

A  
VERY BRIEF  
SUMMARY  
OF  
THE WHOLE BIBLE

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## A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

In 2011 I had the idea to read through the whole Bible one book a week. It was kind of a crazy idea inspired by the book 66 Love Letters by Larry Crabb that I had read the year before. The idea was that we would read a whole book of the Bible in one week and listen to what God had to say to us along the way. Getting through books like Genesis, Isaiah and Jeremiah in one week was quite a challenge (we did Psalms over three weeks). On the other hand, books like Ruth, Obadiah and most of the NT were a breeze to get through in one week. In order to help people with the reading I wrote a brief summary of each book of the Bible that was a part of that week's bulletin. There was nothing original about these summaries but they gave a quick overview of what each book was about. As we begin reading through the Bible again in 2015 it was suggested to me that the summaries I wrote earlier might be of help again as we read together.

So I have compiled them together in the booklet. While we are not reading the Bible straight through as we did in 2011, I have left the summaries in the order that the Bible is written. Hopefully it will not be too much trouble to hop back and forth as the schedule for this year dictates. But keep in mind that the summaries were originally written sequentially and at times I make reference to what was written before. There are certainly better and more scholarly works out there that give you overviews of each book of the Bible but I doubt you can find many that are shorter.

The goal of this brief summary is to give you an introduction to each book of the Bible that gives you something of the historical background and sets each book in its context in relation to the rest of the Bible. It is helpful to remember that the Bible is not written chronologically but topically. These summaries give some indication of the groupings and the transitions from one to another.

Finally, I suggest ideas and questions to help you listen to what God might want to say to you in each book. I believe the Bible is living and active (Heb 4:12 ) and that the Spirit continues to speak to us through the Word. That is hard to imagine in some parts of the Bible but we need to read expectantly. Assume God wants to say something to you and listen for when he does. The goal is not just to get through the book but to get to know the God the book reveals. No matter how many times we read all 66 love letters, we are able to hear new things from the lover of our souls.

# THE OLD TESTAMENT

## GENESIS

The best place to start any story is at the beginning. God begins his story at the very beginning. “In the beginning God . . .” Before anything was, God was already there. And then God decided to create, not randomly or by chance but with purpose and direction. From the beginning of the story God tells us he has a plan and that we have meaning and purpose.

Genesis is not just the beginning of the universe but the beginning of many things. We are told about the beginning of marriage and family. Tragically, it is not long before we see the beginning of sin and death. Sin becomes so great that God wipes out mankind with a flood but then we see a new beginning with Noah and his family. From there we have the beginning of languages and nations. Abraham enters the story and we have the beginnings of the Jews and the nation of Israel. We also see in Genesis the beginning of covenants – God’s way of inviting people to make an agreement with him and enter into a lasting relationship.

The first 11 chapters of Genesis deal with general history. Then in chapter 12 the focus narrows down to one man and his descendants. God promises Abraham to make him into a great nation and bless all the nations through him. The problem is that Abraham has no children. We find that problem continues through Genesis with Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel. Along with the difficulty in giving birth, notice how often the younger is accepted over the older: Abel over Cain, Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Joseph over his brothers, Ephraim over Manasseh. God seems to be telling us something about special births and not choosing who we might expect in Genesis.

Genesis is divided into sections by the phrase “This is the account of . . .” The phrase is repeated 8 times but the main ones are: the account of the heavens and earth (2:4-6:8), the account of Noah (6:1-9:28), the account of Terah [Abraham] (11:27-25:11), the account of Abraham’s son Isaac [Jacob] (25:19-35:29) and the account of Jacob [Joseph] (37:1-50:26). As you read, notice how God interacts and responds to individuals.

Finally, as you read Genesis try to think about who it was written for and why. Genesis was written by Moses for the people of Israel who had come out of slavery in Egypt. Egypt was full of gods but Genesis was written to tell them about the God, the one true God who rescued them. As you read, think about what the stories would have told the Israelites about God. For that matter, think about what the stories tell you about God.

God has given us his Word, including Genesis, to reveal himself and to make himself known to us. So listen for what God has to say to you in Genesis. Don’t let familiarity with the stories keep you from hearing what God has to say to you right now. To help fight against that, I encourage you to use a different version of the Bible than you usually do. Eugene Peterson’s The Message is a great way to shake things up. If nothing else I highly recommend the introductions that he writes at the beginning of each book. The key thing, regardless of the version you use, is what is God saying to you right now through what he wrote so long ago? Listen and learn so you can draw near to the God who is the Creator of all things.

## EXODUS

As the title would indicate, the book of Exodus is about leaving. Genesis ends with the 12 sons of Jacob and their families in Egypt having been rescued from 7 years of famine by Joseph. When Exodus begins, 400 years have passed and the 70 people who went to Egypt (Gen 46:27) now number in the millions. But the Israelites are no longer the guests of Pharaoh, now they are his slaves. God has been silent for a long time but now he is going to act on behalf of this people (Ex. 2:23-25). As we read through the Bible, notice the long periods when God is completely silent.

God is going to bring salvation to his people; he is going to rescue them. But God does not act alone. He never does, he always involves others in his plan. This time, the main person God uses is Moses. Moses is an unlikely hero, as he himself tries to point out to God. Though Moses is reluctant, God is ready. God is going to turn a group of slaves into a holy nation.

Exodus divides nicely into two parts. The first part, chapters 1-19, deals with Moses bringing the Israelites out of Egypt after 10 plagues sent by God and leading the people through the dried up Red Sea to Mt. Sinai. In the second half (20-40) God gives the new nation the laws that are to govern them. The main focus of this section is the plans for the tabernacle and then the tabernacle being built.

Exodus deals with two critical questions that everyone grapples with. They are both asked by Moses in Exodus 3. The first question is “Who am I” (3:11)? The second, more important question is “Who are you” (3:13)? God’s answer is **I AM WHO I AM** (3:14). The rest of Exodus, and really the whole Bible, is written to help us understand what that answer means. At least 11 times in Exodus God tells Moses what he is going to do and says, “then they will know that I am the LORD.” God wants to do far more than get his people out of Egypt; he wants them to know him and dwell with him. That is the point of the tabernacle. Moses sets up a tent outside the camp to meet with God but when the tabernacle is built, it is set up in the center of the camp. God’s desire is to live among his people.

There is a third question implied by Exodus – What good is God? When Moses returns to Egypt, they worship the LORD (4:31) but when Moses’ demands to Pharaoh result in a command to make bricks without straw, the Israelites are not interested in Moses’ good news of God working for them (6:9). Is God to be trusted when things don’t work the way we want? For Pharaoh, the question becomes will disasters cause you to listen to God? You would think the plagues would get his attention but relief from suffering only brought a hard heart (8:15). We also expect the Israelites to learn a great deal about the LORD from the plagues but they seem to have short memories and fickle hearts. In 14:11, when the Egyptian army is bearing down on them, they accuse Moses and ultimately God of bringing them out of Egypt to die. In 15:3, after Pharaoh’s army is drowned in the Sea, the Israelites declare that “the LORD is a warrior” who fights for them. But the lesson is still not learned and before chapter 15 is ended, the grumbling begins again.

As you read Exodus, pay attention to these questions: Who am I? Who is the LORD? Can I really trust him? Listen to what God has to say to you through the design of the tabernacle and the willingness of the people to build it. Ask God to show you how you fit into the story that he began telling so long ago.

Note: In most English translations of the Bible the word “LORD,” in all capitals, is the translation of the Hebrew term YHWH or I AM from Exodus 3:14.

## LEVITICUS

The book of Leviticus feels like it starts in the middle with the end left out. Exodus covers the time from when the Israelites were slaves in Egypt through being set free and going to Mt. Sinai. The book of Numbers takes them from Mt. Sinai to the edge of the Promised Land. Leviticus comes in between the two.

Leviticus is mainly instructions to the priests. Priests and those who served in the Tabernacle were only from the tribe of Levi, hence the name Leviticus. It is full of laws and regulations that describe how the Levites were to work so that the Israelites will be clean and holy.

Leviticus is a hard read. There is little story and mostly descriptions of sacrifices and laws that have little to do with us. This “love letter” does not seem very romantic. As you read, you are liable to keep asking questions like, “Why is this here?” and “Why is this important?” The key to Leviticus is wrapped up in the word holy, it is a word that shows up more than 70 times in the book.

Holy has to do with being set apart, different and unique. We tend to use the word holy only in a religious context. But for the nation of Israel being holy, being unique among other nations, touched everything that they did. It went far beyond their sacrifices to the clothes they wore, the way they planted their crops and their diets. The critical passage for understanding Leviticus comes in 11:44-45 at the end of a chapter about what they can eat and not eat. Why does it matter what they eat? Is it because the diet God demands is healthier? No, it is because they are to be holy, different.

Being holy is hard work. Just imagine the challenge of remaining “clean” as defined by Leviticus. Being clean was critical because if you were “unclean” you were excluded from the community and from worshiping the LORD. And what about all those sacrifices? Can you imagine cutting up and burning animals all day while sprinkling their blood all over the place? It makes me glad I am not a priest. It is too messy and too dangerous. Just ask Nadab and Abihu (see chapter 10, a most unsettling story). Besides I like bacon too much.

Because of Jesus we do not need the sacrifices of Leviticus any more. Through Jesus and his one-time sacrifice we enter the most holy place by a new and living way with freedom and confidence (Heb. 10:19-22). Leviticus always looks ahead to the sacrifices that will be done to make the people holy. Today we look back to how Jesus has made us holy. We are still called to be a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God (1 Pet 2:4-5). But we do not do that to become holy but because Christ’s holiness has been given to us.

As you read Leviticus, ask God to show you what he has for you in this strange book. Keep reading and try to see the big picture.

## NUMBERS

The fourth book of the Bible gets its name from the fact that all the men of military age are “numbered” or counted both at the beginning and end of the book. A better title might be, “How an Eleven Day Journey Turned into a Forty Year Disaster in the Wilderness.” Admittedly, “Numbers” is more concise.

After spending a year at Mt. Sinai, in which the Israelites receive God’s law and build the Tabernacle (covered in Ex and Lev), God is ready to lead his people to the Promised Land. The people are organized and given marching orders. Their portable worship center, the Tabernacle

is carried by Levites with very specific assignments given to different clans. God's presence is seen in a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night. When the pillar moves, the people move. When it stops, the people stop. The band of slaves that came out of Egypt has been formed into an organized nation with a powerful army.

It is a relatively short trip from Mt. Sinai, or Horeb as it is sometimes called, to Kadesh Barnea, at the southern end of the land (Deut 1:2). Yet the people complained all the way. Even Aaron and Miriam give Moses a hard time.

When they arrive at the border 12 spies, one from each tribe, are sent out to explore the land. After forty days of wandering through the countryside, enjoying the produce of the land and sizing up the cities, the spies return. They report that the land is good; it did indeed "flow with milk and honey." But ten of the spies said that the people of the land were too powerful and the Israelites could not conquer them. Two, Caleb and Joshua, said they could conquer the land.

Remember that one of the great questions from Exodus was "Is the LORD good?" The message of the ten spies was the LORD is not really good and we cannot trust him in the face of such big enemies. They go so far as to say that God intentionally brought them there to be killed and their wives and children taken as plunder. Their conclusion, despite all they had seen in the last year, was that God was not only not to be trusted but he was evil. Caleb and Joshua, on the other hand, trusted that God was good and that they would defeat their enemies, regardless of their size, if the people would trust in him.

The Israelites side with the ten spies over Caleb and Joshua and rebel against the LORD. The punishment for that rebellion is that the Israelites would wander in the wilderness for 40 years until everyone over the age of twenty dies out. Only Caleb and Joshua would make it to the land God had promised. Not even Moses would cross the Jordan River.

Toward the end of the book there are some victories over nations who lived on the east side of the Jordan River (the land God promised was on the west side). The ease of those victories and the total destruction of their enemies were a bitter sweet reminder of what God would have done for them if they trusted him forty years earlier. After one battle the generals report to Moses that not a single man has been lost (Num 31:49). When they left Mt. Sinai there were 603,550 men. Forty years later all from that generation were dead but two.

## **DEUTERONOMY**

The title Deuteronomy comes from a Greek translation of the OT and literally means "second law." It is not so much a second law as a repeating of the law to a new generation. More accurately it is Moses' sermon on the law.

The years of wandering in the wilderness are over. The generation that rebelled in the desert has died out and a new generation stands at the border of the Promised Land. Moses, who has faithfully led the people for forty years, is about to die. God is not allowing him to enter the land. But before Moses dies he addresses the nation of Israel one last time. That is the book of Deuteronomy, Moses' last message to the Israelites before he dies.

In that message he reminds them of where they have been, encourages them for where they are going but mostly calls them to trust and obey God. At times Moses sounds angry and frustrated. He has put up with a lot from these people over forty years. At other times he is hopeful as he speaks of great blessing. But mostly he is inviting; inviting a new generation to trust God in a way that the previous generation did not.

The structure of Deuteronomy follows the patterns of ancient treaties. They were called vassal treaties where a king (or suzerain) made a treaty with a vassal country explaining the terms of their relationship. There were basically five parts to these treaties that can be seen in Deuteronomy.

1. A Preamble (Deut 1:1-4)
2. A Historic Prologue – a history of the king’s dealings with the vassal. Moses recounts the history of leaving Mt. Sinai or Horeb, sending out the spies, the subsequent rebellion, wandering in the desert and the nations conquered on the east side of the Jordan (Deut 1:5-4:43)
3. General Stipulations – a call to whole hearted allegiance to the king and his commands. Here Moses repeats the critical part of the Law including the Ten Commandments (Deut 4:44-11:32)
4. Specific Stipulations – detailed laws by which the vassal state could give concrete expression of its allegiance to the king. Here Moses mainly gives instructions about the Tabernacle and sacrifices (Deut. chapters 12-26)
5. Blessings and Curses – for obedience and disobedience of the treaty. Moses gives specifics of how God will bless them if they obey but also the curses that will follow disobedience (Deut. chapters 27-28).<sup>1</sup>

Though this treaty structure sounds strange to us, the people of Israel would have been familiar with it. The Israelites had to understand that they were tenants in God’s land.

Much of what you read in Deuteronomy you will have read previously in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. Why is this so important that God repeats it? What is God saying to you in this “second law”?

## **JOSHUA**

Before you start to read Joshua you should go back and read Exodus 23:20-33. That passage not only is fulfilled in Joshua but it explains what happens in Joshua. God promised to bring his people to a land “flowing with milk and honey.” As the book of Joshua begins, after a 40 year detour, the people stand at the brink of the Promised Land. But there is a problem, the land is inhabited. To enter the land will require a fight.

Moses is dead but now his faithful aid, Joshua, is in charge. The great challenge for Joshua is to be strong and courageous. He is told that 3 times in Deuteronomy 31 and three times in Joshua 1. To fight God’s battle requires great strength and courage. The victory is assured but it will not be easy.

The first half of Joshua is about conquering the land (ch 1-11). The second half is about dividing up the land among the 12 tribes of Israel (ch 12-24). It takes 6 chapters just to get to the first and best known battle for the city of Jericho. That tells us that preparation for the battle is as important as the battle itself. Also, for a book about battles, there is very little detail about the battles themselves. We are reminded that the battle within is as critical as the enemies in the land.

One man lost the battle within and, as a result, many were lost in the battle of Ai. Achan’s sin in chapter 7 reminds us that sin is not a private matter but that it affects the whole community. The first battle of Ai is the only defeat recorded in the account of the conquest. It is

also interesting that it is the only time that there is a record of Israelite casualties in the whole book.

There is a lot of geography covered in this book and it would be helpful to have a map of Israel nearby as you read. If your Bible has maps in the back, it is likely that one of them is a map of the land divided among the twelve tribes. Another thing that might be helpful as you go along is to understand that the kings named in this book are not kings of nations but of city-states. A city-state is a major city and the area around it controlled by one ruler. There was no central government in the region at that time, only loosely held coalitions between the kings of the city-states. That made it easier for the Israelites to come in and take over.

One thing we struggle with as we read Joshua is all the people, including women and children, who are wiped out as Israel conquers the land. It is hard for us to imagine the violence and bloodshed encompassed by this book. Much has been written about this, far more than I can share in this short summary. However, I think it is helpful to remember that God waited more than 400 years to bring judgment on those nations (see Gen 15:13-16). Also in the midst of all the carnage there are incidents of grace, like Rahab (ch 2), who shows up in the genealogy of Jesus, and the Gibeonites (ch 9), who led to the greatest miracle in the book. Ultimately, we have to acknowledge that this did happen under God's command. Then we have to struggle with the questions: does God know what he is doing and is God still good?

That is how the book ends. Much like Deuteronomy, Joshua challenges the people to choose whom they will serve. Will they serve YHWH or the gods of the nations around them? It is a choice every generation faces.

## JUDGES

The book of Judges gives the history of Israel from the end of the conquest and the death of Joshua's generation to the beginning of monarchy. It covers a period of almost 400 years. The leaders of Israel during that period were the judges, hence the title of the book.

A few important things to remember as you read Judges. First off, you should understand that the judges of ancient Israel were not like the judges we have in our courts today. Yes, they would hear court cases (Jud 4:4-5) but they did much more. In the book of Judges they are mainly presented as military heroes. Another important thing to remember is that the judges were tribal leaders and not national leaders. Sometimes tribes would band together against common enemies but the judges were limited in their governing. That points to part of the purpose of the book – to show the need for a centralized government. The phrase that is repeated in the closing chapters of the book is, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit." Judges shows the need for a king.

It was everyone doing as he saw fit that caused the problem. The book of Judges is summed up by a repeating pattern that is explained in 2:10-19 which speaks of a 6 step cycle. 1) "The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD." They abandoned God to worship the false gods of the nations around them. 2) "The LORD handed them over" to their enemies to be plundered and abused. This was generally not the whole nation but regions and tribes. 3) "The Israelites groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them." In their pain they turn back to the LORD for help. 4) "Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out the hands of" their enemies. The judge would lead the people to a great military victory and push back the enemies. 5) During the judge's lifetime the people followed God and experienced his blessing. 6) "But

when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers.” And the cycle started over, only worse than before.

There are 12 named judges in the book and extended stories about 6 of them. As you read the book, you will find these heroes are not all that heroic. Like the people, the judges seem to get worse as the book goes on. The last one is Sampson, a sad picture of a wasted life. Chosen from before his birth to be a great leader, Sampson fritters away his great strength on acts of vengeance. Yet we find out at the end of his account that he ruled or judged for 20 years (16:31).

The final chapters of the book (17-21) are some of the most violent and discouraging in the entire Bible. In those chapters the land no longer flows with “milk and honey” but with the blood of the Israelites shed by their fellow Israelites in civil war. To put this in perspective, the bloodiest single day of our Civil War was the Battle of Antietam, Sep. 17, 1862. The losses from both the Union and Confederate armies were 3,620. A year later the Battle of Gettysburg raged for 3 days from July 1-3. In that battle over 46,000 soldiers were killed, wounded, captured or missing. Judges 20 describes a three day battle where 22,000 Israelites are cut down the first day, 18,000 the second and on the third day the whole tribe of Benjamin is wiped out except for 600 men. How they decide to provide wives for those men is even more incredible. But that is what happens when there was “no king in the land and everyone did as he saw fit.”

## **RUTH**

The book of Ruth is a refreshing oasis in the desert of the period of the judges. If you go straight from the end of Judges into Ruth, you may well ask yourself, “Where did these people come from?”

It is easy to figure out where the title of Ruth comes from, although it could be argued that the main character of the book is really Naomi. Naomi is a woman who goes from bitterness to joy. She assumed that the LORD had abandoned her but found out she still had a vital role to play in God’s plan.

The story begins with Naomi, her husband and her sons going to Moab on the east side of the Jordan River during a time of famine. In Moab the sons marry Moabite women and settle down to wait out the bad times back home. But then Naomi’s husband dies and later the two sons. Hearing that “the LORD had come to the aid of his people” the three widows start out to return to Israel. On the way, Naomi realizes that she has nothing to offer her daughter-in-laws and urges them to return to their homes. Reluctantly one of them is talked into going back. But Ruth refuses. Ruth declares that Naomi’s people would be her people and, more significantly, Naomi’s God would be her God.

Up to this point Ruth has not seen much to make her trust in the LORD; the family comes during a time of famine and then all the men die. Yet Ruth is adamant. For some reason she is determined to stay with Naomi and depend on her God. Naomi is not so sure. When the unlikely pair arrives back at the family home in Bethlehem, Naomi declares a name change to Mara or bitter. She went away full but returns bitter.

The third main character of the book is Boaz, a man who scrupulously keeps the law. This is seen in him letting the poor glean in his fields and protecting them as they do. Most significantly Boaz is the kinsman redeemer. If anyone from poverty was unable to redeem his inheritance, it was the duty of the kinsman to redeem it (Le 25: 25, 28; Ru 3:9, 12). He was also required to redeem his relation who had sold himself into slavery (Le 25:48-49). As Boaz takes care of and

ultimately loves Ruth, he becomes of picture of Jesus Christ who is our redeemer who paid the price to free us from the slavery of sin.

The rest of the story is how Ruth's faith is found to be valid and how Naomi learns that the LORD has not stopped showing kindness to the living and the dead. As you read, pay attention to Naomi's statements and how they change over the course of the book. God has a plan and these two widows are a critical part of his story. In the end we learn that even a Moabite woman can be in the line of David and, ultimately, in the genealogy of Jesus (Mt 1:5-6).

## 1 SAMUEL

The book of 1 Samuel deals with the transition from the period of judges ruling in Israel to the time of kings. The early chapters sound much like the book of Judges with wicked leaders exploiting their power - in this case the sons of Eli who are priests, and the enemies of Israel continuing to overpower them. At this time their main enemy is the Philistines, a coalition of 5 powerful city-states located along the Mediterranean coast. The powerlessness of the Israelites is seen when the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of the LORD's presence is captured. The Ark proves to be more than the Philistines can handle as it is soon returned. But it turns out the Israelites cannot handle it either.

1 Samuel tells the story of three significant men in Israel's history, Samuel, Saul and David. Samuel is the son of godly Hannah who pleaded that the LORD would give her a son but then gives that preschool aged son over to the ungodly Eli to be raised. God reveals himself to Samuel at a young age and he grows up to be the last judge and the first prophet. When Samuel is old, his sons prove to be unfaithful. The people do not want more wicked judges and ask for a king instead.

This is a critical turning point in Israelite history. The people see the need for a central government with a standing army to defend against the enemies that have tormented them for so long. But God sees the request for a king as a rejection of himself, the true king of Israel (Deut 33:5, Ex 15:18). The idea of a king was not a new one. It was part of God's promise to Abraham, the Law made provision for a king and, oddly enough, Hannah spoke of a king (Gen 17:6, Deut 17:14-20, 1 Sam 2:10). But the people's demand for a king was different. The people want a king like the nations around them (1 Sam 8:5). They want an absolute dictator who is a law unto himself. They reject YHWH as the king who will lead them and take care of them.

But God says yes and gives them Saul as the first king. But notice that when Samuel first anoints Saul he is called a leader, some versions use the term prince, but not a king. (1 Sam 9:16, 17; 10:1). The LORD is still the king and Saul serves under him. As long as Saul remembers that, things go well but when he starts acting independently and stops obeying the LORD, he is rejected as king.

Saul's replacement is David, God's real choice of a king, chosen not because of his appearance but because of his heart. David is anointed king in chapter 16 and begins to act like a king in chapter 17 in the famous battle with Goliath. But notice that David is doing exactly what the people longed for in a leader but Saul refused to do. And David does it depending on the LORD.

When it was obvious that David was the LORD's choice for the next king, Saul should have resigned and gone home to live out his days in peace. But who ever heard of a king resigning?

That is not what the kings of the nations did. But that is the point. Saul was not to be like the kings of the other nations. He was to be a holy prince who partnered with YHWH, the true king, in leading the people. Instead Saul becomes bitter and jealous. The rest of the book is the struggle between Saul and David as Saul becomes more like a maniac and David becomes more like a king.

As you read about these three great leaders, each with his own strengths and weaknesses, what does the King want to say to you about who is in charge?

## 2 SAMUEL

The book of 2 Samuel is the ongoing story of David's life. More stories are recorded in the Bible about David than anyone else and we know more details about his life than even Jesus. Some of the other kings warrant a few brief sentences while David's narrative stretches over three books (1 Sam, 2 Sam and 1 Kings) and then it is repeated in 1 Chronicles. As we read through these stories it would be good to ask, why is God so enamored with David that he includes so much of David's story? Also what do the accounts of David's life teach us about the God David followed?

The great challenge of David's life is whether he would be like a king of the nations around Israel, what the people asked for, or would he rule as a co-regent with YHWH as the true king. This struggle is epitomized in three chapters in the preceding book, 1 Samuel 24, 25 and 26. Twice (ch 24 and 26) David is put in the place where he could have killed Saul and accelerated his ascension to the throne. In both cases David is advised by people close to him that not only would he be justified in killing Saul but that the opportunity had been given to him by the LORD. Each time David refuses to strike Saul, referring to Saul as the LORD's anointed. The LORD had made Saul king and David could trust that the LORD would also make him king in the LORD's time and way. Thus David does not make himself king but entrusts himself to the One he sees as the true king of Israel.

Sandwiched between those two noble accounts is a time when David almost acts like a tyrant (ch 25). David almost kills a man named Nabal simply because Nabal had slighted David and refused a request for food. Now all three stories are told in a way that we sympathize with David and think he would be justified in killing Saul or Nabal. But he wouldn't. When David straps on his sword vowing he will not take it off until he wipes out Nabal's household he is acting like a king. But the problem is he is acting like the wrong kind of king. David is not to be a king who is a law unto himself, who acts like a despot, who brings a reign of terror on his enemies every time he is crossed. Instead, as Abigail points out to him, he is to depend on the LORD and live according to the LORD's commands.

In 2 Samuel David finally becomes king. As long as he remembers the lessons of the previous book he is a great king, Israel's greatest, but when he forgets, disaster follows. So David does not reward those who kill his enemies but brings judgment on them instead. He does not destroy the household of the previous king, as the usual practice of the day was, but brings Mephibosheth, Saul's grandson, to eat at his own table. David's great sin with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah in an attempt to cover it up is the time when David acts like the wrong kind of king. He was doing exactly what the kings of the nations around Israel might do but not a king who knew that YHWH was the true king.

That act marred the rest of David's life and reign but God's shows grace for the sake of the covenant that he made with David. David wanted to build a temple but God sends word that David will not build the LORD a house, that is, a temple, but the LORD will build David a house, that is, a dynasty. While David is not able to live as the perfect king, we have the hope that one in his line will come and not only be the perfect king but the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

As you read 2 Samuel listen to what God has to say to you about what a king after his own heart is like. Then spend some time thinking about who is the true king in your heart.

## 1 KINGS

The book of 1 Kings and its sequel 2 Kings records the story of all the kings of Israel after David. It is mostly a story of failure and defeat. In 1 Kings especially we see how things can quickly deteriorate.

The first half of 1 Kings is about Solomon, David's successor. Solomon is famous for his wisdom and building the temple that David was denied. Solomon's reign marks the pinnacle of Israelite glory and historic significance. It is the one time in Israel's history that the nation controls all the land that God promised to his people. The wealth of Solomon exceeds anything imaginable to his successors. In a day when there was no standard currency, a king's wealth was often described by what he served at his table every day. How would you like to be the head chef in charge of the daily listing of food in 1 Kings 4:22-23?

Though Solomon builds and dedicates a magnificent temple to YHWH, his devotion is less than his father's. If you compare Deuteronomy 17:14-20 with 1 Kings 10:23-11:6 you see that Solomon did everything that God said *not* to do. Solomon accumulated great wealth, bought horses from Egypt, and, most significantly, married foreign wives who turned his heart away for the LORD God.

After just three kings, because of Solomon's sin, the kingdom is divided. The rebellion against Solomon's son Rehoboam was not just an uprising against an unpopular leader. It was God's punishment for Solomon's unfaithfulness. Ten tribes rebel against the household of David and start over with a new king. Those tribes are referred to as the Northern Kingdom or Israel (sometimes also called Ephraim). David's descendants maintain control of the Southern Kingdom or Judah. Neither kingdom will see the glory of Solomon repeated and a state of civil war exists for most of their history.

The first king of the Northern Kingdom, Jeroboam, fears the people's allegiance reverting to the south with each trip to Jerusalem for worship. So he sets up two new worship centers in Bethel and Dan, the southern and northern ends of his kingdom. These new places of worship are complete with golden calf idols who are said to be "the gods who brought you out of Egypt." Those idols insure that the 19 kings of Israel never follow YHWH. By God's standards they are all evil failures as kings regardless of military success or economic prosperity. The kings of the south are not much better; the best ones are in 2 Kings so we will save them for that summary.

The bright spot in 1 Kings is not the golden glory of Solomon but the camelhair covered prophet, Elijah. He is the lone voice in the desert who stands against Ahab and his evil wife, Jezebel. The prophets are the spiritual advisors to the kings, even when the kings don't want to hear. They are God's way of showing that the king is not the final authority. Elijah is the

greatest of these nagging voices. His battle with the 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel shows the power of YHWH even if the people are not willing to turn back to the true God.

One of the great challenges of reading 1 Kings is keeping the kings and the kingdoms straight. Remember after Solomon there are two kingdoms and two different sets of kings whose reigns overlapped with the kings of the other kingdom. 1 Kings and 2 Kings jump back and forth between the kingdoms with little warning. As you read these stories about kings, ask God to teach you his lessons about loyalty and obedience.

## 2 KINGS

It should be no surprise that 2 Kings continues the story of Israel's kings begun in 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 Kings. The nation of Israel at this point is divided. The Northern Kingdom or Israel broke off from the Southern Kingdom or Judah after Solomon's reign. The Northern Kingdom, while bigger geographically, is very unstable politically and hence not very prosperous. There are a series of short lived dynasties in the north and while some would point out various economic or political reasons, 1 and 2 Kings make it clear that obedience to YHWH is the critical issue.

There are all kinds of rating systems in the world but for the kings of Israel there were two standards. The positive measurement was David's reign while the negative standard was Jeroboam, the first king of the Northern Kingdom. Jeroboam leads the people in idolatry and none of the nineteen northern kings repent of that sin. The assessment that is repeated over and over again is: "he did evil in the eyes of the LORD and did not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam." Because of this failure of all the kings of the north, the ten tribes of Israel are conquered in 722 B.C. and scattered throughout the Assyrian Empire.

The Southern Kingdom of Judah is much more stable. While there are a couple attempts to wipe out the line, all the kings are descendants of David. In the south there are 8 kings who receive a favorable rating because they are like David. The first 6 are not entirely faithful but certainly are an improvement over the others. It is not until you get to Hezekiah and Josiah that you find kings who "did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, just as his father David had done (2 Kings 18:3, 22:2). The worst of all the kings was Manasseh who filled Jerusalem with innocent blood and did much evil in the eyes of the LORD. Not even Josiah's reforms could make up for his grandfather Manasseh's sins and in 586 B.C. Jerusalem falls to the Babylonians. The temple is destroyed and the people are taken into captivity. But God is not done with his people; 2 Kings ends on a note of hope with Johoiachin released from prison. The captivity will end and the people will return.

The beginning of 2 Kings focuses on a very unusual character, Elisha, the successor of Elijah. When you read the miracles that occur in Elisha's story, they may seem familiar. That is because most of them are repeated by Jesus, only Jesus does them better. Elijah and Elisha are prophets in a line promised by Moses (Deut 18:15-22). The greatest of all the prophets is Jesus who fulfills the type of the prophet and what the prophets foretold about the Messiah. Since Elisha was clearly a prophet, he was God's spokesman, hence he must be listened to. Those who ignored him or mocked him did so at great risk.

By spending so much time on Elisha at the beginning of the book, we are reminded again that the kings are not the final authority nor are they the center of God's story. Kings who ignore God are not a critical part of the story God is telling. Take Jeroboam II for example (2 Kings

14:23-29). He reigned for 41 years which is the longest of the Northern kings and he brought great prosperity and stability restoring much of the territory that was lost. Yet by God's measure he was a failure. God sent other prophets, Amos, Hosea, and Jonah during this time who were the first of the prophets to leave behind books of their own.

## 1 CHRONICLES

When I come to 1 Chronicles, two questions come to mind. First, why all those names? The first 9 chapters, about a third of the book, are all genealogies and lists of names (and the lists of names don't stop after the ninth chapter). Second, why is David's story repeated? The rest of the book is a retelling of David's life, mostly recurring from 2 Samuel.

Part of the answer to those questions comes in understanding that 1 and 2 Chronicles were written in the time after what is referred to as the Babylonian Captivity, the 70 year period after the fall of Jerusalem and the return of people to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. This is the period covered by the books Ezra and Nehemiah. Part of the purpose of Chronicles is to link the people returning to Israel with the past and give them hope for the future. That is done in part by listing a lot of names and by giving David's history.

Family genealogy was far more important to the Jews of that time than it is to us. People today often don't have a sense of their family tree past their grandparents. For the Jews, being able to trace your line back at least to a tribal patriarch was very important. Being part of a family, clan and tribe was a link to being part of God's story. It showed you belonged and that you had hope of God's future blessing because of his promises to your ancestors in the past.

That is fine for them but it does not do much for me. When faced with reading 9 chapters of names of people that are not my relatives, what am I to get from this? One thing it tells me is that God is interested in individuals, and not just famous ones. Most of the people in these chapters are not heard of anywhere else; we don't know anything of their story. But the fact that their names are there shows that God knows their stories and he cares. Imagine how exciting it would be to have your name show up in a book written by a bestselling author. Even if he did not say much about you, it would be heady to know that others who read the book would see your name. How much more if your name showed up in God's book? The good news is that those who have said yes to Jesus have their names in his book (see Rev 3:5; 13:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27).

Now what about repeating David's story? As you read, you will see that much of the account is the same as 2 Samuel but there are some significant differences. Saul's reign is not mentioned at all, only his death. David's sin with Bathsheba is not referred to at all nor the rebellion of Absalom. So, in many ways, David comes off looking better than in 2 Samuel. But the author is not trying to cover up anything; after all, he knew his readers would have access to the previous histories. Rather, he is emphasizing God's covenant with David and the prominence David gave to worship in preparation for the temple. For the captives returning under Persian rule, it was important to remember that God had promised a king to come from David's line. They did not have a king then but they had the hope that the king would come someday. In the meantime, worship was important for a people trying to rebuild and reestablish the temple and all the practices that went with it. David is presented as the ideal king who made worship a priority and who gives hope to a people without a king trying to rebuild a temple.

In that sense, we have more in common with the people that 1 Chronicles was written for than you might guess. We too are awaiting the time when the king will return. We live as exiles now who try to worship the unseen God with faith that he sees us. We need the messages of the past to continue to give us hope for the future.

## 2 CHRONICLES

As you read 2 Chronicles the sense of déjà vu will continue. The book covers the same ground as 1 and 2 Kings but, like its predecessor, from a different perspective. This is the revisited history for the captives returning to the land after the fall of Jerusalem, 70 years earlier. It is a reminder of why the captivity happened in the first place but it is also to reassure these people that God is still at work.

The first fourth of the book is about Solomon. Some of the details in 2 Kings are left out, like his many wives leading Solomon into idolatry, while we have more details about the temple. The writer was not trying to make Solomon look better than he was but emphasizing the right way to do things. The splendor of the old temple was important but God's promise to listen to people who were willing to humble themselves was even more important (see 7:11-22, esp. vs 14). For a people rebuilding a temple that was not nearly so grand with constant opposition from the people around them, the promise of the LORD's presence and blessing was critical.

The rest of the book covers the kings of the divided kingdom. In 1 and 2 Kings there was a greater emphasis on the kings of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Here the emphasis is on the Southern Kings of Judah. There is no promise of an ongoing line for the Northern Kings so they are hardly mentioned and nothing is said of Elijah and Elisha whose ministry was in the north. Instead we are told more about the kings of Judah.

For example, in 1 Kings the Southern King Jehoshaphat is mentioned to the extent that Jehoshaphat is part of Ahab's story. Here it is just the opposite. In 2 Chronicles, 4 chapters are devoted to Jehoshaphat with Ahab being mentioned because of the battle that they fought together. Jehoshaphat is one of the good kings of Judah. He was not as powerful as Ahab was but he "did what was right in the eyes of the LORD" (20:32), which made him much greater than Ahab.

The worst of the kings of Judah is Manasseh. "He did much evil in the eyes of the LORD, provoking him to anger" (33:6). He led the people in to sin that was so great that "they did more evil than the nations the LORD had destroyed before the Israelites" (33:9). Yet in 2 Chronicles we learn something of Manasseh that we did not know before. He repented. Even wicked Manasseh could change. The people returning to the land did not have to follow the failures of their forefathers. They too could change.

The constant struggle for the kings of Israel was whether they would choose YHWH as their true King. That was the challenge for the exiles as they tried to rebuild. It is still the struggle for us today. As you read 2 Chronicles, ask God to show you the things you need to hear in a new way from the stories you read before.

## **EZRA**

The books of Kings and Chronicles tell the story of the demise of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Israel's capital, Samaria, falls in 722 B.C. and the people of the 10 Northern tribes are scattered throughout the Assyrian Empire. The people of Judah last until 586 B.C. when Jerusalem is destroyed by the Babylonians. All this happened just as God's prophets said it would. But they also said that the fall of Jerusalem was not the end of the story.

Jeremiah said that after 70 years God would bring the people back to the Land (Jer 29:10). Isaiah even names the Persian king who would declare that the people could return. Cyrus is named not once but three times (Isa 44:28, 45:1, 45:13) and that was 200 years before he was born. God still had plans for his people.

The Jews were not taken to Babylon all at once nor do they return all at one time. There were three major groups who returned under three different leaders:

- Zerubbabel, a governor, rebuilds the temple
- Ezra, a priest, rebuilds the people
- Nehemiah, a governor, rebuilds the walls

The first two of these leaders are the subject of the book of Ezra. That is followed by Nehemiah's story in the book that bears his name.

The book of Ezra begins in 538 B.C. with the edict of Cyrus that the Jews can return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. Cyrus returns some of the original temple articles taken by the Babylonians and provides materials for the building. About 50,000 people take up Cyrus' offer and return under the leadership of Zerubbabel, a descendant of David. Their first task is to restore the sacrificial system and rebuild the temple.

Despite an exciting start, the work of the temple does not go smoothly. There is opposition from without that leads to a series of bureaucratic letters and archive searches. Then the people themselves lose interest. But finally, with the help of Joshua the priest and the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, the temple is completed.

Almost 80 years after the first return, Ezra comes with a smaller group of Jews. Ezra was a priest who could trace his line directly back to Aaron (7:1-5). More importantly he was a teacher devoted to "the study and observance of the Law of the LORD" (7:6, 10). Ezra's job was to teach the people to do the same.

The time of captivity in Babylon had cured the Jews forever of the sin of idolatry. But being free of one sin did not make them a holy people as God desired. When Ezra arrived, there was a question if they would continue to be a distinct people or be swallowed up into the nations around them. The people were intermarrying and were in danger of being led in the wrong direction again. As you read Ezra you might ask what the obstacles that you face in obeying God and what would lead you in the wrong direction.

## **NEHEMIAH**

Nehemiah tells the story of the leaders of the third group of exiles to return to Jerusalem. Taking place 13 years after the events in Ezra, Nehemiah's focus is to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem. Toward the end of the book we find out that Ezra is still around and he helps teach the people to follow God's ways.

Nehemiah's firsthand account begins with him in the palace of Artaxerxes the Persian king. He is the cupbearer for the king. Hearing that the wall of Jerusalem is still broken down, Nehemiah's first response is to pray for a period of days. Then he asks King Artaxerxes if he can go to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls. The king agrees and Nehemiah is sent to Jerusalem as governor.

Nehemiah first inspects the walls, or what is left of them. His description of the gates and the order that he comes to them gives one of the best descriptions of the geography of Jerusalem in the Bible. After assessing the situation, he calls the people to begin rebuilding the walls.

Despite opposition and threats, the walls go up in record time. The work is done in 52 days and recognized as being done with the help of God (6:15-16). There is a wonderful dedication ceremony with the people breaking into two groups to march around the city on top of the walls that the critics said would not hold a fox. Nehemiah is not just involved in building programs but also helps the poor and rules justly as governor. After a time he has to go back to Babylon. When he returns he finds that reforms he had put in place have not been carried out but is soon able to restore things to the way they should be.

Nehemiah is not just interesting history but is a wonderful study in godly leadership. More than one book on leadership has been written based on Nehemiah. First we see Nehemiah's leadership in prayer as he confesses the corporate sins of the nation in chapter 1 and his quick prayers through the rest of the book. Nehemiah's organizational skills are seen as he assesses the situation in chapter 2 and then assigns work parties in chapter 3. Every leader faces opposition at some point.

Dealing with opposition from without and within is another leadership skill Nehemiah demonstrates (ch 4, 6). Finally, Nehemiah is a great leader to be able to inspire people to work on building a wall and the harder work of inner transformation.

In Chapter 8 Ezra reenters the story and conducts a most unusual "church" service. Twenty-three days later there is another service of repentance and corporate prayer. Notice how these people repent of the sins of their forefathers as well as their own sin. The choices of previous generations have a spiritual impact on subsequent generations. These people saw their lives as being part of a spiritual flow that went back to Abraham centuries before. Today we have little sense of historic perspective that would prompt such a prayer.

As you read Nehemiah, listen to what God may have to say to you about being a leader, supporting leaders and how your current life is impacted by the past.

## **ESTHER**

Esther is an unusual book. It is one of only two books of the bible named after a woman and with a woman as the main character. It is one of a very few that takes place entirely outside the Promised Land. But what really sets the book of Esther apart from the other books of the Bible is that there is no mention of God. Because of the absence of any reference to God, there have been times throughout history when it was suggested that Esther be left out of the Bible. But I'm glad we have this unusual book where the hand of God can be seen if you look close enough.

The main purpose of Esther is to explain where the feast of Purim comes from. There are a series of feasts that the Jews celebrate every year. Most of them are given by God to Moses in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. But Purim came much later and Esther explains why.

The events of the book take place from 483-473 B.C., during the 57 year gap between when the temple was rebuilt under Zerubbabel and when Ezra returned to Jerusalem (see the Ezra Summary). The story takes place in the Persian capital of Susa, in modern day Iran. It was during the reign of King Xerxes (his Persian name) or Ahasuerus (a Hebrew variant).

The story begins with Xerxes holding a 7 day banquet for all the important men of the kingdom. At the end of the seven days, when everyone had had too much wine, Xerxes wanted to show off his beautiful wife, Queen Vashti, to his guests. But Vashti refused to show up. So what is a king to do when the queen says “No”? Simple; get a new queen.

And that is where our hero and heroine enter the story. Mordecai was a Jewish man who had been taken captive by the Babylonians. He had a cousin named Hadassah or Esther. Her parents had died and Mordecai raised Esther as his own daughter. Now it just so happened that Esther was a raving beauty and she just happened to win the yearlong beauty contest to replace Queen Vashti.

Next we learn about Haman, the bad guy of our story. Haman is promoted to an important position and everyone is impressed except for Mordecai who refuses to bow to Haman. This so infuriates Haman that he vows revenge. But it is not enough to kill Mordecai; Haman makes plans to wipe out all of the Jews.

Haman comes amazingly close to succeeding but how he failed is the rest of the story. You can read it for yourself but it involves a number of “it just so happens.” It just so happens that Mordecai uncovers a plot to assassinate the king. It just so happens that the king can’t sleep on a critical night and has the court reporter read about his reign to put him back to sleep. It just so happens that the section that is read is about Mordecai foiling the plot to kill the king. Then it just so happens that when the king wants to honor Mordecai that Haman shows up to answer the question of the best way for the king to honor someone.

There is more but I think you get the idea. The book of Esther may not ever mention God but that does not mean that his power and presence are not felt. Esther tells us that the unseen God of Israel is not limited by location or miracles. He works in the ordinary circumstances to bring about extraordinary results. The feast of Purim is to remind Jews of that. Esther’s story can teach us the same lesson with or without the feast.

## **JOB**

When we come to the book of Job it is good to remember that the Bible is arranged topically and not chronologically. If placed in historic sequence, Job would show up in the early chapters of Genesis, sometime after the flood. But it is grouped with the five books that make up the wisdom or poetry section (Job-Song of Songs). I will say more about Hebrew poetry in the Psalm Summary and more about wisdom in the Proverbs Summary.

The book of Job grapples with the question that apparently spans back almost to the beginning of time: “Why do bad things happen to good people?” The opening chapters describe Job’s goodness, followed by conversations between the LORD and Satan about Job. Satan argues that Job is only good because God blesses him. Take away the blessing and Job will not be so good, Satan reasons. So God allows Satan to attack Job. First Job loses his possessions and his children. Then he loses his health. Yet “in all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrong doing” (1:22).

Then Job's three friends show up; Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. For seven days they say nothing but grieve with Job. This was their best gift to Job. After that they begin to argue with Job. The bulk of the book is the dialogues that go on between Job and the three friends. There are three rounds of speeches where each of the friends speaks and then Job replies ((ch 4-27). The arguments go round and round but the basic premise remains the same. Job's friends reason that Job must have sinned in some way to explain why all these bad things have happened. Job, on the other hand, maintains his innocence.

At the end of the speeches, we find out that there is a fourth younger friend named Elihu. He has been silently listening in on the whole thing. He has remained silent out of respect for his elders but when they talk each other into silence he starts his own diatribe that goes on for six chapters (ch 32-37).

Finally God speaks and challenges Job with a series of unanswerable questions. At least Job cannot answer them, nor can anyone but God. With the questions God challenges Job if he has any right to stand in God's court, something Job longed for and eventually demanded earlier in the book (ch 38-41). In the last chapter everything is restored to Job and he lived happily ever after. Or "and so he died and full of years" (42:17).

But somehow we don't feel satisfied at the end. Job never is given an explanation. The question of "why do bad things happen to good people" is never really answered. But while we are not satisfied, Job was. And he was satisfied before everything was restored to him. He was satisfied because before he had merely heard of God but then he actually had seen God (42:5). Job tells us that knowing God in a personal way is better than having all our questions answered. Or, to put it another way, as I know God better, the significance of my questions will fade.

## PSALMS

### Part 1

The book of Psalms is the great song book of Israel. The authors of the psalms are many and varied but more than half are attributed to David. Psalms was collected and put together over a long period of time with the book as we know it now coming sometime after the Babylonian Captivity.

Hebrew poetry goes far beyond Psalms. We have seen some in our reading already; Job is mostly poetry. We will see more as we go along, most of the prophets are written in poetry. One of the keys to understanding Hebrew poetry is parallelism. You can even see the influence of Hebrew parallelism in the NT. So it will be helpful to have some idea of what it is and how it works.

All poetry has a form. The better you understand the form the easier it is to understand the poetry. Western poetry is often based on rhyme and meter. We can be glad that Hebrew poetry does not follow that pattern because rhyme and meter is very difficult if not impossible to translate. Hebrew poetry follows a pattern of lines that repeat the same idea or that are parallel.

Notice how similar the two lines in this verse are:

*Why do the nations conspire,  
and the peoples plot in vain (Ps 2:1)?*

In these lines "nations" = "peoples," and "conspire" = "plot." They are not exactly the same but convey the same idea. So does that mean Hebrew poetry is just redundant? Not really. The repetition allows us to see a clearer picture. It allows us to see the same thing from a different

angle (Notice how those last two sentences were parallel. I said basically the same thing in a different way).

Now what makes Hebrew poetry fun, interesting and beautiful is the variety of ways parallel thoughts are put together. Notice the parallels in this verse:

*For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish (Ps 1:6)*

Here the word “way” is repeated in both lines but everything else is opposite, including the order. “Watches over” is the opposite of “perish” and “righteous” is the opposite of “wicked.” But the order is also switched. “Watches over” is at the beginning of the first line but “perish” is at the end of the second. “The righteous” is at the end of the first while “the wicked” is at the beginning of the second.

Most Bibles are printed in a way that helps you see the parallels. Usually there are two parallel lines with the second line indented further than the first. Even that pattern of couplets is not always the same. Sometimes there are three or more lines parallel (see Ps 5:2-3). What makes it even more fun is that the parallels extend beyond the couplets to the whole psalm. For example, in Psalm 1 verses 1-3 speak of the “blessed man” while 5-4 speak of the wicked. When talking about the “blessed man” (vs 1) in the first part we are told what he does not do and then what he does do (vs 2). For the wicked man the order is switched. First we are told who he is (vs 4) and then we are told whom he is like (vs 5). These parallels can be quite complex in some of the longer Psalms.

As you read, pay attention to these parallel lines and patterns. Think about what the repetition can teach you. The more you are aware of these patterns the more you will see.

## Part 2

Because we believe the Bible to be God’s Word, given by and inspired by him (2 Pet 1:20-21, 2 Tim 3:16-17), we have a very high regard for Scripture. We believe that the Bible is not only true but that it is sufficient to lead us in the holy life that God has called us to. So because of this high view, we take the Bible at face value, that is to say, for the most part, we take the Bible literally. When the Bible says that Jesus was resurrected from the dead or that the Red Sea parted or that God created all things in six days we believe that is literally what happened.

However, it is important to understand that we view the Bible literally and as literature. We read the Bible with the same principles of literature that we would apply to any book. This is critical to remember because while we take the Bible literally we recognize that not all of it is meant to be understood literally.

The Bible is full of metaphors, especially in the poetry sections. A metaphor is not understood by looking up the words in a dictionary. Eugene Peterson writes often of biblical metaphors. In his book Eat This Book, Peterson says; “A metaphor states as true something that is literally not true” (p. 94). Then he gives the example of the statement that God is a rock. Psalm 18:2 says “The LORD is my rock.” Twenty-five times in the Psalms the word rock is applied to God and that does not count all the other rock-like metaphors applied to God in Psalms. We believe that “The LORD is my rock” as Scripture reveals but, as Peterson points out, we don’t worship at a rock quarry or purchase a god rock that we can set up in the back yard (Ibid.).

So if God is not literally a rock, how are we to understand the many references to him being a rock in the Psalms? We have to pay attention to how the metaphor is used. While God is not a

chunk of granite, the idea of him being solid and unmovable like a rock is wonderfully reassuring in a world that is constantly shifting and moving. This is where paying attention to the parallel lines that I wrote of in the first part can be a big help. By repeating ideas in different ways the Psalmist helps us understand the richness of the metaphors.

Metaphors also invite us to use our imaginations. If “the LORD is my shepherd” what does that tell me about God? If “the LORD is my shepherd” what does that tell me about myself? Psalm 23 paints a picture of words and metaphors that helps me answer those questions. But the richness of the picture will not be fully appreciated unless I use my imagination to place myself in the picture and experience God as my shepherd.

As you read the Psalms pay attention to the many metaphors and how these literally untrue statements teach us the truth about God and ourselves. Let your imagination dwell on and enter into the metaphors. If God is our rock, what kind of rock is he? How big of a rock? How are the terms rock, stronghold and fortress related? How can you rest in God as your rock?

### Part 3

In the first Psalm Summary I referred to the book of Psalms as Israel’s song book. It is also Israel’s prayer book. For those of us who have grown up in less liturgical churches we have a built in bias against written prayers. That is not always a good thing when we consider that God has given us 150 written prayers in the book of Psalms alone, to say nothing of the many written prayers in the other books of the Bible.

Maybe one reason that we are weak in our prayer life is because we have not learned to repeat the prayers of the great prayer book of Israel. Just the great variety of prayers contained in that book should teach us something.

Many of the Psalms are prayers of praise that remind us that we tend to miss God’s goodness in our lives and are not nearly thankful enough. Even those psalms that speak of great pain or disappointment often begin or end with praise. We are called to praise God as Creator and sustainer of all things. As we remember his faithfulness in the past we are to give thanks. We are to be filled with praise as we remember his mercy and the fact that he does not treat us as our sins deserve. The prayers of the Psalmist call us to “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good. His love endures forever” (Ps 106:1, 107:1, 118:1, 136:1).

The prayers of the Psalms also teach us about confession and repentance. The Psalms take sin very seriously and show how wicked people are. The expectation for the wicked is not good but there is hope in repentance and turning back to God. Simply acknowledging our sin and crying out for mercy is a great start as Psalm 51 teaches us. But Psalms also teaches about the subtlety and deceptiveness of sin. The prayers of Psalms call us to repent as individuals and as part of a community. The psalms see our acts impacting others much more than our individualist things. These prayers show us how deeply we are all impacted by the sin deep within.

One thing that should encourage us in these prayers is their complete honesty and frankness. These are no sugar coated formulas to impress God or talk him into our grocery list of wants. These are anguished heart cries that are passionate and even shocking. We may not be comfortable with the cries for vengeance we hear in places like Psalm 109:12 or 137:8-9. But we can be comforted that such an honest desire is heard by God and recorded in his book of prayers. We can be reassured that such an ardent display of emotion is what God expects to hear from us. God will not be surprised by what we really think or feel. Our prayers should reflect

that freedom. The prayers of Psalms teach us to come to God as we are not as we think we should be.

We learn to talk by imitating others. We learn to write by copying down what others wrote before us. We best learn to pray the same way. Maybe as you read this we you can let some of the Psalms become your prayer. Find one that captures the state of your heart right now and pray it back to God.

## PROVERBS

The book of Proverbs is one of the few books of the Bible that tells you what the purpose is. It is “for attaining wisdom” (1:2). Biblical wisdom is far more than knowledge or expertise. A man may have six earned doctorate degrees and won more times on *Jeopardy* than anyone else but still be a fool by the Bible’s standards. The opening verses of Proverbs, by the use of Hebrew parallelism, show that wisdom is about discipline, insight and “doing what is right and just and fair” (1:3). There is a moral element to wisdom that must not be ignored. To that end, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (1:7).

For the most part, Proverbs is the instructions of a father to his son (1:8). It deals with a variety of topics and themes but always comes back to the way of wisdom. In the first nine chapters the father talks to his son and urges him, above all, to pursue wisdom. Wisdom is personified as a beautiful woman who calls out in the streets. Her offer is to the simple and foolish to come and learn from her. Anyone can be wise if they will first acknowledge their need.

In chapter 8 Lady Wisdom speaks for herself. We find out that not only is she beautiful but powerful. Kings come to her for advice not the other way around. She says she was the first thing that God brought forth at creation and she understands how it is all put together. So you will never understand the world without knowing her. What son wouldn’t want to pursue such a woman?

But there is another woman whom the father warns his son about. She is louder and flashier and very enticing. The other woman is the adulteress. Because, the opposite of wisdom is not ignorance but sin. The adulteress seems to have everything to offer that a young man would want. But what the son can’t see is the result and that is always death. Both women are constantly calling out and inviting. The question is who will the son listen to and follow.

Chapters 10-29 are filled with, well, proverbs; short pithy statements of wisdom that for the most part are in two line couplets. There is not a lot of order or structure to these chapters as the proverbs bounce from topic to topic. Marriage, family, work and wealth are some of the recurring themes. It should be remembered that proverbs are what tend to happen, norms of life. Proverbs are not promises and should not be taken as such.

The last two chapters are sayings and discourses from wise men and women other than Solomon. The other chapters are said to have come from Solomon, the son of David. Some of them were collected and the book was probably put together much later than Solomon (see 25:1). Solomon’s life brings its own warning about wisdom. While being the wisest man in the world, Solomon certainly lived foolishly, especially at the end of his life. Solomon should remind us that while wisdom is important, it does not guarantee godliness or a growing relationship with the LORD. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom but not the end of it.

## ECCLESIASTES

Ecclesiastes is a strange book, even the name is strange. The word “ecclesiastes” is a Greek word that means “the preacher.” It comes from the first verse, which tells us that the book is the words of the preacher or teacher. But it is not the *who* that makes Ecclesiastes odd but the *what*.

The theme of the book is clear from beginning to end. It is summed up in one often repeated word. It is stated four times in the first verse the preacher speaks (1:2) and three times in the last verse that he speaks (12:8). The word is vanity or meaninglessness. The Preacher has done extensive study and concluded that life is meaningless (1:12-14). The Hebrew word translated vanity or meaningless literally means chasing after wind or smoke as reflected by the end of 1:14. It is not the vanity of looking too long in the mirror but the vanity of useless and profitless.

In doing his research to come to the conclusion of vanity, the Preacher has examined the “toils” of life. There are five toils that he has studied: wisdom, pleasure, wealth and power, duty or honor, and religion. The Preacher having great wealth and power is able to delve into each of these areas with as much time and effort as needed. But his conclusion is always the same; “all is vanity.”

Now you may on the one hand want to agree with the Preacher’s conclusions while on the other wonder how such a negative sermon made it into the Bible. One of the keys to answering that question is another often repeated phrase in the book: “under the sun.” The Preacher is writing about life that is under the sun and excludes God in heaven from the picture. In that way, Ecclesiastes is the most modern book of the Bible. It is the book that our age needs to hear first. There was a time when if someone asked you what part of the Bible he should read first the best answer was one of the Gospels or Genesis. But for the modern man who thinks that there is nothing but what is under the sun, he should start with Ecclesiastes. Peter Kreeft in the wonderful book Three Philosophies of Life, sums it up well when he says, “Ecclesiastes is “the question to which the rest of the Bible is the answer” (p. 19, I am indebted to Kreeft for much of this summary not just this quote). You don’t appreciate the answer if you have not grappled with the question and that is what the Preacher forces us to do.

If you think money, power, or sex will make life good, the Preacher says I have tried it all and it is empty. If you think wisdom and being moral will give life meaning, the Preacher says that it is just as empty. Wisdom may be better than folly and work better than laziness but in the end everyone dies so it is all vanity. It is all chasing after the wind.

Our only hope is that there is something beyond this world that we experience with our senses; more significantly someone beyond the physical. Of course the modern denies that vehemently, but all he is left with is smoke. There is no hope if there is not someone beyond this world, someone above the sun, someone like God. God is the answer and the only hope to the Ecclesiastes question. Let me conclude by quoting a very long sentence by Peter Kreeft.

*The point is simply this: without God—no not just without God, for the author of Ecclesiastes speaks frequently of God—without faith in God—no not even that, for the author has faith in God, in fact, an unquestioning faith: never does he doubt God’s existence—rather, without the kind of faith in God that is larger than life and therefore worth dying for and therefore worth living for, without a faith that means trust and hope and love, without a lived love affair with God, life is vanity of vanities, the shadow of a shadow, a dream within a dream (Three Philosophies of life, p. 27).*

## SONG OF SONGS

The Song of Songs, or Song of Solomon as some versions have it, is a little like reading ancient love letters. The book is a romantic dialogue between two lovers with a chorus of friends thrown in now and then. Most versions help us distinguish between the man and the woman in the headings based on the gender of the Hebrew pronouns that are used. For example, the NIV uses the terms Beloved and Lover for the female and male. The man is a king, perhaps Solomon himself (3:7-11), while the woman is a Shulamite (6:13), probably meaning she was from a city in Northern Israel.

While we do not know a lot about this couple, the one thing that is clear is that they are madly in love. They describe their longings and affection for the other in detailed and even ridiculous ways. But that is the way lovers often are. I would not recommend that a young man try to woo a young lady by comparing her temples to pomegranates or her neck to a tower with shields on it (4:3-4). But while we may not understand all of his descriptions, we have no doubt about his ardor or desire. If anything, it gets a little embarrassing listening to this couple go on like this. When he starts at her feet and works his way up describing her body, we almost feel the need to look away.

Which causes us to wonder, how did such an erotic book get into the Bible? What are we to do with it? The simple answer for some is “Cut it out! Throw it away!” But we have it and believe that God has given it to us. If he is not blushing, what are we to do with this love letter that looks more like an actual love letter than any of the others (Larry Crabb, 66 Love Letters, p. 103)?

Some take the Song of Songs very literally as an idealistic picture of marriage. It is a call to celebrate the wonder of love in all its aspects between a husband and wife; especially the physical, sexual side. God has made us to enjoy our spouses and this couple leads us in doing that to the full extent.

A second way of looking at the Song of Songs is symbolically. One complaint about this book is that, like Esther, God is not in it. But if we view it symbolically then God is everywhere in it because God is the Lover. So, in that way, the book is a picture of God’s passion for the individual soul, his love for his chosen people, his delight in his bride. This is the way most ancient writers understood the book and for many it was their favorite book.

A third way to see the Song of Songs is both literal and symbolic. Yes, it is a picture of the love between a husband and his wife but it is also the picture of Jesus’ love for his bride. The wonder of love is certainly big enough to encompass both because the greatest is love (1 Cor 13:13).

## ISAIAH

With the book of Isaiah we come to a new section of the OT and are reminded that the OT is ordered topically not chronologically. This last section of the OT is called the prophets, 17 books in which the prophets declare, “Thus saith the LORD.” A prophet is one who is sent by God with a message and who generally calls the people back to the LORD.

Among the prophets who left behind books, Isaiah is generally considered the greatest. Historically, Isaiah wrote during the period of 4 kings of Judah when the Assyrian Empire was at its height. Prophetically, Isaiah speaks of the rise and fall of the Babylonian Empire and the

return of the people under the Persian King Cyrus. He goes beyond that to speak of the coming Messiah – his birth, his suffering, and his ultimate victory. His themes are sweeping and his writing majestic.

Many have noted how Isaiah's 66 chapters correspond to the 66 books of the Bible. The first 39 chapters deal with events that correspond to the 39 books of the OT while the last 27 chapters, with their emphasis on the coming Messiah sound much more like the NT. Of course there is quite a bit of overlap between the two.

Isaiah is probably the most familiar of the prophets. You will find many passages are well-known, even if you did not realize they came from Isaiah, and the book is often quoted in the NT. Chapter 1 gives the hope of the crimson stain of sin turning white as snow. Isaiah's famous vision of the LORD in the temple as the seraphs cry, "Holy, Holy, Holy" is in chapter 6. The next chapter has the prophecy of the virgin giving birth to Immanuel. Chapter 9 is often read at Christmas time as the prophet says, "For unto us a child is born . . ." There are a series of prophecies against the nations and then judgment is turned to hope as the LORD promises to lay a stone in Zion that the one who trusts in will never be dismayed (28:16f). Chapters 36-39 are repeated almost verbatim from Hezekiah's history in 2 Kings 18-20.

The second part of Isaiah has many familiar references to the coming Messiah or the Servant as Isaiah refers to him. Chapter 40 speaks of the voice of one calling in the wilderness that is later fulfilled by John the Baptist. There is a wonderful contrast between the living God and dead idols in 42-43. The servant, the LORD's chosen is discussed in 49-53, including prophetic statements about the suffering of Messiah, fulfilled by Jesus. In the synagogue in Nazareth Jesus read the opening of Isaiah 61 and then proclaimed, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 4:16-21).

As you read Isaiah pay attention to what God says to his people. God loves his people but hates their sin. He wants to gather his children in his arms but he is the holy, holy, holy God and his righteousness demands retribution. It would be helpful if you think of all the people of Israel as a single individual, a rebellious teenager who has broken the rules too many times. The LORD then sounds like the anxious father who has been waiting up all night for the troublemaker to return home. He can't seem to decide if he is going to beat the kid within an inch of his life or hug him. Only in this case the Father's wrath is just and must be carried out so he pours out his wrath on the Servant. The servant takes on the punishment that we deserve and by his stripes we are healed.

## **JEREMIAH**

Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet and rightly so. His prophecies start at the time of King Josiah of Judah, a relatively prosperous and peaceful time in Israel's history, and go through the end of King Zedekiah's reign, when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem. When Isaiah told Hezekiah what the Babylonians would do, Hezekiah shrugged and said; at least it won't happen in my life time. Jeremiah, on the other hand, was not only told in explicit detail what would happen, he had to live through it happening. And it broke his heart.

Jeremiah was also a reluctant prophet. Though God tells him he was set apart as a prophet before he was born, Jeremiah, like Moses, says he doesn't know how to speak (1:4-8). Also, Jeremiah is given an unpopular message. Who wants to be a prophet of doom, literally? Jeremiah's basic message is that the Babylonians will come and wipe out Jerusalem, including

the temple. Other “prophets” were saying Jerusalem would never fall because God’s promise to preserve the temple. They confused God’s protection in the past for a promise for the future. Jeremiah proclaimed God’s corrective truth and for this he was beaten (20:2), imprisoned (37:15-16), and thrown into a muddy cistern (38:6). No wonder he was not interested in the job.

When Jerusalem does fall, the Babylonians take care of Jeremiah because they see him as being on their side since he prophesied favorably toward them. They offer to take him to Babylon and treat him well but Jeremiah chooses to stay with the remnant of the Israelites left in the Land. Then there is a conspiracy to kill the governor placed in charge by the Babylonians. After he is assassinated, the people are afraid the Babylonians will come back and kill them all. They ask Jeremiah to inquire of the LORD, promising to do whatever Jeremiah reports the LORD said. But when Jeremiah says that they should stay in the land, the people do exactly what so many generations before them did, they reject the word of the LORD. They flee to Egypt and, adding insult to injury, they drag Jeremiah along with them. Once in Egypt, Jeremiah prophesies that the Babylonians, who the Israelites were so intent to avoid, are on their way to Egypt to conquer that country as well.

Jeremiah’s prophecies cover a period of almost 50 years and he gives us more autobiographical details than any other prophet. But his writing is not in chronological order. This makes it very hard to follow from a historical perspective. He seems to write topically and you should try to follow his themes as you read rather than the sequence of events. One of the main themes is the people’s unfaithfulness to the LORD while the LORD remains faithful to his promises, even promises of judgment.

While Jeremiah deals with ancient events and the clashing of empires; his writing deals with universal and timeless issues as well. The book begins by saying how the people of Israel have forsaken the LORD (2:13). But like all of us, it is more than a matter of external obedience; it is an issue of the heart. Their problem was that their sin was engraved on their heart (17:1) and the LORD probes the heart and mind (20:12). Israel has broken God’s covenant but the good news is that the LORD will establish a new covenant. That new covenant will include a new heart with God’s laws written on it. Since external obedience is not possible, God gives a new heart with a new inclination so that we can have a new relationship with him. That new covenant is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

## **EZEKIEL**

Ezekiel is the book that makes me glad I am not a prophet. God had Ezekiel do some pretty strange things like eat a scroll, dig through a wall, and lay on his left side for 390 days. He cut up hair with a sword and when his wife dies he is not allowed to grieve for her. These are not just random acts but living illustrations that God uses to go with the prophecies he gives Ezekiel. If that is not odd enough, God gives Ezekiel visions that are hard to imagine even though he gives detailed descriptions of what he saw. My favorites are the angelic beings with gyroscopic wheels that show up several times in the book.

All that to say; Ezekiel is not an easy read. If you thought Isaiah and Jeremiah were challenging, wait until you meet Ezekiel. You will not understand all of what you read here but ask God what he has to say to you in Ezekiel’s strange visions and unusual practices. Even in the difficult parts God has good things to say.

Ezekiel was a contemporary of Jeremiah, although it is unlikely that the two knew each other. While Jeremiah lived in Jerusalem until it was destroyed, Ezekiel lived in Babylon having been taken captive by the Babylonians. Unlike Jeremiah, Ezekiel writes in chronological order and even dates his visions. So we know that he started in 593 B.C. and his prophecies stretch over a 22 year period. Though he lived in Babylon he had visions that took him, sometimes violently (8:2-3), to Jerusalem and beyond.

Like Jeremiah, Ezekiel was a priest and many of his visions have to do with the temple. He is shown the corruption and sin of the leaders in the temple (ch 8-10), sees the glory of the LORD depart the temple (ch 10), and, toward the end of the book, has an extensive section about a new temple (ch 40-46). The dimensions and description of this temple do not match up with the temple that was built when the people returned to the land so it is unclear how this yet unbuilt temple fits into God's plans for the future.

One of the great themes of Ezekiel is the glory of God. His visions are hard to understand because he sees such glorious displays of heavenly beings. But they pale in comparison to the glory of God. There is a significant tie between the glory of God and the temple. When both the tabernacle and the temple were built there was a very momentous time when the glory of God filled the place preventing the priests from continuing to do their jobs (Ex 40:34-35, 1 Ki 8:10-11). In both cases that event symbolized the LORD coming to live with his people. The temple was not just a place to gather and perform sacrifices but the throne of God. One of the saddest scenes in the Bible is in Ezekiel 10:18-19 when the glory of God leaves the temple. God is no longer living with his people, the covenant has been broken and judgment awaits.

Throughout the book, when God speaks to Ezekiel he calls him "Son of man." Interestingly, that is the term that Jesus uses most often in the Gospels to refer to himself. It is because Jesus comes that a new covenant can be established (see ch 16, 36, 37). The new covenant brings restoration and more. The people of Israel are not only restored to the land but the land is amazingly productive. Not only is there a new temple but from that temple flows a river that empties into the Dead Sea bringing it to life with fresh water (ch 47). And the glory returns to the temple (43:4-5). Under the new covenant the LORD lives again with his people.

## DANIEL

If you grew up going to Sunday School then the book of Daniel will be familiar to you, at least the first half. The first six chapters of Daniel do not sound like a prophet at all but are stories of exiles trying to find their place in a foreign land. It is the second half of the book where the prophecies full of apocalyptic visions come.

As a young man, Daniel lives through the capture and destruction of Jerusalem that Jeremiah and Ezekiel wrote of. Daniel, along with his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah are chosen to enter a royal academy for three years to be trained for the king's service. The first thing that they are given is new names, Babylonian names. Daniel is given the name Belteshazzar and his friends are better known as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. The new names were to help them forget their past and practices and fit into their new culture. But these four Jewish men refused to forget.

Daniel and his friends remain faithful to YHWH and the LORD remains faithful to them. Just because they have been taken to a distant land does not mean that they have been taken from the presence of the LORD. God is still with them and, like Joseph in Egypt, they rise to the top

and are appointed as chief officials. One of the most remarkable verses in the book, and easily overlooked, is the last verse of chapter one. “And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus” (1:21). That does not mean much to the modern reader but if you put all the history together, that means Daniel was a high ranking court official for about 65 years.

That was a time when royal courtiers did not last long. In chapter 2 Daniel is almost executed on a whim of Nebuchadnezzar when the “magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers” could not tell him his dream, much less interpret it. In chapter 3 the three friends are thrown into the fiery furnace for refusing to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar’s golden image. And in chapter 6 Daniel is thrown into the lion’s den for praying to YHWH. The fact that they survived all of this speaks of the power of the God they put their faith in and the education of several kings about who the true God really was.

The second half of the book was usually skipped in the Sunday School stories. Chapters 7-12 are visions of the rise and fall of Empires and the end of all things. Daniel spoke of the coming of Alexander the Great before Greece was a super power and of the rise of Rome before most Jews even knew it was there. He also saw a king who would take over the whole world and was given words that were to be sealed up until the end (12:9). This last half is very hard to understand but looking back over history we can piece more of it together than Daniel probably understood. He admits that he did not understand his visions and God sent an angel to help him understand (10:12). Centuries later another exiled Jew on the Island of Patmos would have confusing visions and receive angelic messengers sent from God. Daniel’s visions are the keys that help us understand parts of John’s apocalypse that we call Revelation.

## HOSEA

The last 12 books of the OT are called the Minor Prophets; not because their message is less important but because they are so much shorter than their big brothers. All 12 can fit on one scroll while Isaiah and Jeremiah would each take up a scroll. Remember also that the books of the OT are not in chronological order. The first of the Minor Prophets, Hosea, was written hundreds of years before Daniel and is addressed to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. As you read Hosea it will be helpful to remember that the names Israel, Ephraim and Samaria all refer to the Northern Kingdom.

Hosea prophesied during the relatively peaceful and prosperous reign of Jeroboam II. You may recall from reading 2 Kings that Jeroboam II had one of the longest reigns in the midst of violent coups and kings that did not last long. But while things were prosperous on the outside, the land was full of sin and corruption. God was not impressed; Jeroboam was considered a failure (see 2 Ki 14:23-29).

So the LORD sent Hosea to condemn the people’s sin and call them back to the true God. It was the typical prophet’s message. But the LORD did more than give Hosea words to say. He turned Hosea’s family into a living illustration of YHWH’s relationship to Israel.

When Hosea starts his prophetic ministry he is told to take “an adulterous wife.” It is debated if she was adulterous before they were married or just afterward. I’m afraid I assume the worst of Hosea’s wife, whose name was Gomer (no relation to the famous Marine of the ‘60’s TV show). In this marriage Hosea represents faithful YHWH, Gomer represents unfaithful Israel and adultery equals idolatry.

Then three children are born to this odd couple. Each of their names is a word play for what God wants to teach in the book. The first is Jezreel, which is the name of the place where Jehu, after one of the many coups, wiped out the family of Ahab (2 Ki 9-10). The LORD told Hosea he would soon bring judgment for this violence and Israel would suffer a great defeat at the Valley of Jezreel. The next child was named Lo-Ruhamah which is Hebrew for *not loved* because God said he would no longer love the Northern Kingdom. The third child was named Lo-Ammi meaning *not my people* because the LORD rejected his people as they had rejected him as their God (all this is in ch 1).

This would be a sad, hopeless family except God intervenes to reverse it all. After speaking of judgment in the beginning of chapter 2, God speaks of alluring his bride back to himself. At the end of the chapter he promises to remarry his unfaithful wife (2:19-20). Chapter 3 is about Hosea buying Gomer back from the person to whom she had prostituted herself. Then God speaks of a great harvest of grain, wine and oil at Jezreel, which is Hebrew for *God plants* (2:21-22). Then God will show his love to Lo-Ruhamah and will call Lo-Ammi my people (2:23).

The rest of the book is a see-saw back and forth between these two extremes. On the one side are God's wrath, justice and judgment. On the other is his love that overrides the first. This book is a great reminder that sin has a great cost but that God is willing to pay the cost for us. That is the nature of his love. The only question is will we accept his offer. One of the questions left unanswered in the book is did Gomer remain faithful to Hosea after he bought her back? Maybe we are not told because every generation and every individual has to answer the same question.

## JOEL

Every spring our sanctuary experiences an inundation of lady bugs. While mildly annoying and messy these little creatures do not do any real damage. They are nothing like the infestation of locust described in the short book of Joel. The difference between locust and grasshoppers is unclear to me. It seems that if you have a few hopping about then you have grasshoppers. If you have millions of them devouring the countryside then you have locust. A swarm can pack 40 to 80 million in less than half a square mile and eat millions of pounds of plants in a day.

That is what the prophet Joel describes. No historical details are given by Joel so we don't know exactly when he wrote. The first chapter looks back to a locust invasion that already happened. The results were devastating for all types of people from the wicked drunk to the pious priest to the ordinary farmer. Each of their lives was disrupted by the famine that followed.

The second chapter prophesies the coming of another invasion. While the invaders sound similar to the locust, this chapter seems to be speaking of a human army that comes with just as much devastation. Perhaps Joel is predicting the coming of the Babylonian army but since the historic setting is not known we can't be certain. What is clear is that this time of judgment and disaster is known as "the day of the LORD."

"The day of the LORD" is an important prophetic phrase in the OT. It is used 19 times in the OT with 5 of those times being in Joel's brief book. If we assume an early date for Joel, he may have been the first to use the phrase. The term does not speak of a specific day as much as a time when God brings great disaster and blessing, disaster for the rebellious and blessings for God's people. Joel describes both.

Joel is also known as the Prophet of Pentecost. Of all the OT passages he could have referred to, it is Joel 2:28-32 that Peter quotes in Acts 2 to explain what happened on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon the first believers and the church was born. Peter was saying that the Spirit of the Lord was upon them but the good news was and is: “Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved” (see Act 2:14-21).

## AMOS

Being a prophet did not require a certain background or training. Amos was proof of that. The prophet Isaiah was a princely figure familiar with the royal court. Jeremiah and Ezekiel were priests. Daniel was a high ranking government official who in today’s terms might be called a bureaucrat. Amos was a shepherd and sycamore fig farmer (1:1, 7:14-15). He had no interest in being a prophet but when God called, he responded with obedience. Like other prophets, his message was not popular and his enemies tried to shut him up but the man who cared for sheep was faithful to shepherd the people of Israel.

Though from the Southern Kingdom of Judah, Amos was called to preach against the Northern Kingdom of Israel. He spoke during the reign of Jeroboam II, which would make him a contemporary of Hosea. His book is divided into three groups of oracles.

The first group, chapters 1-2, is 8 messages against nations. There is a repeated pattern in this message that begins with the statement; “For the three sins of (city/nation), even four, I will not turn back my wrath.” Sin has been building up, God has been delaying judgment but he can put it off no longer. Beginning with Damascus, the capital of Aram, in the north and working around counter clockwise, Amos speaks of the nations around Israel. At first the people would have cheered what Amos said because it meant the downfall of their enemies. But like a noose growing ever tighter, the cheering would stop when he named the last nation; “For the three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath (2:6). It is one thing for God to judge others; we don’t want his judgment coming home to us.

The second group of messages, chapters 3-6, are three sermons of judgment. Each begins with the ominous call, “Hear the word” and is punctuated throughout with the phrase, “declares the LORD.” In these messages Amos denounces the people’s sin of presumption, sin of religious orthodoxy and sin of moral and ethical corruption. Amos even calls the women of Samaria, Israel’s capital, cows. No wonder his message got him in trouble. The people are warned against their ongoing sin at Bethel and their mistreatment of the poor. Their only hope is to abandon their wicked ways and seek the LORD.

Chapters 7-9, the last group of oracles, contain 5 visions the LORD shows Amos. These visions are earthy and reflect Amos’ agricultural background. The first 2 visions are of destruction brought by locust and fire. Amos begs that God will relent from these judgments because the nation would not survive. The LORD does and says he will not bring those particular disasters. But then Amos is shown a plumb line, representing God’s righteousness, that can’t be ignored. The fruit is ripe and God cannot overlook their sin any longer.

As you read Amos, pay attention to what God says about the people’s exploitation of the poor and needy. What might Amos say to us today as we see people with needs around us?

## OBADIAH

Obadiah, with just 21 verses, is the shortest book of the OT and is shorter than most of the books in the NT. Like Joel, it is unknown when Obadiah was written or much about the author. There are 12 different men named Obadiah in the OT but none stand out as a likely candidate for writing the book.

What we do know is that the prophecy is not addressed to the Jewish people but to the nation of Edom. The Edomites were the descendants of Esau (it is helpful to remember that Edom and Esau are used interchangeably in this book). Esau was the oldest son of Isaac and Rebekah and the brother of Jacob. So the origins of this story take us back to Genesis, especially chapters 25 and 27. Rebekah had twin boys, before they were born we are told that they will both become a nation but the older would serve the younger. Esau was born hairy and red, Edom means red. Jacob came out holding on to Esau's heel; Jacob means heel grabber.

These brothers, who developed in the confines of the same womb, were never close. Neither were the nations that came from them. The Edomites lived in a rugged, mountainous region south-east of Israel. Interestingly, the region was known for its red rock formations (notice all the references to rocks and heights in Obadiah). Edom refused to let Israel pass through their land when the people were traveling from Egypt to the Promised Land after the Exodus. After that the two nations were often at war with each other and rarely lived together like brothers.

Obadiah was written sometime after Jerusalem was sacked by enemies. Since that occurred more than once, it does not help pin down the date of the event Obadiah refers to or when he wrote. Whenever it happened Edom is being condemned because instead of helping their brothers in Jerusalem, they helped Israel's enemies and were part of the looting of the city. They were cheering at the misfortune of others. It is kind of like people in the Arab world dancing in the streets after 9/11 or people in New York celebrating after the death of Osama Bin-Laden.

God is neither impressed nor pleased. He tells Edom through Obadiah that though they think they are secure in their rocky fortresses the enemy will come to them also.

The greater challenge for us as we read Obadiah is not the date that it was written or the historic circumstance behind it. Our challenge is to hear what God has to say to us today from these nations that did not get along. The brevity of this letter makes it almost harder to hear God's message for us. But I am confident that God does want to speak to our hearts, maybe a message about revenge or about long term broken relationships. Whatever God wants to say to you, will you take the time to listen to the brief book of Obadiah, maybe more than once, maybe in some different versions, until you hear what God has for you in Obadiah?

## JONAH

The story of Jonah being swallowed by a whale (it was actually a great fish) is one of the best known and quickly dismissed stories in the Bible. But my guess is that few have ever read the book that bears Jonah's name. Besides the book, Jonah is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25, during the reign of Jeroboam II. That makes Jonah a contemporary of Hosea and Amos.

Jonah is more of an anti-prophet than a prophet. His book has very little prophecy and is mostly an account about his reluctance as a prophet. It is a finely crafted tale full of irony, contrasts and parallels that draw us into the story. It is also a story without beginning or end. In Hebrew the first word is "and" then the book ends with an unanswered question.

The book begins with the phrase familiar to the prophets, “The word of the LORD came to . . .” But we are shocked when the prophet does not obey but runs in the opposite direction. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire and about 550 miles northeast of Israel in modern day Iraq. Tarshish, on the other hand, was in Spain, to the west, perhaps the furthest place in that direction that Jonah knew of. The Israelites were not a seafaring people. The two seas most commonly referred to in the Bible, the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea, are actually lakes. There are few sea stories in the Bible and most involve storms (notice the similarities between Jonah 1 and Acts 27).

When the storm breaks we see some of the great contrasts in the book. The sailors are afraid and active, Jonah is complacent and asleep. The sailors are praying looking for a god to help; Jonah is not praying but knows the God who can help. The sailors recognize the supernatural hand of retribution while Jonah is the cause of retribution. The sailors tried to rescue Jonah while Jonah didn’t want to rescue Nineveh. For the sailors the fear of the storm is replaced by the fear of the LORD. But for Jonah the ship is replaced by the great fish.

Notice how often the LORD sends or provides or appoints something in the story – a storm, a fish, a plant and a wind. They are all very natural things with supernatural force or timing. While Jonah tries to flee from God, God remains with him even to the very depth of the sea.

In chapter 1 Jonah runs from God, in chapter 2 he prays to God. His prayer is a psalm and shows that Jonah was immersed in the Psalms. The inside of the fish becomes Jonah’s personal hell (i.e. Sheol, 2:1). He contrasts the deep to God’s presence in the temple. Repentance brings regurgitation and Jonah is resurrected (see Mt. 12:39-40).

In chapter 3 the word of the LORD comes again, only this time Jonah obeys. Jonah is unusual among the prophets in that his message is received and his audience repents. The people of Nineveh, including the king, grieve over their sin with sackcloth and God relents.

In chapter 4 Jonah is angry, it is mentioned 6 times. Here we find out why Jonah ran away in chapter one. His great fear was that the people would repent and God would relent and then Israel’s great enemy would not be destroyed. After God provides a plant for shade and a worm to eat away the shade, Jonah is even angrier. This leads to a conversation between the LORD and Jonah about what he had to be angry about. The conversation reveals that God cares about the people of Nineveh. Shouldn’t Jonah also? That is the question that is left unanswered as the book ends. We can speculate about what Jonah might have said but the way the book ends forces us to answer the question for ourselves.

## MICAH

Micah is not a well-known book, even among people who know their Bibles fairly well. But, early in the first century, when Magi showed up in Jerusalem asking about the birth of Messiah, the religious scholars of the day went right to Micah 5:2:

But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for out of you will come a ruler  
who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.  
(as quoted in Matthew 2:6 NIV)

While this is Micah's most famous prophecy it is not the only one. He also predicted the fall of Samaria (1:6-7), the invasion of Judah (1:14-16), the destruction of Jerusalem (3:12), the exile to Babylon (4:10) and the return to the land (4:1-8).

The first verse tells us what kings Micah served under. Jotham and Ahaz were two of the worst, while Hezekiah was one of the best. This tells us that Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah, Hosea and Amos. On an interesting note: his prophecy in 3:12 is quoted in Jeremiah 26:18. This shows how quickly the prophet's writings were accepted as authoritative by God's people. Micah was a clever writer as well. In 2:10-16 he uses a series of word plays that are lost in most of our English translations but made clear in *The Message*.

In 1:8 Micah says he will walk around barefoot. Walk is an important theme in this book. The question in Micah is how will you walk and who will you walk with. The two questions are very much intertwined. Throughout the Bible, walk is a metaphor for conduct and association (see Ps 1:1 and Am 3:3 for two examples). Micah says that in the past God's people have walked in the wrong way. This is seen especially in their treatment and exploitation of the poor. Now they are called to walk in a new way.

God himself will teach them so they can walk in his path (4:2). They will not walk proudly (2:3) or walk after wind (2:11, see NASB or ESV). Instead they will walk in the name of the LORD (4:5) and humbly with their God (6:8). That verse is the key to it all. God has shown you, O man, what is good and what he requires. It is not more sacrifices or even to sacrifice your child, which some of the gods required. Simply he wants you to walk in the right way with the right one. The right way is to act justly and to love mercy. The right one to walk with is "your God," which you do humbly acknowledging how much you need his direction.

Micah may be best known for the Christmas prophecy about where Jesus would be born but he teaches us how to walk with the Savior who said, "Come, follow me."

## NAHUM

With Nahum we return again to the city of Nineveh. It is remarkable that this pagan capital is the focus of two of the Minor Prophets. The first was Jonah, who at first refused to go to the enemy city but later goes to Nineveh and sees the city turn to God in repentance. The religious transformation did not last though and by the time Nahum comes along God is again ready to bring judgment on the Assyrians of Nineveh.

One of the marks of a true prophet is being able, as God reveals it, to say what will happen in the future. The primary function of the prophet is to say "Thus sayeth the LORD!" Predictive prophecy is secondary to proclaiming the word of the LORD but it is important because predicting the future gives validity to the prophet's message. Only the true God can tell us what the future holds. When a prophet accurately tells us what is coming, it shows that everything else he says is also from the LORD.

Predictive prophecy is one of many things that show the supernatural nature of the Bible. The odds of the prophecies in the Bible that have come to pass just happening are astronomical. The Bible is unique among religious books in terms of prophecies made with great detail which history and archeology have proven to be accurate. The accuracy of what the Bible has predicted that has come true also speaks of the reliability of what it has predicted but is yet to happen.

Nahum is a great example of predictive prophecy that was fulfilled. Nineveh was one of the major cities of the ancient world. At the time Nahum wrote, it was the capital of the Assyrian

Empire, the world power of the day. The city was unequalled in size of all the ancient cities. There were two walls around the city. The inner wall was 100 feet tall with towers 200 feet. The wall was 50 feet thick with a 7 mile circumference. Clearly capturing and destroying such a city would be a major undertaking. Nahum gives at least 12 specific predictions about the fall of Nineveh. Let me mention just 4 of them:

- Nineveh would be completely destroyed (3:19). This is perhaps the most significant prophecy considering the size and fortifications of the city. Not only was Nineveh destroyed but it happened relatively quickly, after a three month siege. It was destroyed and never rebuilt. It was so completely wiped out it was forgotten. There was a time in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when critics pointed to Assyria and the city of Nineveh as proof that the Bible was not historically accurate because at that time there was no record of or archeological evidence of Nineveh outside of the Bible. Then some archeologists who believed the Bible went looking for the city where the Bible said it would be and found the site of a once great city that was destroyed just as the Bible said it would be.
- Nineveh would be destroyed in a state of drunkenness (1:10, 3:11). History has shown that the king ordered that wine be issued to the army just before the fall.
- Nineveh would be destroyed in an overflowing flood (1:8). History shows that there were record rains before the city fell and the enemies may have used the overflowing Tigris River as a weapon against the city.
- Nineveh would be burned (3:13). The archeological evidence showed that massive fires had burned large portions of the city.<sup>1</sup>

Nahum teaches us that God's word will come to pass no matter how unlikely it seems and that repentance of previous generations means nothing for the present generation.

## **HABAKKUK**

If you have ever been frustrated by the amount of evil and wickedness in our world and by God's apparent inactivity against it, then Habakkuk is the book for you. The book is an interesting dialogue between Habakkuk and the LORD. Habakkuk has questions as we all do, about the evil he sees around him but he also has the privilege of the LORD answering.

The structure of the book looks like this:

Habakkuk's First Complaint (1:2-4)

The LORD's First Answer (1:5-11)

Habakkuk's Second Complaint (1:12-2:1)

The LORD's Second Answer (2:2-20)

Habakkuk's Prayer/Psalm (3:1-19)

Habakkuk's first complaint begins with the question, "How long?" As Habakkuk considers his nation all he sees is violence, injustice, wrong and destruction. 1:4 could be a description of virtually any nation at any time – including our own. So Habakkuk's first question is, LORD, how long are you going to let this go on?

In the LORD's first answer he tells Habakkuk he is going to do something about the issues Habakkuk identifies. But apparently God's plan is not what Habakkuk had in mind. The LORD

is going to do something that will amaze Habakkuk and he would not believe. God's plan is to bring the Babylonians in to judge Judah with even worse violence and destruction.

Habakkuk does not like God's answer. His second complaint is summarized by the question, how can a holy God bring punishment with an unholy people? His first complaint was that it is not fair that there is so much violence and destruction. His second complaint is that it is not fair for God to bring more violence and destruction from outsiders. In one sense Habakkuk's complaint is universal. What is unique about him is he brings his complaints to God and waits for an answer (2:1). The tower speaks of silence, isolation and waiting, three things that few today are willing to pursue for any length of time.

The LORD's second answer is that the Babylonians will be punished as well but "the righteous will live by faith" (2:4). We may not understand all that God does or doesn't do from our limited perspective but will we live by faith and trust that God is good? "The righteous will live by faith" is one of the central tenets of the NT and is quoted three times (Rom 1:17, Gal 3:11, Heb 10:38). Centuries later a young German monk would be captivated by the idea and it would be the spark that Martin Luther used to start the Protestant Reformation.

The last chapter of Habakkuk is a prayer written as a psalm. In this prayer, complaints have been silenced by faith and turned to praise. Here Habakkuk answers the implied question of God from chapter 2; will you be one of the righteous who live by faith? Habakkuk gives a resounding yes. A key word in this psalm is the word "yet." In verse 16 his legs tremble with fear *yet* he will wait patiently. In verse 17 life does not work as Habakkuk thinks it should *yet*, in verse 18, he will still rejoice in the LORD. The shaky legs of verse 16 are replaced by the legs of a deer that fearlessly climb to the heights.

By the end of the book, Habakkuk is in a completely different place than when he started though nothing changed outwardly. There is nothing wrong with bringing our questions to God but will we listen long enough to hear his answer and live by faith when it is not the answer we want to hear?

## ZEPHANIAH

The OT prophets were not known for their cheery messages. These are not the books that people tend to turn to when they need a little pick me up or encouragement. You would not recommend Zephaniah to the depressed. The book begins:

I will sweep away everything  
from the face of the earth,  
declares the LORD.

Zephaniah is a book about the day of the LORD. That is a phrase we have seen before, especially in Amos. But in this short book of three chapters, Zephaniah refers more to the day of the LORD than any of the Minor Prophets. The actual phrase is used 6 times and it is referred to at least 18 times. The question comes; is the day of the LORD a good thing or a bad thing? The answer is; it depends whose side you are on.

Have you ever considered what you would do to the wicked and evil places of the world if you had unlimited power? A few weeks ago I was listening to the radio on my way home. I caught part of a talk show where the host was talking about a nation that the United States has been in conflict with for decades. The man on the radio said something to the effect, "I have

long thought that the best thing to do is to bomb them out of existence. Turn them into a glass parking lot and then we'll talk." My thought was; I'm glad you don't have that kind of power.

But God does. What Zephaniah describes is the kind of destruction that the radio talk show host only dreamed of. The first half of the book describes the day of the LORD as a time of judgment. God's wrath will be poured out on Judah (ch 1), the nations around Israel (ch 3) and ultimately on the whole earth (3:8). If you are depending on military might (1:14) or financial success (1:18) or anything else this world has to offer, forget it. The whole world is going to be destroyed. Then what will you have left? Then what will you depend on? Then who will save you?

That is one side of the day of the LORD. But there is another side. The earth may be destroyed but that is not the end of the story. In fact, if we add what we know from NT books, like Revelation, to Zechariah then the end of the earth is really just the beginning of the story. Yes, the day of the LORD is a time of great judgment and destruction but it is also the time of great blessing for God's people. The end of chapter 3 talks about this time of great reversal and restoration. It is in this section that we have one of the most endearing and hopeful images of our God. Read 3:17 and you might hear a song in the back of your head before you are done. Most of us have sung this verse without any idea that it came from Zephaniah. More significantly, when you think about God and how he thinks of you, is your first thought to think of him singing over you with love?

A more encouraging picture is hard to imagine. Maybe I was wrong about looking to the prophets when you need a pick me up. It all depends on whose side you are on.

## HAGGAI

Some of the Minor Prophets we can only guess at the time and the circumstance in which they gave their prophecy. Not so with Haggai. We not only know the historical setting, we know the exact date he prophesied. Because of being able to put dates to the reigns of Persian rulers, we know that Haggai's first prophecy was August 29, 520 B.C.

To understand the background of this book we need to remember some history from the book of Ezra. After 70 years of captivity, Cyrus, king of Persia, issues a decree in 538 B.C. allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. This fulfills the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah and others (Ezra 1:2-4). This leads to a group of about 50,000 Jews returning to the land of Israel under the leadership of Zerubbabel. The name Zerubbabel means 'sown in Babel' and that most likely was where he was born. He is of the royal line of David but is only a governor because Israel is a vassal state under the Persians (Ezra 2). The first thing Zerubbabel and the people do is rebuild the altar and reestablish worshipping with sacrifices. Then they start work rebuilding the temple (Ezra 3). The work on the temple is opposed by neighboring groups and the work stops for 16 years (Ezra 4). After letters go back and forth and a couple Persian kings are replaced, Darius the Great comes to the throne. He supports the Jews and allows the work on the temple to resume. But permission is not all that was needed (Ezra 5:1-2). The people needed prophetic prodding to get them going and that is what the book of Haggai is about.

The key phrase in the book, used 5 times, is "give careful thought to your ways." Haggai calls the people to think about how their life is working. The people have big plans and expectations but nothing is going as they hoped. They have left God out of their plans and their

lives as demonstrated by the unfinished temple in Jerusalem. God's message through Haggai is, get to work.

Haggai 1:12-13 are some of the most remarkable verses in the Bible. The people listened *and* obeyed what Haggai said. That certainly sets Haggai apart from the rest of the prophets who are mostly ignored. Haggai in turn gives the people the wonderful assurance that the LORD says, "I am with you."

However, willing hearts are soon discouraged. Another message of encouragement is needed from the prophet. So on October 17, 520 B.C., Haggai gives another proclamation from the word of the LORD (2:1). The people were discouraged because the new temple seemed nothing compared to the old one (2:3, see also Ezra 3:12). The new temple was smaller than Solomon's temple but, more significantly, they did not have the wealth of gold and silver to pour into it that Solomon did. But the LORD promises something better. He promises that he is going to shake things up. The desire of all nations will come to that temple and then the glory of the second will be greater than the glory of the first (2:7-8). That prophecy was fulfilled more than 500 years later when Jesus Christ came and walked in that temple.

As you read Haggai you might give careful thought to how God's temple needs to be built today. Of course, to answer that, we need to realize that God's temple is no longer a stone building in Jerusalem. Since Jesus has come, God's temple is in you and me (see 1 Cor 3:16-17, 6:19-20; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:21-22). Since the LORD Almighty is with us, what kind of work do we need to do on his temple?

## ZECHARIAH

Zechariah was a contemporary of Haggai and like him encouraged the people who returned to the land from Babylon to rebuild the temple (Ezra 5:1-2, for the historic setting see the summary on Haggai). Like Haggai, he gives dates that allow us to pinpoint when he wrote. Zechariah's first prophecy came 2 months after Haggai started.

Beyond that, the two prophets were very different. Zechariah was a young man (2:4) while Haggai would have been much older to have remembered Solomon's temple. Haggai is the second shortest book in the OT while Zechariah is one of the longest of the Minor Prophets. Zechariah, like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, was a priest as well as a prophet. Where Haggai is direct and to the point, Zechariah is full of visions and dreams that are, as one writer put it, "universal in scope and are eschatological and apocalyptic in outlook" (Hobart E. Freeman, An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets, p. 333). In other words, they are strange and almost impossible to understand.

While Zechariah called the people to rebuild the temple, that is not the main focus of this book. His message might best be summarized by the call in the opening verses, "'Return to me' declares the LORD, 'and I will return to you'" (1:3). As we have seen many times in the OT, God longs to be known by his people. That longing is so great that he is going to come to his people and shepherd them. Zechariah has much to say about the coming Messiah. As you read, you will notice passages that are familiar from their fulfillment in the Gospels. There are 41 citations or allusions from Zechariah in the NT.

The book divides easily into two parts:

The Visions of Zechariah – chapters 1-8

The Prophecies of YHWH – chapters 9-14

The visions are in two parts. There are a series of 8 visions that Zechariah saw in one night in chapters 1-6. Then two years later there is another set of visions in chapters 7-8. The name Zechariah means *YHWH remembers*. These visions show that the LORD remembers his promises and his love for his people.

The prophecies also divide into two parts with two oracles or burdens from the LORD (9:1, 12:1). This is the section that has more to do with the coming king/shepherd who we now recognize as Jesus. Some of what is foretold here happens when Jesus first comes, some will be fulfilled when he comes again. This section is marked by the phrase, “on that day” (or “in that day” depending on the translation). That phrase shows up 18 times in the last 5 chapters. The “day” that is being referred to is the day of the LORD, even though that phrase is only used once. In Zechariah, that day is much more positive than in some of the other prophets because of the coming of the shepherd king and the LORD’s care for Judah.

As you read Zechariah listen for the heart of God for his people. What is God’s heart toward you? You may feel like spiritually you are dressed in rags but God sees you with royal robes and marked as holy unto him (see 3:1-5).

## MALACHI

The name Malachi means “my messenger” or “messenger of YHWH.” Some have thought that Malachi was little more than a name, that is, there was no person just a message. In that case the first verse would read “The word of the LORD to Israel through his messenger.” Some have even thought that Malachi was an angel because an angel is a messenger. But most assume he was a prophet named Malachi who happened to be what his name meant.

Nothing is known of Malachi and the book tells us nothing directly. Several things are assumed from the context of the book and other historic details. The people had been back in the land a little more than 100 years. Spurred on by Haggai and Zechariah, the Jews finished the temple in 516 B.C. In 458 B.C., Ezra arrives with several thousand more Jews to settle in the land. Ezra, a teacher of the Law of Moses, leads in a time of revival and repentance. Then in 445 B.C., another great leader comes to Jerusalem. Nehemiah comes and leads the people to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem. He also continues the reforms started by Ezra. Nehemiah returned to Persia sometime around 433 B.C. and the people slip back into their old ways. But Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem for a second term as governor which would have ended at least by 407 B.C. Malachi would have prophesied sometime during the time Nehemiah was away or during his second term as governor.

The style of Malachi is different from the other prophets. There are a series of discussions where the LORD states what he has done or said in the past. The people then refute that claim. Then God explains how it is true. In these conversations the LORD deals with the complaints of a people that feel abandoned by a God who has not kept his promises. The Jews have felt that they were unloved by God but the LORD shows how they were loved because he chose them to have a special relationship to himself. The priests had been going through the motions of sacrifices which did not seem to do any good but God points out they were bringing defective sacrifices. Better to shut the temple doors and go home. The people complain that God does not pay attention to their prayers but he says that is because they have broken the covenant with their wives and divorced them. The people feel that all who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD. But the LORD explains that he is coming to judge. When he comes, who will be able to stand

before him? God says the people have robbed him by not bringing their tithes and offerings. Finally the people say that it is futile to serve God because the evil prosper. But God speaks again of the Day of the LORD. He says that before that great and dreadful day he will send the prophet Elijah.

And then silence.

For 400 years nothing is heard from God. No prophet says, "Thus saith the LORD." Then a man appears in the Jordan wilderness calling the people to repent and turn to God. It is any wonder that people went to him and asked, "Are you Elijah?"

# THE NEW TESTAMENT

## MATTHEW

As you have read the OT I hope that you have sensed the growing longing and expectation of the coming Messiah in the OT. More than that, I hope that there has been a growing longing and expectation growing in you for Messiah to come. From the first hint of the one who would come and crush the serpent's head in Genesis 3:15 to the promise of the Messiah who would be like a refiner's fire in Malachi, the OT anticipates the coming of Jesus in the NT.

In the book 66 Love Letters, Larry Crabb speaks often of the longing to jump ahead and get to the good part, so to speak. But we need the OT, all of it, to show us how much we really need the Messiah and the salvation that only he can bring. In Galatians 3:15-25 Paul explains how the law or the OT is like a tutor leading us to Christ. But we tend to want to skip some of our lessons. In the introduction to the NT that he calls "The Hero Takes Center Stage," Larry writes: *If we miss the message of [God's] first thirty-nine letters, we'll miss the message of his last twenty-seven. Or worse, we'll pervert it and think we've got it. We'll make it fit into our hellishly twisted definition of love and never be captured by the real story of love that could take our breath away* (p. 194).

Matthew does not let us forget the OT. His account begins with a genealogy that firmly roots Jesus in the history of God's people. He is the son of David the king and Abraham the patriarch. In the account of Jesus' birth there are at least three prophecies that are fulfilled. Matthew consistently sees Jesus fulfilling what was spoken in the OT.

Matthew is also tied to the OT by his emphasis on the kingdom of heaven. Jesus' first message in Matthew is, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near" (4:17). Then the phrase kingdom of heaven is repeated over 30 times in the gospel. We find the laws of the kingdom in chapters 5-7, what is commonly called the Sermon on the Mount. There are the stories or parables of the kingdom in chapters 13 and 20-21. But mostly Matthew introduces Jesus to us as the Messiah/King. The one long ago promised to patriarchs, kings and prophets has finally arrived.

The question is, as it so often was in the OT, will the people listen to the one God has sent? In the past the Jews ignored, rejected and even killed the spokesmen God sent. What will the Jews do now that God has sent his Son (see 21:33-41)? Though the Jews had a great expectation for the Messiah to come, the gospels show us how much those longings were based on their own selfish desires rather than on what God had revealed and what Jesus came to do. The idea of a suffering Messiah was the furthest thing from their thinking, even those closest to him did not understand (16:21-22). Though Jesus told them over and over, they were still surprised when Jesus was arrested, beaten, crucified and buried.

Their surprise was even greater when three days later he was alive. Jesus demonstrated he was king by his authoritative teaching (7:28-29), by his authority over illness and demons (8:8, 8:32), and by his authority over creation itself (8:27). But the ultimate proof of Jesus' authority and power as Messiah/King was in the resurrection (28:18).

For the most part the Jews missed Jesus because their minds were made up before he came as to what he would be and do. I wonder what we will miss in Matthew because our minds are already set and we assume we know these stories. May we read with expectation, the hero we

have longed for has come. May we not let the familiarity of these accounts keep us from hearing them anew and having our imaginations enter into the story to see the long awaited Messiah as he wants to be seen.

## MARK

The NT begins with 4 books that we call gospels. That comes from Mark 1:1, “The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Gospel is a Greek word that simply means good news. The story of Jesus Christ is good news; indeed, it is the best news. But the good news does not come in the way we would write it today. Today we would write a biography. We would start at the beginning; tell about Jesus’ parents, his early childhood, influential figures and events as he grew up. We would be chronological and sequential. Gospels are not like that.

The gospels tell us next to nothing about Jesus’ early life. Mark begins with Jesus as an adult being baptized by John. The gospel writers do not mind changing the order of events to better make a point. They are more interested in telling us who Jesus is than in covering all the details of his life. The main focus of the gospels is the last week of Jesus’ life, about one third of Mark is devoted to that time period. In many ways the gospels are a unique type of writing and most believe Mark was the first one.

There is actually nothing in the second gospel to link it to Mark. However, the early tradition of the church is that John Mark is the author of the book. Mark is mentioned a few times in Acts (Act 12:12, 25; 15:39). His mother owned the home in Jerusalem that was the meeting place of the early church and may have been the location of the last supper. Mark had a cousin named Barnabas who took him along on a missionary journey with Paul. Mark left them early in the trip and returned home. Later Barnabas wanted to take Mark on another trip while Paul refused. This led to Paul and Barnabas going different directions with Barnabas taking Mark with him. Later, Mark was with Peter toward the end of Peter’s life (1 Pet 5:13). Many believe that Mark was with Jesus at the time of his arrest and is the one who flees naked from the guards (Mk 14:51-52).

Mark is the shortest of the gospels. He does not have some of the longer teaching sections that others have, like the Sermon on the Mount. Mark’s writing is characterized by movement and quickness. The Greek word that means immediately or right away is used 42 times in Mark, more times than in the rest of the NT combined. There is a sense of urgency in Mark as Jesus moves toward Jerusalem and the betrayal and death that awaits him there. Jesus is presented as a man who eats and sleeps and walks around with other men. But he is so much more. Mark also emphasizes the miracles of Jesus.

Tradition tells us that Mark recorded the stories that Peter told about Jesus. Mark does not give commentary on the stories but lets them speak for themselves. While Matthew presents Jesus as the long awaited king who has finally come, Mark shows Jesus as the servant who came to give his life as a ransom for many (Mk 10:45).

As you read Mark you will come across many stories that are the same as Matthew. But notice how they are different. What do the differences tell you? How do you see Jesus as a servant in these stories? Use your sanctified imagination to enter into the stories. What did Jesus sound like when he spoke in different settings? How might he look at people when he healed or rebuked them? What is Jesus saying to you in Mark’s gospel?

## LUKE

Luke is unique among the Gospels in that it begins with a prologue explaining how it was written and to whom (1:1-4). Others had written accounts of Jesus' life but this is a thoroughly investigated account written for a man named Theophilus. This Gospel is unique in that it has a sequel. The opening verses of Acts make it clear that Acts is a continuation of the story started in Luke and written to the same man.

It is from Acts that we get the clues that lead to the author of both volumes. When speaking of Paul's journeys toward the end of Acts, the author includes himself and says "we." This first happens in Acts 16:10-11 when Paul leaves Troas to go to Macedonia. By looking at the so-called "we passages," considering who the "we" involved are, and then following a process of elimination, Luke is shown to be the best candidate to have written Acts. If he wrote Acts then he also wrote the Gospel that was sent to Theophilus.

Luke holds a unique position as the only Gentile writer of Scripture. This seems appropriate with the emphasis in Luke-Acts on the Gospel being for all people, not just the Jews. Luke was a physician (Col 4:14) and a close associate of Paul. He joined Paul during his second missionary journey and was often with Paul after that. He was likely a well-educated man and was the best writer of the NT from a literary stand point.

While many of the stories in Luke will be familiar from Matthew and Mark, there is much that is exclusive to this Gospel. Two of Jesus' most famous parables are found only in Luke; the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. Luke gives a greater emphasis on the Holy Spirit than the others, which is a prelude to the work of the Spirit in Acts. As an outcast Gentile himself, Luke had a great interest in the overlooked of society. He had many stories about women and names some of them at a time when women had little identity. He speaks of children and the poor and needy. Luke is also pro-Roman. To the Jews, centurions were always the bad guys but in Luke-Acts we never meet a centurion that we don't like. Part of the purpose of writing Luke-Acts may have been to show that Christianity was not a threat to Rome.

But, of course, the Gospel of Luke is mostly about Jesus. As a Greek, Luke is not interested in the fulfillment of OT prophecies that Matthew shows. To Luke, Jesus is the perfect man. Luke's genealogy of Jesus traces all the way back to Adam, the first man. But unlike his forefather, when Jesus is tempted he does not sin but continues to trust in and depend on his Father in heaven. Where Mark has Jesus in a crowd, Luke has Jesus interacting more with people and dealing with individuals who are named. We hear about two tax collectors, named Levi and Zaccheus, whom Jesus has meals with. He goes to another dinner with a Pharisee named Simon. The difference between a Pharisee and a tax collector could not be greater. But Jesus, the perfect man, somehow fits better with the sinners and tax collectors than the righteous Pharisees.

That difference is explained in what many see as the key verses of the book: "The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (19:10). Jesus came to save women and children, diseased and demon possessed, tax collectors and sinners, and, yes, even Pharisees. To accomplish that mission Jesus had to suffer and die. Something the disciples miss, even though he tells them it is coming repeatedly, and explains it to them after his resurrection (24:27).

As you read Luke this week, pray that you will not miss what the Son of Man has to say to you in these familiar stories. The original reader of this book was a man named Theophilus. That name means either "loved by God" or "lover of God." As you read Luke may you put

yourself in the stories to see how much you are loved by God so that you will become a greater lover of God.

## JOHN

Matthew, Mark and Luke are sometimes called the Synoptic Gospels. Synoptic comes from two Greek words: “syn” meaning together and “optic,” which we get the word optical from, meaning to see. The first three Gospels see Jesus together; or they see the life of Jesus in very similar ways. They tell the same stories. John, on the other hand, is very different. He looks at Jesus from different angles.

While John covers the basic story of the other three; speaking of John the Baptist and following through to Jesus’ death and resurrection, most of John’s Gospel is not found in the Synoptics. Mark begins with the ministry of John the Baptist, Matthew and Luke begin with the birth of Jesus, but John begins with the very beginning echoing the words of Genesis 1:1. There are no parables in John and Jesus’ teaching is focused much more on who he is than on the Kingdom of God. The Synoptics focus on Jesus’ ministry in and around Galilee while John’s accounts are centered much more in Jerusalem. John does not have Jesus speaking to the crowds like in the other three but dealing with individuals, like Nicodemus in chapter 3 and the woman at the well in chapter 4.

Unlike the Synoptics, John tells us why he wrote:

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30-31 NIV)

There are several key words to John in these verses such as sign, believe, Christ (or Messiah), and life. When we understand these words the way John uses them in the Gospel, we see that his purpose is to give us a basis for believing that Jesus is God come in the flesh and that he entered our world in order that we could have eternal life when we put our faith in him.

To accomplish this, John is methodical and systematic. He mentions seven miracles, five of which are unique to John. John refers to them as signs, wondrous events that show that Jesus had power and authority over creation that only God could have. These signs point to the true nature of Jesus so that people would put their faith in him (2:11, 4:53-54).

Along with the 7 miracles are 7 “I am” statements (remember to the Jewish mind 7 is the number of completion and perfection). In chapter 8 there is a lengthy debate between Jesus and the Pharisees about the validity of Jesus’ statements and who he is. The climax of this debate is when Jesus says, “Before Abraham was born, I AM” (emphasis mine). At that point the religious leaders picked up stones to kill Jesus because they understood Jesus to be claiming to be the eternal I AM, the personal name of God, YHWH. John has Jesus backing up that remarkable claim with 7 “I am” statements where he takes to himself divine attributes given to God in the OT. Jesus said, “I am the bread of life” (6:35), “I am the light of the world” (8:12, 9:5), “I am the door” (10:7), “I am the good shepherd” (10:11, 14), “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25), “I am the way the truth and the life (14:6) and I am the true vine” (15:1).

John shows that Jesus is God come to live among us to give us life (1:1-14). But we have to understand what John means by eternal life. Jesus defines that not just as existing for a long time but defines it this way: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3 NIV). The life that Jesus offers is nothing less

than a relationship with the eternal God who exists in three persons. As you read John, ask the Holy Spirit to open your eyes to see Jesus in a new way so that you will know the Father better.

## ACTS

In my earliest memories it seems like my childhood pastor was always preaching from the book of Acts. I'm sure that has more to do with limited childhood memories than his actual preaching schedule. I also remember a childhood confusion about the book. When people spoke of this book I thought they were saying "Axe" not "Acts." So I was always wondering why the early followers of Jesus never carried an instrument for cutting wood. Not a single tree is chopped down in the whole book.

Even when I was old enough to see the difference between "axe" and "acts" the title still bothered me. The Acts of the Apostles is the older, fuller title; but most modern translations leave out the second part of the title. The trouble with that title is that most of the apostles have very little to do with Acts. A better title would be "The Adventures of Peter and Paul." Or a short title could be "Luke (part 2)."

The opening verses clearly show that this book is the continuation of the third Gospel (see the summary of Luke to see how we arrive at Luke as the author of both books). In the first volume Luke tells us "all that Jesus began to do and teach" (1:1). In this second volume, Luke tells how some of Jesus' followers continued to spread the good news of what Jesus did and taught.

The story begins with a small band of disciples in Jerusalem hoping that now that Jesus has been resurrected from the dead, he will restore the glories of the Davidic Kingdom to Israel (1:6). But Jesus has different plans about a different kind of kingdom. They are going to build a kingdom but not one that has to do with the control of land but a kingdom that has to do with the control of hearts. Jesus told them this will only be possible when the Holy Spirit comes. Then they will be his witnesses first in Jerusalem and Judea, then on to Samaria and ultimately to the ends of the earth (1:8).

Acts tells the story of the followers of Jesus doing just that. They are in Jerusalem when, on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit comes on them and they begin proclaiming the story of Jesus in a language they never knew. After Peter explains things in the first of many sermons in the book of Acts, 3,000 are added to the small band that will become known as the church. As the church grows, so does opposition from the religious leaders in Jerusalem. The persecution forces the followers of "the Way" out of Jerusalem into Judea and on to Samaria.

As the church expands geographically two great surprises come. The first is that the good news of Jesus is not just for Jews. Peter finds that out after an amazing encounter with a centurion named Cornelius in chapter 10. The second surprise comes in one of the greatest transformations of all time, Saul the persecutor becomes Paul the missionary. Paul becomes Jesus' messenger to the Gentiles. The rest of the book deals with Paul's three missionary journeys and a trip to Rome. This is one time where a map comes in handy as Paul travels from town to town in the Mediterranean world.

There is still opposition, mostly from the Jews, but the church is certainly growing and the "kingdom" is expanding. Paul takes advantage of his Roman citizenship, the Pax Romana, good Roman roads, and the almost universal usage of the Greek language to tell a spiritually hungry

population the good news of Jesus Christ. It was an unprecedentedly advantageous time for quick spread of the gospel and the growth of the church.

Acts begins with a small group in Jerusalem and ends with Paul in Rome with fledgling churches scattered in scores of towns in between. The church had gone to the ends of the earth, at least as the first disciples knew it. As you read Acts, listen to how God might be calling you to be his witness.

## ROMANS

In the book of Romans we come to yet another category of the books of the Bible. Romans is the first of 21 epistles or letters to the early churches or church leaders. There are 13 epistles written by Paul (or 14 if you think he wrote Hebrews) and 7 general epistles written by James, Peter, John and Jude. In the epistles the theology of the 4 gospels is explained and lived out. These letters, especially Paul's, were addressed to churches with very little OT background or training in God's ways and often addressed specific problems or concerns.

Romans is not the first epistle that Paul wrote but it is always listed first showing the importance of the letter's theme and message. It is likely that Paul wrote from Corinth at the end of his third missionary journey and before his arrest in Jerusalem. It is a letter of introduction from a missionary who hoped to visit Rome and be supported by the believers there before he moved on to Spain (1:9-15, 15:23-32).

Romans is an invaluable document of the early church because it is a systematic presentation of the "gospel" that Paul preached. Since Paul had never been to Rome, he was letting them know what they could expect to hear from him. This gospel "is the power of God for everyone who believes" (1:16). It is a salvation that is from first to last based on faith in what God has done through Jesus Christ. For, as Habakkuk said long before; "the righteous will live by faith" (1:17).

Paul begins by showing why this salvation is so desperately needed. In the first 3 chapters Paul hammers home the point that God is righteous and we are not. There is none righteous. We cannot possibly save ourselves and the OT law only makes us conscious of sin. We have to understand the bad news of sin before we can appreciate the good news of grace.

Starting in 3:21 and going through chapter 5, Paul explains the nature of salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. God has saved us by the means of justification. We have been judicially declared not guilty and set free not on the merit of anything we have done but because of what Jesus has done for us. While we were sinners and God's enemies, Christ died for us so that now we are saved from God's wrath and have peace with him.

We *are* saved by justification but chapters 6-8 tell us that we *are being* saved through a process of sanctification. To sanctify means to set apart or make something holy. So we are no longer slaves to sin but slaves to obedience which leads to righteousness. We live in the new way of the Spirit and not the old way of the law. While we still struggle with sin, we are confident that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus and nothing can separate us from his love.

God's plan of salvation is on track and cannot be derailed. That is the message of chapters 9-11. The Jewish people are still loved by God, even though the church embraces Gentiles. When we consider God's plan and the way he has accomplished our salvation, we marvel as Paul does in the doxology in 11:33-36.

Finally, the gospel that Paul preached includes us living transformed lives, as he explains in 12-16. We are living sacrifices that love deeply and sincerely. We use our gifts to serve each other and the strong submit to the needs of the weak.

Romans is the closest thing that the NT has to a systematic theology, although it is far too practical and more interesting than a systematic theology book. It is probably the most studied and written about book of the Bible. You could spend years on it but in reading it I hope that you will get a feeling for the flow of Paul's argument and reasoning that is often missed by in-depth study. I recommend reading it in two sittings if you can; the first 8 chapters and then 9-16. Listen to the wonderful message of salvation and remember how lost you truly are without the justification and sanctification through Jesus Christ our Lord.

## **1 CORINTHIANS**

Many Christians talk about a desire to return to the NT church. By that they mean some ideal time in the early church like what is described in Acts 2:42-47 or 4:32-35. But the reality is that the church has never been perfect because it is made up of sinful people. Many of the early churches struggled in very ungodly settings, with little biblical knowledge to figure out how their newfound faith should be lived out.

The church at Corinth was one of the worst. Their problems were so many and varied that they received several letters from Paul to try to straighten them out. Two of those letters survived and are the two books of the NT that we call 1 and 2 Corinthians.

Corinth was a shipping port and one of the major cities of Greece. It was known for its pottery, brass, games, temples and immoral living. Paul came to Corinth around 50 A.D., after being in Athens at the end of his second missionary journey. Paul remained in the city for a year and a half, the second longest time he spent in any one city (see Acts 18:1-18). So Paul knew these people well and he was concerned for them. He knew the temptations around them but he also knew that their greatest dangers came from within not without.

Paul had written the Corinthians an earlier letter (1 Cor 5:9) that we don't have. Then he heard reports from Chloe's household about problems in the church (1:11) and questions from others in the church (16:17) which prompted the letter referred to as 1 Corinthians. Paul is worried about and disappointed in these young believers. He hoped that they would have matured more but still saw them as being very influenced by worldly values (3:1). The problems that Paul addresses are wide-ranging from court cases to communion and from adultery to meat sacrificed to idols. He scolds them as their spiritual father and calls them to get along with one another.

To the Greeks of Corinth, who prided themselves on their wisdom and philosophy, Paul's message may have sounded like foolishness. But God's foolishness is the power of God for salvation and transformation (1:18-25). Paul proclaimed the message of Christ crucified but also the miracle of the resurrection. Because of some false teaching in Corinth we have the richest passage about Jesus' resurrection and because he is raised, the hope of our resurrection (ch 15). Because the Corinthians were fighting about gifts and how they should be used, we have the wonderful metaphor of the Church as one body with many parts, each that is needed and significant (12:12-31). Because the Corinthians were turning communion into drunken banquets, we have the best discussion of the "Lord's Supper" outside of the Gospels. And because the Corinthians could not get along, we have the greatest definition of love ever written (ch 13).

The believers in Corinth that Paul wrote to were far from perfect or the ideal church. They had a long way to go in their spiritual journey. But there is one thing that Paul says about them that we should not miss. It comes in the opening verses where he says who he is writing to. “To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy [or saints] (1:2 see NASB or ESV). A sanctified person is a saint; the same Greek word is used in different ways. Despite all their problems Paul had confidence that these people were saints not because of what they had done but because they were “in Christ Jesus.” Christ had made them holy and was in the process of making them holy. The same is true for us. As you read 1 Corinthians, ask the Holy Spirit to show you how you can live more like the saint that you are in Christ Jesus.

## 2 CORINTHIANS

If Paul was frustrated when he wrote 1 Corinthians, he was downright angry in 2 Corinthians. The level of his furor grows until toward the end of the letter he admits, “I am out of my mind to talk like this” (11:23). What led to Paul being so upset and to the letter we call 2 Corinthians?

The answer to that question is much debated and far from clear. It comes from piecing together details from 1 and 2 Corinthians and Acts. But that information does not fill in all the gaps or give a complete picture of what happened. There are two main questions in this discussion. First, how many letters did Paul write to the Corinthians (3, 4 or 5)? Second, how many times did Paul visit Corinth (2 or 3)? We know from 1 Corinthians 5:9 that he wrote a letter that we no longer have. Then he wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus. Sometime after that it would seem that Paul went to Corinth for a visit that was painful to all of them (2 Cor 2:1). Sometime after that he wrote to them “out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears” (2:4). That could refer to what we call 1 Corinthians but it makes more sense to me to be referring to another letter that is no longer extant. That letter may have been carried by Titus and when Paul finally caught up with Titus and heard a report from him (2:13; 7:6, 13-14; 8:6); Paul wrote the letter known as 2 Corinthians, perhaps in Macedonia.

It seems that the Corinthians had addressed some of the concerns that Paul had brought up in 1 Corinthians but now new concerns have arisen. The main problem now is personal antagonism toward Paul. Some new “apostles” had come to Corinth and were opposing Paul to elevate their own position. While upsetting, this opposition brings out some of Paul’s best writing. This letter is the most personal and autobiographical of his epistles. We not only have details of Paul’s life that are found nowhere else but we are able to see his pastoral heart. We hear of the physical suffering that ministry brought him but also the emotional and mental torment he faced (ch 11 esp. 28-29).

So as Eugene Peterson points out, we can be grateful for this letter and the circumstances that prompted it. “However much trouble the Corinthians were to each other and to Paul, they prove a cornucopia of blessings to us, for they triggered some of Paul’s most vigorous writing” (Introduction to 2 Corinthians in *The Message*).

In broad terms the book is easily divided into three parts. The first seven chapters are a discussion of Paul’s service as a minister of a new covenant (3:6). This section has wonderful discussions of the transformational work that God is doing to change us from glory to glory. We carry this glory in jars of clay as we are given a ministry of reconciliation. The second section, chapters 8-9, deals with the Corinthians giving to a collection for the poor in Jerusalem. Paul had been working with several churches to collect a gift that would be given to needy believers

in Jerusalem. These chapters give us clear teaching about NT giving. In the final chapters, 10-13, Paul defends his apostleship in light of those that he sarcastically calls “super apostles” (11:5, 12:11). Here we learn about Paul’s suffering and about a remarkable vision.

Regardless of all the historic details behind the writing of 2 Corinthians, this letter has wonderful things to teach anyone who wants to be a minister of a new covenant.

## GALATIANS

The difference between Christianity and the religions of the world can be summed up in the two words, “do” and “done.” Every other religion teaches that we please God or the gods by what we *do*. If we *do* the right things, as defined by the religion, then we can win the god’s favor and expect life to work. Christianity, on the other hand, is all about what Jesus has *done*. Because of Jesus’ death and resurrection the work of salvation is *done*. We put our faith in the completed work of Jesus and can come to God with freedom and confidence.

Most believers understand the distinction between *do* and *done* when it comes to our salvation. We can never *do* enough to pay for our sin or gain God’s favor. So we put our faith in what Jesus has *done*, say yes to Jesus and are born again. Unfortunately, many Christians think that they enter God’s family based on what Jesus has *done* but then it is up to him or her to *do* the right thing to keep God’s favor and blessing.

The antidote to this false thinking is the book of Galatians. “You foolish Galatians! . . . After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort” (3:1, 3)?

Unlike most of Paul’s letters, Galatians is not written to one church or an individual but to a group of Churches in the Roman province of Galatia. Galatia was a region in Asia Minor or modern day Turkey. There is great debate as to which churches in Galatia Paul was writing to. It makes the best sense to me that he was writing to churches in southern Galatia that he established on his first missionary journey such as Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. Also it is disputed when Galatians was written. Many assume that it was written before the counsel in Jerusalem spoken of in Acts 15. It seems likely that Paul would have referred to such a significant event that had a direct bearing on the discussion in Galatians if that event had already taken place. If that is the case then Galatians would have been the first of Paul’s letters chronologically and perhaps the first of the NT books to be written.

Galatians is written in response to some Jewish teachers who had come from Jerusalem. These teachers became known as Judaizers, because they said that Gentile Christians had to follow Jewish law, especially circumcision. This was a critical time because if the church would have followed this teaching it would have abandoned the *done* of Christianity for the *do* of religion. Paul would have none of it (see 1:8-10).

Paul begins by telling his story to show his credentials not only as a good Jew but as an apostle, chosen by Jesus and accepted by the other apostles. His story ends with an encounter with Peter, the leader of the apostles, where Paul rebukes Peter for living like a Gentile until certain Jews from Jerusalem show up. Paul shows that the law only exposes our sin and our inability to justify ourselves. Now we must die to the law so that we can live in Christ (2:15-21).

Then Paul argues from the OT for justification through faith alone. If this sounds a little like Romans then you will understand why Galatians is sometimes called Little Romans. Paul then argues for our freedom in Christ. If these young believers give in to the Judaizers now they will give up the freedom that Christ died to give them. They don’t have to *do* the right things but

they need to let the Holy Spirit produce fruit in them that will transform them from the inside out. When they are filled with “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” they will naturally fulfill the law (5:22-23).

As you read Galatians pay attention to the arguments Paul makes against a religion based on *do* but also rejoice that in Jesus Christ we have a faith that is *done* completely with nothing needing to be added.

## EPHESIANS

Ephesians is one of the four letters of Paul that are sometimes called the “Prison Epistles,” because Paul wrote them while imprisoned by the Romans. The others include Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. They likely were written after the events of Acts when Paul was under house arrest in Rome (Act 28:30-31). So technically, “Captivity Epistles” would be more accurate than “Prison Epistles.” The point is that Paul was unable to move about freely but he could receive guests who would tell him what was happening in the churches Paul had started. Then Paul could write letters.

Ephesus was the chief city of the coastal area of Asia Minor. Paul spent more time there than any other city, about 3 years (see Acts 19). While this letter is addressed to the Ephesians, it was likely meant to be circulated among the churches in the region. This would explain the lack of personal references to people in a city that Paul spent so much time in. Since Ephesus was the largest city and likely the largest church, the letter became associated with that name.

Ephesians does not address any problems or controversy. Instead it is a wonderful treatment of the relationship between Christ and the church. It does not so much focus on the process of salvation and justification, as Romans and Galatians do, but on who we are in Christ.

That phrase, “in Christ” or “in him,” is a key to the book. The first three chapters focus on our position as part of the church in Christ. The second three chapters deal with how we live in Christ. After the opening salutation, Paul gives praise to God “who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ” (Eph 1:3). The rest of the book is an explanation of those blessings and then how those blessings impact our lives.

We see in Ephesians how overwhelmed Paul is by the salvation Jesus Christ has brought and that he gets to be a part. Ephesians is a book of long sentences, in Greek there are eight long passages that are one long sentence (1:3-14, 15-23; 2:1-7; 3:1-13, 14-19; 4:1-7, 11-16; 6:14-20). It is as if once Paul gets started he can’t find enough adjectives and superlatives to pile together to describe what Christ has done for us and his church.

While we as individuals receive every spiritual blessing in Christ it is never in isolation. All this happens in the context of the church. The church is the great surprise of the NT. It is something the Jews never anticipated or were entirely sure what to do with. The church was one new man, one new body, composed of Jews and Gentiles in Christ (2:14-18). The church is not about a location or what happens in a building. The church is about relationships where leaders equip and prepare others for works of service so that the whole group, the whole body, becomes mature and looks more and more like Jesus (4:12-13).

The new entity called the church is not easy to describe. Paul uses three metaphors to help us understand this unique relationship. He speaks of the church as the body of Christ (1:23), as a building or temple (2:19-22), and as the bride of Christ (5:25-27). While these metaphors are

difficult to fully comprehend, they speak of a deep, intimate, growing relationship with Jesus that becomes more intense and mysterious as we journey with him (5:32).

However, we are never meant to journey alone. We are part of the church, the community of those who have been saved by faith not by works and brought together in unity in Christ. Regardless of our past we are now saints and God's masterpiece in Christ Jesus to do good works that were prepared in advance for us (2:8-10). Our relationship with Christ impacts all of our other relationships including husbands and wives, parents and children and employers and employees (or in Paul's day slaves and masters, 5:21-6:9).

As you read Ephesians I would encourage you to pay attention to Paul's prayers in this letter, especially at the end of chapters 1 and 3. Let Paul's words become your prayers and seek how you can be "filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (3:19).

## PHILIPPIANS

Paul's letter to the Philippians is his most joyful, even though it was not written under joyful circumstances. This is another of Paul's "Prison Epistles," most likely written while he was under house arrest in Rome. Paul speaks 4 times in chapter one of being in chains (1:7, 13, 14, 17). More than that, he could at any time be executed, although he hoped to be released (1:20-26). On top of that some were using Paul's confinement to stir up trouble for Paul (1:17). But Paul is not concerned. He is joyful because the gospel is being preached and even in his internment he is able to impact the palace guard (1:13) and Caesar's household (4:22).

The letter was written as a thank you note to a congregation that had faithfully supported Paul. The church in Philippi was started by Paul during his second missionary journey (see Acts 16). After he left, the believers in Philippi continued to support Paul's work with monetary gifts. Recently they had sent another gift to Paul in Rome (4:10-19), who continued to have expenses though chained to a Roman guard. The gift was delivered by Epaphroditus (4:18), who likely was a leader in the Philippian church. After Epaphroditus got to Rome he became sick and almost died. There may have been some misunderstanding about why Epaphroditus had not returned sooner. Paul explains the situation and sends Epaphroditus home with this letter.

Epaphroditus brought news of factions and disunity that Paul addresses in the letter. Instead of selfish pursuit of one's own agenda, they were to follow the example of Christ Jesus (2:1-11). The restoration of relationships was to be a priority and two women are urged to get along (4:2-3). There were also some Judaizers pushing circumcision (ch 3) but not as bad as in Galatians.

But mostly Philippians is about joy. The noun, joy, is used 4 times while the verb, rejoice, is used 8. This is not a pie in the sky "don't worry, be happy" sort of joy. Rather it is a joy in the transformation that is to be found in Jesus Christ. This is not a letter about Paul, Timothy or Epaphroditus, though they are all mentioned. It is first and foremost about Jesus. Some variation of Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior occurs in 51 of the 104 verses of Philippians (Homer Kent, "Philippians," Expositors Bible Commentary, vol 11, p. 99).

One of the greatest passages of the NT about the nature of Jesus as God and man is in 2:6-11. Interestingly, it is not even intended as a theological statement. It is more of an aside in which Paul quotes what may have been an early hymn sung by the church.

There is great joy in Paul because of the transformational work done by Jesus Christ. So Paul is joyful in the confidence that he who began a good work in them will complete it (1:6). That completion included becoming blameless and pure so they can shine like stars in the

universe (2:15). We may not look like much now but when Christ returns, our lowly bodies will be transformed like his glorious body (3:20-21). It was that kind of perspective that allowed Paul to be filled with joy and be content in whatever circumstance he found himself (4:12). As you read Philippians pray that Jesus Christ will release you from the chains of circumstances and fill you with his joy.

## COLOSSIANS

Colosse was a small town in Asia Minor about 100 miles from Ephesus. According to Acts, Paul had never been there but it is likely the church was started during Paul's extended stay in Ephesus. According to Acts 19:10, Paul's teaching was so powerful and extensive that all "who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord." The church was started by Epaphras (not to be confused with Epaphroditus of Philippians) who may have been converted by Paul in Ephesus and then returned home to tell the people in Colosse the good news. So while these believers had never met Paul (2:11) they were his spiritual grandchildren.

It is clear that Paul was imprisoned when he wrote this (4:3, 10, 18) and it is assumed, along with the other Prison Epistles, that he wrote Colossians from Rome. It is likely that Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon were written about the same time and were delivered by a man named Tychicus (Eph 6:21, Col 4:7). You will notice many similarities between Ephesians and Colossians. In Colossians Paul mentions the church in Laodicea (2:1, 4:16), which was the town closest to Colosse. Paul also wrote a letter to the Laodicians and wanted the two groups to swap letters. Some believe that the letter to the Laodicians is what we call Ephesians. I assume that it is just another of Paul's letters that we don't have today.

The main purpose of Colossians is that Epaphras had told Paul about some teachers that had come to Colosse preaching some false ideas. Paul never states exactly what these false teachers were propagating but we can make some guesses based on what he says about them. Paul says that it was a hollow philosophy (2:8) that emphasized rituals like circumcision, diet and holy days. It seemed to be a syncretistic movement, that is, they combined ideas from different religions including paganism, Judaism and Christianity. The most critical and damaging ideas that these false teachers propagated was to make Jesus Christ a lesser being and reduce him to a minor role. As one writer said, "It did not *deny* Christ but it did *dethrone* him" (Curtis Vaugn, "Colossians," Expositors Bible Commentary, vol 11, p. 168, emphasis his).

In a way it is good that we don't know the details of the Colossian heresy. If we did we might make the mistake of thinking that what Paul wrote only applies to those ideas. But Paul, through the Holy Spirit, has given us something better. He has given us the answer to every group that would take away from Christ. Instead of showing what is wrong with the counterfeit, Paul tells us the glories of the real deal. He presents Jesus Christ as the supreme creator of all things who is fully God in every way. Jesus has made peace with God and restored a right relationship with the Father through his blood shed on the cross. Cultic groups always want to take away from the nature of Jesus and add some essential work to salvation. Paul will have none of it.

Once Paul clearly establishes the supremacy of Christ and what he has done for us then we are encouraged to live in him (2:6-7). Transformation comes not from external obedience or observance of the right practices and procedures. We are changed from the inside out. Because Christ has made us alive, we can live a new way as we think a new way. Our focus is not on

earthly things but heavenward, where Christ is enthroned (3:1-2). So we put to death the old ways and live a life of love and submission to one another. It is so easy if we just don't get distracted by counterfeits and keep our eyes on the genuine article.

## 1 THESSALONIANS

When I read the book of Acts I am impressed at the impact that Paul had in various cities in a brief period of time. With the exception of Corinth and Ephesus, the amount of time Paul spent in most cities is measured in weeks and months. Yet after these limited visits Paul was able to plant churches that grew to become vibrant communities of believers.

An amazing example of this is the church at Thessalonica. During Paul's second missionary journey he was led by the Holy Spirit to leave Asia Minor and cross the Aegean Sea to Macedonia. Paul then went inland to Philippi where he had a successful ministry. But opinion turned against Paul, and he and Silas were flogged and thrown in jail. The next day the city officials asked them to leave (see Acts 16). Paul and Silas left Philippi and traveled 100 miles on foot to Thessalonica. Think of how painful that trip must have been after the severe beating they received in Philippi.

In Thessalonica Paul, as he usually did, started teaching in the synagogue. After three Sabbaths, or about a month in the city, the Jews caused a riot and Paul is again forced to leave. Paul and Silas go down the road to the next town, Berea. There another church is successfully started but then Jews from Thessalonica come and stir up trouble for them. For his protection, Paul is then shipped off to Athens where he waits alone for Silas and Timothy (see Acts 17). Imagine how Paul must have been concerned for the believers in these towns that he was able to spend so little time in. His mind would have swirled with questions: How are they doing? How were they standing up to opposition? Did I teach them enough? What questions are they struggling with? Will they give up and go back to their old ways?

When Silas and Timothy do arrive in Athens, Paul's concern for the young believers causes him to send Timothy back to Thessalonica to see how they are doing and encourage them (1 Thes 3:1-2). Meanwhile, Paul leaves Athens and goes to Corinth where he is able to stay almost 2 years. It is there that Timothy catches up with Paul and reports on the Thessalonian believers.

If you can imagine Paul's concern for his spiritual children, then you can imagine his relief when he hears from Timothy that the young believers are acting amazingly mature. That excitement and relief is reflected in the letter Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica, the letter that we call 1 Thessalonians (that would make this letter one of Paul's first chronologically). The letter is full of praise and thanksgiving for what God has done for them and how they have responded. Paul reminds them of things he had taught them before but there is no criticism or rebuke. The Holy Spirit had continued the good work that was begun in these believers and would bring it to completion in Christ Jesus (Phil 1:6) even if Paul wasn't there to oversee it.

The great theme of this letter is the second coming of Jesus Christ. There is some reference to that at the end of each chapter. Timothy did seem to return with a question about those who had already died. Did they somehow miss out on what was to come? Paul explains that when Jesus returns there will be a resurrection of those who have "fallen asleep in him" followed by a gathering with believers who are alive at the time (4:13-5:11). These words were a great encouragement to the Thessalonians and every generation of believers since then who have struggled with the death of a loved one.

## 2 THESSALONIANS

Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians springs out of much of the same circumstances as the first. I would encourage you, if you have not already done so, to read the summary I wrote for 1 Thessalonians to get a feel for the background of this church and Paul's relationship to these believers. The second letter was likely written not all that long after the first. Perhaps whoever delivered the first letter came back to Paul with a report about the church that prompted this second letter.

The first line says that the letter is from Paul, Silas and Timothy. Silas and Timothy were involved with establishing the church in Thessalonica and must have been with Paul when he wrote this letter. All three are named in the first line of 1 Thessalonians as well. But it is assumed that the content of the letter came from Paul. Paul speaks of writing with his own hand at the end of the letter (2 Thes 3:17). From the book of Acts we know that Corinth was the last place those three were together so it is assumed that Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians in Corinth.

The believers in Thessalonica continue to persevere in their faith but there are three changes in their circumstances that led Paul to write this letter. First the church was facing a time of renewed persecution. Remember, that it was persecution from jealous Jews that caused Paul to leave the newly established flock after only being with them about a month (Act 17:5-10). While we don't know the source of this new persecution, the Thessalonians appear to be close to despair. Paul encourages them to hang on. He reassures them that the suffering they are enduring is nothing compared to the punishment to come for those who are causing them trouble.

As in the first letter, the Lord's return is a major theme. The second concern that Paul addresses is false teaching or a letter that was said to have come from Paul saying that the day of the Lord had already come and that they missed it. Paul explains, as he did when he was with them, that certain things needed to happen before the Lord's return. Some see this as a contradiction of the sudden, "thief in the night" coming that Paul spoke of in the first letter (1 Thes 4:13-5:11, and esp. 5:2, 4). But Paul is talking about 2 different events. In 1 Thessalonians he is talking of a resurrection and removal of believers to be with Jesus. This event is sometimes referred to as the Rapture of the Church. In 2 Thessalonians Paul is talking about what the OT refers to as the Day of the LORD or Christ's return. That event will be preceded by a time of rebellion and the rise of someone Paul calls "the man of lawlessness" (2 Thes 2:3). Since this man has not yet arrived on the scene, they did not miss the Lord's return.

The third problem Paul addresses most likely springs from the second. There were some in the church who had stopped working and were idle. The reason for this may have been the assumption that the Lord would return soon so there was no point in working. Paul's instruction is for them to follow his example and work. When he was among them he worked to support himself and was not a drain on others.

We don't know where the false teaching came from but, like in other epistles, we can be grateful that the problem arose so that we could hear Paul's teaching about the return of the Lord.

## 1 TIMOTHY

The next 3 books of the NT, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, are often called the Pastoral Epistles because they are written to young men given the role of leading or pastoring a church. So, unlike Paul's other letters up to this point, these letters are written to individuals. They are more

personal and direct that his other letters since they are intended for some of his closest companions. Yet there is also an expectation that these letters would be read to the whole church and used by a wider body.

We learn from 1:3 that Paul wrote from Macedonia and that Timothy was in Ephesus where Paul left him to care for the flock. Tradition tells us that after being under house arrest in Rome, where the book of Acts ends, Paul was released. He then travelled to Spain and returned to other areas in the Mediterranean world. It is during this time that we assume he wrote 1 Timothy and Titus.

Timothy is named 24 times in the NT and his name appears with Paul at the beginning of 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians and Philemon. He had a very significant role in the early church. Timothy is first mentioned in Acts 16:1-3 at the beginning of Paul's second missionary journey. He was from Lystra. His mother was a Jewish believer and his father a Greek. From 2 Timothy 1:5 and 3:14-15 we conclude that Timothy was taught the OT from his infancy by his mother and grandmother. However, it was Paul who brought him the gospel of Jesus Christ because Paul often refers to Timothy as "my son in the faith." After Acts 16 Timothy is Paul's constant companion or Paul's emissary to various churches.

It was an extraordinary relationship, as Homer Kent points out: *The relationship of the apostle Paul to the younger Timothy is one both beautiful and challenging. That an older man should selflessly love, instruct and repose confidence in a youth and then continue to exhibit such close companionship for approximately twenty years is surely admirable. For a young man to respond with similar respect, confidence and heartfelt admiration without jealousy, impatience, or resentment is equally commendable. The relationship of the two men is a remarkable display of Christian virtues at their best* (Homer Kent, The Pastoral Epistles, p. 19).

In this first letter, Timothy is given instructions that cover a wide variety of situations in the life of a church. He is instructed about prayer, qualifications of leaders, how to help widows, and the use of and danger of money. Paul's main concern is for Timothy to silence false teachers (1 Tim 1:3). These false teachers wanted to distract people with myths and genealogies. Endless talk and debate were their means of taking people away from the truth.

The cure for the false teaching was to stick to the basics. Timothy was not to let them look down on him because he was young (4:12, a favorite verse when I started as a pastor at the tender age of 22). Instead he was to read and proclaim the ancient Scriptures. The letter has several pithy statements on the nature of Jesus or the gospel such as 1:15-17, 2:3-6, 3:16, 4:9-10, and 6:12-16. I suspect that these were things Timothy had heard Paul say repeatedly before. Some of them may have been the words of songs that the early church sang. But by putting them in writing, Paul gives them authority and gives Timothy ammunition for his critics and false teachers.

Don't think that the Pastoral Epistles are just for pastors. There is much here for all of us to listen to and learn from. Trust that the Holy Spirit has something to say to you in this letter and that you may have more of a role as a leader than you ever imagined.

## 2 TIMOTHY

2 Timothy has a very different tone from 1 Timothy and Titus. 2 Timothy is Paul's last letter. Paul has been arrested again and, unlike being under house arrest at the end of Acts, the conditions are not good. Paul is in chains and it is hard to find him (1:16-17). He has already

had one trial where he had to defend himself (4:16) and he does not expect to be released (4:6). The grim sense of the letter is summed up in Paul's plea to Timothy, "come before winter."

While Paul is not hopeful about escaping execution, the letter is still optimistic for Timothy and the work of God in evil times. It is assumed that Timothy is still in Ephesus as he was when Paul wrote 1 Timothy. Paul's message of encouragement to Timothy is, keep going. Timothy was blessed with a godly mother and grandmother who started him on the right path (1:5, 3:14-15). He was gifted and empowered by God (1:6-7). So Paul says that Timothy is not to be ashamed but to follow Paul's pattern of sound teaching (1:13).

Of course, it was that "sound teaching" that got Paul beaten, ship wrecked, persecuted and jailed awaiting execution. Enduring like a soldier likely meant that Timothy would end up like Paul did. But Paul looks beyond present suffering to see the victor's crown (2:5) and the crown of righteousness (4:8). Paul was confident that because Jesus was the risen savior that we too will live with him. Death will not have the final word.

Paul warns of terrible times in the last days. The Bible always sounds amazingly up to date for such an ancient book but I think nothing better describes our world today than 3:2-5. That leads to Paul describing more of his suffering and perhaps the most unsettling verse in the whole NT, 3:12. Timothy's response to this is to continue in the truth of the holy Scriptures. Because the Scripture is God-breathed or inspired it is useful for whatever circumstances we find.

There are many names in this short letter of 4 chapters. Some are familiar to us from other parts of the NT like Titus, Luke and Mark. Others we know nothing about, like Alexander the metal worker who did Paul great harm (4:14). Some were loyal and some abandoned Paul in his time of need. But it seems appropriate that in his final letter this man who touched so many lives would name so many people.

## **TITUS**

While Titus appears in our Bibles after 2 Timothy it would have been written before. It most likely was written around the same time as 1 Timothy. Like Timothy, Titus was instructed in the care of young churches. Titus was left on the Island of Crete "to straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town" (1:5).

Crete was in the Mediterranean Sea south of Greece and Asia Minor. When Paul was on his way to Rome, the city of Fair Haven on Crete was the last place the ship stopped before the big storm that led to the shipwreck (Act 27). Perhaps after his release from imprisonment in Rome, Paul returned to Crete and started some churches. Paul went on to minister in other locations leaving Titus to instruct and organize the young flocks.

Little is known of Titus. He is not mentioned in Acts but was a close, trusted associate of Paul's. He is first referred to chronologically in Galatians 2:1-3. Paul traveled from Antioch to Jerusalem with Barnabas and Titus. Paul's ministry to the Gentiles was vindicated by the fact that Titus, a Greek, was not required to be circumcised. Titus is mentioned 9 times in 2 Corinthians. He was sent to Corinth as Paul's representative more than once and after he brought a report back to Paul that prompted the writing of 2 Corinthians, Titus was sent back with that letter. Titus was also entrusted with gifts that the Corinthians and other churches in Macedonia were collecting to give to other churches (2 Cor 8-9).

It seems to me that Titus was diplomatic, conscientious and reliable. He was Paul's go to man for hard situations that needed a tactful but firm hand. That is seen first in Corinth and then

on Crete. Paul quotes a local “prophet” to say that “Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons” (1:12). Not the most promising place to organize a church or find leaders to guide the church. Perhaps the letter was not only to give Titus instruction but authority among the believers he was working with.

There are marked similarities between 1 Timothy and Titus. This is seen especially in the qualifications of leaders. Compare 1 Timothy 3:1-13 with Titus 1:5-9. The qualifications for elders are very similar but not exactly the same. Paul has fewer requirements for Titus than Timothy, and Paul says nothing to Titus about deacons. This may be because the churches on Crete were younger and did not have as many qualified, mature candidates for leadership. Like Timothy, Titus is instructed how to deal with various groups like older men, older women, younger men and slaves. The basic message was to say no to ungodliness and to live self-controlled lives (2:12).

Paul’s final instructions to Titus were to meet Paul at Nicopolis where they would spend the winter together (3:12). The last that is heard of Titus is in 2 Timothy 4:10 where Paul says that he had gone to Dalmatia (in Europe), presumably at Paul’s direction.

## PHILEMON

The short letter of Philemon has a delightful story to it if we read between the lines a bit to find it. The story deals with the relationship between three men; Paul, Philemon and Onesimus. Actually, there is a fourth person who is critical to the story. He is the one who brings them all together, Jesus Christ.

We know who Paul was; the persecutor turned missionary. He was the man transformed by an encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. Then Paul began proclaiming Jesus throughout the Mediterranean world until he ended up under house arrest in Rome. It was during that time that Paul wrote this letter along with Philippians, Ephesians and Colossians.

Philemon is known to us only from this letter but from it we draw several conclusions. It is assumed that Philemon was a man of wealth because he owned slaves and had a house big enough for the church to meet in it. It is also assumed that Apphia was his wife and Archippus was his son (both named in vs 2). Since Archippus is named at the end of Colossians (Col 4:17) and Onesimus was said to be traveling with Tychicus (Col 4:7-9), we assume that Philemon lived in Colosse and that this letter was written at the same time as Colossians and the two were delivered together.

We don’t know when, but sometime before this letter was written, Philemon met Paul who in turn introduced him to Jesus (vs 19b). Since we don’t have any record of Paul going to Colosse, we think that this happened during Paul’s extended stay in Ephesus (Act 19). Maybe Philemon returned to Colosse with the good news and was instrumental in starting the church there.

The third man in our story is Onesimus (Spoiler Alert: if you have never read Philemon, stop here and read the letter before going on. It’s not long. I’ll wait). Onesimus was a slave who was owned by Philemon. At some point Onesimus ran away and likely robbed Philemon to finance his escape (vs 18). Onesimus traveled to Rome and somehow came in contact with Paul. Like his master, Onesimus learned of a new Master through Paul (vs 10). Onesimus became a believer. While Onesimus was very dear to Paul, Paul felt he needed to send him back to Philemon. So he sent Onesimus back to Colosse with a letter to Philemon that is now part of our Bibles.

Going back to the master was a very risky thing for Onesimus. Philemon had the right to kill a runaway slave. But Paul is confident that Philemon will receive Onesimus not as a thieving slave but as a new found brother (vs 16). The one who was useless has now become useful (vs 11). In that verse Paul makes a play on words because the name Onesimus means useful.

This short letter then becomes a delightful picture of the gospel. We were all useless to God but have become useful through Jesus Christ. And, like Onesimus, we owed a great debt, yet the debt was paid by someone else (vs 18).

The frustrating thing about the story is that we don't know how it ends. What was Philemon's response when he first saw Onesimus? What did he do after he read Paul's letter? I assume, like Paul did, that Onesimus found encouragement and his heart was refreshed by his old master (vs 7).

I hope that you read this brief letter several times through in different versions of the Bible. Read it imaginatively. Put yourself in Paul's place and think about sending this new believer back to your old friend. What would it be like for Onesimus to travel from Rome to Colosse clutching this letter, hoping it would be enough? What would it be like to be Apphia and see your husband read this letter and then respond to Onesimus? As you read, ask the Holy Spirit to give you a better understanding of the gospel in a letter to a slave owner.

## HEBREWS

Today's trivia question: How many books of the NT did Paul write? The answer of course is 13. Or is it 14? It all depends what you do with Hebrews.

The book of Hebrews is unusual in that there is nothing in the letter to tell us who wrote it nor is there a strong tradition to associate an author with the book (like Matthew and Mark). The fact is we don't know who wrote it. Some think that Paul wrote it and at times it certainly sounds similar to Paul's writings. Yet the style and vocabulary are very different from Paul's other letters. The Greek is much more polished than what we usually see from Paul. That has led some to suggest that Paul originally wrote the letter in Hebrew and someone else, possibly Barnabas, translated it into the Greek form that survives today. Other names that have been suggested as author include Luke, Peter and Apollos. But it really is all conjecture. We have to admit, we just don't know.

Nor is it known who the book was written to. Again there is nothing in the letter itself to indicate who the first recipients were. The very Jewish nature of the letter and its dependence on the OT are the reasons it became known as Hebrews. It seems to be written for Jewish believers who in the face of persecution were considering abandoning Christ and returning to Judaism.

While we may not know much about the origin of this letter, we can be grateful for it. Hebrews shows not only how Jesus is superior to anyone and anything in the OT but also that he is the fulfillment and completion of the OT. The letter gives a wonderful picture of Jesus, who the author tells us is the "radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Heb 1:3).

So Jesus is superior to angels, Moses, the priests and the sacrificial system. Skillfully weaving together OT passages, the writer preaches a series of messages that show Jesus as the great priest who invites us into the most holy place. Jesus accomplished what no OT priest ever could. He finished the work and since he was finished he sat down (1:3, 10:12). The old way

pointed to Jesus, showed how much we needed Jesus but now that the new way has come, there is no point in going back.

That is the writer's great concern; that they would go back, fall away or abandon their faith. So there are a series of warnings as we go through the letter. The warnings are given to the community to watch out for each other. We are to continue to meet together (10:25) and encourage each other daily (3:13). We are not to turn away because of a sinful, unbelieving heart (3:12) nor shrink back (10:39). We are to leave elementary teachings and not fall away (6:1-12). Instead we are to approach the throne of grace with confidence (4:16) and draw near to God with a sincere heart (10:22).

We are to be people of faith who follow the example of the faithful cloud of witnesses (ch 11). Knowing who Jesus is and what he has done changes everything. We fix our eyes on him and run the race marked out for us (12:1-3). Since we enter the most holy place by Jesus' blood we are to live holy lives (12:14) and be marked by love (13:1).

Ironically, the writer calls Hebrews a short letter (13:22) when it is one of the longest of the epistles in the NT. I would encourage you to read as much of it as possible in one sitting. The more you read at once, the more you will see how the author's argument flows through the whole letter. If you can't read the whole letter in one sitting, try to read the first seven chapters together and then 8-13.

## JAMES

With the book of James we come to a new grouping of NT books. The seven books of James-Jude are called the "General Epistles." General because they are not addressed to a specific church or individual, like Paul's letters.

The first of these epistles is said to be written by "James, a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ." So the question comes, "who is this James?" Of the people named James in the NT, there are two who seem likely candidates. The first is James the son of Zebedee, the brother of John. As one of the original apostles he would certainly have an authoritative voice. But it is generally agreed that James the son of Zebedee was executed too early to have written this epistle (Act 12:2).

The second possibility, and the one most pointed to by tradition, is the James the brother of Jesus. We know from references in the Gospels that Jesus had siblings (of course technically they would have been half siblings). In Matthew 13:55, four brothers are named, one being James. Initially, Jesus' brothers, presumably including James, did not believe in him (Jn 7:5). Eventually, James came to believe his brother was also his savior. Paul says that James is one of the people Jesus appeared to after the resurrection (1 Cor 15:7). James became a leader in the early church in Jerusalem with great influence on other churches (Act 12:7, 15:6-22, 21:18). In early Christian writings he is referred to as James the Just.

The letter is addressed "To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations." This was a historic reference to the Jews dispersed through the nations by various empires over the centuries. James may have used it as code for Jewish Christians forced out of Jerusalem during a time of persecution, like after Stephen's death (Act 8:1). James may be writing to young believers scattered over a large area who need exhortation and advice.

If that is the background for the letter it helps resolve the so called conflict between James and Paul regarding salvation by faith (compare Jam 2:14-26 with Gal 3:1f). The focus of James

is living out one's faith while Paul is explaining that salvation is through faith. Paul says that nothing else needs to be added to save us while James says that faith that saves results in a change that can be seen in what we do.

James is a series of short messages that exhort and command. There is no clear progression or logical sequence. He gives practical teaching on living the Christian life. The letter of James reminds us a bit of Proverbs in the OT and is as hard to outline. He paints pictures and illustrates with everyday circumstances and objects from nature. James never actually quotes Jesus but sounds a lot like him, especially in places like the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7). But that should not surprise us too much if they grew up together.

As you read James, listen for practical advice and uncomfortable prodding. This timeless message speaks to believers of all ages and all levels of maturity. There is something that we all need to heed each time we read it.

## **1 PETER**

The promise of the New Covenant is that we can be changed, transformed. But such transformation is usually slow and hard to see. No character in the NT reflects that life changing alteration more than Peter. In the Gospels it is Peter who speaks up first, runs ahead and finds his foot in his mouth more than the others. His devotion is obvious but his maturity lacking. It is Peter who proclaims, "You are the Christ, the son of the Living God." Only to be told, "Get behind me Satan," a few minutes later (Mt 16:13-23). Peter had the courage to get out of the boat and start to walk on water but is rebuked for his lack of faith when he becomes afraid and starts to sink (Mt 14:25-31). Peter insisted that he would die with Jesus only to deny that he knew Jesus three times (Mt 26:33-35, 69-75). Peter had started the journey but he had a long way to go.

In the book of Acts we see a very different Peter. After Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit, Peter is more confident and bolder. He is still the leader and the spokesman of the Apostles but now he does not back down or turn away from persecution. But even then he still has to grow and learn. Peter is surprised, along with the rest of the Jewish believers, that the gospel is for Gentiles too (Act 10). Later, Peter is rebuked by Paul for catering to Jewish custom and leading others astray (Gal 2:11-14). The coming of the Holy Spirit changed Peter but his growth was not complete.

When we come to the epistle of 1 Peter we find a mature, steady Peter. We hear the same direct, forthright speech that we heard in the Gospels and Acts but it has been mellowed with age. Instead of the impetuous young man, we have the words of the seasoned older man who is concerned for other believers.

Peter writes to believers "scattered" throughout Asia Minor, or modern day Turkey. We don't know the specifics of who they were or how Peter is connected to them. It seems that these Christians were going through a time of great suffering, probably brought on by persecution. Part of the lack of specifics may be Peter's way of hiding the identity of his readers from those who would persecute them. The cryptic phrase at the end of the letter, "She who is in Babylon," is likely Peter's way of saying he is in Rome.

Persecution is not the worst thing, Peter tells his readers, but can be a great opportunity. The goal is growth not comfort. So now the one who said, "You are the Christ," speaks of Jesus with greater depth and affection. The one who climbed out of the boat now says prepare your mind

for action (1:13). And the one who denied Jesus three times says that we should rejoice that we “participate in the sufferings of Christ” (4:12).

The call from the mature Peter is to grow up. Growing up means living differently. We no longer conform to the old way but are transformed to live in a new holy way. We recognize that, like Israel under the old covenant, we are God’s chosen people, a holy nation, set apart to do God’s work for his glory. So we are to live as “aliens and strangers” (2:11) recognizing that we are no longer a part of what once captivated us. This new way of living impacts all of our relationships from government officials to slaves and masters. Husbands and wives recognize that their relationship to one another is rooted in and impacts their relationship to God.

Growth and maturity come slower than we wish but 1 Peter assures us that it really can happen. As you read this week, ask the Holy Spirit to show you how you need to grow so that you can be strong, firm and steadfast (5:10).

## **2 PETER**

2 Peter is Peter’s second letter to believers to stimulate them “to wholesome thinking” and to remember the words of the prophets and apostles (3:1-2). Like Paul in 2 Timothy, Peter feels that the end of his life is near (1:13-14) so he wants to give his listeners a written record so that they can always remember his words. The letter is addressed broadly to “those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours” (1:1). So it is as much for us today as his first century readers.

In 1 Peter the emphasis was on enduring suffering, here Peter’s main concern is a warning about false teachers. But before giving the warning, Peter starts with the solid foundation that those who have trusted in Jesus Christ as their savior have. The best way to spot the counterfeit is to know the real thing. That is what Peter focuses on in chapter 1.

He starts with the astonishing claim that God has given us everything we need for life and godliness (1:3). So we need to be constantly growing and adding to our faith godly qualities. If we are maturing in the truth then we will not be deceived by the lies of the false teachers.

So we need to constantly be reminded of what God has already said. We do not follow cleverly invented stories but have the reliability of eyewitness accounts. Better than that, Peter assures us that Scripture is not just the authors’ own interpretation. Even an eyewitness can be confused about the details. But the writers of the Bible were carried along by the Holy Spirit (1:19-21). The word “carried along” has the idea of a ship being carried along by the current. It is the same word that is used in Acts 27:15 of the ship that Paul was on. The authors of the Bible remain their own unique vessels, with their own style and vocabulary, but they are carried by the Holy Spirit so that what they wrote was reliable and true. This passage in 2 Peter along with what Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 gives us our understanding of the inspiration of the Bible. God has given us a uniquely, Holy Spirit inspired book and we must pay careful attention to it.

Having laid the foundation of truth, Peter then turns to the false teachers that he is concerned about. 2 Peter chapter 2 is one of the most difficult passages in the NT to interpret, so don’t feel bad if you feel a little overwhelmed by it. We are told of angels, Noah, Sodom and Gomorrah, and righteous Lot (who never seemed that righteous in Genesis). All are given as examples of God’s judgment and protection; judgment for those who proclaim lies and protection for those who remain faithful. These false teachers were not just out there somewhere; Peter warns that they were close enough to be sharing meals with his readers (2:13).

Though they are a great danger, we can be assured that the false teachers will get what is coming to them. The worst of Hell seems reserved for them. The day of judgment is coming but it will take longer than we expect or desire. God's time is not our time. That is the focus of the third chapter. While we wait we are to live holy and godly lives. This takes us back to the beginning of the letter.

There are still plenty of false teachers and we still await their final judgment. But are we growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (3:18)?

## 1 JOHN

Unlike the other NT epistles, with the exception of Hebrews, the letter we call 1 John tells us neither who wrote it nor to whom it was written. But unlike Hebrews, there has always been a strong tradition about who the author was. It has been widely accepted that the author was the Apostle John, hence the title 1 John. There is a clear connection in language and style between this letter and the fourth Gospel. Both begin with the "beginning" and speak often of light, life, truth, walk and remaining (or abiding). So if we conclude that the Apostle John wrote the Gospel then it makes sense that he also wrote this letter.

We do not know who John wrote to and no locations are mentioned in the letter to give us a clue as to where it might have been sent from or to. Some suggest it was sent to the same churches that John was told to address the book of Revelation to (Rev 1:11). But that is pure speculation.

John is concerned as he writes about false teachers. He calls them antichrists (2:18) and false prophets (4:1). There has been much speculation about who these false teachers were and what they taught. Many of the NT epistles deal with warnings against false teaching without knowing much detail of what was being taught. In many ways, and this is certainly true of 1 John, the problem of the false teaching was secondary to the truth we are to live out as followers of Jesus Christ.

John starts the letter with words reminiscent of John 1, saying that "the Word of life" has appeared. In the Gospel, John declared the truth about who Jesus is. Now, in this letter, John tells us who we can walk with or abide in or have fellowship with – Jesus. Most writers and commentators point to 5:13 as the purpose of the book; "I have written these things ... so that you may know you have eternal life." But they ignore the purpose John gives at the beginning of the epistle: that we might have fellowship with the Father, the Son and one another (1:1-3). It is when that happens that John's "joy will be complete" (1:4, a phrase used three times in the Gospel).

If we think of eternal life not as getting to heaven someday but as Jesus defines it in John 17:3 we will have a much easier time understanding 1 John. "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." Knowing the Father in an ever increasing, transformational way will result in life as we walk sinlessly in the light which God is. That is John's message and when we grasp it, it won't matter what the false teachers say – any false teachers at any time or any place.

I believe that 1 John is largely a commentary on what Jesus said in John 13-17, the night before the crucifixion, and especially what Jesus said about the Vine and the branches in John 15:1-17. In that section the key Greek word is *meno* which is translated remain or abide. Of the 120 times the word is used in the NT, more than half are used by John; 41 times in the Gospel

and 23 in the five short chapters of 1 John. It is as we abide in Christ that we have fruitful, productive lives. In 1 John we are told to abide in Christ (2:6) at least 5 different ways:

- Abide in the light 2:9-11 (NIV – live)
- Abide in the truth 2:18-27, esp. 24-25 (NIV – live)
- Abide in the Son 3:1-10, esp. 6, 9 (NIV – lives, remain)
- Abide in love 3:11-24, esp. 24 (NIV – lives, compare to John 15:9-11)
- Abide in the Spirit 4:12-21, esp. 12-13 (NIV – lives, compare to John 14:23)

As you read 1 John, imagine hearing the words of a very old man who was forever changed when he heard the words of Jesus as a young man. What does the Holy Spirit want to say to you in these words?

## **2 & 3 JOHN**

I am going to combine these two short letters into one summary. Both letters are written by “the elder.” No name or further designation is given for the author. The language and style of the letters is very similar and very much like 1 John. So if we accept that 1 John was written by the Apostle John, the Son of Zebedee, then it makes sense that the same John wrote these two letters as well.

2 John is addressed to “the chosen lady and her children.” The question then comes, does this refer to an unnamed individual and her family or is this a personification for a particular congregation and the members of that church? While there is no way to be certain, I assume the latter idea. One reason for writing it this way and not naming the church would be to protect the readers in case the letter fell into the wrong hands.

Most of what is said in 2 John is found in 1 John. Notice “a new command” (vs 5, compare to 1 Jn 2:7f) and antichrists (vs 7, compare to 1 Jn 2:18f, 4:1f). As in 1 John the readers are warned about “deceivers” and false teachers. 2 John goes a step further to say don’t let them into your house (vs 10-11). Many a Mormon or Jehovah’s Witness has had a cold conversation on the front step because of those verses.

3 John is written to a man named Gaius. While the name shows up in four other places (Act 19:29, 20:4; Rom 16:23; 1 Cor 1:14), my guess is that this is someone different. Gaius was a common name in the Roman world and this Gaius seems to be the spiritual child of John (vs 4), not a disciple of Paul. We know nothing else of him but John thinks very highly of him and repeatedly calls him “dear friend” or literally, beloved.

In one sense 3 John is the opposite of 2 John. 2 John says not to let certain teachers in your home while 3 John calls for hospitality to be shown to those who “work for the truth.” 3 John actually gives an example of both. Diotrephes needs to be silenced while Demetrius should be well taken care of.

As you read these short letters you might give some thought to the people and influences that you let into your home. Remember not everyone comes into your house through the door. While I don’t think 2 John 10-11 requires only talking to cultists outside your house, I do think we might consider the ideas and philosophies we give our tacit endorsement to by what we watch and listen to. On the other hand, it might be good to consider those who walk in the truth who could be encouraged by some hospitality.

## JUDE

The second to the last book of the Bible, Jude, is one of the least known books. I've never heard someone say it's their favorite. It tends to rank up there with Obadiah and Zephaniah. That is unfortunate because, although it is short and unfamiliar, it is still God's word and still full of truth.

Let's start with the name. Jude is a variant of the name Judas. Ever since Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus, the name has fallen out of favor. Before that, Judas was a very popular name among the Jews for two reasons. First, Judas is the Greek version of the Hebrew name Judah. Second, Judas Maccabaeus was the name of a very famous Jewish revolutionary warrior who fought against the Greeks in the second century B. C. The popularity of the name is reflected in there being 8 different men named Judas in the NT. But who is going to name a book of the NT Judas; hence the name, Jude.

Then the question comes, which Judas/Jude is the author of the epistle. One possibility is the other Apostle Judas; there were actually two of them. Not the most noted or notorious Judas Iscariot but Matthew and Mark refer to another Judas, who Luke and John call Thaddeus. The change in Luke and John may well have been because the name had already become unpopular because of what the other Judas had done. But verse 17 of the book of Jude seems to indicate that the writer was not an apostle.

An important clue to the writer's identity is given in the first verse when he says he is the brother of James. Because James was also a popular name and because he says nothing else to identify James, it is assumed that this James is the one who was a leader in the early Jerusalem church (Act 15:13), who wrote the epistle called James (Jam 1:1), and who was the half-brother of Jesus. We know from Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3 that not only did Jesus have a brother named James but also one named Judas/Jude. So it would seem that two books of the NT were written by Jesus' brothers.

We know nothing of when Jude wrote or who specifically he wrote to. It is clear that he wanted to write a different kind of letter (vs3) but instead wrote a warning about false teachers that had infiltrated the church. It seems his readers were Jewish believers because he makes reference to many OT figures without any explanation of who they are. In addition to the OT, he quotes and alludes to other religious writings that were well known at the time. He uses many figures of speech taken from nature and he liked to write in triads. Notice the sets of three just in the opening verses. The book is written by James, servant, and brother. It is written to the called, loved, and kept; and he greets them with mercy, peace and love. See what other groupings of three you can find as you read the book.

If Jude seems vaguely familiar, like something else you have read recently that is because it is very much like 2 Peter, especially the second chapter. They are so similar that it is assumed that one influenced the other. But did Jude influence Peter or Peter Jude?

As I think of Jude and his concern for the believers he writes to, I am struck by how quickly false teachers came in and abused their position in the church. If it happened just a few decades after Jesus' death and resurrection we should not be surprised when we see it today. But how well do we "contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (vs 3)? Could you define "the faith?" My hope is that after reading 65 of God's love letters that you will have a better idea of what the faith is. The best way to spot the counterfeit is to know the genuine article. To fight against the false teachers of our day we have to know the truth and defend the faith.

## REVELATION

The book of Revelation, unlike the general epistles we have been reading recently, tells us who wrote it, where he wrote it from and to whom it was written. First and foremost, we need to remember, as the first verse tells us, that this is “The revelation of Jesus Christ.” All the books of the Bible are given to reveal Jesus to us but this last of the 66 is given to us to let us see Jesus. Revelation shows Jesus in a unique, powerful and often strange way. Its main purpose is not to predict the future or give us a time table for the end times, it is to reveal Jesus.

The revelation was made to the apostle John (1:1, 4, 9), as he was exiled on the Island Patmos. Patmos was a rocky outcropping in the Aegean Sea off the coast of Asia Minor that served as a sort of penal colony where unwanted prisoners were sent. Jesus himself appears to John and instructs him to write down what he will see and hear (1:11, 19). The message that John recorded was then to be sent to seven churches in Asia Minor, or modern day Turkey. As we look at the list of cities that the churches are in, Ephesus and Laodicea are familiar to us from Acts and Paul’s epistles. The others are new. A map of the area shows that John starts in the south with Ephesus, the most important city in the area, and works his way around clock-wise to the other cities.

The first word of the book in Greek, the word translated revelation, is the Greek word that we get apocalypse from. Sometimes Revelation is referred to as Apocalyptic Literature. OT examples of apocalyptic writing are Daniel, Ezekiel and some of the Minor Prophets. These books are characterized by vivid, symbolic imagery and visions that deal with the last days or end of time. Because of the imagery and symbols, apocalyptic writing and especially Revelation have been understood in a variety of ways. In Revelation John sees a series of visions that he describes as accurately as his words allow him to. I believe that what he describes is what he actually saw but that even if we fully understand the vision it is likely symbolic of something else.

For example, in the first chapter Jesus appears to John. What John sees of Jesus is unlike anything John saw of Jesus when he was with John before his death and resurrection. John sees Jesus as he is now, glorious, powerful and majestic. But if we take this vision too literally we have a problem right off. In verse 16 we are told that in his right hand Jesus holds seven stars. Are we to understand that as seven balls of fire around which planets revolve? If so, is it not very painful for John in the next verse when Jesus places that same right hand on John’s shoulder? Instead of assuming that Jesus is actually holding seven stars we need to ask what do the seven stars mean or represent. And that is where the differences begin.

Here are some suggestions that might help us as we try to understand Revelation: The key to understanding Revelation is the rest of the Bible, especially books like Daniel and Ezekiel. Numbers are important. Pay attention to the way John uses and repeats numbers, especially the number 7 which is repeated 52 times in the book. Remember that the purpose is not to tell us everything that is going to happen at the end of time but to show us Jesus. Focus on what this book has to tell you about Jesus and not on the future.

Chapters 2-3 are letters written to the seven churches by Jesus himself. Notice the repeated pattern of the letters and if you have ears to hear each letter is for you.

In chapters 4-5 John is invited into heaven where he sees an angelic worship service. In the midst of the worship, a scroll with seven seals on it shows up. At first no one is found who is worthy to open the scroll. Then, the climax of the service comes when the Lion of the Tribe of

Judah is found to open the scroll. The Lion looks like a freshly killed lamb but all of creation falls in worship.

Chapters 6-19 deal with the final outpouring of God's wrath on a sinful world. Each of the seven seals is a separate punishment with the seventh seal leading to seven trumpets of judgment with the seventh trumpet leading to the seven bowls of God's wrath. These disasters, sometimes repeating, spiral downward with greater violence and velocity. At the end of this cataclysmic time, Jesus returns and defeats all of God's enemies and establishes his kingdom for 1,000 years (ch 20).

The final chapters of the book tell us of the new heaven and the new earth. The new Jerusalem is lowered from heaven and becomes the dwelling place not only of God's people but of God himself. The eternal plan of the ages comes to completion. God has restored all that was lost in the Fall and made it better. The Immanuel Agenda is completed, God is with his people and they are with him forever. No wonder the book ends with the plea: Come, Lord Jesus.