the LORD, ‘Isn’t this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing 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.’”

Jonah 4:11: “And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”

### **REPENTANCE**

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Jonah 3:7-9: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals 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.”

## *Why It Matters*

A thoughtful reading of Jonah can raise an interesting question. Are we more ready to condemn sinners than God is? While God wanted to show compassion on the people of Nineveh, Jonah wanted their destruction. When God wanted to call them to repentance, Jonah wanted them to remain in their sins and die.

Jonah wanted God to bless his own nation of Israel and nobody else. He was not prepared to love his enemies, even though God was. Are you more like Jonah or more like God? Are you prepared to love your enemies? Are you prepared to pray blessings on your enemies? Are you prepared to act on their behalf? Or would you rather they “get what they deserve”?

God gave the punishment we deserve to Christ, so that He could give us the blessings Christ deserves. Will you take that message to your personal Nineveh?



# MICAH

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## *Overview*

**T**he book called Micah is a message to Jerusalem and Samaria, capitals of the Southern and Northern Kingdoms, respectively. At the time of these prophecies, the Southern Kingdom of Judah had become as unrighteous as their estranged brothers to the north. There was dishonesty in business, sham religion, prophets preaching for money, judges controlled by bribes, and rampant exploitation of the poor.

God had shown them how to live, and they had habitually rejected His ways. Therefore, God would abandon them—but not forever. We find in chapter 5 that a ruler would one day be born in Bethlehem who would bring peace to Israel and all the world. In the closing verses of the book, Micah writes: “But as for me, I watch in hope for the LORD, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me” (Micah 7:7).

### *What Does It Say?*

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Micah’s prophecy alternates between the message of doom and the message of hope. It is a prophecy of judgment followed by deliverance.

Micah stresses God’s hatred of idolatry, injustice, rebellion, and empty ritualism. But God delights in offering pardon to those who repent. God’s requirement is spelled out; the people are “to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). If the people listen and respond, God will restore them. Micah writes: “You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea” (Micah 7:19).

God delivered this message through the prophet Micah. Outside of this book, we know of him also from Jeremiah 26:18. God's message through Micah is directed to both the people of Jerusalem and the people of Samaria. These are the capitals of the Southern and Northern Kingdoms, respectively.

### **THE REQUIREMENT OF GOD**

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Micah 6:8: “He has shown you, O mortal, 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.”

### **THE MERCY OF GOD**

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Micah 7:18: “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy.”

### **THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD**

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Micah 7:9: “Because I have sinned against him, I will bear the LORD’s wrath, until he pleads my case and upholds my cause. He will bring me out into the light; I will see his righteousness.”

## *Why It Matters*

This book of Micah's prophecies were written, along with Isaiah and Amos, during the eighth century BC, a period of political power and economic prosperity for both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. But it was also a time of excessive sin, moral decay, and spiritual decadence. It should be a time in history we can relate to very well.

It seems that just about everyone in Israel was looking out for number one, concerned for their own prosperity at the expense of anyone they could control. We call it "social and economic injustice."

Micah gives us God's response: "Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! At morning's light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it. They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud people of their homes, they rob them of their inheritance. Therefore, the LORD says: 'I am planning disaster against this people, from which you cannot save yourselves. You will no longer walk proudly, for it will be a time of calamity'" (Micah 2:1-3).

Are you in the habit of giving preference to others? Are you in the habit of using what power you have for the good of others or merely yourself? Do you plot ways to bring advantage to yourself because you have the power to do so? Read Micah with yourself in mind. Do you act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God?

# NAHUM

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## *Overview*

**N**ahum is a prophetic address to Nineveh, capital of Assyria. The city had temporarily averted destruction by repenting under the preaching of Jonah, but had since reverted to its former ways of extreme wickedness, brutality, and pride. Their destruction was certain and imminent.

God used the Babylonians, the Medes, and the Scythians to overthrow Nineveh and to carry out His sovereign judgment in 612 BC, soon after Nahum's message had been delivered.

### *What Does It Say?*

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Nineveh, the capital city of the dreaded Assyrian Empire, is the subject of Nahum's prophecy. Nahum announced the coming destruction of Nineveh, a mighty and feared enemy of Judah. Assyria had already carried off the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and held Judah hostage through the payment of tribute, but Judah was now assured that the Assyrian threat to their Southern Kingdom was over.

Nahum's prophecy describes Nineveh's overthrow and Judah's joy. Though Nineveh had once stood as a great and glorious city, she would now come to nothing under the mighty hand of God.

God's prophetic spokesman behind this book is Nahum. Nahum, which means "comfort" or "consolation," is a shortened form of Nehemiah, meaning "comfort of Yahweh." The prophecy was delivered to the people of Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, as well as the people of Judah.

### **THE JUDGMENT OF NINEVEH**

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Nahum 3:5-7: “‘I am against you,’ declares the LORD Almighty. ‘I will lift your skirts over your face. I will show the nations your nakedness and the kingdoms your shame. I will pelt you with filth, I will treat you with contempt and make you a spectacle. All who see you will flee from you and say, “Nineveh is in ruins—who will mourn for her?” Where can I find anyone to comfort you?’”

Nahum 1:7-9: “The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him, but with an overwhelming flood he will make an end of Nineveh; he will pursue his foes into the realm of darkness. Whatever they plot against the LORD he will bring to an end; trouble will not come a second time.”

### **THE RESTORATION OF ISRAEL**

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Nahum 2:2: “The LORD will restore the splendor of Jacob like the splendor of Israel, though the destroyers have laid them waste and have ruined their vines.”

## *Why It Matters*

God brought down Edom, as prophesied in Obadiah, and God brought down the mighty Assyrians, as prophesied here in Nahum. Both were indicted for the sin of pride and arrogance. Anyone who remains arrogant and resists God's authority will face His anger. We read in 1 Peter 5:5 that "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." Nahum stands as a testimony to the cost of pride.

Nahum is also a reminder that no power can stand against the power of God. The Assyrian army was among the most feared conquering machines ever known to mankind. Yet they stood no chance against the God of the universe. God alone could rescue Judah, and He alone can rescue you from any power, great or small. You can place your confidence in God, because He alone is the ruler of all history, all nations, all people—everything.



# HABAKKUK

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## *Overview*

**H**abakkuk is unique in that it is not an oracle to Israel or to any other nation. Rather, it is the record of a conversation between the prophet Habakkuk and God.

In the first two chapters, Habakkuk argued with God over His ways that seemed unjust and even unfathomable. But having heard the replies from God, Habakkuk learned that the just must live by faith. There is a beautiful confession of that faith recorded in chapter 3.

### *What Does It Say?*

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Habakkuk was troubled by what he saw around him, especially in his own land of Judah. This prophecy is an honest expression of Habakkuk's thoughts and God's answers. First, Habakkuk is concerned that the evil in Judah goes unpunished. God responds by telling Habakkuk that Judah will be punished by the Babylonians. Habakkuk then asks God how He can use such an evil nation as Babylon to be His tool to punish evil. God answers that Babylon will also be punished for its evil. But while evil will be punished, God tells Habakkuk that the faithful will receive mercy and be rewarded. Habakkuk finally confesses his full trust and joy in God regardless of the present circumstances.

The prophet Habakkuk lived in Judah toward the end of King Josiah's reign (640–609 BC) or at the beginning of the reign of King Jehoiakim (609–598 BC). He was a contemporary of Jeremiah. While this book relates a conversation between Habakkuk and God, its audience is the people of Judah. Mentioned in the book are the Babylonians, the great power to the north that would be used by God to punish sinful Judah.

### **PERPLEXITY WITH THE WAY THINGS ARE**

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Habakkuk 1:2-4: “How long, 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 wrongdoing? 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.”

### **FAITH**

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Habakkuk 2:4: “See, the enemy is puffed up; his desires are not upright—but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness.”

### **JOY IN THE LORD**

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Habakkuk 3:17-19: “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.”

## *Why It Matters*

Habakkuk is an expression of honest perplexity. As in the Psalms, in this book we see a man who comes to God with his real thoughts and feelings. It is a reminder to us that God is ready, willing, and able to hear our questions and concerns, whatever they may be. And we must be ready to receive His answers. Habakkuk heard God's answers and responded with unbridled faith. As this book comes to a close (3:17-19), Habakkuk expresses his unqualified joy in the Lord, without regard to circumstances, however perplexing they may be.

# ZEPHANIAH

## *Overview*

**T**he great day of the LORD is near—near and coming quickly. The cry on the day of the LORD is bitter . . . . 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” (Zephaniah 1:14-15). With these words, Zephaniah warned Judah and all the nations of the coming day of judgment, the day of the Lord.

The prophecies of Zephaniah are a passionate cry for repentance, to avert the wrath that will come upon the sinner when God makes all things right and brings justice to the earth at the day of the Lord.

In Zephaniah, as is common in the other prophetic books, though Israel will be severely disciplined, God’s chosen nation will not forever be lost or destroyed. A remnant will be preserved who will humble themselves before God and worship Him with all their hearts.

### *What Does It Say?*

Zephaniah’s prophecy begins with a grim statement of God’s plans to “sweep away everything from the face of the earth” (1:2). Zephaniah is a book of judgment upon Israel and upon all the nations of the earth.

The judgment of Judah is described, followed by the judgment of Philistia, Moab, Ammon, and other surrounding nations. The great day of the Lord will be a worldwide event. It will bring untold disaster on all those who do not repent.

But Zephaniah tells us of a remnant of people who do, in fact, remain true to their God. Through these people, God will restore the fortunes of His chosen people. There will be great rejoicing in the city of Jerusalem as the nation is restored.

Zephaniah served as a prophet to Judah from about 640–621 BC during the reign of King Josiah, the last good king of Judah. His message was delivered to the people of Judah, but he addressed the future of many other nations, including Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Cush, and Assyria. As the capital of Judah, Jerusalem is mentioned several times.

## *Key Verses & Themes*

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### **THE DAY OF THE LORD**

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Zephaniah 1:14: “The great day of the LORD is near—near and coming quickly. The cry on the day of the LORD is bitter; the Mighty Warrior shouts his battle cry.”

Zephaniah 2:3: “Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the LORD’s anger.”

### **THE REMNANT**

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Zephaniah 3:12-13: “But I will leave within you the meek and humble. The remnant of Israel will trust in the name of the LORD. They will do no wrong; they will speak no lies. A deceitful tongue will not be found in their mouths. They will eat and lie down and no one will make them afraid.”

### **RESTORATION**

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Zephaniah 3:20: “At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home. I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes.”

## *Why It Matters*

If there is any doubt that universal and complete disaster will sweep across the entire world because of sin, if there is any doubt that the “end of the world” will one day come upon us, the book of Zephaniah should remove that doubt. No one will escape, not even one, except those who repent and follow God. We know from the clear teaching of the New Testament that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (see Romans 8:1). This is because our condemnation was already transferred to Jesus when He died in our place. But all those who are not sheltered in Jesus will know the fury of God’s wrath when the world as we know it comes to an end.



# HAGGAI

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## Overview

**T**he last three books of the Old Testament—Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi—take us past the destruction of Judah and Israel, past the period of exile, to the time of resettlement in the Promised Land and the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. It is the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. In fact, Ezra 5:1-2 describes how the prophets Haggai and Zechariah helped the people rebuild God’s temple.

The book of Haggai deals with God’s desire that His temple be rebuilt and with the people’s reluctance to rebuild it. Haggai’s message was a call from God for the people to change their priorities and be encouraged by the glory and blessings of God.

### *What Does It Say?*

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Next to Obadiah, Haggai is the shortest book in the Old Testament. It has one specific purpose: to call the people of Judah to complete the rebuilding of the temple. Haggai reminds the people of the consequences of disobedience and obedience. He shows them that when they give priority to God and His temple, they are blessed and not cursed. When they are obedient, they receive the encouragement and strength of the Spirit of God.

Haggai also tells the people about the coming of the Messiah. When He comes He will bring judgment on the nations, but He will come to Israel and fill the temple with His glory.

Because of Haggai’s encouragement and the leadership of fellow prophet Zechariah and governor Zerubbabel, the temple was successfully completed in Jerusalem.

Haggai and Zechariah are the two prophets commissioned by God to exhort the people to rebuild the temple after their return from exile. Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are the only three post-exilic prophets.

Mentioned in this book are Zerubbabel, the governor over the people in Judah, and Joshua, the high priest (of no relation to the Joshua who guided Israel after the death of Moses).

The location for Haggai's prophecy is Jerusalem. The words of this book were delivered in Jerusalem to Jerusalem.

### **PRIORITIES**

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Haggai 1:4: “Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?”

### **REBUILDING OF THE TEMPLE**

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Haggai 1:7-8: “This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,’ says the LORD.”

### **THE GLORY OF THE TEMPLE**

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Haggai 2:7-9: “‘I will shake all nations, and what is desired by 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.”

## *Why It Matters*

While the physical task of rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem is not ours to do, the issues that hindered the people from their God-given task will sound very contemporary.

Of central concern were priorities. The people were fully content to enjoy their finely finished homes without regard for the house of God that stood in ruins. They could be easily motivated by the pursuit of their own comforts but not by the building of God's house and the anticipation of God's glory.

They also seemed to feel there was no particular value in doing this "spiritual" work. Nothing would really change whether the temple was built or not.

Do these excuses sound familiar? God says, "Give careful thought to your ways" (Haggai 1:5) because the consequences of this attitude are significant. Do you need to check your priorities? Do you know the significance of your God-given tasks? God will work through your work for your joy and His glory.

# ZECHARIAH

## *Overview*

**Z**echariah was written, along with the book of Haggai, to encourage the people to rebuild the temple after their return from exile. The people were lacking in spiritual commitment as well as vision for the future of Israel under God. They were disloyal as well as discouraged.

Zechariah calls the people to repentance and gives them a vision for the future. He tells them of the future importance of the temple. It will be inhabited by God and filled with His glory. When the Messiah comes, it will be His place of dwelling.

### *What Does It Say?*

Following an impassioned call to repentance and obedience, Zechariah moves to a series of night visions he received from the Lord. These visions describe the judgment of Israel's enemies, the blessings to come to Jerusalem, and the need for God's people to remain pure. The visions provided hope for the people who would stand with God.

This book was intended to encourage the people to complete their work on God's temple in Jerusalem. But Zechariah told them that the Lord would not return as soon as they were finished. Rather, Israel would suffer great difficulty from the nations of the world before the day of the Lord's coming to judge the nations and establish God's glorious kingdom on the earth.

God's spokesman for these prophecies is Zechariah, who ministered during the time of the Jewish restoration from Babylonian captivity. Zechariah, like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, had the dual roles of prophet and priest.

The same high priest, Joshua, mentioned in Haggai is also mentioned several times in this book.

Zechariah's prophecies are given from and to the city of Jerusalem.

### **THE COMING MESSIAH**

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Zechariah 9:9-10: “Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the warhorses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.”

### **THE DAY OF THE LORD**

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Zechariah 14:4: “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.” (See also 2:11; 3:10; 12:3-4, 6, 8-9, 11; 13:1-2, 4; 14:6, 8-9, 13, 20-21.)

### **REBUILDING THE TEMPLE**

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Zechariah 8:9: “This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Now hear these words, “Let your hands be strong so that the temple may be built.” This is also what the prophets said who were present when the foundation was laid for the house of the LORD Almighty.’”

## *Why It Matters*

The book of Zechariah provides the most complete and dramatic description in the Minor Prophets of the final triumph of God over the evil forces of the earth. It is an awesome picture of God gathering the enemy armies together for one destructive blow that will destroy them forever. It is a prophetic record of the final inning of the game when a decisive victory is assured. It ought to bring us courage and hope that justice will prevail and God will triumph.

It should also bring us hope and comfort to know that God controls the future. It is never out of His hands. He asks us to trust Him and remain obedient to His will no matter what the present or the future may look like to us. We only see the moment and have very little control. He knows the future and has total control.



# MALACHI

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## Overview

**M**alachi probably was written about eighty years after the prophets Haggai and Zechariah encouraged the people to rebuild the temple of God in Jerusalem. But times were hard. The glory of Israel had not been restored. And sin and empty religion were rampant among the leaders and the people who followed them.

In his prophecies, Malachi first rebuked the priests who were dishonoring God with their sacrifices and leading the people astray with their teaching. He then rebuked the people who had broken their commitment with God and were entering into marriage with idol worshipers. The book of Malachi (and the Old Testament) closes with the reminder that the people need a redeemer—one who will come from God and save His people.

### *What Does It Say?*

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Malachi was faced with a disillusioned people. Even though the temple had been built some eighty years earlier, Israel remained a weak and insignificant little nation. There was no prosperity, no glory, no messianic reign establishing Jerusalem as the center of the world's attention. The people were wondering if all the prophets had been feeding them a line. God himself seems somewhat of a letdown, even unjust.

Malachi's assignment was to recharge these people and straighten out their thinking and their lives. Malachi begins by affirming God's covenant love for Israel and then sets out to rebuke their unfaithfulness. He first addresses the unfaithfulness of the priests, who were the leaders and teachers of the people. Then he rebukes the unfaithful people. He tells them that the Lord really is going to return. He will purify the priesthood, and He will judge the people. Malachi calls them to respond with repentance. He closes this short four-chapter book, and the final book of the Old Testament, by announcing the day of the Lord.

Malachi was the last of the prophets of God until the coming of John the Baptist. His message was to the priests of the people and to the people themselves. No specific individuals are mentioned. At the close of the book, the prophet Elijah is prophesied to appear prior to the coming of the Lord. These prophecies were delivered from Jerusalem to the residents of that city.

### **THE DAY OF THE LORD**

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Malachi 4:1-2: “‘Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and the 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 rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves.’”

### **THE PROPHET ELIJAH TO COME**

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Malachi 4:5-6: “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.”

### **THE APPEAL TO RETURN**

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Malachi 3:7-9: “‘Ever since the time of your ancestors 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?” Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, “How are we robbing you?” In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me.’”

## *Why It Matters*

Malachi was intended to be a spiritual wake-up call to the people of Israel. Life was quite mundane and the glorious promises of God were not coming true. Walking by faith and not by sight was not very exciting to these discouraged people.

It is easy to relate. The Bible tells us that Christ will return and set all things right. He will vindicate the godly and punish the wicked. He will prove himself God to all the people. But we continue to wait and wait and wait. We do not see what has been promised. Peter writes about this in 2 Peter 3:3-18. He tells us that people will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation” (3:4).

But Peter tells us to be patient, for the day of the Lord will, in fact, come. And because of that fact, we ought to live holy and godly lives as we look forward to that day. Since we are looking forward to His coming, we should make every effort to be found spotless, blameless, and at peace with Him when He arrives.