

# **Exploring the Word of God: The Old Testament Books of Law, History, and Poetry**

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## INTRODUCTION

Most of these materials were written in the mid 1990s. We were able to print the materials on the books of Moses as the first volume in an ambitious series, but the series was never continued, and even the first volume fell out of print. However, the authors had a substantial amount written for subsequent volumes, and we were eventually able to edit and share that on our website along with a few articles written by others. We have compiled our articles on the Old Testament into this book and we are happy to make it available as an e-book and through print-on-demand publishing.

As you can see, we are lacking any articles on the later history of Israel, and we have little coverage of the Prophets. We do not have any plans to fill in these gaps, but we are publishing what we have to make it available. We have also published some volumes on the New Testament.

The Hebrew word *Torah* means “instruction,” and this is the word that Jews use for the first five books of the Bible — what some call the Pentateuch, or the books of Moses, the law of Moses, or simply, The Law. Although these books do include various laws, they have much more than law. They include history and promises of salvation; they form part of the background we need to understand Jesus and the New Testament. The apostle Paul wrote, “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us” (1 Corinthians 10:11).

# 1. EXPLORING GENESIS

## What's in a name?

*Genesis* is a transliteration of a Greek word meaning “origin,” “beginning” or “generation.” This name was given to the book from the Greek (Septuagint) translation of Genesis 2:4: “*hante he biblos geneseos ouranou kai ges,*” which means “This is the book of the generations of heaven and earth.”

The Hebrew Bible names the book after its first word, *bereshith*, meaning “in the beginning.” It was standard practice in the ancient Near East to call a literary work by its initial word or phrase. Both the Hebrew and Greek titles are appropriate for Genesis, the record of historical origins.

Without the book of Genesis, the rest of the Bible would make little sense. Genesis lays a foundation that allows us to begin to answer the big questions in life, such as: Why are we here? Where did we come from? Where are we going? God answers these questions more fully as the Bible story unfolds. Genesis describes the beginning of the world, of human beings and civilization, of families and nations, of sin and salvation.

## Outline

Genesis can be divided into a prologue (1:1–2:3), and 10 sections introduced in the King James Version with the words “these are the generations of” (2:4 - 4:26; 5:1 - 6:8; 6:9 - 9:29; 10:1 - 11:9; 11:10-26; 11:27 - 25:11; 25:12-18; 25:19 - 35:29; 36:1 - 37:1; 37:2 - 50:26).

Genesis traces a line of descendants from Adam to Jacob, highlighting God's selection of, and commitment to, the family of Abraham – the family through whom he would implement his plan of salvation (12:1-3).

The placing of the Genesis narrative in this genealogical framework shows

that the accounts are intended to be understood as real-life histories of men and women.

## How to read this book

Although Genesis gives us fascinating glimpses of the beginning of human history, it is not primarily a historical or scientific statement. Genesis makes the theological statement that God created men and women in his image and has an eternal purpose for them. Every scientific, historical or literary analysis that misses this point misunderstands the text of Genesis.

It cannot be emphasized too strongly that the primary value of Genesis, as indeed of all Scripture, is theological. It is possible to devote a great deal of time and energy to all kinds of incidental details and to miss the great theological issues. For example, the story of the Flood speaks of sin, judgment, redemption, new life. To be occupied with details about the [date and extent of the Flood, or about the] size of the ark, and with problems of feeding or of the disposal of refuse, is to be concerned with side issues. While God's revelation was largely in historical events, and while history is of tremendous significance for the biblical revelation, it is the theological significance of events that is finally important. (*New Bible Dictionary*, p. 413)

## Learning about God

The first thing Genesis teaches us is that God exists:

It is no accident that *God* is the subject of the first sentence of the Bible, for this word dominates the whole chapter...it is used some thirty-five times in as many verses of the story. The passage, indeed the Book, is about Him first of all; to read it with any other primary interest...is to misread it. (Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, p. 43)

Genesis also tells us that:

- The world exists only because God does, and because he chose to make it. The world does not have to exist. If nothing had ever been created, God would still exist, throughout all eternity.
- Everything depends on God and ultimately belongs to him (Psalm 89:11). Nothing can claim to exist by its own power or purpose. As a proverb states, "God without man is still God; but man without God is nothing."
- It is possible to reject God, but to do this results in evil, chaos, destruction and pain. This is why sin is a tragic fact of human existence.
- In spite of our rejection of God, he has not rejected us. Genesis shows



that God, from the beginning, has a plan to save humanity from its chosen path of sin and death.

God acts in history. In the midst of human affairs, with all our problems, struggles and uncertainties, God's presence is certain. This was known by the patriarchs – the founding fathers of our faith – and, as Genesis teaches us, it can be known by Christians today.

Viewing Genesis from a New Testament vantage point, we see Jesus Christ in action as the eternal Word: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made” (John 1:1-3; see also Colossians 1:16).

Furthermore, Jesus' ministry is anticipated in Genesis 3:15. The “offspring” of the woman who would crush the serpent's (Satan's) head is Jesus Christ, the “seed” of Abraham mentioned by Paul in Galatians 3:16.

Perhaps the greatest revelation of Christ in Genesis is found in God's establishment of his covenant with Abraham (12:1-3; 15:1-21; 17:1-21). God made glorious promises to Abraham. The apostle Paul explains how, through Jesus Christ, the New Testament church became the spiritual inheritors of many of those promises (Galatians 3:1-29). As we shall see, a proper understanding of God's covenant with Abraham is indispensable to understanding the rest of the Bible story.

Genesis reveals much about the nature of God:

- God is the Creator and Life-giver (1:1 — 2:9).
- God is personal and desires a relationship with human beings (1:26 — 2:25; 15:1-2:1.).
- God is holy and judges sinful humans (3:8-24; 6:5-7; 11:1-9; 18:16 — 19:29).
- God is merciful, even in judgment (3:21; 4:15; 6:8; 18:32).
- God is sovereign over every power (18:14; 26:12-16).

## Other topics

**Satan:** Genesis reveals an adversary who masqueraded as a serpent and influenced the first humans to sin. The Bible later names this adversary Satan, which means “adversary.” Through his influence, Satan generates discord, deception and disobedience among human beings (Genesis 3:1-7; 2 Corinthians 4:4; Revelation 12:9).

**Redemption:** Even as he expelled Adam and Eve from the garden because of sin, God prophesied that one of their descendants would save humanity (Genesis 3:15; Galatians 3:16; Revelation 13:8).

**Election or calling:** Abel, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph are all called by God and chosen for their place in the history of God's people.

**Covenants:** The Bible is a story of God's successive covenants (agreements) with his people, culminating with Christ ushering in the new covenant. Genesis begins this story, recording God's covenants with Noah and with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

**The Sabbath:** God rested after the six days of creation, a pattern that would later be used to regulate Israelite life under the laws given through Moses (2:2-3; Exodus 20:8-11).

**Marriage and the family:** From the beginning, God instituted marriage to unite husband and wife for life (2:21-25). God commanded Adam and Eve, "Be fruitful and increase in number" (1:28). Marriage enables love to be expressed between husband and wife, and children to be brought up within a family.

## **What this book means for you**

Genesis may be an ancient book, but its message is up-to-date. Its real-life stories are related in frank and honest detail. They contain vital lessons to help us improve our relationships with God, family and society.

Genesis illustrates the supreme importance of our relationship with God. God created humanity in his image (1:26). He wants us to have a relationship with him, to place him first in our life. Abel did so, and God respected him (4:4). Enoch walked with God (5:22-24), as did Noah (6:9). Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Jacob all developed strong relationships with God – despite their mistakes. We can, too.

Genesis is also a book about family relationships. It shows how they can be destroyed by favoritism or by resentments handed down from previous generations. And it shows that even family members who hate each other can be reconciled. Read the story of Esau and Jacob (Genesis 27–33), and Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 42–46).

Finally, Genesis reminds us of our responsibilities to the world. When God commanded Adam "to work...and take care of" the garden of Eden (2:15), he was trusting him with the stewardship of the earth. This still applies to us. We should look after our environment.

Even more important is our attitude toward other people. From the beginning we are told we should not harm others, for we are all made in God's image (9:5-6). Genesis reveals that God's concern stretches out over all humanity, as it begins to reveal God's plan of salvation through Jesus Christ.



“As we got farther and farther away from the earth, it diminished in size. Finally, it shrank to the size of a marble, the most beautiful marble you can imagine. That beautiful, warm, living object looked so fragile, so delicate, that if you touched it with a finger it would crumble and fall apart. Seeing this has to change a man, has to make a man appreciate the creation of God and the love of God.”

James Irwin,  
Apollo 10 astronaut

This photograph is one frame from a sequence of an earthrise taken by Apollo 10 astronauts from the lunar module. When the photographs were taken, the spacecraft was racing around the moon at about 3,100 miles per hour. The earth rises bright and lifelike in sharp contrast to the bleak moon surface in the foreground.

## **2. GENESIS: “IN THE BEGINNING...” FROM CREATION TO ABRAHAM**

### **Creation: chapters 1:1 – 2:3**

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). These famous opening words of the Bible express the Hebrew and later the Christian belief about the foundation of the universe. Does the universe have meaning? Genesis tells us that it does. The universe was divinely conceived. Therefore, it can only be fully understood in light of a divine plan.

Here are some of the main things we learn from the creation account:

- God is the Creator (verse 1).
- God made everything there is, and it was very good (verse 31).
- The climax of God’s creation was the making of man and woman (verses 26-27). Human beings are different from other creatures in two essential ways. First, we are made in God’s image. Second, we have dominion over the rest of the physical creation.
- God’s six days of creative activity and the seventh day of rest set a pattern, which was later used for a weekly cycle of work and worship (Genesis 2:2-3; Exodus 20:11).

The poetic flow of the Hebrew language of Genesis is simple, yet profound. Creation is described as taking place in six days. Notice in the following box a summary of the creation week.

The purpose of the Genesis account is to establish God as Creator (Hebrews 1:10). It was never intended to be a scientific explanation of how he accomplished the creation. The Bible is not a science textbook. The scientist searches for the what and how of life’s questions, but the Bible

addresses the *who* and *why* behind those questions.

Before scientific knowledge proliferated during the last 200 years, most Christians believed that Genesis 1 was a literal description of the beginning of the universe. Many Christians still do. However, a considerable number of Bible scholars today, while believing in the inspiration and accuracy of the Genesis account, find the traditional, literal interpretation inconsistent with evidence we can see in the world around us.

These scholars have offered various explanations to account for these apparent inconsistencies. Some, having noticed that “light and darkness” is the subject of both the first and fourth days of creation (verses 3-5 and 14-19), “waters and sky” the subject of the second and fifth days (verses 6-8 and 20-23), and “land life” the subject of the third and sixth days (verses 9-13 and 24-31), believe the account to be a poetic or schematic portrayal of creation. For more on that, see “Are the Six Days of Creation Literal or Figurative?” at <http://www.gci.org/bible/genesis/sixdays>.

<b>The Creation Week</b>	
<b>Day 1: separation of light and darkness, day and night</b>	<b>Day 4: creation of sun and moon to govern the day and night</b>
<b>Day 2: separation of water and sky, the expanse</b>	<b>Day 5: creation of animals for the water and the sky</b>
<b>Day 3: separation of land and water; creation of plants</b>	<b>Day 6: creation of animals for the land, and humans to govern all animals</b>
<b>Day 7: creation completed; God rests</b>	

Other scholars consider Genesis 1:2-31 as describing a re-creation. This view was popularized by C.I. Scofield in his reference Bible, published in the United States in 1909. Scofield believed that Genesis 1:1 describes an initial creation that took place in the dateless past,” while verses 2-31 describe a re-creation of an earth being prepared for human life (*The First Scofield Reference Bible*, commentary on Genesis 1:2).

This theory attempted to harmonize the Bible and geology. The intervening gap between the beginning (verse 1) and the seven days of re-creation, Scofield reasoned, would be great enough to explain the fossils and

rock strata found in the geological record. It would also explain the apparent contradiction between Isaiah 45:18 (New King James Version), which says that God did not create the earth “in vain” (Hebrew *tohu*), and Genesis 1:2 (NKJV), which describes the earth as being “without form, and void” (Hebrew *tohu* and *bohu*).

According to Scofield, the verb “was” (Hebrew *hayab*) should be translated “became.” Genesis 1:2, in this view, reads, “And the earth became without form, and void.” Although the Hebrew word allows for such a translation (it has the meaning of “became” in Genesis 19:26, Deuteronomy 27:9 and 2 Samuel 7:24), *hayab* is most often translated “was” throughout the Old Testament. Hence, it could also be translated, “Now the earth was without form, and void” (Jewish Publication Society translation, 1917).

While Bible scholars have proposed various interpretations of the creation account, Genesis does not explain the natural laws or the mechanism by which God created the universe. Genesis is not physics, astronomy or geology. It is a story of faith, telling why we came to be and to whom we belong. Its message is that “the earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it” (Psalm 24:1). It declares that in the beginning there was God, and that all things came to be as God called them forth.

This does not mean, however, that a Christian should leave scientific knowledge at the church door. When properly interpreted, scientific evidence may help us understand certain details. When scientific evidence seems to contradict biblical revelation, one or the other, or perhaps both, have been misunderstood. To read more about that, see “Must We Choose Between Science and the Bible?” at <http://www.gci.org/science/choose>.

## **“Image” and “likeness” of God: Genesis 1:26-27**

The Bible makes an important distinction between humans and other living creatures. The animals were made after their kind (verse 25), but the man and woman were made in the image, or likeness, of God. This means that humans have a special relationship with God and can communicate with him.

Knowing that we are made in God’s image...provides a solid basis for self-worth. Human worth is not based on possessions, achievements, physical attractiveness, or public acclaim. Instead it is based on being made in God’s image. [Furthermore,] God made both man and woman in his image. Neither man nor woman is made more in the image of God than the other. (*Life Application Bible*, NIV, commentary on Genesis 1:26-27)

Men and women have equal access to God and can equally experience a personal relationship with him.



## **Adam and Eve disobey God Genesis 2:4–3:24**

This second account of creation is written from a different point of view: It focuses on the first humans. It also uses a different name for God. In the first account, God is referred to as *'elohim*, which means “the mighty God the Creator, the Great One who inhabits eternity.” *'Elohim* is used in this important account to emphasize God’s sovereign power. In the second account, the name used for God is *Yahweh 'elohim*. *Yahweh* is used when God emphasizes the importance of his relationship with humanity.

God planted a garden as a residence for the man, Adam. But on his own, Adam was incomplete – as he soon recognized (Genesis 2:20). So God created woman, a separate but equal creation, sharing man’s essential and unique nature. This was not an afterthought, of course – the delay in creating the woman was intentional, to increase the man’s appreciation for her. Adam named the woman Eve (Genesis 3:20).



God thus established the institution of marriage as the union of one man and one woman for life. Because of this, marriage is to be held in honor. Marriage was not a product of human culture. God designed it for the happiness of the human race, to enable love to be expressed within a family structure, and as a means of reproduction. Both husband and wife have important responsibilities in the marital relationship (Genesis 2:24; Ephesians 5:21-33).

God gave Adam and Eve permission to eat fruit from the many different trees in the garden, including the fruit of the “tree of life” (Genesis 2:9, 16). That tree symbolized constant access to God and eternal life (Revelation 2:7; 22:14). Only one tree was off limits. God told Adam and Eve, “You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die” (Genesis 2:17). Adam and Eve were faced with a test of obedience. Would they listen to their Creator’s instructions, or would they choose to disobey?

The wily serpent, who symbolized Satan the devil (Revelation 12:9), now

entered the scene. He approached Eve, and, imputing an evil intention to God's command, expressed his own doubts (Genesis 3:1). The serpent's objective was to pose as a benefactor, to entice Adam and Eve to sin. The serpent said to Eve: "You will not surely die.... For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (verses 4-5).

Eve was enticed by Satan's words. She had to see for herself if she would truly receive this Godlike power. Eventually, Eve "took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it" (verse 6). The first man and woman failed their basic test of faith. Thousands of years later, the apostle Paul explained that both Adam and Eve were guilty of sin in this action (Romans 5:12-14; 2 Corinthians 11:3).

The serpent had cleverly undermined the relationship that should have existed between human beings and God. He tricked our first parents into defying the Creator's command by suggesting that God was greedy and selfish and was trying to keep something good away from them. Through an attitude that was an affront to God himself (Psalm 51:4), Adam and Eve ruined their chances of living a God-centered life. The serpent had lured them into alienating themselves from their Creator.

By disregarding God's command, Adam and Eve had made a fateful choice. They had attempted to run their lives according to what seemed right to them and not according to the principles clearly enunciated by God. They usurped God's authority and set themselves up as lawgiver, judge and jury of the way things ought to be. The couple asserted their independence from God, and grasped at an imagined equality with him. They thought that the forbidden fruit would be the key to vital knowledge they needed – knowledge that God was withholding from them.

Adam and Eve liked the idea of being "like God" in knowledge. But their perception was terribly distorted. God's intention was for them to grow in knowledge through seeking his divine will and unlimited wisdom. Through their disobedience, the first humans terminated their contact with the only sure source of truth. In this sense, they barred themselves from the Garden of Eden and from the tree of life (Genesis 3:24).



Yet, even as Adam and Eve cut themselves off from God's presence, he mercifully gave them a promise and a hope for the future salvation of the human race. In what is often called the Bible's first messianic prophecy, God told the serpent, "I will put enmity between you [Satan] and the woman, and



between your offspring and hers; he [the Savior] will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (verse 15).

To reverse the consequences of human sin, God would send his Son, Jesus Christ, to die for us. Satan would strike the heel of the Savior, Jesus Christ, through the crucifixion. However, Jesus would triumph over evil and death through his resurrection from the dead. Thus, he was prophesied from the beginning to “crush” Satan’s head by destroying the power of sin and the serpent’s sin-filled system.

The disobedience of our parents, Adam and Eve, plunged the human race into sin (Romans 5:12). Yet, when we uncover the complete biblical picture, we see that, in spite of our flawed past and uncertain present, we humans can look forward to a positive future.

God has a plan to save humanity, and the Bible tells us about that plan. It is, above all, a story of hope! As we explore the Word of God, we will discover that we are destined to inherit eternal life in the kingdom of God. To experience this magnificent purpose, however, we must first be reconciled to God through the sacrifice of his Son, Jesus Christ (Romans 5:9-21).

## **The first murder: chapter 4**

Adam and Eve had two sons: Cain and Abel. Each brought an offering to God. God rejected Cain’s offering but found Abel’s sacrificial offering pleasing because it was given in faith (Hebrews 11:4). It typified Christ’s work on our behalf. Cain became bitter and resentful. He ignored God’s advice (Genesis 4:7) and murdered his brother Abel. God then condemned Cain to a life of wandering and alienation (verse 12).

Verses 17-24 list some of Cain’s descendants, and show the organized beginnings of civilized life. But the sinful nature of humans continued to haunt them. Lamech, for example, boasted of a murder he had committed.

## **From Adam to Noah: chapter 5**

Family trees (genealogies) similar to this one are often given in the Bible. They describe a line of descent. Some of these genealogies are selective. For example, names are sometimes left out to underscore a spiritual lesson. Therefore, it is not always possible to compute chronology and exact historical dates simply by adding up all the numbers.

It is interesting to compare Genesis 5:1 with Matthew 1:1. In Genesis, we have “the book of the generations of Adam” (KJV), a record of the descendants of the first Adam, most of whom rejected God. “The book of the generation of Jesus Christ” (KJV), on the other hand, introduces the Gospel record of the “second Adam,” Jesus Christ the redeemer. “For as in

Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22).

In this context, Adam and Christ are pictured as heads of two contrasting governments. To whom will you give allegiance? Will you follow Adam in death, or will you accept Jesus as Lord and live?

## **The great flood: chapters 6–9**

The human race became increasingly violent and corrupt over the next few centuries, which led to God’s intervention with a flood. God told his servant Noah to build an ark in which Noah and his family, and animal and bird life would be protected from this great flood. The Bible describes Noah as a saint among sinners, the only light in his crooked and perverse generation. In a world of sin, he alone was faithful to God (Genesis 6:8-9).

The ancient story of Noah building his ark is much more than history. God instructed Noah to build the ark because a crisis was at hand. But the people of Noah’s day saw no such crisis. For them, life would continue with business as usual. This is the normal attitude of the majority. “In the days before the flood,” said Jesus,” people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage...until the flood came and took them all away” (Matthew 24:38-39).

Even when Jesus preached and healed the sick, many failed to recognize the miraculous nature of what was happening in their time. “You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky,” Jesus told his generation, “but you cannot interpret the signs of the times” (Matthew 16:3).

Noah’s neighbors looked at the ordinary skies, which seemed to promise ordinary weather. They did not perceive the troubled and turbulent moral climate – a sign of imminent disaster. But Noah, because he was a just man and walked with God, was enabled to see what others could not.

How about you? Do you assume that only the visible is real?

## **God’s covenant with Noah: chapters 6:18; 8:20–9:17**

Covenants are an important and recurring theme in the Bible. God established special covenants (agreements) with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David. For example, when Noah stepped out of the ark onto an earth devoid of human life, God gave him a reassuring promise, in three parts, shown below.

The series of biblical covenants culminates in the coming of Jesus Christ and the ushering in of a new and better covenant (Jeremiah 31:31; Hebrews 7:22, 8:6).

### The Rainbow Covenant

- As long as the earth remained, the seasons would come as expected (Genesis 8:22).
- Never again would God send such a great flood upon the earth (Genesis 9:11).
- The rainbow would become a sign that God would keep his promise (verses 12-17).

Genealogies provide valuable historical links. Chapter 10 gives the genealogy of Noah’s three sons: Shem, Ham and Japheth. Shem’s family appears last since the next major episode of the story develops around his descendants. But first, the story of Babel.

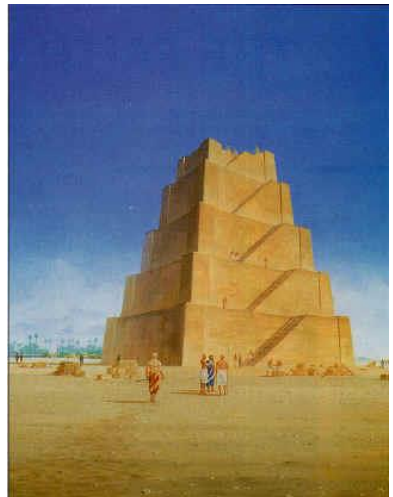
### The Tower of Babel: chapter 11:1–9

After the flood, the human race lived in the same geographic area and spoke one language (verse 1). During their wanderings eastward, the descendants of Noah came across a plain in Mesopotamia where they decided to settle. Their ambition was to build “a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we can make a name for ourselves” (verse 4).

Displeased by their arrogance, independence and lack of trust in their Creator, God intervened, confused their language and scattered them over all the earth (verse 8). He did this for their own good; what is contrary to God’s will is never in humanity’s best interest. The people abandoned their ungodly project, leaving the city and tower unfinished.

The city is normally identified with Babylon. *Babel* is a Hebrew word meaning “gate of god,” which is linked with *balal*, meaning “to confuse” (verse 9). The story illustrates the futility of humanity’s attempt to challenge God’s supremacy.

Based on archaeological evidence, an artist’s impression shows how the Tower of Babel may have looked, with stairways leading from one level to the next.



## **From Shem to Abram: chapter 11:10–32**

Once again we find a selective list of names. With Terah (verse 27), the list becomes more detailed. After the death of his father, Nahor, “Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot...and his daughter-in-law, Sarai...to go to Canaan” (verse 31). The stage is now set for the story of Abram, whom God later renamed Abraham. (Abram’s new name signified God’s promise to make him the “father of many nations” – see Genesis 17:5.)

### 3. THE SERPENT AND YOU

In the paradise of Eden, Adam and Eve had all they needed. They were content at first. God had given them the run of the garden, except for the fruit of one tree – the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They were told to leave that fruit alone, and they did – until the serpent, Satan, made a few subtle suggestions.

“Why not have everything?” he asked Eve. She knew that God had said, “You must not eat fruit from the tree [the fruit of this one tree], and you must not touch it, or you will die” (Genesis 3:3).

But the serpent was quick to plant a seed of doubt: “Did God really say that? And if he did say it, why? The fruit is good. Why listen to the unreasonable commands of God that prevent you from fully experiencing life?”

Eve was persuaded after a little manipulation. When she brought the idea to Adam, he accepted it and also ate of the forbidden fruit.

This story has overtones for us today. That serpent was not confined to the Garden of Eden. The same serpent (Revelation 12:9) and the same seductions come sliding up to us every day, presenting us with the idea that we know better than God. And dissatisfaction with life is an attitude Satan still offers us.

“Are there appetites you have been commanded to control? Why not indulge them?” he asks. “Are there forbidden desires just out of reach? Why not find some way to grab hold of them?”

These are thoughts we must reject. Some desires, were they to be fulfilled, would hurt us. There are some ambitions that God, in his wisdom, does not

want us to gratify – not to limit us, but to help us avoid trouble we cannot foresee. Life itself also throws up its own restrictions. To acknowledge that we cannot always have everything our way is a mark of maturity.

Jesus told us that to inherit the kingdom of God, we must humble ourselves and become like little children (Matthew 18:3-4). We must maintain an attitude of humility in our relationship to God and his way of life. The apostle Paul understood this concept from experience. “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances” (Philippians 4:11).

Satan is a fallen angel who heads the evil forces in the spirit realm. He is referred to in the Bible in various ways, including the devil, enemy, evil one, murderer, liar, thief, tempter, accuser of the believers, prince of demons and



god of this age or world. He is in constant rebellion against God. Satan generates discord, deception and disobedience among human beings. In Christ, Satan is already defeated, and his dominion and influence as god of this age will cease at Christ's return (John 8:44; 2 Corinthians 4:4; 1 Peter 5:8; Hebrews 2:14; 1 John 3:8; Revelation 12:9-10; 20:1-3).

Satan is pictured above as a serpent in a detail from James Tissot's 19th-century watercolor titled *God's Curse*. Images of serpents were sometimes associated with gods or deities of the underworld and may have symbolized winter, sometimes called the “season of death.”

## 4. THE SKILL OF THE WRITERS



Biblical authors put much thought and effort into composing God’s Word. They wanted to make sure that the reader would clearly understand and remember the important points of Scripture. Since we read the Old Testament in translation, however, it is not always possible for us to recognize the diligence of these writers. Their skill often lies hidden in

the Hebrew language.

As an example, let’s take a close look at the meaning of the Hebrew words in Genesis 9:6. By doing so, we will gain greater respect for the communication skills of the writers. The New International Version reads: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed.” This is a good translation. However, it lacks the compactness and wordplay of the original Hebrew text.

In the Hebrew, this saying consists of the following words:

Shophekh dam ha’adam

ba’adam damo yishaphekh.

You do not have to know Hebrew to recognize that the words in the second line of the verse are similar, but in reverse order, to those in the first line. The first and last words of the saying (*shophekh* and *yishaphekh*) come from the same root word – the word for “shed.” The second and second-to-last words (*dam* and *damo*) come from the same root word, the word for

“blood.” The middle two words (*ba’adam* and *ba’adam*) come from the word for “human.” The order is therefore as follows: shed, blood, human; human, blood, shed.

This type of arrangement is called a chiasm or an “envelope structure” because the same word is used at the beginning and at the end to envelop the phrase. This poetic device lends a rhythmical quality to the text, making it easier to read and remember.

A second poetic device is used inside this particular envelope. It is called “paronomasia” or “a play on words.” The words that are played on in this verse are “blood” and “human.”

The Hebrew word for “blood” is *dam*. The word used here for human is similar: *’adam*. The saying in Genesis 9:6, then, makes an important connection between humans and blood.

To understand this connection fully, we need to look at the previous verses: “But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man” (verses 4-5).

The life of any flesh is in its blood (verse 4). When Cain took his brother’s life, God told Cain, “Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground” (Genesis 4:10). Part of the message of Genesis 9:4-6, therefore, is that the life of humans (*’adam*) is in their blood (*dam*). The poetic device makes the point easier to remember.

Plays on words are common in the Hebrew Bible. For example, when Leah and Rachel name their sons, the names they choose reflect the situation. Rachel, before naming her son Naphtali, says, “With great wrestlings [*naphhtulei*] I have wrestled [*niphtalti*] with my sister” (Genesis 30:8, NKJV). Similar wordplay accompanies the naming of the other sons (Genesis 29:31-35; 30:1-24).

Like wordplays, envelope structures also permeate the Bible on many levels. Some are less than a verse long, while others cover entire chapters. For example, several psalms begin and end with the phrase “Praise the Lord” (Psalms 146–150).

An envelope structure can extend over even larger units. The book of Job, for example, begins (chapters 1–2) and ends (chapter 42) with narrative written in prose. These sections of prose narrative form an envelope for the rest of the book (chapters 3–41), which is a debate written in poetry. Also, the book begins with a description of Job’s family (Job 1:2) and wealth (verse 3), and concludes with a description of his wealth (Job 42:12) and family



(verses 13-16).

On the greatest level, the first chapters of Genesis and the last chapters of Revelation form an envelope for the entire Bible. The Bible begins and ends in paradise. Genesis describes the initial paradise God created for humans: “In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river watering the garden flowed from Eden” (Genesis 2:9-10). And in Revelation we are given a vision of humanity’s ultimate destiny: “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life” (Revelation 22:1-2).

## 5. THE FAITH OF ABRAHAM

*For an overview of what will be covered in this chapter, read Genesis 12–25.*

Abraham is without question one of the outstanding individuals of the Old Testament. God spoke to him personally, visited him in his home and even considered him a friend. And Abraham loved God. He obeyed him, served him, and was even willing to sacrifice his son to prove his faith. Abraham is a biblical superhero, richly deserving a place in the Old Testament Hall of Fame. But are his experiences something you can personally relate to?

Abraham may seem superhuman, but if we look more closely at some of the incidents in his life we'll see someone like the rest of us, with many frailties and weaknesses. He eventually became someone who “believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6).

But Abraham wasn't born that way. He had to grow and learn by experience. In Genesis 12, God told Abraham to uproot himself and his family from their familiar surroundings and move to a new land. It was a test of faith and obedience for a 75-year-old man. Abraham did as he was told. He went out, “even though he did not know where he was going” (Hebrews 11:8). On this occasion Abraham trusted God. But Abraham wasn't perfect.

Read the rest of Genesis 12. Isn't this a rather strange thing for a man of faith to have done? Abraham's wife, Sarah, even at her age, was so attractive that other men were taken with her beauty. Abraham was concerned that some might even consider killing him so that Sarah would be available to marry. Fearing for his life, Abraham deceived Pharaoh into believing his

beautiful wife was his sister.

Earlier, Abraham had trusted God. But in this chapter we see Abraham acting first in faith, and then in fear. Even though Abraham was a man of faith, he was an imperfect human.

Read the accounts of Abraham's relationship with his nephew, Lot. Note how Abraham preferred peace to strife in the incident recorded in Genesis 13:5-12. Lot took advantage of his uncle's desire for peace, and chose what he thought was the best territory. It was a decision that rebounded. Lot and his family settled in a disputed area and became caught up in local wars. In Genesis 14:12-16, Lot was taken prisoner, and we read how Abraham went to his rescue.

Abraham's love of peace, mixed with loyalty and courage, is an impressive quality. He was indeed a man learning to live up to God's standards. But he had not yet fully learned to trust in God.

God had made important promises to Abraham regarding his descendants. The problem was, Abraham didn't yet have any descendants. Sarah was barren, and she and Abraham were well past the age they could expect to have children. In Genesis 15:1-3, Abraham explained this situation to God. But God insisted that eventually they would have a son who would inherit the promises.

Instead of waiting in faith, Abraham and Sarah took matters into their own hands (Genesis 16:1-4). Their impatience produced much unhappiness for Abraham, Sarah and her maid, Hagar. Hagar's experiences are recorded in some detail in the Bible. They provide us with a touching example of God's compassion and mercy for the oppressed (verses 5-16; 21:9-21). But we learn from this that God does not always spare us from the consequences of our lack of faith.

It is a lesson that is often repeated throughout the Bible. Although sin is forgiven, the physical consequences are often still felt. It was a lesson even Abraham had to learn the hard way. Abraham and Sarah had to wait many more years for their son and heir. Finally, when Abraham was 100 and Sarah 90 (Genesis 17:17), the time had come. The New Testament book of Hebrews tells us: "By faith Abraham, even though he was past age – and Sarah herself was barren – was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise" (Hebrews 11:11).

So the final verdict was that Abraham and Sarah did wait in faith. But Genesis reminds us that their faith was mixed with a strong dose of human doubt and misgivings (Genesis 17:15-19; 18:10-15). Eventually a son, Isaac, was born to Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 21:1-3). Sometime later came the

great test of Abraham's life. God told him to travel to a distant mountain and offer Isaac as a sacrifice (Genesis 22:1-2).

Put yourself in Abraham's place. What conflicting emotions must have raged through his mind? Isaac was his long-promised heir. Why would God want him dead? Abraham had waited so long for a son, and now he would have to lose him.

On the other hand, Abraham reasoned that God could raise Isaac from the dead. Had God not caused Isaac to be born from parents who, in terms of childbearing potential, were as good as dead? God had said the promises were to be fulfilled through Isaac. Abraham trusted and relied on God. He believed that God knew what he was doing (Hebrews 11:17-19).

As Paul wrote in his epistle to the Romans: "Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised" (Romans 4:20-21).

God intervened at the last moment: "Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son" (Genesis 22:12). And that is how we think of Abraham now – a great man of faith and courage who dedicated his life to seeking God's will and fulfilling his purpose. But from the experiences recorded in the Bible, we can see that Abraham's life was not one unbroken catalog of faith. There were ups and downs, moments of worry, doubt, indecision and frustration.

The faith chapter in Hebrews reminds us that "without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (Hebrews 11:6).

A life spent learning to obey God is like a journey, with a starting point, a route and a destination. For Abraham that journey began when he left his home to travel wherever God would lead him. He could not always know what route the journey would take. But he learned to trust in God to direct his steps.

Your journey may not be as eventful as Abraham's, but you can be sure there will be tests and trials, ups and downs, successes and failures along the way. We can all be encouraged by these examples from the life of the father of the faithful.

One does not learn to live by faith all at once. It doesn't come naturally. We must learn, and, as we learn, we make mistakes. But those mistakes need not cut us off from God. He is a patient, compassionate and merciful teacher.

Like all good teachers, he does not expect his students to fail. He will

work with us, encourage us, and, yes, sometimes allow us to be tried and tested, “that your faith...may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Peter 1:7). Indeed, God says, “My righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him” (Hebrews 10:38).

But for those who do follow God in faith, there is the promise from Jesus Christ: “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5).

## **6. ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB: WERE THEY REAL PEOPLE?**

A hundred years ago, many Bible critics claimed that stories of the patriarchs were nothing more than religious fiction. The “silence of history” concerning the patriarchs, upon which these critics based their claims, was shattered with the discovery of ancient tablets at Mari (in southeast Syria) and Nuzi (in modern-day Iraq).

These tablets, although not directly mentioning the patriarchs, still constituted such valuable testimony about their life-styles that the late Professor William F. Albright (the then-acknowledged “dean” of Palestinian archaeologists) concluded that “the narratives of Genesis dealing with Abram may now be integrated into the life and history of the time [the second millennium B.C.] in such surprisingly consistent ways that there can be little doubt about their substantial historicity” (*Biblical Archaeologist*, July 1973, p. 10). Professor Albright’s conclusion was based on the following evidence from the Mari and Nuzi tablets:

1. Names like Abraham and Jacob were in common use among the Amorites in northern Mesopotamia about 2000 B.C. and later.

2. Mari was the center of a vast network of trade routes ranging from Crete to Elam, from Cappadocia to Megiddo. Merchants constantly traveled these routes from one end to the other. Seen in this context, Abraham’s journey from Ur to Haran, then to Canaan and Egypt, is not as improbable as the critics once thought.

3. Abraham’s relationship with Hagar (Genesis 16) and Jacob’s with Bilhah (Genesis 30) can be better understood by a comparison with a

marriage contract from Nuzi, in which the wife was required, if she proved to be barren, to provide a substitute for her husband.

4. Abraham's reluctance to drive out Hagar and Ishmael (Genesis 16:6) is understandable in the light of Nuzi customs governing such relationships.

5. Another Nuzi tablet revealed the adoption by a childless couple of a servant born in their house. He became the heir if he cared for them in their old age (see Genesis 15:2-3).

6. Jacob's relationship with Laban (Genesis 29) becomes more understandable when compared to other tablets from Nuzi.

Overall, the patriarchs' way of life conforms so closely to the cultural world described by these tablets that there is no reason to doubt that they were real people.

## 7. ABRAM, THE REAL STORY

By J. Michael Feazell

As a boy I heard the story of Abraham recounted at least once a week, and it usually went something like this: “God told Abraham to go, and he went. He didn’t ask questions; he didn’t hesitate; he just packed up and left everything he knew—country, family—and went. That’s how all of us should obey God. When God says ‘jump,’ you don’t ask ‘how high?’ you just jump.”

Maybe you have heard a similar story. There’s no disputing the point—we should obey God like that. But we don’t. Not all the time—not even most of the time. It usually takes us a while to get our act together. We might want to do what God says, but put it off. We might try to do what God says, but chicken out. We might even get started doing what God says, but then not follow through.

### **All of faith**

The background for the story above comes not from the Genesis account of Abram’s call, but from Hebrews 11, commonly called the “faith chapter.” Verse 8 reads: “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going” (NKJV). Verse 11 adds, “By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised.”

You might at first think that the author of Hebrews was reading the Classics Illustrated version of the Abraham story, because the Genesis version paints a somewhat different picture—a not-so-sanitized picture of



the patriarch and matriarch of the chosen people.

## Message from God

The early record, found in Genesis 11:27-32, is sketchy: Abram was the son of Terah; his wife's name was Sarai and she was barren; Terah moved Abram and Sarai, along with his grandson, Lot, to Haran; Terah died. (There is no mention of the rest of the family moving to Haran.)

Somewhere along the line (we are not told when), God spoke to Abram, giving him a most remarkable promise. The Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:1-3).

## In a hurry?

God told Abram to "go forth from your country." What was Abram's country? Haran seems to have been only a temporary home for Abram, not a place that would qualify as "your country." Since Ur is called the native land of Abram's brother Haran (11:28), it would seem that Ur would have been "your country" and the location of Abram's "father's house."

If that is true, then it would seem more likely that Yahweh said these things to Abram while Abram was still in Ur—while he was still with his relatives and in his home country. If so, it becomes clear that Abram may have been rather slow about getting "out of your country, from your relatives and from your father's house."

In that case, it would make one wonder whether *Terah* moved Abram, Sarai and Lot from Ur in response to what Yahweh had told Abram. (The passage in Genesis refers to no one else moving.) After all, Terah took Abram and headed to the land of Canaan (Genesis 11:31), but stopped short in Haran. Was he trying to light a fire under Abram by getting him started?

Whether it was immediately or later, at some point after God's call, Abram did pack up all his considerable possessions, including slaves (12:5), and traveled from Haran across the Euphrates River and down to Canaan, leaving his father's house and whatever relatives might have also made the trip from Ur to Haran.

## Faithful?

Abram had barely set up shop in the "land of promise" before there was a famine so bad that he packed up and moved to Egypt. One has to wonder: if Abram trusted God's promise about the land flowing with milk and honey,

why go straight to Egypt when there was trouble? After all, in 13:10, we find that the plain of Jordan was lush and “well watered everywhere.” Why didn’t Abram go there, part of the promised land, instead of Egypt? We aren’t told.

What we are told is that Abram’s stay in Egypt was on the shady side. Fearing that the king would kill him in order to marry his beautiful wife, Abram asked Sarai to tell the king that she was his sister. As expected, the Egyptians saw how beautiful Sarai was and told the king. So he took her, believing she was Abram’s sister, and treated Abram well for her sake, apparently giving him plenty of riches in the form of stock. But God plagued the king because of it. When the king found out Sarai was the cause of the plagues, he was less than happy with Abram’s deception and deported him, but let him keep all those gifts.

There are several things to consider here. One is that Abram handled his affairs a lot like many of us tend to: Seek the most expedient way out of a problem, that is, shortsighted, knee-jerk, unplanned living. What about faith? Abram didn’t show much in this episode. But there is another side to the story.

## **Faithful**

In this incident, Abram was weak in faith. But here’s the kicker: Consider what God did in spite of Abram’s lack of faith. He blessed Abram with more stock. He protected Sarai, in spite of Abram’s willingness to let the king take her. He got Abram back into the promised land, though it took a deportation to do it. Who knows how long Abram would have stayed in Egypt otherwise?

What is the lesson? God is faithful, even when we are not. That’s a pretty big lesson, and it only gets stronger as we move through the Genesis stories. We begin to get the impression that these stories are not here to give us models of excellent living, but to show us God’s faithfulness to those who call on his name.

## **Rest of the story**

When we read Genesis, the facts are stacked against Abram. But it is often the case that the obvious, simple facts don’t tell the whole story. There is often something going on under the surface, behind the scenes, that plain facts don’t have the capacity to convey.

From your own experience, you know that “just the facts” doesn’t always convey the real story. Sometimes the facts give a false impression, because they don’t contain the deeper facts, the invisible facts—the heart, the motivation, the mitigating circumstances, the personal journey.

In Mark Twain’s story of Tom Sawyer, the facts were against Muff Potter.

He was holding the bloody knife, he was drunk, there was a witness against him, and worst of all, he remembered nothing, so even he believed he must be guilty—from the facts. But the simple, obvious facts conveyed an untrue story. There were deeper facts, unseen facts, which told the true story and spoke louder than the simple, obvious facts.

## Perspective

It's easy to say Abram was weak in faith. But consider this from Abram's perspective: God spoke to Abram, giving him some of the most dramatic, famous and far-reaching promises in the Bible. In spite of such unprecedented special treatment from God, Abram's life was far from a bed of roses. For example, where was God when the so-called promised land of blessing and descendants was a parched, cropless wasteland with no kids bearing Abram's name, when in desperation Abram decided he had to head down to Egypt so he could feed his wife, slaves and animals?

Where was God when Sarai's desperation over her barrenness drove her to offer her servant Hagar to Abram to give him a child, or when Abraham had to contend with Sarah's bitter jealousy toward Hagar and Ishmael? Where was God when Abraham's love for Ishmael was brushed aside as irrelevant when it was time for Isaac to come along? What were the big promises worth to Abraham when he had to struggle with water rights, when he had to go to war to rescue his kidnapped nephew, when he had to send Ishmael away with nothing but the bread and water he and his mother could carry, and most of all when he was trudging along beside a donkey toward Mount Moriah like some worshiper of Molech to make a burned sacrifice of Isaac?

Abraham had to deal with strife, pain, heartache, tragedy and grievous disappointment, just like you and me. And through it all, he kept trusting God to be faithful to his word of grace and promise.

Sometimes Abraham put things off. Sometimes he tried to solve things himself (he did the tell-them-you're-my-sister thing again the very year Isaac was born). Sometimes he acted unwisely. But it was in the middle of the pains, problems, frustrations and mess-ups of life that Abraham trusted God, not in some happily-ever-after fairy tale land where heroes are practically-perfect-in-every-way and nothing serious ever goes wrong.

And God was faithful to Abraham, just as he is faithful to us—not faithful to do the kind of things we think a proper God should do, like giving us whatever we long for or think we need—but faithful to us—to his redemptive purpose for us, to his new creation of which he has made us part in Christ.

The Hebrews version is the real story: the “rest of the story.” Hebrews gives us God’s redemption of Abraham’s story, the true meaning that God gave Abraham’s story in Christ.

In the same way, God has redeemed your story—your personal history, the record of your weaknesses, shortcomings and failures, and has transformed you and your history into something new—his new creation in Jesus Christ. In Christ, we can put our troubled past behind us, and trust his word of truth for us. As Paul put it, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Corinthian 5:17, NIV).

## **8. WHERE DID THE HITTITES COME FROM, AND DOES IT MATTER?**

By Sheila Graham

“I always enjoy your articles,” a friend told me. “Why don’t you write anymore?”

I explained I had been working on a degree in religion for several years. The only writing I’d done was for my university coursework—about such subjects as where the Hittites came from. Papers only my professors would ever read, and only, I suspect, because they are paid to.

“Oh, I don’t know,” my friend said. “I think the Hittites might be interesting.” Well, oka-a-ay, I thought. Let’s see.

### **About those Hittites**

Are you ready?

Even before my studies I knew the Hittites were an ancient people mentioned several times in the Bible. After Sarah died, Abraham bought the cave of Machpelah near Hebron from the Hittites for a family burial site.

But I was surprised to learn historians and archaeologists didn’t believe the Hittites ever lived in the land of Canaan, and certainly not during the time of Abraham. At one time, some scholars doubted the Hittites ever existed at all, anywhere.

But after some significant 20th century archaeological finds, scholars now concur there were indeed such a people, but they were not the small tribes mentioned in the Bible. The Hittites were a major empire with a capital,

Hattusha, located at Bogazkoy, about 100 miles east of Ankara in Anatolia, now part of Turkey, not even close to Canaan.

Well, I was determined to show when the Bible says Abraham bought a cave from the Hittites, Abraham bought that cave, and it was from the Hittites. My professor was amused at my resoluteness, but encouraged me in my efforts.

## **Hittites or bust**

After extensive research, I had to admit archaeological finds so far have not confirmed a Hittite presence in Canaan during the period when Abraham lived (the second millennium B.C.E.). As far as archaeologists can tell, northern Hittite troops did not go farther south than Damascus. No neo-Hittite states (Hittites referred to in later books—1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 Chronicles) have been found south of Hamath, so that also excludes any territory in Canaan.

But, archaeological finds of Egyptian origin in Anatolia confirm records of the relations between the Hittites and Egyptians, powerful rivals on either side of Canaan. When the Hittites began extending their empire south, their successes caught the attention of the Egyptians. The two superpowers pushed each other back and forth for control of Syria and Canaan.

Isn't this thrilling? Hang in there. I'm nearly done.

The Hittites led by Muwattalis won a major battle against the Egyptians and their king Rameses II at Kadesh on the Orontes River about 1300 B.C.E. Some years later a peace treaty was made between Rameses II and Hattusilis III.

Now here's the interesting part. Archaeologists have come to realize the Anatolian Hittites and the Syrian Hittites are of the same peoples. Canaanite mythological tales were also found incorporated into Hittite mythology. So these peoples were certainly not isolated from one another

## **Another possibility?**

References to the Hittites in Canaan during Abraham's time could also have been the biblical writers' use of contemporary geographical terms. In other words, the Jews who many years later recorded these events in the Bible may have used the names of the people who occupied the territories during their own time rather than during Abraham's time.

All the Hittites named in the Bible have Semitic names. So if they were Hittites of the old empire or neo-Hittites, they had been assimilated into the Semitic culture.

Numbers 13:29 is attributed to an early biblical writer, who tells us the

Hittites “occupied the hill country” of Canaan. And this agrees with the story of Abraham purchasing the cave of Machpelah from the Hittites.

So although I could not definitely prove from archaeology that the Hittites were situated in Canaan at the time of Abraham, archaeological finds do reveal the close relationships between the two ancient superpowers—the Hittite Empire and Egypt.

The Hittites and the Egyptians traveled back and forth, over or around Canaan, to do battle or to try to cement peaceful relations, depending on what rulers were in power. Some Hittites could have ended up in Canaan.

So I found the Hittites. But maybe by now you wish I’d left my discovery with my professors.

### **Does it matter?**

Does it matter whether or not those people called Hittites in the Bible were really Hittites? Does it matter if Abraham bought a cave from a tribe that biblical writers many centuries later identified as Hittites, but which really were some other small tribe, with a different name?

What if archaeologists never find anything to prove conclusively Hittites were around during the time of Abraham or Joshua or the Judges? Or what if they do? Does it really matter?

### **God doesn’t lie**

It mattered to me once. I thought every word in the Bible, whether written in a poem or a psalm or a parable, was literally true and historically precise. If it were not, then could any of the Bible be trusted? I wouldn’t allow myself to entertain such thoughts.

After all, the Bible is the Word of God, and God does not lie. I still believe that, by the way.

While I realize archaeologists’ finds more often than not substantiate what is recorded in the Bible, I do not stake my faith on whether or not the Hittites lived in Canaan during the time of Abraham. The Word of God is inspired, but it was not written as a history textbook or a scientific journal.

The Bible was written to lead humanity to salvation in Christ Jesus, freedom from sin and death—not to give us a Hittite history lesson. There is power in the Word of God—power to transform your life and mine.

As the author of 2 Timothy says: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16).

God’s Word was written to change lives for the better, and couldn’t your life use a little changing? I know mine could.

## **9. ISAAC AND JACOB**

### **GENESIS 25:19–36:42**

#### **Jacob and Esau: chapter 25:19–34**

In the Hebrew culture, a woman's inability to have children was a reproach. It struck at the core of the Hebrew belief that every family stemming from Abraham was part of the covenant of God. Infertility, a "barren womb," was embarrassing to a wife and could end a loving relationship. The denial of motherhood was a crushing blow. And few acts of God could be a more direct blessing than the reversal of a woman's infertility.

The answer to prayer in the case of Rebekah, Isaac's wife, is only one example of God's miraculously "opening the womb." So it had been with Sarah (Genesis 15:2-6; 18:12-14; 21:1-3). So also it would be with Rachel (Genesis 29:31; 30:22-23), with the mother of Samson (Judges 13:2-24), with Hannah (1 Samuel 1:2-20), and at the beginning of the New Testament with Elizabeth, of whom John the Baptist would be born (Luke 1:5-25).

Eventually, Esau and Jacob were born to Isaac and Rebekah. As firstborn son, Esau was destined to become head of the family and inherit a double share of the estate. However, he sold his birthright and forfeited any claim to the blessing that went with it. While God does not say anything good about Jacob's strategy in tricking Esau, he openly condemns Esau's attitude. Esau was worldly minded (Hebrews 12:16-17). He was destitute of spiritual insight and of appreciation for the blessings of God's covenant with Abraham. He, like many today, lived only for the moment.



## Isaac and Abimelech: chapter 26

Since the Philistines did not migrate from the Aegean Sea to the southern coast of Canaan until the early 12th century B.C., the reference to them in verse 1 must be explained. It seems likely that a later editor updated the ethnic designation of a non-Canaanite people originally known as *Caphtorites* (Deuteronomy 2:23) by calling them “Philistines” (Jeremiah 47:4; Amos 9:7).

In this chapter we see how Isaac became afraid that Abimelech would kill him and take his beautiful wife, Rebekah. Like his father before him, Isaac lied about his relationship to his wife. He repented, though, and, during the years that followed, God allowed him to prosper.

Out of jealousy, the men of Gerar plugged Isaac’s wells and tried to get rid of him. Gerar was on the edge of a desert, so water was precious. If someone dug a well, he was staking a claim to the land. To plug up someone’s well was an act of war. In the end, Isaac moved to Beersheba, where God encouraged him with a special revelation. Here, for the first time, we see the title that would later become so familiar: “The God of your father Abraham” (Genesis 26:24).

## Isaac blesses Jacob: chapters 27–28

God already told Rebekah (Genesis 25:23) that her older son (Esau) would serve her younger son (Jacob). But when she heard that Isaac was going to bless Esau, she took matters into her own hands and devised a plan to trick Isaac, who was blind, into blessing Jacob instead.

Shortly after blessing Jacob, Isaac realized the deception, but still recognized Jacob as heir to God’s promise to Abraham (Genesis 27:30-33; 28:1-4).

In the ancient world, the time of death was a time when the powers of the dying head of the family could be rallied to enable him to pronounce his last will and testament in the form of a blessing. . . . The act of blessing in words of poetry set the blessing into motion and brought about what was pronounced. Once these power-laden words of blessing were spoken, they could not be recalled. . . . The [patriarchs] understood the blessing to be very much under the control of God. (Walter Harrelson, *Genesis*, Genesis to Revelation Series, p. 63)

Although the blessing became Jacob’s, he paid a heavy price for the deception. Esau hated Jacob and wanted to kill him. Isaac and Rebekah’s relationship was damaged, and Rebekah never saw her favorite son again.

Fleeing for his life (Genesis 27:41-45), Jacob eventually reached the city of Luz, where God appeared to him in a dream. In it, God repeated to Jacob the promises he had made to Abraham and Isaac, adding his personal

guarantee of blessing and protection (Genesis 28:10-15). Jacob renamed the city *Bethel*, meaning “house of God” (verse 19).

## A mother’s love

Frederick W. Robertson, a 19th-century English preacher, gave a memorable sermon titled “Isaac Blessing His Sons.” Robertson read Rebekah’s words to her son Jacob: “Go out to the flock and bring me two choice young goats, so I can prepare some tasty food for your father, just the way he likes it. Then take it to your father to eat, so that he may give you his blessing before he dies.... Let the curse fall on me. Just do what I say” (Genesis 27:9-13).

Robertson explained that even the most passionate human devotion, if unprincipled, will not bless but destroy. Said Robertson: “Here we see the idolatry of Rebekah; sacrificing her husband, her elder son, her principle, her own soul, for an idolized person. Do not mistake. No one ever loved child, brother, sister, too much. It is not the intensity of affection, but its interference with truth and duty, that makes it idolatry.

Rebekah loved her son more than truth, that is, more than God....

The only true affection is that which is subordinate to [God’s higher authority].... Compare, for instance, Rebekah’s love for Jacob with that of Abraham for his son Isaac. Abraham was ready to sacrifice his son to duty. Rebekah sacrificed truth and duty to her son. Which loved a son most? Which was the nobler love? (*Sermons on Bible Subjects*, E.P. Dutton & Co., London, 1906, p. 78)

## Jacob meets his match: chapters 29–31

These three chapters cover the years of Jacob’s exile: the years of service for his two wives and for flocks of his own. This episode shows how God often permits us to reap the shame and sorrow of our self-chosen ways (Galatians 6:7).

Jacob met his match in Haran with his uncle Laban, who proved to be just as deceitful with Jacob as Jacob had been with Esau.

When Jacob ran into Laban, one cheat met another. Just as Jacob had taken advantage of his brother by playing on his love for food (25:33), Laban cheated Jacob by playing on his love for Rachel. Additional ironies: Jacob learned his deceit from his mother, Laban’s sister. And eventually it was Laban’s daughter Rachel who enabled Jacob to escape her father’s cheating grasp. (*The New Student Bible*, NIV, commentary on Genesis 29:25)

The deceit over Leah (Genesis 29:15-30) made Jacob’s home life miserable. Leah, the unloved wife, hoped with each new son to win her husband’s affection. Rachel, on the other hand, was bitter because she was

not able to have children. It is hardly surprising that the law later commanded, “Do not take your wife’s sister as a rival wife...while your wife is living” (Leviticus 18:18).

Although Laban took advantage of Jacob, God still blessed Jacob materially. Eventually, Jacob responded to God’s encouraging promise: “Go back to the land of your fathers...and I will be with you” (Genesis 31:3).

### **Jacob wrestles with God: chapter 32**

As Jacob was returning to Canaan, he was confronted by God. The confrontation took the form of a wrestling match. In this struggle, Jacob revealed one of his most impressive traits: persistence. He persisted even after his hip was “touched” by God, holding on until God blessed him (verses 24-26). Jacob’s leg was “wrenched,” but he emerged from the struggle a new man. As a result, God changed Jacob’s name (verses 27-28). Jacob, “the ambitious deceiver,” became Israel, “the prince who prevailed with God.”

### **Jacob meets Esau: chapter 33**

In spite of Jacob’s miraculous experience at Peniel (Genesis 32:30), he still had to learn to trust God completely. He feared Esau and bowed before him, hoping his gifts would appease his brother (Genesis 32:13-21). But God had changed the heart of Esau. To Jacob’s amazement, his brother welcomed him with open arms (Genesis 33:4).

The story of Esau’s remarkable change of heart is one that we should not forget.

Life can bring us some bad situations. We can feel cheated, as Esau did, but we don’t have to remain bitter. We can remove bitterness from our lives by honestly expressing our feelings to God, forgiving those who have wronged us, and being content with what we have. (*Life Application Bible*, NIV, commentary on Genesis 33:1-11)

### **Jacob returns to Bethel: chapter 35**

Humiliated by what had happened at Shechem, Jacob was forced to leave. Showing a repentant attitude, he quickly eliminated the corrupt family practices of idolatry and returned to Bethel, the place where God first revealed himself to Jacob.

Christians can learn a lot from Jacob’s example. Have we forgotten our spiritual commitment? Maybe we are not as close to God as we used to be. Perhaps we have settled down in our own Shechem. We need to have the courage to emulate Jacob, who renewed his relationship with God and completely turned his life around in response to God’s direction.

## **Esau's family: chapter 36**

Esau's family had settled in the hill country of Seir in southeast Canaan (verse 8). Esau was completely different from Jacob. Esau was worldly. Bethel and its altar were not for him. The New Testament calls him a "profane person" (Hebrews 12:16, KJV). The word profane originally referred to an enclosure outside the tabernacle that was not set apart for any sacred purpose. In Esau's life there were no sacred enclosures. He lived on an earthly plane, concerned only with the immediate. Unlike Jacob, Esau apparently never developed the spiritual dimension or meaning in his life. Jacob and Esau were brothers, but they were spiritual strangers. God wants us to be more like Jacob. Jacob was not perfect, but he did return to God and demonstrated that he would live according to the will and promises of God.

## 10. JOSEPH: THE HAND OF GOD

*For an overview of what will be covered in this chapter, read Genesis 37-50.*

The Egyptian officer prodded his horses in excitement. Dust and rocks flew up behind the stately, ornamented chariot as the horses, already lathered and breathing hard, began galloping again. In the distance, he could see a train of donkeys driven by men and women in Hebrew garments. He could barely make out an old man with a long beard. His anticipation grew. The officer, Hebrew himself, was sure it was his father, whom he hadn't seen in more than 20 years.

The horses' hooves beat against the ground in a hypnotic rhythm as Joseph's thoughts drifted back to his separation from his family so long ago. He was only 17 then, a youth just learning what it was to be an adult. In an innocent zeal to please Jacob, his father, Joseph had alienated his older brothers. Total commitment to his father had blinded him to their growing jealousy until it was too late.

Joseph looked up at the caravan, which had come to a sudden halt. The Hebrews had seen his chariot. They stood, squinting into the distance, unsure of what they saw and what it meant.

Joseph prodded the horses again and they renewed their gallop. Memories of so many years pressed down on him, emotions he'd suppressed so long. He had suffered at the hands of his brothers. He had also suffered at the hands of his Egyptian master, whom he'd served with respect and even love.

Through it all, he'd seen the hand of Almighty God. And now he would once again see his father. His father and brothers recognized Joseph as he

pulled into their circle. He reined in the horses, turning the chariot at the last moment, and jumped down before it stopped. Running toward his father, he felt irrepressible love and joy.

As the two men embraced each other, Joseph's brothers looked on, but no longer with envy. Instead, they shared the joy of the moment with the brother they had wronged so many years before.



“Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more” (Genesis 37:5). This scene is depicted in James Tissot's watercolor (above).

Joseph's life story (Genesis 37–50) is one of the most poignant and compelling in the Bible. It has all the elements of drama, ranging from the deepest sorrow to the greatest exultation. It is a story of faith and hope during years of trouble, but it is also a story of success and joy.

Although some disagree, most scholars place Joseph's life around 1700 B.C., coinciding with the rule of the early Hyksos kings in northern Egypt and a native Egyptian dynasty in southern Egypt. The Hyksos kings were foreign invaders, a mixture of Semitic and other races who came to power more through gradual infiltration than through military dominance.

The Bible does not clearly identify the dynasty ruling during Joseph's rise to power. However, it would seem reasonable that a Hebrew would be more acceptable to a Hyksos king who shared with Joseph a common Semitic background. If so, one has to see the hand of God in the history of Egypt, preparing the land for Joseph's rise to power and the consequent growth of Israel in Goshen.

Perhaps the principal theme of the story of Joseph is the power and love of Almighty God. The reader, like the participants, begins to feel an

overwhelming sense of God's presence, of his hand working out the destiny of all humanity.

For example, the dreams of Joseph (Genesis 37) came true, despite the plotting of his brothers and the injustice of Potiphar's wife. The dreams of Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker (Genesis 40) also came true, just as Joseph interpreted. And, finally, the dreams of Pharaoh (Genesis 41), which foretold the future of Egypt, came true.

Joseph, inspired by God, explained the meanings of the cup-bearer's and baker's dreams, as well as Pharaoh's. More importantly, he believed them. Instead of being at odds with God, working against his will, Joseph believed God and took consolation in his plans. Unlike his brothers, who had attempted to thwart God's purpose for Joseph, he had worked to fulfill God's will.

Joseph's name, also prophetic, attests to divine intervention, even from the beginning of his life. Rachel had been barren the first 26 years of her marriage. Eventually, God had compassion on her. As the Bible records, "God remembered Rachel," and she conceived Joseph. In Hebrew, the name is *Yoseph*, which means "adding" or "he who adds" (Genesis 30:22-24).

God blessed everything Joseph set his hand to, from his work as a slave in the house of Potiphar, to his duty in the court prison, to his work as Pharaoh's chief government minister in Egypt. God, through Joseph, brought Israel to Egypt and preserved his chosen people during the great famine. God put Israel in a position to grow and prosper, just as Joseph's name meant.

Joseph's story is encouraging for another reason, a reason on the personal level. God often uses hardships to accomplish his plans for the individual. We can easily see how the evil that Joseph's brothers did to him prepared him for rulership. It made him more compassionate and understanding.

Although Joseph was upright as a youth, the biblical account shows that he didn't exercise tact in dealing with his brothers while he still lived at home. Later in life, even after they hurt him so much, he graciously extended mercy and compassion to them. Joseph overcame the pain his brothers caused him and extended mercy to them because he saw God's hand in his life: "Do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you" (Genesis 45:5).

His brothers naturally felt guilt and fear. Joseph went to great lengths to alleviate both, encouraging his brothers repeatedly: "So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt" (verse 8).

Years later, after the death of their father, Jacob, the brothers again feared that Joseph would punish them. Once again, though, Joseph showed his compassion: “But Joseph said to them, ‘Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives’” (Genesis 50:19-20).

Earlier, at the time of the famine, Joseph had also dealt wisely with his brothers. He knew that 20 years can change people. The years had changed him, and he wanted to know what kind of character his brothers had developed. So Joseph tested them.

After holding them in custody for three days (Genesis 42:17), Joseph set them free. Simeon, however, was to remain in Egypt until the others returned with Benjamin, the youngest brother. The plan served two purposes. First, Joseph wanted his entire family in Egypt. Second, he wanted to know whether his brothers would act honorably toward their brother Simeon, who remained behind in Egypt while they returned to their father in Canaan.

When his brothers finally did return with Benjamin, Joseph made it appear that Benjamin had stolen his silver cup (Genesis 44:1-13). This, too, was a test of their character. Joseph knew that Benjamin, as the youngest son and the only other son of Rachel, was special to Jacob. He knew his brothers could be jealous toward Benjamin, as they had been toward him. He knew they could easily leave Benjamin in Egypt. After all, they had sold Joseph into slavery in Egypt (Genesis 37:26-28).

This time, instead of 20 pieces of silver (the price the brothers received for selling Joseph), it was their lives and freedom at stake. The brothers passed the test.

Judah had already offered himself to Jacob as surety for Benjamin. He had been the brother who suggested selling Joseph into slavery more than 20 years earlier. Now he was the one who spoke for the others. After a passionate speech explaining how much Benjamin meant to Jacob, Judah offered to take upon himself Benjamin’s punishment: “Now then, please let your servant remain here as my lord’s slave in place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers” (Genesis 44:33).

Joseph then knew the character of his brothers. He saw the positive changes the years had made. At last, he knew he could rely on them.

The story of Joseph is not just a story of his faith and success; it is a story of the faith and success of the entire family. It is a story of growth and change. More importantly, it is a story of God’s love and power in the lives of those who serve and follow him.

God did not leave the destiny of Joseph or that of his family to chance.



Ultimately, God dealt with the sins of Joseph's brothers just as surely as he protected and elevated Joseph. Joseph didn't need to exact retribution. He didn't need revenge. He left the matter in God's hands. Through it all, God worked out his plan to plant the seed of Israel in the fertile land of Egypt. He put the sons of Israel in a place where they could grow into a nation and begin to fulfill their destiny. As we shall see, God would continue to accomplish this plan in the book of Exodus.

## 11. EXPLORING EXODUS

### What's in a name?

The English name *Exodus* comes from the Septuagint title for the book, *Exodos*, which means “road out” or “way out.” The first part of the book culminates in Israel’s going out of Egypt and crossing the Red Sea – a defining moment in Israel’s history.

In a literal rendering of the Hebrew text, the book of Exodus begins with the word *and*, thus emphasizing its continuity with Genesis. The Hebrew title for Exodus is derived from the first two words in the book, *ve’elleh shemoth*, which mean “And these are the names” (1:1).

The book continues the story of the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Exodus begins with a list of the sons of Jacob, who were the focus of the last part of the book of Genesis.

### Outline

Exodus can be divided into three sections: the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (1:1–15:21), the journey to Mt. Sinai and the establishment of the covenant there (15:22–24:18) and the building of the tabernacle where God was to dwell (25:1–40:38).

Throughout each of these sections, we see Israel’s lack of faith – first not trusting God to deliver them from the Egyptians (14:10-12), then continual complaint and unrest as they journeyed between the Red Sea and Mt. Sinai (15:22-27; 16:1-3; 17:1-7), and finally worshiping the golden calf against God’s specific commands regarding idolatry (32:1-8). Yet, despite Israel’s inadequacies, God continually extended mercy to his people.

## How to read this book

Although Exodus is concerned with historical events of extreme importance to Israel, it is not written in the style of a modern history book: “The chronological setting is given only in general terms, consistent with the Hebrew treatment of history as [a] series of events and not as a sequence of dates” (*New Bible Dictionary*, p. 360).

The central message of Exodus is God’s grace toward Israel. God redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt, miraculously saved them from the Egyptian army, led them through the Red Sea and established a covenant with them at Mt. Sinai.

As with Genesis, and indeed every book of the Bible, we should be less concerned with historical details than with God’s revelation of his purpose for us: “That there are problems in Exodus, not even the most conservative of scholars would wish to deny: but many of them are geographic or historical and few of them, if any, affect the theological message of the book” (R. Alan Cole, *Exodus* [Tyndale Old Testament Commentary], 15). For example:

We do not know how long Israel was in Egypt.... We do not know the exact date of the exodus... nor the route that Israel took, nor even the exact site of Sinai.... Yet not one of these affects the main theological issue, and therefore we must not allow them to loom too large in our thinking. It is not essential that we know the numbers, or route, or date of the exodus. It is enough that, with later Israel, we know and believe that such an event happened, and that we too interpret it as a saving act of God. (*ibid.*, p. 16)

## Learning about God

God revealed his name to Moses as “I AM WHO I AM” (3:14). God alone has life inherent; everything else depends on God for its existence.

Exodus also tells us that:

- The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was also the God of Moses (3:16), the God who led his people through the Red Sea. God fulfills his purpose through historical acts. The exodus was a critical event in his plan of redemption.
- God is all-powerful. Nobody can successfully oppose him. For example, one pharaoh attempted to thwart God’s purpose for Israel by trying to drown all the Israelite baby boys. God used these circumstances to enable his servant, Moses, to receive otherwise unobtainable training in Pharaoh’s own court (1:22–2:10). Later, another pharaoh stubbornly refused to let the Israelites go free. God simply used this stubbornness

as the stage on which he revealed himself, through a series of miracles, to be Israel's all-powerful Savior (6:28–12:36).

- God is concerned for his people. God protected the Israelites from the Egyptians (14:13-31), he provided manna for them (16:4-5) and he gave them victory over the Amalekites (17:8-16).

Exodus also foreshadows Christ's sacrificial act of redemption for his people. God commanded the Israelites to kill the Passover lamb and put some of the blood on the top and both sides of the doorframe. God would then save them from death (12:21-23). The New Testament writers speak of "Christ, our Passover lamb," who was sacrificed for us (1 Corinthians 5:7). When John the Baptist saw Jesus, he exclaimed, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

## Other topics

**The Ten Commandments:** One of the best-known parts of the Bible is Exodus 20:1-17, where God gave the Ten Commandments. The first four commandments concern the relationship with God, and the last six our relationship with fellow human beings. Jesus later explained the spiritual intent of the law, especially in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7).

**The Sabbath:** In addition to being the Fourth Commandment, Sabbath keeping is mentioned both before (16:22-30) and after (31:12-17) the giving of the Ten Commandments. The Sabbath was crucial for Israelite identity.

**Passover:** The Passover was first kept on the night God's angel killed the firstborn of Egypt, and Israel was commanded to keep it every year thereafter as a memorial of their deliverance (12:12-14). The blood of the Passover lamb symbolized God's protection and mercy for his people, Israel, as his firstborn (4:21-23; 12:1-14, 21-28). This foreshadowed the sacrifice of "Christ, our Passover lamb" (1 Corinthians 5:7). God also commanded the people to put out all yeast or leaven from their houses, and to remember their flight from Egypt by eating unleavened bread for seven days every year (12:15-20; 13:6-10). The unleavened bread would remind them of the haste with which they left Egypt (12:39).

**The dwelling of God:** Several chapters are devoted to describing God's tabernacle, its construction and the various regulations regarding worship at the tabernacle (Exodus 25–31, 33–40). The tabernacle, and in particular the Most Holy Place, was to be a physical reminder that God lived among his people. Eventually, the tabernacle was replaced by a temple built in Jerusalem (1 Kings 6).

**Covenants:** Having previously made covenants with Noah and with

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Genesis 9:8-17; 17:1-14; 26:23-25; 28:10-22), God now made a covenant with the entire nation of Israel, the terms of which are recorded in Exodus 20–23. God thus made the people of Israel his own nation. This was a glorious covenant, but the new covenant would be far more glorious (2 Corinthians 3:7-11).

### **What this book means for you**

Exodus shows the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob making a covenant with their descendants, the Israelites. God expected Israel, as his covenant nation, to live according to his holy law. The first and most important law was to have no other gods – to have an undivided loyalty to the true God. This principle is still true.

Although the principle of worship is still valid, most of the details we see in the Mosaic code are not. They were appropriate for Israel at that time in history, but in the new covenant they are no longer required. Many of the civil laws are based on timeless principles, and can be instructive for Christian life today, although some adaptation is needed for modern circumstances.

In addition to its moral teaching regarding everyday living, the book of Exodus has tremendous significance as an analogy of a Christian's journey from sin to the kingdom of God. The crossing of the Red Sea foreshadows Christian baptism (1 Corinthians 10:1-2). The Israelites left Egypt, never to return. At baptism, a Christian forever renounces a former life of sin. The Israelites entered into an old covenant relationship with God, mediated by Moses; Christians enter into a new covenant relationship with God through the mediation of Jesus Christ.

## **12. EXODUS: BIRTH OF A NATION FROM EGYPT TO SINAI EXODUS 1:1–19:25**

### **Setting the scene: chapter 1**

Exodus opens with a list of “the sons of Israel” (verse 1) who were the focus of the last part of Genesis. The attention shifts quickly in verse 7 to the “Israelites” (people of Israel). From this point on, the name Israel usually refers to the nation of people, not to the patriarch.

Jacob’s descendants had been “fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them” (verse 7). By this time, a new pharaoh ruled over Egypt who did not honor the friendship that once existed between the Egyptian rulers and the family of Joseph. This pharaoh feared that the Israelites might become powerful enough to challenge his authority, so he began to oppress them.

But no matter how much Pharaoh exploited the Israelites and how hard he worked them, their numbers continued to grow. As the Israelites multiplied, Pharaoh began to see them as more than just a labor pool. He became concerned that this large alien population would organize and pose a threat to Egypt. Pharaoh decided to tackle the problem in a more cruel way, only to be defeated by the faith and courage of the Hebrew midwives (verses 15-21).

### **Moses: prince and alien: chapter 2**

Pharaoh decreed that all Hebrew baby boys were to be drowned in the

Nile River (Exodus 1:22). Moses' life was saved by his mother's resourceful action. She placed him in a watertight basket (the same Hebrew word, *tebbah*, used for Noah's "ark") and set it adrift in the river. Moses was later rescued by Pharaoh's daughter.

As a child growing up in the palace, Moses would have received a traditional Egyptian education, learning to read and write the Egyptian hieroglyphics and cursive scripts. As he matured, he would have gained expertise in military, religious and political affairs (Acts 7:22). It was not unknown for foreigners to be trained in this manner for responsible posts in the army, priesthood or civil service.

At age 40, Moses came to the defense of a fellow Israelite, and he killed an Egyptian taskmaster. Consequently, he was forced to flee into exile (Exodus 2:11-15; Acts 7:23-29). It has been said that Moses spent 40 years in Egypt learning to be somebody, and 40 years in Midian learning to be nobody, and this prepared him for the mighty task of delivering the children of Israel.

### **The burning bush: chapters 3–4**

"Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush" (Exodus 3:1-2). Moses was at Mt. Sinai (Horeb), the place where God later gave the Ten Commandments to Israel (Exodus 19:20). God had a great commission for Moses. He was to be God's messenger to Pharaoh, and lead the Israelites to freedom. However, Moses was extremely reluctant. He raised one objection after another, but each was countered by God.

Throughout the burning-bush incident, Moses showed a profound reverence for the presence of God. He realized how unworthy he was to stand before his Creator. As we study this account, we should reflect on our own attitude and approach to God. One thing that did not please God, however, was Moses' resistance to his special calling. Moses wanted God to find a better man, but God promised to help him fulfill his commission. Similarly, God promises to be with us today: "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6).

Objections of Moses	God's answers
"Who am I, <u>that</u> I should go to Pharaoh...?"	God answered, "I will be with you" (Exodus 3:11-12).
"Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?"	God revealed himself as the God of their ancestors, and God of the present: "I AM WHO I AM" (verses 13-14).
"What if they do not believe me or listen to me...?"	God gave him three signs with which to convince them (Exodus 4:1-9).
"I have never been eloquent.... I am slow of speech and tongue."	God promised to teach him what he should say (verses 10-12).
"O Lord, please send someone else to do it."	God countered, not by replacing Moses, but by sending Aaron with Moses as a spokesman (verses 13-16).

### Pharaoh wins round one: chapters 5:1–6:13

God instructed Israel to leave Egypt in order to worship him. Pharaoh's reaction revealed his rigid hostility, already predicted by God (Exodus 3:19). "Egyptian hieroglyphics pictured the word for *foreigner* as a bound man with blood flowing from a wound in his head; the Israelites felt the full weight of such oppression" (*The New Student Bible*, NIV, commentary on Exodus 6:9). Moses' request to Pharaoh only made life harder for the Israelites. They blamed Moses for their trouble, and Moses pleaded with God for deliverance once again.

### The family tree of Moses and Aaron: chapter 6:14–27

As is often the case in Scripture, this family record is selective. Moses and Aaron are shown to have descended from Jacob through the line of Levi. The list covers the period of Israel's stay in Egypt. This biblical genealogy more firmly identifies Moses and Aaron. As well as outlining the history of a family, genealogies were used to establish family credentials and authority.

### The contest with Pharaoh: chapters 6:28–12:36

Pharaoh again rejected Moses' request. The Egyptian ruler had already shown what sort of person he was: "I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go" (Exodus 5:2). Pharaoh was not concerned about Moses' message, for he had not yet seen any evidence of God's power. So God



initiated a series of judgments to teach Pharaoh and his people who the Lord was, and to show them the extent of his sovereign power over all creation (Exodus 7:5).

The 10 plagues convinced the Egyptians, and the surrounding nations, of the power of the God of Israel. After the death of Egypt's firstborn, Pharaoh ordered the Israelites to leave the country immediately (Exodus 11:1-6; 12:29-36). For Israel, this day when God saved his people was to be remembered throughout the ages. The Passover festival was instituted to commemorate the day. The blood of the Passover lamb symbolized God's protection and mercy for his people, Israel, as his firstborn (Exodus 4:21-23; 12:1-14, 21-28). This foreshadowed the sacrifice of "Christ, our Passover lamb" (1 Corinthians 5:7).

<b>The Ten Plagues</b>
1) The Nile River turned to blood. Its polluted water killed the fish (7:14-24).
2) Seven days later, frogs, driven from the riverbanks by the rotting fish, sought shelter in the houses (7:25; 8:1-15).
3-4) Gnats, and then flies, breeding among the carcasses of fish and frogs, plagued the land (8:16-32).
5-6) Disease struck the cattle, and skin infections, perhaps carried by the frogs and insects, broke out on humans and animals (9:1-12).
7) Hail and thunderstorms ruined the flax and barley crops. Those Egyptians who heeded God's warning remained safe (9:13-35).
8) The wind blew in a plague of locusts, which stripped the country bare of any remaining vegetation (10:1-20).
9) For three days, the light of the sun was blotted out by total darkness (10:21-29).
10) Egyptian firstborn sons died. So did the firstborn of all livestock (11:1-12:30).

### **Crossing the Red Sea: chapters 12:37–14:31**

After centuries of living in a foreign land, the Israelites were free. This is what God had promised their father Abraham (Genesis 15:13-14). Before starting their journey to the border, God gave further instructions about how

the Passover was to be observed. In this “dedication ceremony” of the Exodus, God announced how this great event was to be further commemorated. For seven days after the Passover, the Israelites were to eat unleavened bread as a reminder of their quick departure from Egypt. “You must keep this ordinance...year after year” (Exodus 13:6-10).

God then led his people “around by the desert road toward the Red Sea,” going before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (verses 17-22).

Meanwhile, Pharaoh had changed his mind about letting the Israelites leave. He and his army set out to recapture them. The sight of Pharaoh’s army filled the people with fear. But Israel soon learned the lesson of Moses’ words: “The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still” (Exodus 14:13-14). God parted the waters of the Red Sea so the Israelites could cross safely. The returning walls of rushing water crushed Pharaoh’s forces.

The crossing of the Red Sea foreshadows Christian baptism: “Our forefathers...all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (1 Corinthians 10:1-2).

The exodus from Egypt was the defining event in the history of ancient Israel. As Eugene H. Merrill points out:

The choice of Israel as a servant people was already implicit in the patriarchal covenant statements (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:13-21; 18:18; 22:18; 26:3-4; etc.), but not until the Exodus deliverance did the nation as such come into historical existence. The Exodus, therefore, is of utmost theological importance as an act of God marking out a decisive moment in Israel’s history, an event marking her transition from a people to a nation. (“A Theology of the Pentateuch,” in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck, pp. 30-31)

## **The Song of Moses and Miriam: chapter 15:1–21**

This is one of the oldest songs recorded in the Bible. As a hymn of victory, it celebrated God’s miraculous triumph over the Egyptian army. Not only did the Israelites remember God’s past deliverance, they anticipated his future blessings (verses 13-18).

## **The people complain, but God provides: chapters 15:22–17:7**

It was not long before the people started to complain. In Egypt, there had been an abundance of fish, fruit and vegetables, and no shortage of water. But in the Desert of Sinai, the people were soon hungry and thirsty (Exodus

15:22-27; 16:1-36).

God gave them manna, a substance that would become Israel's main food for 40 years. Manna probably means "what is it?" recalling the Israelites' first reaction to it (Exodus 16:15). God's method of provision was designed to teach them obedience and daily dependence upon him. It illustrates humanity's need for God's love and provision (John 6:25-35; Revelation 2:17).

At Rephidim (Exodus 17:1), the people complained again. This time the water was undrinkable. Moses interceded on their behalf and God worked another miracle. New Testament writers regarded the smitten rock as a symbol of Jesus Christ. He is the source of the water of life: ever fresh, pure abundant, accessible and unfailing (John 7:37-39; 1 Corinthians 10:4).

### **Fighting the Amalekites: chapter 17:8–16**

Joshua led the Israelite army against the Amalekites, descendants of Esau. But it was God who gave the victory, through Moses' intercession. In fighting against God's people, Amalek was really fighting against God.

### **Jethro's advice: chapter 18**

Jethro, who was Moses' father-in-law, dominates this chapter. He recognized God's power (verses 1, 9-10), God's supremacy (verse 11), God's presence (verse 12), God's righteousness (verse 21) and God's will (verses 19, 23).

Jethro's wise counsel is worthy of note. He saw the heavy strain on Moses, who was not delegating authority. Jethro advised him to appoint associates as judges. Moses accepted the advice of his father-in-law, and selected men of character and ability.

The qualifications for these men (v. 21) were that they should be (1) "capable men" (i.e., men with a native aptitude for judging), (2) "men who fear [in reverence and belief] God," (3) men of truth (i.e., "trustworthy"), and (4) men who hated all "dishonest gain."... Notice that some of the same qualities are expected of leaders in the church (Acts 6:3; 1 Tim 3:2-12; Titus 1:7-9). (*The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, pp. 413-414)

### **The camp at Sinai: chapter 19**

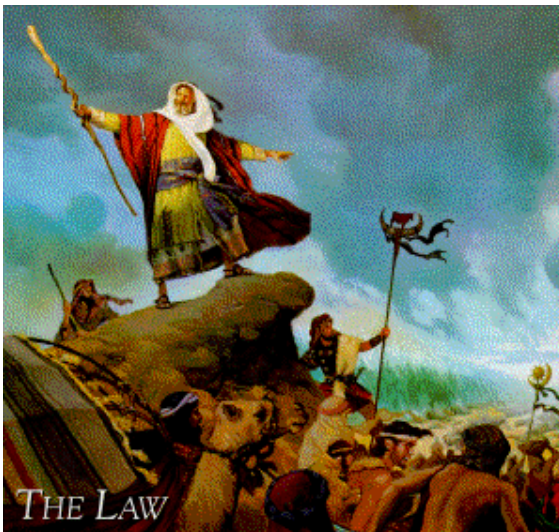
Through Moses, God, as he promised earlier (Exodus 3:12), brought Israel to Mt. Sinai, where he now would establish his covenant with the nation. Thunder, lightning, trumpets and smoke heralded God's presence and demonstrated his awesome power (Exodus 20:18-20 explains why). God

told Moses that the Israelites were to be his special representatives. As the high priest represented Israel to God (Hebrews 5:1), the Israelites were to be “priests” to the surrounding nations (Exodus 19:3-6). For Christians, Hebrews 12:18-25 contrasts Mt. Sinai with Mt. Zion, the physical with the spiritual.

### 13. CROSSING YOUR “RED SEA”

“The Lord said to Moses, ‘Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground’” (Exodus 14:15-16).

Our illustration, by Mike Wimmer, captures the epic qualities of one of the most spectacular events in Old Testament history — the children of Israel crossing the Red Sea. The majestic figure of Moses dominates the scene. His rugged Midianite tunic, softened with decorative Egyptian cuffs, waistband and hem-tassels, is draped with a cloak of red, white and black — the same



colors that would later identify the priestly Levites. His gleaming face, framed with the white linen *kaffiyeh* that hugs his head and shoulders, reflects his inspiration and determination. Moses’ staff and his outstretched arms seem to beckon the Israelites to safe passage.

From behind the rock, to Moses’ right, we

catch a glimpse of Aaron staring intently at the parted waters. Beside the rock, to Moses' left, stands the courageous figure of Joshua, who proudly carries the standard of the tribe of Ephraim. The insignia of Issachar can be seen at the lower right. This dramatic scene from the Exodus makes a fitting introduction to a study of the Pentateuch — the name commonly given to the five books of the law — because it vividly pictures God's great plan of redemption for all humanity that these books begin to describe.

As you start your journey through the Bible, keep in mind that the great God who called Moses and the nation of Israel also wants to lead you. The same God who spoke to Moses speaks to you today. His message, alive and vibrant, is one told through the lives of men and women like Moses, Joshua and Miriam.

The apostle Paul realized this truth when he wrote to the church at Corinth: "Our forefathers were all under the cloud and...they all passed through the sea.... These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come" (1 Corinthians 10:1, 11).

God speaks to all of us today. He speaks to you. So when you read of Moses, the tribes of Israel and Pharaoh's armies at the Red Sea, remember that this is God speaking to you. Perhaps you are standing at a "Red Sea" of your own right now, being called out of the familiar and into the unknown journey ahead with God.

If you are, you need to answer some vital questions:

- From what "Egypt" do you need to be freed?
- Do you believe that God can provide you a way of escape?
- Are you willing to follow his directions?

When you apply the truths of Scripture to your own life, you begin to appreciate their meaning and value more deeply. And you begin to hear God's words of encouragement to you: "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today" (Exodus 14:13).

## **14. LAW, COVENANT AND WORSHIP: EXODUS 20–40**

### **The Ten Commandments: chapter 20:1–21**

The law of Moses was a system of divinely inspired precepts that, in letter and in spirit, defined sin and regulated the Israelites' conduct. The first four commandments concerned their relationship with God; the remaining six, their relationship with one another. Jesus explained this two-clause summary of the law in Matthew 22:37-40.

The commandments show God's concern for the whole of life. He set out rules and standards governing family relationships, regard for human life, sex, property, speech and thought. The Ten Commandments are the Maker's instructions on how the Israelites were to live a life of service to God and their fellow citizens.

Jesus Christ fulfilled the law of Moses and revealed its spiritual intent. He said, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law.... I did not come to destroy but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17, NKJV).

The law was in effect until Christ came as the fulfillment of the promises God gave Israel. "What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come" (Galatians 3:19). Christians live by faith in the Son of God and walk according to the law of Christ (1 Corinthians 9:21). "Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law" (Galatians 3:25). For further information, see the chapter below on the Ten Commandments.

## God's law code: chapters 20:22–24:18

In this section of Scripture, we are introduced to “the Book of the Covenant” (Exodus 24:7), with its record of civil, social and religious legislation. It is the oldest record we have of Hebrew law. It gives us a detailed account of Israel’s duty to God and neighbor. As we deal with others, we should keep the principle of these laws in mind. This section addresses worship, civil laws, festivals and God’s faithfulness.

### Civil, Social and Religious Law

1. Instructions about worship (20:22-26)
2. Civil laws (21:1–23:13);
  - a. the rights of servants (21:1-11).
  - b. Manslaughter and human life (21:12-32)
  - c. Property damage and theft (21:33–22:15)
  - d. Moral and religious obligations (22:16-31)
  - e. Human rights and Sabbath laws (23:1-13)
3. Laws for the festival seasons (23:14-19)
  - a. Unleavened Bread (23:15)
  - b. Harvest of Firstfruits (23:16)
  - c. Ingathering (23:16)
4. God’s commitment to his people (23:20-33)

### Unique Law Code

Although the Book of the Covenant is similar to other ancient law codes, it is different in four important ways.

1. The code rests on the authority of God, not that of a king.
2. There is no division between civil and religious law. Other ancient codes dealt with legal matters only; morals and religion belonged elsewhere. In the Bible, legal, moral and religious laws are inseparable. This shows God’s concern for life as a whole.
3. There is one law for all, whatever one’s status. Regulations protecting the weak and helpless (servants, orphans, widows, foreigners) are particularly striking.
4. A high view of human life is demonstrated by fixed penalties; one crime – one punishment.



Israel's agreement to the covenant was formally sealed by burnt offerings and fellowship offerings (Exodus 24:5). Moses then read from the Book of the Covenant. The blood sprinkled on the altar and on the people bound the Israelites to their agreement with God (verses 6-8). The symbolism of blood is prominent in this chapter. It represents the surrender of life to God. The covenant made at Sinai is now obsolete (Hebrews 8:13), replaced by the new covenant in Jesus Christ.

### **Making the Tabernacle: chapters 25–27**

God set out the terms of his covenant, and the Israelites had agreed to obey (Exodus 24:3). As a visible sign that he would always be with his people, God gave Moses instructions to build a special tabernacle, or tent – a portable sanctuary. God was to have a home amongst the Israelites. He would guide and accompany them wherever they went. They would know that he was no local god, whose power was limited to Sinai (adapted from *Eerdmans' Handbook to the Bible*, p. 166).

### **Ark, table and lampstand: chapter 25:10–40**

Verses 10-22: The ark: This box, 3.75 feet long, 2.25 feet wide and 2.25 feet high, was made of acacia wood overlaid with gold. It contained a jar of manna, Aaron's staff that budded and the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written (Hebrews 9:4).

The “mercy seat” (NKJV), the golden lid of the ark, illustrated how God's throne was not only a throne of judgment, but one of grace (Leviticus 16:2-16). Over the mercy seat two golden cherubim stood facing each other (Exodus 25:20).

Verses 23-30: The table for the “shewbread” (NKJV): Made of acacia wood, it was 3 feet long, 2¼ feet high and 1½ feet wide, and overlaid with gold. Upon it was placed the 12 loaves of bread. The bread was renewed every Sabbath and was eaten by the priests only. This bread typified Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life. It is Christ, our High Priest, who nourishes Christians (Matthew 4:4; John 6:33-58).

Verses 31-40: The golden lampstand: The seven-branched lampstand (Hebrew: *m'norah*), a symbol of life and light, pointed to God as the source of Israel's blessings (compare Job 29:2-3 with Jeremiah 25:10).

### **The general construction of the tabernacle: chapter 26**

Verses 1-6: The 10 linen curtains: These were made of fine linen, and blue, purple and scarlet yarn, with artistic designs of cherubim embroidered into them.

Verses 7-37: The tabernacle coverings, frames, curtain (“veil,” NKJV) and

outer curtain: The veil of the tabernacle separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, the inner sanctuary where the ark of the covenant was located. The veil represents humanity's separation from the presence of God, which ended when Christ was crucified. At the moment of Christ's death, the veil was "torn in two from top to bottom" (Matthew 27:51). Although the Old Testament high priest could go behind the veil only once a year, Christ, as our High Priest (Hebrews 9:11-12), provides continual access to the presence of God to everyone who enters "by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain [veil], that is, his body" (Hebrews 10:20).

## **The bronze altar and courtyard: chapter 27**

Verses 1-8: The bronze altar: This was the great altar for animal sacrifices. It was 7.5 feet square and 4.5 feet high. It was located at the entrance of the tabernacle, thus signifying that the shedding of blood is central to humanity's approach to God. The altar typifies the cross, and the burnt offerings made on it typify Christ, who offered himself unblemished to God (Exodus 12:5; Hebrews 9:14; 1 Peter 1:19).

Verses 9-19: The courtyard: The curtains of fine linen surrounding the courtyard demonstrate that righteousness is required for true worship (Revelation 19:8). They prevent access to anyone who does not come in by the entrance. The entrance of the tabernacle represents Jesus Christ. As our "gate," he is our access to God by virtue of his redemptive work (John 10:7-9).

Verses 20-21: The oil for light: The fine olive oil symbolizes the Holy Spirit (1 Samuel 16:13).

## **The priesthood: chapter 28**

Verses 1-5: Aaron, the high priest, typifies Christ (Hebrews 9). Aaron's holy garments for "dignity and honor" (Exodus 28:2) represent the glory and beauty of Christ as our High Priest.

Verses 6-14: The ephod was an apron-like garment worn under the high priest's breast-piece. It had shoulder straps and an embroidered waistband, and was worn over a robe. On top of each of the shoulder pieces was an onyx stone encased in gold and engraved with the names of six tribes of Israel.

Verses 15-29: The breast-piece was embellished with precious stones engraved with the names of the tribes of Israel. When Aaron wore this into the Holy Place, it foreshadowed Christ bearing the names of Christians in God's presence (Romans 8:34).

Verse 30: Mystery surrounds the purpose of Urim and Thummim, meaning "Lights and Perfections." They were used to ascertain God's will on special occasions (Ezra 2:63). They were closely associated with the breast-

piece of judgment and suggest the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Verses 31-35: Robe of the ephod: The bells on the hem of the robe spoke of God's acceptance of the priestly sacrifice. As long as the people heard the tinkling of the bells, they knew that the high priest was still alive in the Most Holy Place. This meant that God was satisfied with their sacrifice.

Verses 36-38: The gold head-plate was inscribed with the words, "Holy to the Lord," analogous to the holiness and purity of Christ's priesthood (Hebrews 7:26).

Verses 39-43: Underneath the special high priestly regalia, Aaron wore the same vestments as the regular priests. This indicated that the dignity and honor that characterized Aaron (typifying Christ — Hebrews 4:14) also characterized his sons (typifying Christians in this age — 1 Peter 2:9). The linen undergarments (Exodus 28:42) typify the righteousness of Christ imputed to the believer (Revelation 19:7-8).

### **Priestly rituals: chapter 29**

Verses 1-4: The washing: This cleansing in water, in which Aaron participated because he was a sinner, symbolizes our "rebirth and renewal" (Titus 3:5; John 3:5). Christ, as our "holy, blameless, pure" High Priest (Hebrews 7:26-28), did not need to be cleansed. Nevertheless, he yielded to John's baptism in the Jordan to identify himself with sinners and fulfill the Old Testament prophecies (Matthew 3:13-17).

Verses 5-25: The clothing and anointing: Aaron was clothed with splendid garments. His anointing was symbolic of "the Spirit of God descending" on Christ (Matthew 3:16; Acts 10:38). Aaron alone was anointed before the blood was shed (the consecration of the priests required various offerings in which the shedding of animal blood took place). This sets Aaron apart as a striking picture of Christ, who was anointed as God in the flesh and lived a sinless life. Christ did not need to be redeemed as we do.

Verses 26-46: Special food for priests: This was fitting for those who represented the people before God in sacrifice and worship.

### **Worship and the altar of incense: chapter 30**

Verses 1-10: The altar of incense was made of acacia wood overlaid with gold; it was 11.5 feet square and 3 feet high. Equipped with horns and poles for transporting it, the altar was located in the Holy Place in front of the curtain. Aaron offered incense twice daily. The incense symbolizes prayer, which, like an ascending sweet aroma, rises acceptably to heaven (Revelation 5:8; 8:3). No "other incense" (Hebrew: *qetoretz zarab*, meaning "incense that is strange or foreign to the law") was to be used (Exodus 30:9).

Verses 11-16: The atonement money: True worshipers had to be

redeemed. All adults in any national census were on an equal footing — all needed redemption — shown by the payment of the half shekel.

Verses 17-21: The bronze basin: This washbasin was used by the priests to cleanse their hands and feet. It is symbolic of the washing of water through the Word (Hebrews 10:22; Ephesians 5:25-27; John 13:3-10). As Christians, we, too, must be continually cleansed and purified from sin (1 John 1:9).

Verses 22-33: The anointing oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Only those who have been cleansed (forgiven) can properly worship God (John 4:23; Ephesians 2:18).

Verses 34-38: The incense: The ingredients are listed, as in the case of the anointing oil. Once again, only those redeemed (Exodus 30:11-16), cleansed (verses 17-21) and anointed (verses 22-33) can truly worship God.

## **God chooses his workers: chapter 31:1–11**

This chapter shows that when God selects men and women for a particular job, he also equips them to do it. Verse 3 is one of the earliest references in the Bible to the guiding work of the Spirit of God.

## **The Sabbath: chapter 31:12–18**

The Sabbath was an appointed day of rest and worship. It was a memorial of the seventh day of creation, when God rested from his work. The observance of the Sabbath was included in the Ten Commandments, and was a sign between God and his people Israel (Genesis 2:2-3; Exodus 20:8-11; 31:17). It pictured a future reality — sharing in the rest of God through faith in Christ (Hebrews 4).

## **The golden calf: chapter 32**

Unfortunately, only six weeks after pledging their allegiance to God, the children of Israel demanded a replica of one of the gods of ancient Egypt. The impatience of the people was matched by the weakness of Aaron, the high priest. Not only did he preside over the making of the calf, but he also identified it with the true God of Israel!

Moses' indignation is understandable. In breaking the tablets of stone, he dramatically proclaimed Israel's breaking of the covenant. Only his intervention saved the people from annihilation. Nevertheless, God punished them for their sin (verses 25-28).

## **Moses sees the glory of God: chapter 33**

God's punishment brought results. The Israelites discarded their personal idols. Moses, though, was still concerned. He wanted to ensure that God had restored favor to his people, so he asked for a bigger sign than in the past. Moses was permitted to see a glimpse of God's glory (verses 18-23).

## **The covenant renewed: chapter 34**

God renewed his covenant by writing the law on a new set of stone tablets. He revealed himself to Moses with this self-description:

He passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished. (Exodus 34:6-7)

This renewal of the covenant gave additional guidelines resulting from Israel’s worship of the golden calf, as well as warnings about the coming temptations of the Canaanite religion. For example, the Israelites were not to follow the Canaanite practice of cooking a young goat in its mother’s milk (verse 26). God also reiterated the Sabbath and three annual festivals (verses 18-22).

## **Setting up the tabernacle: chapters 35–40**

These chapters explain how the instructions God gave earlier (Exodus 25–31) were to be carried out. The people contributed gifts to the tabernacle. Their response was so enthusiastic and generous that Moses asked them to stop giving.

This illustrates an important spiritual principle that you will often see as you study the Bible. Giving should always be done willingly and proportionate to one’s blessings (2 Corinthians 9:7). The act of giving imitates God’s grace to us. As Jesus told his disciples, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21).

When the tabernacle was finished, God filled it with his glory. In the New Testament, God “tabernacled” among his people in the form of Jesus Christ and they witnessed his glory (John 1:14 uses the Greek word for “live in a tent”).

## 15. THE NAME OF GOD

When God called to Moses out of the burning bush, telling him to free the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, Moses asked, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?” (Exodus 3:13). God answered Moses, “I AM WHO I AM” (verse 14). The Hebrew word for “I AM” is *‘ehyeh*, which comes from the verb “to be.” It can also be translated as “I SHALL BE.”

God further told Moses: “Say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers...has sent me to you’” (verse 15). Although the Hebrew word for “Lord” is *‘adon*, the word translated “LORD” in verse 15 is different. Spelled with the four Hebrew consonants *YHWH*, it is known as the tetragrammaton (Greek for “four letters”). *YHWH* is related to *‘ehyeh* and also comes from the verb “to be.” Both words have the sense of “being actively present.”

Although most scholars pronounce the tetragrammaton as *Yahweh*, the correct pronunciation is not known for certain. The Hebrews avoided saying the tetragrammaton because they believed that saying the personal name of God could take God’s name in vain. When reading a passage of the Hebrew Bible that contained it, they referred to God by another word — *‘adonai* or “my Lord.”

The oldest known manuscript fragments of the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament) leave the tetragrammaton untranslated. However, later manuscripts, probably reflecting Christian editing, render the tetragrammaton as *kyrios*, Greek for “Lord.” Later, English

versions rendered the personal name *YHWH* as the impersonal “the LORD.” They used all capital letters for “LORD” to indicate they were translating *YHWH*, not *‘adon* or *‘adonai*.

The text of the Hebrew Bible originally consisted of consonants only. When vowel marks were added in the 10th century A.D., the vowel marks of *‘adonai* were used for the tetragrammaton to remind the reader to say *‘adonai* instead of trying to pronounce the divine name.

When Latin translators in the 16th century came upon this combination, they transliterated, using the consonants of *YHWH* and the vowels of *‘adonai*, creating the artificial form *Iohoua*. In 1530, Tyndale rendered the tetragrammaton as *Iehouab* in his Old English translation of Exodus 6:3. (As with many other words in that era, I was used for J, and U for V.) Subsequently, *Jehovah* became the standard spelling, and this appears at a few places in the King James Version (in Psalm 83:18, for example). However, in the vast majority of cases, the King James Version translates *YHWH* as “the LORD” and *‘adonai* as “the Lord.”

## **16. SHOULD CHRISTIANS KEEP THE LAW OF MOSES? — WHAT ABOUT THE TEN COMMANDMENTS?**

When Jesus was on earth, he kept the laws of Moses — but he also criticized them. Soon after he went back to heaven, his followers met to decide whether Christians should keep the laws of Moses. The question came to the foreground when people who weren't Jewish began to follow Christ: "Some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses'" (Acts 15:5).

What were these laws? Were they biblical laws, or the unbiblical traditions of the elders? In every other New Testament mention of the "laws of Moses," the biblical books of Moses are meant (Luke 2:22; 24:44; John 7:22-23; Acts 28:23; 1 Cor. 9:9; Heb. 10:28). Luke could have said "traditions," but he did not. Anyone who knew the teachings of Jesus would already know that unbiblical traditions were not required. They did not need to debate about Jewish traditions.

Just as circumcision was biblical, so also were the laws of Moses. The claim was that non-Jewish believers should be circumcised, and then, as part of the covenant people of God, they should then obey the laws of the covenant. The law of Moses said that men were to be circumcised.

Today, we might explain (as Paul did) that Jesus instituted a new covenant, and that the Jewish believers were God's people not because they were Jewish, but because they were believers. Membership in the new covenant is



by faith, not by ancestry. But the Jerusalem council did not approach the question from this perspective. Let's see how they did it.

## **The apostles speak**

“The apostles and elders met to consider this question” (Acts 15:6). Perhaps dozens of elders were involved. “After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: ‘Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe’” (v. 7).

Peter reminded the people that God had used him to preach the gospel to Cornelius and his family (Acts 10). Cornelius was not circumcised, but Peter did not use that as proof. Rather, he focused on the foundations of how a person is saved—by believing.

“God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith” (vs. 8-9). God gave the Holy Spirit to this uncircumcised family, purifying their hearts, calling them holy, as acceptable to him, because of their faith.

Peter then began to scold the people who wanted the gentiles to obey the laws of Moses: “Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are” (vs. 10-11).

Peter's point is that the yoke of Moses was a burden that the Jewish people were not able to keep successfully. Those rituals showed that, no matter how hard people worked, they could never be perfect. They showed, for anyone who ever wondered, that works can never lead to salvation. Salvation is attained in a different way—by grace. We can't earn it, so it has to be given to us.

Since the law of Moses cannot bring us salvation, there is no need to require the gentiles to keep it. God gave them the Holy Spirit and showed that he accepts them without all those rituals. They are saved by grace, and the Jews are, too.

If we follow Peter's logic, we will see that Jewish believers do not have to keep the laws of Moses, either. They are saved by grace through faith, just as the gentiles are. The old covenant is obsolete, so its laws are no longer required for anyone, and that is why Peter could live like a gentile (Gal. 2:14). But that is getting ahead of the story. In Acts 15, the question is only whether gentiles have to keep the laws of Moses.

## The judgment of James

After Barnabas and Paul told “about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles” (Acts 15:12), James spoke. As leader of the Jerusalem church, he had a lot of influence. Some of the legalists even claimed him as their authority (Gal. 2:12), but Luke tells us that James was in complete agreement with Peter and Paul.

“Brothers, listen to me. Simon [Peter] has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself” (Acts 15:13-14). The fact that God has already acted was powerful evidence. James then quoted from the Greek translation of Amos to show that Scripture agreed with what was happening (vs. 15-18). He could have used other Old Testament prophecies, too, about gentiles being included among God’s people.

Experience and Scripture pointed to the same conclusion. “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (v. 19). There is no need to require the yoke of Moses, for that would make things unnecessarily difficult for the gentile believers.

James then suggested four rules: “Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood” (v. 20). Instead of making things difficult for the gentiles, these four rules would be enough.

Believers should not lie, steal and murder. That was as obvious to them as it is to us, so they did not need a special reminder about it. The decree makes it clear that gentiles do not have to be circumcised, nor do they have to obey the laws of Moses. They are circumcised spiritually, not physically. God never gave those commands to the gentiles.

## Moses is preached

We should not make it difficult for the gentiles, James said. Instead, it will be enough to give them four rules, which they will find easy to comply with. Why give them these rules? Notice the reason that James gives: “For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath” (v. 21).

James was not encouraging gentile Christians to attend the synagogues. He was not saying they should listen to the laws of Moses. However, because those laws were commonly preached, the apostles should tell the gentiles four rules. Then they would not think that Christianity is more difficult than it is.

To summarize: Some men said that gentiles should be circumcised and obey the laws of Moses or else they could not be saved. Not so, said the

apostles. Gentiles are saved by grace and faith. God is pleased to dwell in people who aren't circumcised and who don't keep the rituals. But since Moses is widely preached, we need to give a decree that clearly distinguishes the Christian faith from the Law of Moses.

This pleased the entire church, so they wrote it in a letter and sent it to Antioch, where they "were glad for its encouraging message" (v. 31).

## **But what about the Ten Commandments?**

Since the Law of Moses includes all the laws that Moses gave ancient Israel, it includes the Ten Commandments. But shouldn't Christians keep the Ten Commandments? Several of the Ten are quoted in the New Testament, but the only time that the Ten are mentioned *as a group* is in Paul's second letter to the Corinthian church. Let's see what he wrote:

"You are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, *not on tablets of stone* but on tablets of human hearts. . . . He has made us competent as ministers of a new *covenant*—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:3-6).

Paul has mentioned "tablets of stone," and then the "new covenant." He then builds a contrast between the old covenant, the tablets of stone that contained the Ten Commandments, and the new covenant, the basis of Christianity. Let's see how he develops the contrast:

"Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?" (verses 7-8).

Paul is talking about something written on stone, at a time when Moses' face shone with glory. He is talking about the Ten Commandments. This is what was written on stone. Paul is calling the Ten Commandments a "ministry that brought death." Paul was not a minister of the letter (the Ten Commandments), but of the Spirit.

Of course, it was God who gave the Law. Nevertheless, Paul saw a fundamental contrast between the Law and the Spirit, between the old and the new. There is continuity, for both old and new are covenants of the same God. But even though God does not change, and his underlying principles do not change, his covenants do. Paul explains some differences in the next verses:

"If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness!" (verse 9). The Ten

Commandments were a ministry that condemned people. They had some glory, but not nearly as much as the new covenant. The Ten Commandments cannot bring righteousness, but the new covenant does.

“For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory” (verse 10). The Ten Commandments have no glory now, Paul is saying, in comparison to the new covenant, which brings life and righteousness.

“And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!” What was fading away? Moses’ face was fading, but Paul is not talking about Moses’ face any more—he is talking about “the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone.” That is what “came with glory” (verse 7). That is what was fading away.

The Ten Commandments, Paul is saying, came with glory, but they are fading away, just as surely as the glory of Moses’ face also faded. The new covenant not only has much greater glory, but it also “lasts.” The Ten Commandments, Paul implies, do not last forever. They were designed as a temporary “ministry of condemnation,” designed to lead people to Christ.

Notice the contrasts Paul has made:

<b>The Ten Commandments</b>	<b>The New Covenant</b>
written on tablets of stone (v. 4)	written on the heart
the letter that kills (v. 6)	the Spirit that gives life
a ministry that brought death (v. 7)	a ministry that brings life
engraved in letters on stone (v. 7)	ministry of the Spirit
came with glory (v. 7)	even more glorious
the ministry that condemns (v. 9)	the ministry that brings righteousness
no glory now in comparison (v. 10)	the surpassing glory
it came with glory (v. 11)	much greater glory
it is now fading away (v. 11)	the ministry that lasts

Paul says that the Ten Commandments, although good, are temporary and fading. What has faded away concerning the Ten Commandments? Some people try to say that the Ten Commandments, instead of fading, are actually more binding on people today than ever before. They want to expand the Ten instead of letting them fade.

But Paul is saying that there is a fundamental change in the way people relate to God. The old way is a written law that condemns people to death. The new way is the Holy Spirit, which brings forgiveness and life. The Spirit leads us to obey God, but it is a fundamentally different relationship, a different basis of relating to God.

There is some basic continuity between the old covenant and the new. Most of the Ten Commandments are quoted with approval in the New Testament. Those commands reflect aspects of God's law that were in effect long before Sinai—from the beginning. One is not—the Sabbath command. It was a ceremonial law, instituted for a temporary time period.

### **Paul's boldness in Christ**

Once Paul understood the change, he was strengthened and encouraged: "Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away" (verses 12-13).

Paul did not hide. He was bold in preaching the new way—salvation through the crucified Christ. But despite his boldness, and the clarity of the message, many people did not accept the gospel: "But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts" (verses 14-15).

Many people today, Jewish or not, do not seem to understand. They keep reading the Bible with old covenant eyes. The only solution is Christ. Only in him can the "veil" be removed. "Whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away" (verse 16).

### **Jesus: the basis of our relationship with God**

What does it mean to "turn to the Lord"? It means to see Jesus as the basis of our relationship with God. It means seeing our identity in him, not in the Law of Moses. Christ becomes central. We obey *his* law, the law of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21). When we put him first in our identity, he will help us see the covenantal change more clearly.

"The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (verse 17). We have freedom in Christ—but what kind of freedom? Certainly, we still obey—Paul makes that clear in Romans 6. But in this context of 2 Corinthians, what kind of freedom is he talking about? It is freedom from the ministry that brought death—freedom from the old covenant. There is a lot of continuity, but there is some important change as well.

## **An unfading glory**

Not only do the covenants change from old and temporary to new and permanent, Christians themselves are changing: “We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (verse 18).

Moses had only a fading glory, and his covenant had only a fading glory. It could give only temporary blessings. But we, with the eternal Spirit living within us, are being changed into a permanent glory—a glory that does not need to hide, a glory that looks to the heart instead of the stone tablets.

## **Christian use of the Ten Commandments**

What then are Christians supposed to do with the Ten Commandments? Can we approach it as Scripture inspired by God, “useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16)? Yes – we should approach it exactly as it is written – as a report of what God gave his people in the time of Moses. We read it as a story first, before jumping to conclusions that we are supposed to obey every command within it.

When we read in Genesis 17 that the males among God’s people were to be circumcised, we do not assume that we should do so today. When we read in Exodus 13 that God’s people are to redeem their firstborn children and have a festival of unleavened bread, we do not assume that we should do so today. Those commands were given for a specific people. So also the commands we find in Exodus 20.

The Ten Commandments begin with this preface: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” This gives a historical context to the situation: it was a multitude of just-escaped slaves, in a desert, surrounded by polytheistic nations. God gave them laws that would compensate for their lack of civic experience, laws that would help them resist polytheism, laws that would help them become a distinct nation, laws that would help them structure society in a new land. These laws were good for their situation, but some of them are not needed today.

Much of the Old Testament is a story. Nevertheless, 2 Timothy 3 can say that this type of writing, since it is part of Scripture, is “useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” Stories can help inform our ethics. They can illustrate consequences, misunderstandings, weaknesses and flexibilities. The story of Abraham and circumcision is useful

for teaching and for training in righteousness without requiring us to practice circumcision. The commands about sacrifice are to be read as part of a story, not as commands for us today. The details may be useful symbolically, but they are read first in the context of a story, not as currently valid law.

Genesis is a story, and in that story God gave certain commands and implied other commands. Some of them apply to us today and some do not. Exodus continues that story and gives more commands, commands about how people should worship, how to behave with one another and what to do when someone disobeys. Some of these commands apply to us today; others do not. So we must see them first in the context in which the Bible gives them: a covenant or arrangement God made with a specific people at a specific time in history, a covenant God has now revealed to be obsolete (Hebrews 8:13).

The commands that God gave them are *instructive* but not necessarily *imperative* for us. They are *informative* but not *normative*. They are *descriptive* for ancient Israel, but not *prescriptive* for Christians. If we want to find out which laws still apply to Christians today, we must rely on the New Testament, and the New Testament tells us that one commandment — the Sabbath — is no longer in force. We cannot preach the Ten Commandments for Christians today, because there is an important exception right in the middle of the Ten, and it is confusing to say Ten when only Nine are meant.

Moreover, Christians have a better standard of behavior in the New Testament — a bigger body of literature with better balance. We have the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. We should point people to Christ, not to Moses, for instruction on how to live like a Christian.

## **17. DID MOSES STEAL THE TEN COMMANDMENTS?**

Shushan, which lies 200 miles east of Babylon, was the capital of ancient Elam (Susiana), and later the winter palace of the Persian kings. It was the scene of many biblical events in the time of Daniel, Nehemiah, Queen Esther and King Ahasuerus (Xerxes).

French archaeologists began excavations at Shushan in 1852. M. Dieulafoy discovered the palace fortress that the writer of the book of Esther calls the citadel of Susa. In 1901, another expedition, led by de Morgan, uncovered three fragments of black stone. After being fitted together, they formed an impressive round-top stele or pillar, which stands about 7.5 feet high. This was a copy of the Law Code of King Hammurabi, considered one of the most significant legal documents from antiquity. (Hammurabi was the sixth king of the first dynasty of Babylon, whose dating is controversial but commonly given as 1792-1750 B.C.) The stele is now displayed at the Louvre in Paris, France.

A relief on the upper face of the stele depicts the king in worship before the sun god on a throne. The code begins with a prologue, followed by 300 laws. These can be divided into 12 sections of law: legal process, thieves, vassals, homes and land, trade, inns, deposits, family, injury to others, building, hiring, and the treatment of slaves. Sixty-seven paragraphs cover the major subjects of marriage, family and property.

This discovery was particularly important to Bible scholars. First, it supported the authenticity of the law of Moses. Some Bible critics had held that the art of writing and the science of law were unknown in that early period of history. But here was specific evidence that both were well known.

Second, there were striking parallels between some of Hammurabi's



statutes and those of Moses in the Book of the Covenant. For example, in citing the law for personal injury, Hammurabi's statute 206 states: "If a man wound another accidentally in a quarrel with a stone or his fist, and oblige him to take his bed, he shall pay for the loss of his time and for the doctors." The law of Moses, for the same offense, is remarkably similar (Exodus 21:18-19).

The similarity between these and a few other statutes left the way open for some critical scholars to postulate that the Mosaic law in the Bible was derived from the Code of Hammurabi. Most scholars, however, have abandoned this theory, since further research has shown that, in ancient times, there were codes of law in various countries. Some of these were even older than Hammurabi's stele.

Furthermore, Mosaic law moved beyond the Code of Hammurabi, or any of the ancient law codes, because it is grounded in the worship of one God. The ethical principles in the law of Moses spring from love toward the one true God. Such love demands that one also love fellow human beings, whom God made in his image. Moses thus talks about human sin and our responsibility to God in resisting sin. Hammurabi and other ancient lawgivers, however, do not address this issue.

Hammurabi's law code is civil and criminal. Moses' law code, on the other hand, begins with spiritual principles — love toward God and humans — from which the civil and criminal laws are derived. From its stress on the motive of love, the law of Moses demanded more humane treatment for slaves, gave higher regard for womanhood, and placed greater value upon human life in general. The priority given to such spiritual values made the Mosaic law unique among all the ancient law codes.

## 18. EXPLORING LEVITICUS

### What's in a name?

The opening word of Leviticus is *wayyiqra'*, which means “and he called.” The Jews used this word as a title for Leviticus. They also called it “the law of the priests,” “the book of the priests” and “the law of the offerings.” These designations summarized the general content of the book, recognizing it as a work intended primarily for the priesthood.

The Septuagint calls the book *Leuitikon or Leucitikon*, “pertaining to the Levites.” The Latin Vulgate translated the Septuagint title as *Liber Leviticus*, “the book of Leviticus,” which then became the title in the English Bible.

### Outline

Leviticus begins where Exodus ends – at the foot of Mt. Sinai. The tabernacle has just been completed, and God now begins to teach the Israelites how to worship him. Through the book of Leviticus, God shows Israel how to live as a holy nation.

The book can be divided into six sections: sacrifices and offerings (1:1–7:38), the priesthood and the tabernacle (8:1–10:20), regulations about life (11:1–15:33), the Day of Atonement (16:1–34), living holy lives (17:1–22:33) and festivals and various regulations (23:1–27:34).

### How to read this book

To us, living in a modern society, the rituals and sacrifices explained in Leviticus may seem strange. Yet portions of the New Testament can be understood only by reference to Leviticus.

For example, what does it mean for Christians to be a royal priesthood? A holy nation? For Christ to be our great High Priest? Our Passover Lamb? Much of the original context of these New Testament concepts is found in Leviticus. Furthermore, some regulations in Leviticus

go beyond the religious institutions and that deal with the events of life. The implication of those regulations is that all of life is, in fact, religious. All that we do, whether in direct worship or not, is part of our relationship to God.... God sees us as totalities, and all of our life – work, worship, relationships, creativity, family – is important to him. (Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Baker Bible Handbook*, Baker Book House, 1984, pp. 150, 152)

The book of Leviticus leads us to an understanding of the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus the Messiah, but we must not overlook other important elements it contains. The book is not only a record of laws and traditions that were superseded by the ministry of Jesus Christ. There are many laws, customs, traditions and principles that address such subjects as hygiene, managing the environment and moral conduct. These are sound guidelines for all people and all times.

“For example, the rules about sexual purity (15:1-33) may be seen as emphasizing the sanctity of sex and warning against its casual treatment. The need for such advice today is obvious” (ibid., p. 152). As the *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible* explains:

Many Christians tend to ignore what the text meant to individual Israelites or to the community of Israel in Old Testament times and go immediately to a type study of Jesus and how he fulfilled many parts of Leviticus in the New Testament. We must first examine the text to see what it meant for Old Testament Israel. Only then can we proceed to a study of Jesus. (p. 68)

## Learning about God

Above all else, Leviticus teaches us that God is holy. This provides the basis of all his laws (11:44-45; 19:2-4; 20:7-8, 24-26). “Jewish sages considered [this] to be of primary importance. They felt that before proceeding to other biblical texts, children should first be educated concerning the sanctity of God and the responsibility of each individual to live a holy life” (*The Spirit-Filled Life Bible*, NKJV, p. 146).

In Leviticus, God is present with his people. In Israel’s worship, all sacrifices and ceremonies took place “before the Lord.” This teaches us that God is always there and that everything we do must be done in light of his presence.

We also learn that God judges sin. Because God is holy, nothing sinful or unclean can come into his presence. For human beings to develop a relationship with God, they must first be forgiven and cleansed of sin (1:1–7:38; 11:1–15:33).

The book of Leviticus also tells us to:

- Obey God (17:2).
- Worship, serve and obey God only (17:3-9; 20:1-5).
- Recognize God’s blessings (23:1-44).
- Be as concerned about every aspect of our lives as God is (18:1–22:16).
- Deal justly with each other, just as God deals justly with his people (19:1-37).

While Jesus is not mentioned in Leviticus, the sacrificial system and the office of high priest foreshadow the greater work of Christ for human salvation (Hebrews 3:1; 4:14-16). Hebrews 7 describes Jesus as our High Priest and uses the text of Leviticus as a basis for illustrating his work. Jesus is the eternal High Priest whose work far surpasses that of Aaron and his successors.

As the author of Hebrews states: “But now [Jesus Christ] has obtained a more excellent ministry.... He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises” (Hebrews 8:6, NKJV).

Through the crucifixion, Jesus fulfilled the Levitical concept of the sin offering (Romans 8:1-4; 2 Corinthians 5:18-21; Hebrews 9:1-1-28; 10:11-12; 13:10-15). In other passages, Paul described Christ as a peace offering (Romans 5:1-11; Ephesians 2:13-18; Colossians 1:18-20).

Christ’s death and resurrection meant that the Levitical prescriptions for sacrifice and holiness have been superseded through Jesus Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:9-:19; 15:1-21; Galatians 2:15–3:5).

The concepts of separation and holiness were attractive themes to New Testament writers. The apostle Peter reflected the theme of Leviticus when he encouraged Christians to “be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy’” 1 Peter 1:15; see Leviticus 11:44; 19:2; 20:7). Peter also called Christians a “royal priesthood” and “a holy nation” (1 Peter 2:9).

## Other topics

**Annual festivals:** These festivals and holy days memorialize God’s great acts of salvation in history, symbolize the power of God and typify the anticipated future fulfillment of God’s plan of salvation for all humanity (Leviticus 23).

**Tithing:** Tithing is the practice of giving a tenth of one’s increase to God. The Israelites paid 10 percent of their agricultural blessings to the Levites (Leviticus 27). Giving God a tenth of what belongs to him anyway, recognizes his ultimate ownership of everything.

**Covenant:** Because God had made his covenant (agreement) with the Israelites, it was important that they lived according to his laws. Read Leviticus 26 and note the eight references to “covenant” (verses 9, 15, 25, 42, 44-45).

**Sacrifice/offering:** Israel’s sacrifices were to serve as a reminder of sin (Hebrews 10:3). An animal’s life was taken to picture that without the shedding of blood there could be no forgiveness (Hebrews 9:22). But the Levitical sacrificial system lasted only until Jesus’ death, the ultimate sacrifice for all humanity’s sins.

**Levites:** The Levites and priests were the ministers of their day. They also regulated the moral, civil and ceremonial laws and supervised the health, justice and welfare programs of the nation.

**Community health:** Leviticus contains rules and guidelines regarding food, disease and sexual purity. Although some of the laws seem arbitrary, others would have promoted hygiene and community health.

## What this book means for you

Leviticus reminds us of the holiness of God and the necessity of living a holy life. Sin is always serious, because God is holy and cannot live with sin. Sin stems from a mode of thinking that is contrary to God, and puts human beings in a spiritual category different from God. If a relationship with God is to be maintained, sin must be removed.

Obedience to God must be important in our lives. Leviticus 1–16 may be summed up in the words of Jesus, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30).

Being right with God leads us to be right with others. Leviticus 17–27 describes godly behavior toward our neighbors. These chapters can be summarized by Leviticus 19:18, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

- Family life should be strengthened and protected (18:6 19:3; 20:10-21).
- The poor should be provided for (19:9-10).
- All business transactions must be fair (19:11-13, 35-36).
- No one should acquire wealth to the hurt of other citizens (25:8-55).

Leviticus shows that God cares for his people. He has thought through our problems and given us guidance and direction, not just in spiritual, but also in physical matters. He always has an attitude of forgiveness toward us and wants to restore us to his fellowship. God can fully restore Christians today because Jesus did what the Levitical sacrificial system could only symbolize. Only in Christ do we experience the awesome opportunity to come humbly, yet boldly, before the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16).

## **19. LEVITICUS: LIVING A HOLY LIFE**

### **Prelude: chapter 1:1-2**

As he had promised, God met with Moses in the tabernacle to reveal his will to the Israelites (verse 1). The first of these revelations related to the sacrifices. The patriarchs, when sojourning in Canaan, had already worshiped God with burnt offerings and sin offerings. Consequently, the sacrificial laws of these chapters presuppose the presentation of burnt offerings, grain offerings and sin offerings as a custom well known to the people.

However, during the time of Moses, God organized the nation of Israel and its worship into more formal patterns. Instead of each individual or family building an altar wherever convenient, there was to be a central tabernacle where all would worship.

Not only did God stipulate where sacrifices were to be offered, he prescribed specific types of sacrifices for the people and for the priests. These God-ordained changes represented a profound break with tradition. No longer would the father of a family act as the family's priest. Now the worship and instruction of such a large nation called for additional order and regulation.

As you read through this section of Leviticus, remember that the New Testament makes clear that the sacrifices of Israel were symbolic of Christ's sacrifice and atonement for us.

Hebrews 5 through 10 is a New Testament commentary on Leviticus, emphasizing the priesthood of Christ and his atoning death. The sacrificial system of Leviticus foreshadows this essential truth. This is the implication

of Hebrews 9:26-28: “Now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.”



“The sons of Aaron the priest are to put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire. Then Aaron’s sons the priests shall arrange the pieces, including the head and the fat, on the burning wood that is on the altar” (Leviticus 1:7-8).

### **Laws of the sacrifices: chapters 1:3-7:38**

These laws describe the technical aspects of the sacrificial rituals. But bear in mind that the “various sacrifices always belonged to larger contexts of worship in which prayer, hymns, and other forms of liturgy were integral parts” (*Harper’s Bible Commentary*, p. 158).

#### 1) Burnt offering (Leviticus 1; 6:8-13)

In the burnt offering the sacrificial animal was completely incinerated on the altar. “The offering represents the desire of the offerer to be in complete harmony with God” (Keith Schoville, *Exodus and Leviticus*, p. 75). The offering symbolized the entire surrender to God of the individual or the congregation. The burnt offering was to be “without defect” (Leviticus 1:3, 10), foreshadowing the perfect sacrifice of Christ, “a lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Peter 1:19).

#### 2) Grain offering (Leviticus 2; 6:14-23)

The grain offering was also known as the meal or cereal offering. It was the only offering without blood, and was called a gift. This offering demonstrated Israel’s dependence on God, as shown by the presentation of the produce of the earth. Although it accompanied the burnt offering, the grain offering was a separate offering. The former symbolized a life devoted

to God; the latter presented fruits of labor dedicated to him. The grain offering had several significant features.

<b>Features of the Grain Offering</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Oil: a symbol of the Holy Spirit.</li><li>• Incense: symbolic of the sacrifice of prayer.</li><li>• Absence of yeast (or leaven) and honey: spiritual purity.</li><li>• Salt: preservation and permanence.</li><li>• Fire: symbolic of God's acceptance.</li><li>• Pleasing aroma: God's approval and pleasure.</li></ul>

3) Peace or fellowship offering (Leviticus 3; 7:11-36)

The peace offering symbolized reconciliation, as shown in the fellowship of eating. This offering is also symbolic of Christ. He is our peace offering, having made reconciliation for us: "For he himself is our peace" (Ephesians 2:14-18). When we are beneficiaries of his atoning work, peace becomes ours (Romans 5:1). Fellowship with Christ becomes the highest point of Christian privilege (John 17:3; 1 John 1:3).

<b>Features of the Peace Offering</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• One portion was consumed by fire, indicating God's acceptance and participation.</li><li>• Another portion was eaten by the offerer. Since eating is part of a covenant, unity between God and offerer is implied.</li><li>• A third portion was eaten by the priest.</li></ul>

4) Sin offering (Leviticus 4:1–5:13; 6:24-30)

The sin offering was made by those who had sinned unintentionally (sins of personal weakness as opposed to sins committed in defiant rebellion against God). Jesus was our sin offering: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

5) Guilt offering (Leviticus 5:14–6:7; 7:1-10)

The offering for committing a violation against the Lord (Leviticus 5:14-19) was always an unblemished ram (verses 15, 18; 6:6). No sin could be overlooked. Even for ignorance, or inadvertence, sacrifice was necessary (Leviticus 5:15).



Restitution had to be made for any wrong committed against God or against one's neighbor, along with an additional 20 percent. For wrong done to the Lord (such as failing to pay tithes, eating the priest's portion of the sacrifice, or failing to redeem the firstborn), the 20 percent was given to the priest; for wrong done to a neighbor, it was given to the victim. "The major altar offerings... followed a stereotyped ritual pattern of six acts, of which the worshipper executed three and the priest performed three" (R.K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 599).

<b>Procedure for Animal Sacrifice</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The worshipper chose a physically perfect animal from the herd.</li> <li>2. The worshipper brought the animal to the courtyard of the tabernacle.</li> <li>3. The worshipper laid hand on the animal, implying that it represented the worshipper, and slaughtered it.</li> <li>4. The priest took the basin of blood and poured it at the base of the altar.</li> <li>5. The priest then burned specified fat portions (or the entire animal in the burnt offering).</li> <li>6. The rest of the animal was then eaten by the priests, or by their families. (In the case of the peace offering, priests and worshipers ate together.)</li> </ol>

## **The investiture: chapter 8**

Chapter 8 describes the investiture — the elaborate ritual in which Aaron and his sons were instituted as a priesthood. They were anointed with a special perfumed oil (verse 10-13, 33; see also Exodus 30:23-25).

The dedication of the whole person to God's service was indicated by the blood on Aaron's ear, hand and toe (verse 23). "The ear, because the priest was always to [obey] the word and commandment of God; the hand, because he was to discharge the priestly functions properly; and the foot, because he was to walk correctly in the sanctuary" (C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1, p. 341).

## **Aaron begins service: chapter 9**

The priests were to make atonement for themselves with special offerings before they could serve. Aaron and his sons then began their priestly service. The order of these sacrifices showed how a relationship with God could be restored.

## The sin of Aaron's sons: chapter 10

It did not take long for the priestly image to become tarnished. Aaron's sons decided to do things their own way. The "unauthorized" fire suggests that they lit their censers from an ordinary fire instead of from the fire of the burnt offering. Perhaps they were under the influence of alcohol, since a prohibition against drinking immediately follows their punishment (verse 9).

Whatever explanation is correct, the point is that Nadab and Abihu abused their office as priests in a flagrant act of disrespect to God, who had just reviewed with them precisely how they were to conduct worship. As leaders, they had special responsibility to obey God. In their position, they could easily lead many people astray. (*Life Application Bible, NIV*, commentary on Leviticus 10:1)

## Clean and unclean meats: chapter 11

Some of the rules of cleanness reflect sound guidelines for diet and hygiene. Others have no known purpose. The Bible does not make any claims about the health value of these rules — their function in Leviticus is for ritual purity. (For further information, see "Are Some Meats Unclean?" at <http://www.gci.org/law/unclean>.)

<b>Clean and Unclean Meats</b>
<p><b>Meats that are clean:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Animals that have split or cloven hooves and that chew the cud: ruminants.</li> <li>• Aquatic creatures with both fins and scales.</li> <li>• Birds that are not listed as unclean and that do not have any traits of those listed as unclean.</li> <li>• Insects belonging to the locust (grasshopper) family.</li> </ul> <p><b>Meats that are unclean:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Camels, rabbits and pigs.</li> <li>• All mammals not listed as clean.</li> <li>• Predatory and scavenger birds.</li> <li>• Shellfish.</li> </ul>

## Postnatal purification: chapter 12

In Canaan, worship was often connected with prostitution and fertility

rites. However, for Israel, anything suggesting the sexual or sensual was strictly banned from the worship of God. This does not mean that this aspect of life is “unclean.” The purpose is to ensure its separation from the worship of God. The rule of strict cleanliness in all sexual matters would also contribute to health. For a New Testament example of the law concerning postnatal purification (Leviticus 12:1-8), see Luke 2:22-24.

The law of circumcision (verse 3) was given to Abraham in Genesis 17:12-14. The spiritual significance of this law is touched on in the law of Moses (Deuteronomy 30:6), the prophets (Jeremiah 4:4) and the writings of Paul (Colossians 2:11-12; Philippians 3:3). (For further information, see our article about circumcision at <http://www.gci.org/law/circumcision>.)

### **Skin diseases: chapters 13-14**

Health regulations pertaining to “infectious skin diseases” (“leprosy,” NKJV) were also included in God’s laws. Such guidelines enabled the priests, who were responsible for the health of the camp, to distinguish between serious and chronic forms of these various diseases. Some of these diseases — unlike the diseases we call “leprosy” or “Hansen’s disease” today — were contagious. Regulations regarding certain forms of mildew (greenish or reddish) in fabrics or houses are also described (Leviticus 13:49; 14:37).

### **Bodily discharges: chapter 15**

Regulations are given for seminal and menstrual discharges, as well as malignant discharges. Washing is prescribed, which would promote hygiene.

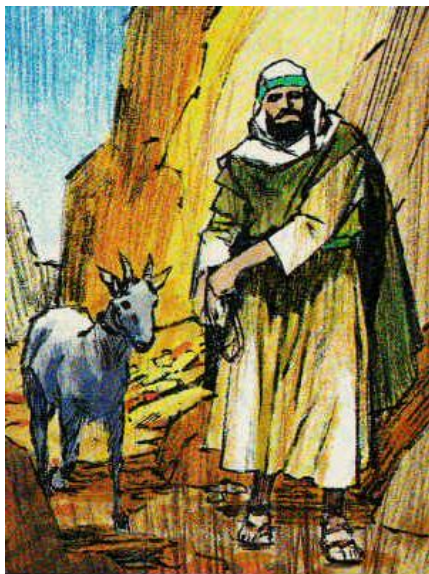
### **The Day of Atonement: chapter 16**

This chapter is central to the book of Leviticus. The 10th day of the seventh month (September-October) was to be the annual Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur.



Only on this occasion was Aaron allowed into the innermost part of the tabernacle, the Most Holy Place, where the ark of the covenant was housed. He first needed to obtain atonement and cleansing for his own sins and those of his household. Only then was he able to cleanse the tabernacle and make an offering on behalf of the people.

Two goats were chosen. One was sacrificed for the sins of the people; the other was sent into the wilderness, carrying the sins of Israel. (For a New Testament look at the Day of Atonement, see Hebrews 9 and 10.)



## **Rules for sacrifice: chapter 17**

Sacrifices were to be offered only at the tabernacle, partly as a safeguard against sacrificing to idols. God can only be approached in the place and by the means of his own choosing (Deuteronomy 16:5-6). In the New Testament, the divinely chosen place points to Jesus Christ as the one and only way (John 14:6; Acts 4:12).

## **Sexual crimes: chapter 18**

Many of these laws are directed against the practices of Israel's neighbors. For example, marriage between those closely related by blood or by marriage was forbidden by God (verses 6-18). In Egypt, which had little marital regulation, such marriages were common.

Adultery, child sacrifice, homosexual relations and bestiality — all part of the debased religions of Canaan — were also forbidden (verses 20-30).

## **The heart of the law: chapter 19**

Verse 2 is the heart of God's moral law: "Be holy, because I am holy" (1 Peter 1:15-16). Holiness is demonstrated by our concern for others, especially the underprivileged. For example, God's instructions to "not reap to the very edges of your field" (Leviticus 19:9) taught the Israelites to reflect God's generous nature. Jesus quoted part of verse 18 as the second-greatest commandment: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39).

## Crimes deserving the death penalty: chapter 20

To have so many crimes punishable by death may seem harsh today, but these offenses were in deliberate defiance of God's holy law. Israel was instructed not to imitate the nations around them, such as the Ammonites who offered children as a burnt sacrifice to Molech (Leviticus 18:21). God had separated Israel from the nations for the all-important reason of preserving the knowledge and worship of himself as the true God.

## Rules for priests: chapters 21-22

Rules for ritual purity were particularly stringent for priests, especially for the high priest. For example, priests could not marry women defiled by prostitution (Leviticus 21:7). Studying these chapters makes it clear that God's people must be holy.

## The festivals: chapter 23

Various annual festivals and Holy Days were commanded for ancient Israel. They were holy convocations, memorials of God's great acts of salvation in history, symbols of the power of God, and types of the anticipated future fulfillment of God's plan of salvation. Paul describes them as "shadows" or pointers toward Christ, who fulfilled all the ritual symbolism (Colossians 2:16-17).

Festival	Date	Origin	Rituals
Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread Leviticus 23:4-8	14th day of the first month, Nisan (March-April)	Hebrew: Pesach; commemorates the slaying of lambs or young goats whose blood was sprinkled on the doorframes of the houses of the Israelites in Egypt (Exodus 12:1-14).	Lambs are sacrificed and eaten (Exodus 12:5-8; Deuteronomy 16:2).
	15th-21st days of Nisan	Hebrew: Chag Ha-Matsoth; observes the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt. The unleavened bread reminds them of the haste with which they left (Exodus 12:39).	Unleavened bread is eaten (Exodus 12:8; Deuteronomy 16:3).
Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) Leviticus 23:15-22	50 days after cutting the wave sheaf during Unleavened Bread; in Sivan (May-June)	Hebrew: Shabhu'oth; celebrates the firstfruits of Israel's wheat and barley harvest, as well as the ripening and gathering of early figs and grapes (Exodus 23:16; 34:22).	The priests offer two loaves made of new flour and make animal sacrifices (Leviticus 23:17-18; Numbers 28:26-31).

Feast of Trumpets Leviticus 23:23-25	First day of seventh month, Tishri (Sept.-Oct.)	Hebrew: Yom Teru'ah; marks the beginning of the most solemn month in the Hebrew calendar (Leviticus 23:24). It is also Israel's civil new year, called Rosh Hashanah (meaning "head of the year").	A day of trumpeting and special sacrifices (Numbers 29:1-6).
Day of Atonement Leviticus 23:26-32	10th of Tishri	Hebrew: Yom Kippur; reminds the Israelites of their need for cleansing and forgiveness (Numbers 29:7-11).	The Israelites confess their sins and ask for God's cleansing and forgiveness (Leviticus 16:29-34; Numbers 29:7).
Festival of Tabernacles and the Last Great Day Leviticus 23:33-43	15th-21 of Tishri	Hebrew: Chag Ha-Sukkoth; recalls Israel's nomadic life in the wilderness before entering Canaan. Also celebrates the gathering of the year's main harvest of fruit and olives (Deuteronomy 16:13-15).	The people camp out in booths (Hebrew <i>sukkoth</i> ) and offer animal sacrifices (Leviticus 23:42; Numbers 29:12-34).
	22 of Tishri	Hebrew: Sh'mini 'atsereth; encourages Israel to reflect on the meaning and significance of the annual festivals on this, the final annual Sabbath of the Hebrew festival year (Leviticus 23:36).	A special order of sacrifices as offered to God (Numbers 29:35-39).

Although God commanded these festivals for Israel, he does not command them for Christians today. See our study paper at <http://www.gci.org/law/festivals1>. Do these festivals symbolize Christian truths? See our Bible study at <http://www.gci.org/law/festivals/picture>.

## Lamps and sacred bread: chapter 24

This chapter discusses two important duties of the priests in the tabernacle: tending the ever-burning lamps and making the weekly offering of 12 loaves of bread ("shewbread," NKJV). Unlike the pagan religions that offered food to the gods, God's priests were to eat the bread themselves. This was to remind Israel of their total dependence upon God. The bread symbolizes Christ. He is the bread of God for our spiritual nourishment (John 6:32-51).

God also deals with blasphemy in this chapter (Leviticus 24:10-23). A member of the "mixed multitude" (Exodus 12:38, NKJV) was executed for blaspheming God's name.

## **The land sabbath and the jubilee: chapter 25**

Every seventh year, the land was not to be cultivated. Not only did this practice teach respect for the land God would give the Israelites, it again emphasized their dependence on God.

God also instituted the Jubilee year, or 50th year (the year following the seventh seven-year cycle). At this time, property reverted to its original owner. The Jubilee was intended to rescue those who were living in poor economic conditions, and to restore to them the means of working their way back to prosperity. This lesson should not be lost on us today. God is a giving God who also wants to see a generous attitude in us (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Both the Sabbatical and Jubilee years were designed to remind Israel that it was God who really owned the land. He also owned their time and their lives. However, there is no evidence that the Israelites ever observed these institutions.

## **Blessings and curses: chapter 26**

Pictured here are the rewards for obedience (verses 1-13) and the penalties for disobedience (verses 14-39). As you read through the chapter, you will notice that God describes the curses in more detail than the blessings. While these statements can be viewed prophetically, they must also be understood as laws of cause and effect.

God's warning to ancient Israel remains in effect today. Disobedience will bring calamity to any nation. But God will always respond to genuine repentance. For an interesting spiritual parallel, read the story of the two kinds of people in Psalm 1.

## **Vows and tithes: chapter 27**

God taught the Israelites that when they made a vow to him (verses 1-29), they must not go back on the promise even if it turned out to cost more than they expected.

Tithing (verses 30-33) is the practice of giving a tenth of one's increase to God. Tithes and offerings were commanded in the Old Testament; the New Testament does not prescribe a percentage but calls for greater generosity. (For further information, see <http://www.gci.org/law/tithing>) Tithing and giving reflect the believer's worship, faith and love for God, the source of salvation and giver of all good things (Numbers 18:20-21; 2 Corinthians 9:7).

## 20. FORM OR SUBSTANCE?

In Mesopotamian thought, the purpose of human existence was to provide the gods with the necessities and luxuries of life. Israelite worship shared many of these external forms, such as calling sacrifices “the food of their God” (Leviticus 21:6). The essence of Israelite worship, though, was quite different.

As the prophets pointed out, God could not be worshiped only externally. To honor God, the Israelites were to obey his laws, including the moral and ethical laws and the ritual laws. Simply to appear before God with sacrifices, while flouting his demands for justice, was to insult him.

God certainly did not need the sacrifices for food: “If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it. Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?” (Psalm 50:12-13). Rather, sacrifices and other types of worship were to honor God as king.

Later in Israel’s history, the prophets warned that purity of form in worship — performing the sacrificial rituals precisely as commanded — was meaningless if the worshipers failed to meet the ethical and moral responsibilities of God’s covenant and laws. When the prophets found that a focus on the *form* of worship had replaced the *substance* of worship — obedience to God’s law — they proclaimed God’s scorching judgment on Israel’s elaborate but empty rituals.

Through the prophet Amos, God warned Israel: “I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them.... But let justice



roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” (Amos 5:21-22, 24).

Although the prophets honored God’s sacrificial system, they continually warned Israel and Judah that sacrifices alone were not enough. As Isaiah proclaimed: “‘The multitude of your sacrifices — what are they to me?’ says the Lord. ‘I have more than enough of burnt offerings.... Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow’” (Isaiah 1:11, 16-17).

God was unhappy with Israel’s sacrifices. Although the people were making the traditional sacrifices, they were unfaithful to God in their hearts. Like many people today, they had come to place more faith in the rituals of their religion than in the God they worshiped. God hates worship done out of pretense or for show. If we are living sinful lives and using religion only to look respectable or feel good, God will reject what we have to offer.

We need to examine our own religious practices. Do they spring from faith in the living God? Or are we guilty of performing empty rituals, as did ancient Israel? If we are, we need to remember that God does not honor our outward behavior if our inward faith is missing. God always demands a sincere heart (Deuteronomy 10:12-16; 1 Samuel 15:22-23; Psalm 51:16-17).

## 21. TITHING IN ISRAEL

God instituted a financial system in Israel that enabled the Levitical priesthood to perform its religious functions. This system also made it possible for the Israelites to attend God's festivals, and provided for the needs of the widows, orphans and poor.

Tithing is an Old Testament practice. God accepted the tithes of Abraham and Jacob (Genesis 14:18-24; 28:20-22). Later, he used the tithing system to finance the religious and secular needs of his people, the nation of Israel (Numbers 18:21; Leviticus 27:30). Tithing continued periodically throughout the eras of the judges and of the kings of Israel and Judah. Even after the Jews were freed from captivity, God rebuked them for stealing his tithes (Malachi 3:8).

The most ancient record of anyone giving a tithe is found in Genesis 14. In a battle between various kings and armies of that day, Abram's nephew Lot was taken captive. Abram rescued him and brought back a large amount of booty from the campaign (verse 16). It was an occasion of great rejoicing.

Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand." Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything. (Genesis 14:18-20)

Tithing, in this context, acknowledged God's sovereignty and lordship over the earth. God later revealed that "the silver is mine and the gold is

mine” (Haggai 2:8). Giving God back a tenth of what is his was a way of recognizing God’s ultimate ownership of everything.

Abraham has been called the “father of the faithful.” Many Christians practice tithing as a voluntary practice, as Abraham did, as a way to enable the church to fulfill its God-given commission to preach the gospel to the world.

Tithing, in patriarchal times, was an act or expression of worship. Tithing is not again discussed in the Pentateuch until the time of Moses — with the establishment of a priesthood in Israel. Mosaic law required the Israelites to pay tithes to the Levites, who did not own land, the usual means of support (Numbers 18:21-24). The Levites, in turn, gave one tenth of what they received to the Aaronic priesthood (verses 25-32).

Although the Levites received tithes, it did not belong to them. The tithe belonged to God. It was “holy” (verse 32), sanctified for God’s use and purpose. God was simply defining how his tithe was to be used.

In the book of Deuteronomy, we find a tithe mentioned in connection with religious celebrations (Deuteronomy 12:11-14). The tithe was to be used by the people during the festival seasons of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. The custom was to travel to a central location (eventually Jerusalem) at these times. If it was impractical to bring the tithe in the form of animals or produce, the people could exchange these for money to buy food and drink at the site of the festival (Deuteronomy 14:22-26).

The tithe was designed to help the people rejoice at the festivals: “Use the silver to buy whatever you like.... Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God and rejoice” (verse 26).

God also instituted a program to help the needy, such as orphans and widows. Those who had the means were to set aside a tithe every third year (verses 28-29). It is not clear from the book of Deuteronomy whether this was the same tithe, or an additional one.

Three tithes are mentioned in the book of Tobit, part of the Apocrypha, probably written between 300-175 B.C. Regarding the tithes, Tobit says, “The first tenth part of all increase I gave to the sons of Aaron, who ministered at Jerusalem; another tenth part I sold away, and went, and spent it every year at Jerusalem; and the third I gave unto them to whom it was meet” (Tobit 1:6-8; Lancelot Brenton’s translation of the Septuagint version).

Josephus, who had been a priest, writes about how tithing was practiced in his day, near the time of the fall of Jerusalem: “Let there be taken out of your fruits a tenth, besides that which you have allotted to give to the priests and Levites. This you may indeed sell in the country, but it is to be used in

those feasts and sacrifices that are to be celebrated in the holy city” (*Antiquities of the Jews*, book 4, chapter 8, section 8).

Josephus later writes: “Besides those two tithes, which I already said you are to pay every year, the one for the Levites, the other for festivals, you are to bring every third year a third tithe to be distributed to those that want; to women also that are widows, and to children that are orphans” (section 22).

## 22. EXPLORING NUMBERS

### What's in a name?

The title of this book in the Septuagint is *Arithmoi*, which translates into English as *Numbers*. This name was probably chosen because of the census described in the first chapter of the book, in which the tribes of Israel are numbered (1:1-3).

Note how the book begins, “And the Lord spake unto Moses in the wilderness of Sinai” (1:1, KJV). The *and* illustrates the continuity between Numbers and the previous book, Leviticus.

The Hebrew title for the book of Numbers, *Bemidbar*, meaning “in the wilderness,” is taken from the first verse. Most of the book describes Israel’s 40 years of wandering in the desert wilderness between Mt. Sinai and the plains of Moab.

### Outline

The book of Numbers is a bridge between the events at Mt. Sinai (Exodus and Leviticus) and Moses’ last words to the Israelites before they entered the Promised Land (Deuteronomy).

Numbers begins with the Israelites at Mt. Sinai. The first part of the book describes their preparations to leave the region (1:1–10:10).

God had planned for the Israelites to travel directly to the Promised Land. But instead of trusting God, they feared to enter the land. Because of their lack of faith, they spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness. All those who left Egypt over the age of 20 died. Joshua and Caleb were notable exceptions because of their faithfulness (10:11–21:9).

In the last year of their wandering, the younger generation, now grown adults, arrived in the plains of Moab, east of Canaan. The events of the next few months form the subject of Numbers 21:10–33:49. Finally, Moses began to prepare the new generation of Israelites to enter the Promised Land (33:50–36:13).

Some of the more significant events of Israel's history in the book of Numbers are:

- The sending of the scouts into Canaan, the Promised Land, and their contradicting reports (13:1-33).
- The refusal of the people to enter the land, and God's subsequent judgment of them condemning the Israelites to 40 years of wandering in the wilderness (14:1-35).
- The story of Balaam and Balak illustrates the futility of opposing God's will for his people (22:1–24:25).
- The human failings of such leaders as Miriam, Aaron and even Moses (12:1-15; 20:1-13).
- The rebellion of Korah, showing that God does not allow human beings to usurp the authority of his chosen servants (16:1-50).

## How to read this book

Numbers is the fourth volume in a series of books on Israel's history. It is part of a continuous narrative stretching from Genesis through 2 Kings, and should be read as such. The book describes why the Exodus generation died in the wilderness, and why Joshua would lead a new generation of Israelites into the Promised Land.

The early chapters, which describe the Israelites' last few days at Mt. Sinai, conclude themes begun in Exodus. For example, Exodus 27 and 38 describe the design of the altar. In Numbers 7, we read of its dedication. In the middle of the book there are further instructions regarding the Levitical priesthood (18:1–19:22) and the observance of God's festivals and holy days (28:16–29:40).

The last few chapters of Numbers are a fitting introduction to Deuteronomy. They summarize what the Israelites had to do once they entered the land of Canaan.

One theme dominates the book: God keeps his covenant with his people. He is sovereign over heaven and earth, and he rules over all nations. He bound himself to Israel and he kept his agreement. Balaam, for example, shows that it was impossible to curse the people God had chosen to bless.

However, God will not compromise his holiness. In Numbers, as in Leviticus, God demands his people to be sanctified in every aspect of their lives. According to circumstances, God will warn, punish, instruct, commend

or bless his people. When the Israelites obeyed, God blessed them; when they disobeyed, God was fair to punish them.

Although Israel's record in the wilderness was far from perfect, God continued his covenant relationship with them. He was always their guide and protector, even as Jesus Christ is ours today (Hebrews 13:8).

Numbers is encouraging for Christians because it reminds us that, in spite of our weaknesses and failures, God remains faithful to his purpose for us, even when we, like the Israelites, are stubborn and self-centered (2 Corinthians 8:6).

## Learning about God

One of the most important aspects of God's character revealed in Numbers is his loyalty to his people. On almost every occasion when their faith was challenged, the Israelites lost courage and complained bitterly. Yet God continued to protect and lead them, even when they begged to return to slavery in Egypt (1:18-20; 14:1-4).

However, Numbers also shows us there are some things God will not tolerate. One is rebellion. The book records seven major rebellions (11:1-35; 12:1-15; 14:1-10; 14:41-45; 16:1-50; 20:1-13; 21:4-6). Israel saw that even though God was merciful, he would eventually punish those who consistently challenged his leadership (14:20-23).

Jesus Christ appears both metaphorically and prophetically in Numbers. Twice during the years in the wilderness, God supplied water miraculously from a rock (Exodus 17; Numbers 20). The apostle Paul understood these events as symbolizing Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 10:1-4), a Sustainer who never fails his people (John 4:13).

The coming Messiah is also prophesied by Balaam in Numbers 24:1: "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel." Jesus Christ is the star and scepter mentioned in this verse, according to the witness of the New Testament. (See, for example, Matthew 2:2 and Revelation 22:16.)

## Other topics

**Organization:** God values order (1 Corinthians 14:33, 40). He numbered the people, arranged the camp and delineated the boundaries of Canaan (Numbers 1-4; 34).

**Unbelief:** Israel's journey between Mt. Sinai and Kadesh-barnea was marred by grumbling. It is the story of repeated murmurings against God and of the punishments that followed. There are recurring warnings against unbelief.

**Rebellion:** When Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses, God strongly

rebuked them (12:1-15). Later, Korah, Dathan and Abiram went further, and openly rebelled against Moses (16:1-40). God made the earth open up and swallow them. God does not tolerate rebellion against his chosen servants.

**Wandering:** God taught this stubborn and ungrateful people an important lesson: “But you – your bodies will fall in this desert... For forty years – one year for each of the forty days you explored the land – you will suffer for your sins” (14:32, 34).

**Festivals and holy days:** God’s festivals and holy days are again listed. The narrative in Numbers concentrates on the special sacrifices given on these days (28:16–29:40).

## What this book means for you

The apostle Paul tells us what we should learn from Numbers. In speaking of the Israelites, he says, “God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert” (1 Corinthians 10:5). Paul went on to say, “These things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did” (verse 6).

In reading the tragic story of Israel’s unbelief, it would be easy to conclude that Numbers serves only as a warning. But the book has many practical and positive lessons that we can apply in our lives today.

There are times when we all feel that we are wandering in a spiritual wilderness, trying to find our way across an emotional desert. During such times, we can derive great comfort from the book of Numbers.

Although rebellion, self-pity and death fill its pages, Numbers is also a book of hope. It is the story of the ever-faithful God of Israel and his ability to salvage victory out of what often appeared to be terrible defeat. Christians should be encouraged by Numbers, for here we see God’s grace and power overcoming Israel’s lack of faith.

However, before we condemn the frailties of the unstable and double-minded Israelites, do we see a mirror image of ourselves in our Christian struggles? We, too, need to move away from an overly confident reliance on self, and humbly confess to God our tendency to rebel and complain against him. When we do, Numbers reassures us that God is more than equal to any crisis, problem or difficulty that we may encounter as we try to live a Christian life.

The wilderness is a place of testing, where God teaches and trains us. The lessons he taught the Israelites during their 40 years of wandering are the same kind of lessons he wants us to learn today. As he was preparing them, so he is moving us into our promised land – the kingdom of God.



## **23. NUMBERS: LIFE AS A PILGRIMAGE**

### **Moses numbers the tribes: chapters 1–2**

One month after setting up the tabernacle, Moses and Aaron conducted a census. The purpose was to number all men over 20 who qualified for military service. God exempted the Levites because of their religious obligations to the community. The camp was arranged around the tabernacle, showing that the worship of God was central to the nation's existence. In the New Testament era, members would be placed in the body, with Christ as the head (1 Corinthians 12).

When the Israelites moved, the three eastern tribes, headed by Judah, led the way. This same rectangular formation was popular in Egyptian warfare strategy. Ramses II, for example, used it in his Syrian campaign (circa 1279 B.C.). Perhaps God was allowing Moses to make good use of the military training he had received in Egypt.

“So the Israelites did everything the Lord commanded Moses; that is the way they encamped under their standards, and that is the way they set out, each with his clan and family” (Numbers 2:34).

### **The Levites commissioned: chapter 3**

Earlier, God had set apart Israel's firstborn (Exodus 12). Now, God set apart the Levites as “substitutes for all the firstborn” (Numbers 3:12, New Revised Standard Version). The idea of substitutionary atonement was central to God's people ever since God substituted a sacrificial ram for Abraham's son, Isaac (Genesis 22:13). It was reiterated through the Passover lamb in the Israelites' escape from Egypt (Exodus 12) and repeated in their

regular sacrifices (Leviticus 4). It was designed by God to foreshadow the role of his firstborn Son, Jesus Christ (Mark 10:45).

### **Duties of Levitical families: chapter 4**

This Levitical census listed all men between 30 and 50 eligible for service in the tabernacle. The Kohathites, Gershonites and Merarites were appointed to guard and transport the holy things of God through the wilderness.

### **Laws of purity: chapter 5**

Chapter 5 illustrates the need for the newly organized nation to be pure. For example, isolation and observation were required in all suspected cases of leprosy. [See commentary on Leviticus 13–14.]

The principle of restitution in God's law (verses 5-10; Luke 19:8) was unique among ancient law codes. It demonstrates an important Christian principle: When we have wronged others, we should look for ways to set matters right.

Trials by ordeal were common in the ancient world. Such trials in other cultures utilized magic and sorcery. The test for adultery, however, safeguarded a wife from an unjust accusation by her husband (Numbers 5:11-31). It served to remove suspicion and doubt. Some scholars feel that the judgment of guilt described here caused the loss of capacity to bear children. There is no biblical record of such a test ever being used.

### **The Nazirite vow: chapter 6**

This special vow was a voluntary dedication to God. Usually, the vow was for a limited time, but Samson was set apart as a Nazirite for life. Samuel and John the Baptist may also have been Nazirites.

#### **Requirements for a Nazirite**

- Abstinence from wine or fermented drink, symbolic of the natural pleasures of life (Psalm 104:15).
- Uncut hair, usually a disgrace for men (1 Corinthians 11:14), was the visible sign of the Nazirite's willingness to bear disgrace for God.
- Special care to avoid defilement through contact with a dead body.

## **Freewill offerings: chapter 7**

The princes of the tribes brought freewill offerings for the tabernacle and the dedication of the altar. Verses 84-88 give the total offering as 2,400 silver shekels, 120 gold shekels and 252 sacrificial animals.

Giving is an important part of worship, and God loves a cheerful giver (Hebrews 13:15-16; 2 Corinthians 9:6-8). The voice from the mercy seat (Numbers 7:89, NKJV) demonstrated God's pleasure for Israel's generosity. This fulfilled God's promise recorded in Exodus 25:22.

## **Purification of the Levites: chapter 8**

Vital symbolism is presented in this chapter. The dedication of the Levites prefigures our consecration to God for his service (Romans 12:1-2). The Levites belonged to God. They dedicated themselves, not in order to become his, but because they were his. We, too, are God's own children, dedicating our lives to him because we are his (1 John 3:2-3).

## **The second Passover: chapter 9:1-14**

God instructed Israel to observe the Passover. Those who missed it for legitimate reasons, such as being unclean or away on a journey, were permitted to observe a Passover one month later. A "second chance" is not given for any other festival; this indicates the importance of the Passover for the Israelite community.

## **God's guidance: chapter 9:15-23**

God led his people with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. In the wilderness of this world of sin, Christians need the guidance of God's Holy Spirit by day and by night (Romans 8:9-14).

## **The silver trumpets: chapter 10:1-10**

These trumpets were used for summoning the Israelites and breaking up camp. They announced God's feast days and new months, and they sounded the alarm in times of war. Long trumpets like these were common in Egypt. Some were discovered in the funeral chamber of Tutankhamen (circa 1333-1323 B.C.).

## **The wilderness march: chapter 10:11-36**

As you read this story, bear in mind that, while the march through the wilderness was necessary, the wandering was not. Israel could have traveled from Mt. Sinai to Canaan in about two weeks. But, because of their disobedience, they wandered in the wilderness 40 years.

## Complaints about food: chapter 11

Murmuring broke out in the camp: “The people complained” (verse 1). The Israelites had welcomed the delicious manna at first, but now they were tired of the monotonous daily rations. They craved the delicacies of Egypt: fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic (verse 5).

God answered the people’s demand for meat by showering them with more quail than they could eat. The rebellious attitude that lay behind their discontent was punished with a plague.

## Moses’ leadership challenged: chapter 12

Miriam and Aaron began to gossip about Moses. The Hebrew verb form here, *vatdabber*, is feminine singular, implying that Miriam led in this criticism. The pretext used was Moses’ marriage to a foreign woman, but the real cause was envy of Moses’ position and authority. Envy is a damaging emotion (Proverbs 14:30), and Miriam’s action delayed the progress of Israel’s journey for seven days (Numbers 12:15).

## Exploring Canaan: chapters 13-14

Deuteronomy 1:19-25 explains that at this point Moses wanted to go straight on into the Promised Land. In fact, he challenged Israel to take possession of it. But the people suggested that he send scouts ahead to check out the territory. Moses consented to the plan (verses 21-23).

“When they reached the Valley of Eshcol, they cut off a branch bearing a single cluster of grapes. Two of them carried it on a pole between them” (Numbers 13:23).



The land was truly all God said it was (Numbers 13:26-27). Joshua and Caleb, two of the scouts, were eager for the Israelites to take possession of the land God had promised them. But the Israelites listened to the 10 faithless scouts with their tales about the great walled cities and the giants of Anak. God’s perspective, as reported by Joshua and Caleb, was forgotten. Within a few miles of their goal, Israel had again given up.

God’s anger was stirred once more, and only Moses’ intervention saved the nation from total destruction (Numbers 14:13-19). But Israel’s punishment for this act of rebellion was severe: “But you — your bodies will fall in this desert. Your children will be shepherds here for forty years...one

year for each of the forty days you explored the land” (verses 32-34).

### **Additional offerings: chapter 15**

Although most of the people would eventually die in the wilderness, God would bring the next generation into the Promised Land. They were to make additional offerings once in the land (verses 1-31).

### **Korah’s rebellion: chapter 16**

“Korah’s rebellion” (Jude 11) was a rejection of Moses’ authority as God’s chosen spokesman. Korah unfairly criticized Aaron’s leadership of the priesthood, while Dathan and Abiram blamed Moses for failing to bring Israel into the Promised Land. Their real rebellion, though, was against God (Numbers 16:11).

God demonstrated that Moses and Aaron were his servants, and punished the rebels: “And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them, with their households and all Korah’s men and all their possessions. They went down alive into the grave, with everything they owned; the earth closed over them, and they perished and were gone from the community” (verses 32-33).

### **Aaron’s staff: chapter 17**

Korah had publicly ridiculed the priesthood. With the miracle of Aaron’s budding staff (verse 8), God once again confirmed through whom he was working. The staff was placed as a memorial inside the ark of the covenant (Hebrews 9:4).

### **The Levitical priesthood: chapter 18**

The Levites and priests were not allowed to inherit rural land. This was to prevent the growth of a wealthy priestly class such as those in Egypt and other nations around Israel. God was the inheritance of the Levites and priests. He gave the Levites the tithes of the nation and they, in turn, gave one tenth to the priests (verses 24-28).

### **The red heifer: chapter 19**

The detailed cleansing process described here should remind us of the need to lead a spiritually clean life. If one is to be a “vessel for honor,” one must be purged from sin (2 Timothy 2:21, NKJV).

### **Death of Aaron and Miriam: chapter 20**

Death dominates this chapter. It opens with the death of Miriam and closes with the death of her brother Aaron. Miriam, Aaron and Moses all died in the same year (verses 25-26; 33:38; Deuteronomy 34:5-8).

Thirty-eight years had passed since Numbers 13:1. These long years of wandering were filled with failure and death (Amos 5:25-26; Acts 7:42-43; 1 Corinthians 10:1-10). Yet God remained loyal to this sinful nation: “The Lord your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He has watched over your journey through this vast desert. These forty years the Lord your God has been with you, and you have not lacked anything” (Deuteronomy 2:7).

Moses’ sin (Numbers 20:2-13) shows how one of God’s greatest servants, even after a long life of obedience to God, stumbled. He disobeyed God. He should have spoken to the rock, not struck it. Though God called Moses the most humble man on earth (Numbers 12:3), in this instance Moses was guilty of self-exaltation, claiming credit and assuming authority that was not his. As a result of this sin of broken faith, God decreed that Moses would not enter the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 32:51-52).

## **The bronze snake: chapter 21**

God gave the Israelites a great victory over the Canaanite king of Arad (verses 1-3). But the celebration was short-lived and the people continued to complain. God punished this rebellion with a plague of poisonous snakes (1 Corinthians 10:9).

At God’s command, Moses constructed a bronze snake and hung it on a pole. Those bitten by poisonous snakes were told to look at the bronze snake in order to be healed. The bronze snake prefigured our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who was lifted up for us on the cross (John 3:14-15).

Satan had appeared as a serpent when he deceived Adam and Eve. Subsequently, the serpent became an illustration in nature of the effects of sin. The bronze snake on the pole foreshadowed sin judged on the cross of Christ. The Israelites, looking to the bronze snake for healing of their snake bites (Numbers 21:8-9), typified the Christian faith in the crucifixion of Christ for spiritual healing of the venom of sin (Romans 4:24-25). The bronze snake later became an object of idolatry in Israel until King Hezekiah destroyed it around 700 B.C. (2 Kings 18:4).

## **Balak and Balaam: chapters 22-24**

With Israel camped on his border, Balak, king of Moab, asked Balaam, prophet and diviner, for help. Balak wanted Balaam to come and curse Israel. At that time, it was a routine business arrangement for a king to hire a prophet to try to influence events by pronouncing blessings and curses.

Balaam responded to Balak’s offer of a reward. However, God turned the tables on Balak and used Balaam initially to bless Israel. Balaam was a mercenary prophet who exploited others. The Bible calls such unscrupulous greed “the way of Balaam” (2 Peter 2:15) and “Balaam’s error” (Jude 11).

## **The doctrine of Balaam: chapter 25**

It was on Balaam's advice that the Moabite women seduced the men of Israel at Peor. Balaam supposed that a righteous God would curse the people for sinning. Eventually, God took Balaam's life for this sedition (verses 1-18; 31:8, 16; Joshua 13:22).

The local deity at Peor, "Baal" (meaning "master"), became a proper name for the great fertility god of the Canaanites. The events described in this chapter illustrate the intoxicating, but ultimately deadly, blend of sexual and religious practices that characterized the Canaanite forms of worship. When the Israelites entered Canaan, they succumbed to these ungodly rituals and broke their covenant with God.

## **The second census: chapter 26**

As Israel was about to enter the Promised Land, God took another census. This new revision of the military lists provided figures for a more equitable division of the land by the drawing of lots.

## **Women's inheritance: chapter 27:1-11**

In other ancient Near Eastern countries, women could not normally inherit property and land. But in Israel God permitted brotherless daughters to do so if they married within their own tribe (Numbers 36:8).

## **Joshua anointed: chapter 27:12-23**

Moses showed humility and selflessness in thinking of the interests of God's people (verses 15-17), even though details about his own death and the reason for it had been explained by God (verses 12-14).

God then invested authority in Joshua to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land (verses 18-20). Joshua had been Moses' chief assistant for many years (Exodus 17:9; 24:13; 33:11; Numbers 11:28; 14:6-9). Moses transferred the mantle of leadership to his faithful attendant and friend (Deuteronomy 34:9).

"The Lord said to Moses, "Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay your hand on him. Have him stand before Eleazar the priest and the entire assembly and commission him in their presence. Give him some of your authority so the whole Israelite community will obey him"" (Numbers 27:18-20).

## **Vows and public worship: chapters 28-30**

Chapters 28 and 29 discuss how Israel was to worship God after they had

entered the Promised Land. In chapter 29, prominence is given to the Feast of Tabernacles and its offerings. (There are 23 verses here about Tabernacles, but only 11 verses are devoted to this Feast in Leviticus 23:33-43.)

Chapter 30 explains that men in Israel were bound by vows of any kind (verses 1-2). The terms under which vows made by women were binding are given in verses 3-15. [Compare this chapter with Leviticus 27.]

### **Vengeance on Midian: chapter 31**

The Midianites were responsible for enticing Israel into Baal worship (Numbers 25:1-3). God's vengeance on Midian, "reiterates that it is important for God's people to know how to deal with sin. The seducing Midianites...show sin's vicious and virulent nature. God deals with sin ruthlessly and calls His people to deal with it similarly in their own personal lives" (*The Spirit-Filled Life Bible*, NKJV, p. 251).

### **The Transjordan tribes: chapter 32**

Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh requested that their inheritance be east of the Jordan River (verses 1-5), just outside the eastern boundary of Canaan (Numbers 34:12). It is possible that by asking for territory outside of Canaan, these tribes showed a lack of faith and a desire to avoid responsibility in the upcoming war effort.

Moses' rebuke reminded the tribes of the terrible consequences of similar unbelief that had been shown at Kadesh, when the scouts were sent out. He eventually accepted their compromise: They would fight alongside their brothers in Canaan before settling down (Numbers 32:16-24).

### **Travelogue of Israel: chapter 33**

This retrospective chapter summarizes Israel's journey from Egypt to Canaan. God then gave directions to exterminate the Canaanites. Idolatry was to be rooted out. God warned, "If you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land, those you allow to remain will become barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides" (verse 55). As you can read in the books of Joshua and Judges, this is exactly what happened. The Israelites did not drive out the Canaanites, and soon they began to pick up their pagan religious beliefs and practices.

Israel's failure has important implications for Christians today.

Just as the Israelites were hesitant to clear out all the wicked people, we are sometimes hesitant to clear out all the sin in our lives.... But Hebrews 12:1, 2 tells us to throw off "the sin that so easily entangles" us. We all have "idols" we don't want to let go of (a bad habit, an



unhealthy relationship, a certain life-style). If we allow these idols to dominate us, they will cause serious problems later. (*Life Application Bible*, NIV, commentary on Numbers 33:55)

### **Tribal boundaries: chapter 34**

The tribal boundaries of the Promised Land were determined by sacred lot. No tribe had absolute claim to its own land. Every inheritance was a gift from God.

### **Levitical cities and cities of refuge: chapter 35**

Forty-eight Levitical cities are listed (verses 1-8). These were set apart because the Levites were not entitled to the usual tribal inheritance (Leviticus 25:32-34; Joshua 21; 1 Chronicles 6:54-81).

The six cities of refuge, or asylum, are also described (Numbers 35:6-34; Deuteronomy 4:41-43; 19:1-13). If a person was accidentally responsible for another's death, a relative of the victim ("avenger of blood") could hunt down and execute the murderer ("the law of blood revenge"). (There was no police force.) The cities of refuge put a control on this practice by protecting the alleged murderer from the avenger of blood. By creating these cities of refuge, God was making allowance for involuntary manslaughter (Numbers 35:22-28). The city assembly judged whether the killing was accidental (manslaughter) or intentional (murder).

### **Laws protecting female inheritance: chapter 36**

We return again to the question of inheritance. The tribe of Manasseh requested that a tribal inheritance, involving five women, be kept within their tribe. Moses approved this request.

Resolving the question of inheritance is a fitting way to end the book of Numbers. One generation of Israelites had marred its inheritance. But God justified their children, even without their knowledge. He was determined to fulfill his plan by establishing the next generation of the children of Israel in the land he had promised their father Abraham (Genesis 15:18-21).

## 24. MIRIAM: FIRST LADY OF THE EXODUS

By Sheila Graham

“Great queen of Egypt, I believe we can all see that the Hebrew child will not accept nourishment from those not related to him. Why not bring a woman of his own race to feed him?”

In her excitement over finding the beautiful child in the basket among the reeds of the Nile River, the princess had not noticed a young onlooker.

“Please forgive me for my boldness, but I know of a Hebrew woman who has just lost a baby. Your newfound child might allow her to feed him. If her majesty pleases, I would be happy to bring the Hebrew woman to you.”

“You speak well for a child of your age,” said the princess. “What is your name?”

“Miriam,” she said.

“Well, Miriam, bring the woman of whom you speak — and quickly, demanded the princess, now ready to accept whatever help she could get to quiet the hungry baby Moses.

Miriam’s forthright courage, her faith and her ability to think and take decisive action, even as a youth, help us to understand why God chose her, along with her brothers, Moses and Aaron, to lead Israel out of Egypt: “I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam” (Micah 6:4).

The Bible doesn’t tell us when God began to use Miriam as a prophetess. The first biblical description of her in this role occurs after God miraculously stopped the pursuing Egyptian army at the Red Sea.

According to Josephus, Miriam was married to Hur of the tribe of Judah

— the same Hur who, along with Aaron, supported Moses’ arms in Israel’s battle with the Amalekites (Exodus 17:11-13).

As part of this influential family, Miriam was there when Moses, Aaron, Hur and various other family members discussed Israel’s problems, and developed strategies to solve them. As a prophetess and the oldest member of the family, her opinion was valued. She was accustomed to being approached for her advice and was revered as the first lady of Israel.



“Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing. Miriam sang to them: “Sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea” (Exodus 15:20-21).

Compared to some other ancient cultures, women in early Israelite history enjoyed many freedoms. A woman, whether married or single, could appear without a veil. She could travel about alone, and meet and talk with men publicly.

Yet, in spite of her prominence, Miriam, and her brother Aaron, both began to fear their influence was waning. Out of jealousy, they began to gossip about Moses’ marriage to an Ethiopian woman: “Has the Lord spoken only through Moses?... Hasn’t he also spoken through us?” (Numbers 12:2).

God heard what Miriam and Aaron said about Moses, and God was not pleased. God knew that it was not so much Moses’ marriage, as Miriam and Aaron’s envy of their younger brother’s authority over them, that underlay their criticism.

Miriam and Aaron did not fear Moses’ reprisal. After all, their brother usually did not defend himself against reproaches. Hadn’t he always listened patiently to the endless complaints of Israel? Miriam and Aaron knew that Moses was long-suffering and humble — perhaps in their judgment, a little too much so.

God, however, did not view what had happened in the same way as Miriam and Aaron. He saw their presumptuous attack, at Miriam’s instigation, against his chosen leader. If they wanted God’s attention, they now fully had it. God commanded: “Come out to the Tent of Meeting, all three of you” (verse 4).

Reminding Miriam of his special relationship with Moses, God said:

When a prophet of the Lord is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses.... With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? (verses 6-8).

When the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, signifying that God had departed, Aaron sheepishly looked over at Miriam. Recoiling in horror at the sight of his sister's pasty-white scaly skin, he must have quickly looked at his own hands and arms as well. No, only Miriam was leprous.

Aaron's tone and approach toward Moses were now remarkably changed: "Please my lord, do not hold against us the sin we have so foolishly committed. Do not let her be like a stillborn infant coming from its mother's womb with its flesh half eaten away" (verses 11-12).

Moses didn't have to be persuaded further. He fervently cried out: "O God, please heal her!" (verse 13). God agreed to do so, but not immediately. Miriam was shut out of the camp for seven days before God removed her humiliating punishment.

We read little more about Miriam in the annals of the Bible. According to Josephus, however, Miriam and Hur were the grandparents of Bezalel, whom God commissioned as the chief craftsman and builder of the tabernacle and its furniture in the wilderness (Exodus 31:2-11; 35:30; 38:22).

Hur was also father of three sons who founded the towns of Kiriath Jearim, Bethlehem and Beth Gader (1 Chronicles 2:20, 50-51).

Miriam went on to travel with Moses and Aaron and the Israelites for almost 40 years in the desert. She died shortly before Aaron, near the end of Israel's wanderings, at Kadesh (Numbers 20:1). Like her brothers, Miriam did not enter the Promised Land, and was buried in the wilderness. Thus ended the life of this talented woman of courage, faith and firm resolve, who, alongside Moses and Aaron, rejoiced in the triumphs and suffered the trials and dangers of God's calling in the wilderness of Sinai.

As with the many other heroes of the Bible, Miriam's strengths and weaknesses were recorded for our education, inspiration and encouragement.

## 25. EXPLORING DEUTERONOMY

### What's in a name?

The name *Deuteronomy* comes from the Septuagint title *Deuteronomion*, which means “second law.” The title is apt, since Deuteronomy is a second telling of the law. Much of what it says repeats what is said in the previous four books.

The book begins, “These are the words Moses spoke to all Israel” (1:1). The Hebrew title *‘elleh badbharim* means “these are the words.” Toward the end of the 40th and last year of the Israelites’ wanderings in the wilderness, Moses spoke to them one last time. Deuteronomy consists of “the words Moses spoke to all Israel” at that time.

The book of Deuteronomy plays an important part in the Hebrew canon. The last book of the law or Pentateuch, it summarizes the contents of the first four books (sometimes called the Tetrateuch by scholars) and forms a link between them and the historical books from Joshua through 2 Kings. Deuteronomy is also one of the books most often quoted in the New Testament. For example, Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy to refute the devil’s temptations (Matthew 4).

### Outline

After an introduction (1:1-5), Deuteronomy consists of three addresses by Moses to the children of Israel, followed by an epilogue describing Moses’ last acts. In the first address (1:6 – 4:43), Moses reminds the Israelites how their lack of faith resulted in 40 years of wandering in the desert.

The second address is the longest. It forms the heart of the book (4:44–

28:68). Most of this address is a repetition of various stipulations contained in the previous three books (4:44–26:19). It concludes by describing the blessings God would shower upon Israel if the people obeyed him – and the curses that would result from their disobedience (27:1–28:68).

Moses' third address is essentially a restatement of what the covenant meant (29:1–30:20). This address is closely linked to the last two chapters of the previous address, since both sections present the covenant in terms of blessings and curses.

The epilogue (31:1–34:12) records Joshua's appointment as Moses' successor, the song of Moses (which declares God's greatness), Moses' blessing on the various tribes of Israel and the account of Moses' death and burial.

## How to read this book

Deuteronomy is a renewal of the covenant between God and Israel. The organization of Deuteronomy follows the usual form of vassal treaties of the time. These treaties were agreements between an overlord, or suzerain (God, in this case), and a lesser lord, or vassal nation (Israel). Deuteronomy, like other ancient treaties, includes

- a preamble identifying the suzerain (1:1-5),
- a historical prologue recounting how the suzerain has helped the vassal (1:6–3:29),
- a list of stipulations for the vassal to do (4:1- 26:19),
- a command to place the treaty in the vassal's center of worship (31:9, 24-26),
- a call to read the treaty publicly (31:10-13),
- a list of witnesses to the treaty (31:16–32:47) and
- lists of blessings for keeping the covenant and curses for breaking it (28:1-68).

By delineating the terms of the treaty so carefully, God made sure the Israelites would be without excuse if they broke the covenant.

On the theological level, Deuteronomy should also be read as the background to the books of Joshua through 2 Kings. Deuteronomy outlines what would happen to the Israelites if they obeyed God, and what would happen if they disobeyed. Generally, the Israelites disobeyed, and experienced unpleasant results. As described in 2 Kings, this eventually led to the Israelites losing the land God had given them.

## Learning about God

Deuteronomy 6:4 is the key expression of one of the Bible's most

fundamental truths. Moses declared, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” This concept of monotheism, the belief that there is only one God, is foundational to three of the world’s major religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This verse begins the passage known to the Jews as the *shema*, after its initial word, “Hear.”

The next verse is equally important: “Love the Lord your God with all your soul and with all your strength” (6:5). Jesus acknowledged this verse as the great commandment of the law. It shows that God expects us to put him first in our lives. God is a jealous God (6:15). Deuteronomy particularly warns against the sin of idolatry.

Deuteronomy also teaches us more about the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Moses foretold of another prophet who would be like him (18:15-19). The New Testament identifies Jesus Christ as the prophet of whom Moses spoke. The apostle Peter, in his sermon on the day of Pentecost, quotes this prophecy as being fulfilled in Christ (Acts 3:22-23; see also John 1:45; Acts 7:37).

As Moses was the mediator of the old covenant, so Christ was for the new: “The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). The law of Moses points toward Jesus Christ. Jesus told the Jews of his day, “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?” (John 5:46-47).

## Other topics

**The Ten Commandments:** Moses reminded the Israelites that God had given them the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai (5:1-21). “These are the commandments the Lord proclaimed in a loud voice to your whole assembly there on the mountain from out of the fire, the cloud and, the deep darkness; and he added nothing more. Then he wrote them on two stone tablets and gave them to me” (5:22).

**Covenants:** Moses explained clearly to the people the terms of their covenant with God and how this covenant would affect their life in the Promised Land. This theme permeates the entire book of Deuteronomy and is summarized in chapters 29–30.

**Tithing:** Two tithes are mentioned in Deuteronomy. A tithe was used to help everyone rejoice at God’s annual festivals (12:4-22; 14:22-27). In every third agricultural year, a tithe was used to help the needs of Levites, widows, orphans and the poor (14:28-29; 26:12-15). Since the land was allowed to rest every seventh year (Lev. 25:1-7), this tithe would have applied every third and sixth year of a seven-year cycle.

**Reminders of holiness:** As the Israelites were about to enter the

Promised Land, Moses restated a number of laws that emphasized the people's need to keep themselves holy. "For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people" (7:6). The laws concerned which meats the people could eat (14:3-21), laws regulating ritual cleanliness and proper waste disposal (23:9-14), instructions for segregation of certain diseases (24:8-9) and even laws regarding clothing (22:5, 11-12).

**Festivals and holy days:** The three festival seasons – Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles – are again described and commanded to be observed as joyous celebrations (16:1-17). God also commanded the people to give offerings at these times (16:16-17).

### **What this book means for you**

In Deuteronomy, Moses recalled how God had saved and protected Israel. In light of this, he challenged the Israelites to rededicate their lives to God. Similarly, Christians should remember how God has saved them through his Son, Jesus Christ (John 3:16). Just as the Israelites observed festivals that reminded them of their rescue from slavery, so Christians observe memorials of what Jesus did for our salvation.

Moses also reminded this new generation of Israelites of their covenant with God. We, too, need to keep our relationship with God and Christ always fresh in our minds.

God's covenant required that the people choose the path of obedience to him. Obedience to God would result in blessings; rebellion would bring curses (Deuteronomy 28). Today, obedience to the gospel involves a new, and far greater, covenant relationship with God (Acts 5:32; Hebrews 8:6).

The wide range of laws in Deuteronomy shows that all aspects of life were to be regulated for the good of the people. God is concerned with every area of our lives, too. He wants us to love him and our fellow human beings.

Another of Deuteronomy's key themes is stated at the beginning: "Go in and take possession of the land that the Lord swore he would give to your fathers...and to their descendants after them" (1:8). Like the Israelites, Christians have a promised land – the kingdom of God. It is God's good pleasure to give you eternal life (Luke 12:32). In all your pursuits, he wants you to seek first his kingdom (Matthew 6:33). By God's grace, through faith in his Son, Jesus Christ, we enter his kingdom. "The Father...has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves" (Colossians 1:12-13).



## 26. DEUTERONOMY: GOD'S PEOPLE CHALLENGED

### Outline of Deuteronomy

1. Introduction (1:1-5)
2. Historical prologue (1:6–4:43)
3. Stipulations (4:44–26:19)
4. Blessings and curses (27:1–30:20)
5. Succession arrangements and public readings (31:1–34:12)



The outline of the book follows a specific pattern used for treaties in the region, which contained five main sections.

### Introduction: chapter 1:1-5

Deuteronomy records Moses' farewell address to Israel on the plains of Moab. Moses rehearsed God's law to the new generation of Israelites to prepare them for life in the Promised Land, which they were about to enter. We are reminded that the Israelites spent 40 years on a journey that should have lasted 11 days (verse 2). "The journey from Jebel Musa (traditional site of Mt Sinai/Horeb)...to Kadesh [an oasis on the border of Canaan]...has recently been shown to take just this time" (*Eerdmans' Handbook to the Bible*, p. 195).

### From Sinai to Kadesh: chapter 1:6-46

Moses reminded the people why God had condemned them to 40 years

of wandering in the wilderness. He highlighted the story of the scouts and Israel's lack of faith (verses 19-46). [See commentary on Numbers 13-14.]

## **Edom, Moab and Ammon: chapter 2**

In this chapter, we learn about God's concern in protecting national rights (verses 2-19), God's insistence on obedience (verses 2-37), God's care for his people (verse 7) and God's blessing and protection (verses 7, 25, 33).

The generosity shown to the Edomites (descendants of Esau), Moabites and Ammonites (descendants of Lot — Genesis 19:36-38), because of kinship, was typical of patriarchal times. God gave specific lands to these peoples (Deuteronomy 2:4-5, 9, 19). Israel was to respect these God-given territorial boundaries (verses 26-37).

## **War against Og: chapter 3**

Og's territory was part of the Amorite kingdom. Bashan, famous for its cattle, was an inviting destination for the tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh. [See Numbers 32.]

## **A call to obedience: chapter 4:1-43**

Moses reminded Israel of the blessings that result from obeying God: "The Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other. Keep his decrees and commands, which I am giving you today, so that it may go well with you and your children after you and that you may live long in the land the Lord your God gives you for all time" (verses 39-40).

Moses also designated three cities on the east side of the Jordan River as cities of refuge. These protected a suspected murderer from the law of blood revenge. [See Numbers 35.]

<b>Spiritual Lessons</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loyalty to God (verse 4).</li> <li>• Uniqueness in being God's chosen people (verses 6-8, 32-35).</li> <li>• Responsiveness to God's commands (verses 9, 23, 40).</li> <li>• Disobedience to God results in suffering (verses 25-30).</li> <li>• Obedience to God results in blessings (verses 1-2, 40).</li> </ul>

## Rehearsal of the Law: chapters 4:44-5:33

Moses reviewed the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17). These express the Israelites' duties to God and neighbor. Together with the "judgments" governing the daily life of Israel (Exodus 20:22-24:18), and the "ordinances" regulating Israel's worship of God (Exodus 25:1-31:18), they formed "the Law" (Matthew 5:17-18), or Mosaic Covenant.

## The Great Law: chapter 6

Verse 4 begins one of the most significant passages for orthodox Jews, who call it the *sh'ma*, after the first word, "Hear." Jews have carried out verses 6-9 literally, writing these words on parchment and binding them in little boxes on their foreheads and hands. These boxes were later called phylacteries (Matthew 23:5; see also Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*, book 4, Chapter 8, section 13).

This command, however, was not intended to be a ritual requirement, but a vital spiritual reality in the life of every believer. Jesus summed up the whole law in the words of Deuteronomy 6:5: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart [or mind] and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Matthew 22:37-40).

In this important chapter, God spoke about Israel's new life in the Promised Land.

Israel's New Life
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purpose of the new life (verses 1-3, 24).</li> <li>• Principle of the new life (verses 4-5).</li> <li>• Plan of the new life (verses 6-9).</li> <li>• Peril of the new life (verses 10-12).</li> </ul>

Moses explained the rationale behind these guidelines: "The Lord commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the Lord our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today" (verse 24).

## Moses' warning: chapters 7-10

Moses now turned to the task at hand. The Israelites would soon be living near Canaanite tribes, and they had to take extra care to obey God, separating themselves from sin. The idolatrous Canaanites were to be exterminated because their wicked ways would corrupt the Israelites. The Ugaritic religious texts, discovered between 1929-37 at Ras Shamra (ancient Ugarit) on the coast of northern Syria, confirm the depraved religious practices of the

Canaanites around 1400 B.C.

Moses predicted that God would give the Israelites victory and prosperity in their new homeland (Deuteronomy 8:7; 9:3). But such blessings would bring dangers. Israel could become proud and be tempted to forget God, not giving him the credit for the success achieved with his help (Deuteronomy 8:10-20; 9:1-29).

In an effort to prevent this, Moses encouraged the Israelites to remember their past:

- “Remember well what the Lord your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt” (7:18).
- “Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands” (8:2).
- “Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day” (8:11).
- “Remember this and never forget how you provoked the Lord your God to anger in the desert. From the day you left Egypt until you arrived here, you have been rebellious against the Lord” (9:7).

Israel was supposed to remember God’s love in order to remain humble and faithful as his chosen people (Deuteronomy 10).

## **Love and obey God: chapter 11**

“Obedience,” a key word in Deuteronomy, is further explained. Israel’s supreme duty was to love God and to show that love by keeping the law (verses 1, 13-14).

## **Canaanite idols to be destroyed: chapter 12**

God commanded Israel to destroy all Canaanite centers of idolatry. Israel was not to use them for worship. God told the Israelites: “You are to seek the place the Lord your God will choose...to put his Name.... To that place you must go” (verse 5; see also verses 15-32).

God also gave commands concerning tithes, offerings and diet. Meat had not been part of Israel’s daily diet in the wilderness, but would be plentiful in Canaan. However, God cautioned them: “But be sure you do not eat the blood, because the blood is the life, and you must not eat the life with the meat” (verse 23).

## **False prophets: chapter 13**

False prophets were to be punished by death because they would lead the

people into idolatry and apostasy. If an entire city defected to idolatry, it had to be destroyed (verses 12-16). False prophets are not a thing of the past (Matthew 24:24; 2 Thessalonians 2:9).

### **Separation of God's people: chapter 14**

Israel was a holy nation. Moses told them: "You are a people holy to the Lord your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be his treasured possession" (verse 2; Exodus 19:5-6). Indeed, God called Israel his firstborn son (Exodus 4:22).

To maintain this close relationship with God, the Israelites had to separate themselves from the sinful customs of the heathen nations around them. For example, pagan mourning customs involved self-mutilation and cutting hair as a token of a gift for the dead. (Compare Jeremiah 16:6 and 41:5 with Leviticus 21:5-6.)

This chapter also describes dietary guidelines God gave Israel (Deuteronomy 14:3-21). These instructions are followed by commands regarding a tithe to be used at the festival seasons, and a tithe to help widows and orphans.

### **The year of release: chapter 15**

Every seventh year saw a remission of all debts (verses 1-3). Lenders were required to cancel the balance on all outstanding loans to fellow Israelites at year's end. It was also a year of release for Hebrew servants who wanted freedom (verses 12-18).

### **Festival days: chapter 16**

Three times each year all Israelite men were to appear before God at his chosen place of worship: the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) and the Feast of Tabernacles. God reminded the people that, on these occasions, they were to give offerings proportionate to their blessings: "No man should appear before the Lord empty-handed: Each of you must bring a gift in proportion to the way the Lord your God has blessed you" (verses 16-17).

### **Civil government: chapter 17**

Conviction for capital crimes was possible only on the testimony of two or more witnesses (verse 6). If a suspected idolater was convicted, the witnesses would have to throw the first stones (verse 7). The priests, who were Levites, formed the supreme tribunal that heard appeals in difficult cases.

God anticipated Israel's desire to have a king like the nations around them. He warned of the excesses a monarchy might bring. These became a reality during the reign of Solomon, who failed to regard the Deuteronomic law (1 Kings 9–11).

## **The future prophet: chapter 18**

God would raise up many prophets in subsequent centuries, but New Testament writers would see in this chapter a reference to the greatest prophet of all, Jesus Christ (John 1:19-45; Acts 3:22-23; 7:37).

## **Cities of refuge: chapter 19**

The institution of cities of refuge is rehearsed. The avenger of blood (verses 4-7) was the dead person's next of kin who was allowed to avenge the death. This was to prevent the development of blood feuds. [See commentary on Numbers 35.]

## **Rules for war: chapter 20**

God exempted certain groups from military service: those who had built a house or planted a new vineyard (verses 5-6), the newly or soon-to-be married (verse 7) and the fainthearted (verse 8).

God's orders to destroy all the Canaanites within the Promised Land (verses 16-17) may seem harsh today. But an opportunity to surrender was given to other nations (verse 10). These Canaanite nations practiced vile religious rituals such as temple prostitution and child sacrifice. They were a threat to the national survival of Israel.

Additionally, God had given these nations time to repent. God told Abraham that "the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure" (Genesis 15:16). The Amorites were one of the Canaanite nations to whom God had shown great patience and mercy. By the time of Moses, God had given them hundreds of years to repent.

## **Various laws: chapter 21**

These laws reflect different aspects of ancient Israel's legal code.

<b>Legal Guidelines</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The law about unsolved murder (verses 1-9).</li> <li>• Marrying a captive woman (verses 10-14).</li> <li>• Firstborn inheritance rights (verses 15-17).</li> <li>• A rebellious son (verses 18-21).</li> <li>• Public hanging of executed criminals (verses 22-23).</li> </ul>

## Rules for daily living: chapter 22

This chapter contains rules that encouraged the Israelites to be responsible citizens in all aspects of life. Guidelines are given in five areas.

Civic Responsibility
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lost property (verses 1-4).</li> <li>• Maintaining sexual identity (verse 5).</li> <li>• Birds nesting (verses 6-7).</li> <li>• Building, farming and clothing (verses 8-12).</li> <li>• Sexual relations (verses 13-30).</li> </ul>

“The assembly of the Lord” (verse 1), or as Stephen described it, “the church [Greek *ekklesia*, meaning “assembly”] in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38, KJV), was to be separated from everyone and everything unclean (Deuteronomy 23:9-14). This would also be true spiritually for the New Testament church (2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1). As Christians, we are cleansed continually by the Word (Ephesians 5:26) to enjoy the fellowship and blessings of God.

## Divorce: chapter 24

Divorce was not commanded by Moses, as the Pharisees claimed in their confrontation with Christ (Matthew 19:7). It was a concession God made because of the hardness, or stubbornness, of the Israelites’ hearts (Matthew 5:31-32; 19:8; 1 Corinthians 7:10-15).

The other regulations that constitute the rest of this chapter show that, even in exercising their personal rights, God’s people are to be thoughtful and considerate of others.

## Further regulations: chapter 25

God instructed the Israelites in several other important areas.

Additional Legislation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Corporal punishment (verses 1-3).</li> <li>• Rights of animals (verse 4); the New Testament uses this principle (1 Corinthians 9:3-14).</li> <li>• Levirate marriage (verses 5-10) for preservation of the family name and property (Ruth 4:7).</li> <li>• Punishment for physical assault (verses 11-12).</li> <li>• Fair weights and measures (verses 13-16).</li> <li>• God’s command to punish the Amalekites (verses 17-19).</li> </ul>

## **The firstfruits: chapter 26**

The offering of firstfruits reminded Israel of how God had blessed them. When they arrived in the Promised Land, the people were to rehearse their historic journey — they were to retell the story of their small beginnings in Egypt, their growth into a great nation, and their quest to claim and conquer the land God had given to them. When reading this chapter, consider the history of your relationship with God. Have you taken the time to thank God for what he has done for you?

## **Ebal and Gerizim: chapters 27–28**

This ceremony of blessing and cursing was to be performed on Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim overlooking the city of Shechem. From Gerizim, six tribes were to proclaim blessings, whereas from Ebal, the other six tribes were to proclaim curses. The altar for burnt offerings on Mt. Ebal typified Christ redeeming his people from sin.

In these prophetic verses, we get a picture of Israel's tragic future of sin and unbelief. As we noted in Leviticus 26, these blessings and curses can also be understood as laws of cause and effect.

## **Commitment to God: chapters 29-30**

Moses called for a commitment, challenging Israel to honor the covenant they had made with God. He exhorted the nation to obey God.

For Christians today, the lesson is clear: The Bible can sit on your bookshelf gathering dust, or you can make it a vital part of your life. However, knowing God's Word is not enough; you must also love and trust God. The Bible is not the main goal – it is to help us get to the goal of a relationship with God.

## **Moses' farewell address: chapter 31**

Moses' life had been a long one — 120 years. He now delivered a few final farewells, along with some counsel and warnings. The law was given to the Levites for safekeeping, and God appointed Joshua as Moses' successor (verses 14, 23).

## **The Song of Moses: chapter 32:1-47**

Moses again called the people to obedience. In this song, Moses reviewed the history of Israel. He reminded the people of their past mistakes and warned them of the consequences of repeating those mistakes. But the finale of Moses' song was positive: To the tribes now poised to take the Promised



Land, he offered the hope that comes only from trusting in God (verses 46-47).

### **Moses' blessing and death: chapters 32:48-34:12**

Moses blessed the nation from Mt. Nebo. He was called “the man of God,” the title of Psalm 90, another song of Moses. Like the patriarch Jacob (Genesis 49), Moses' testament comprised blessings on each of the 12 tribes.

Although Moses could not enter the Promised Land (Numbers 20:12), God showed him its beauty from Mt. Nebo's peak. God then let him die. The last chapter of Deuteronomy contains a fitting tribute to a great servant of God: “Since then, no prophet has arisen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face” (Deuteronomy 34:10).

## 27. EXPLORING JOSHUA

### What's in a name?

The book is named after its leading character, Joshua, who was appointed by God to lead Israel after the death of Moses (Numbers 27:18-23).



Joshua's original name was Hoshea (Numbers 13:8), which means "salvation." Moses changed this name to Joshua (Numbers 13:16). Joshua is the English form of the Hebrew name *Yehoshua*, which means "Yahweh saves." The Greek form of this name is *Iesous*, from which we get the English name Jesus. (Jesus was a popular name in the first century.) The title of the book in the Septuagint is *Iesous Naue*, which means "Joshua, [son] of Nun."

### Outline

The book of Joshua has four main sections: The early chapters describe the Israelites' preparations to conquer Canaan, and the first steps of the invasion (1:1–5:12). The central event in this section is the Israelites' crossing of the Jordan River (3:1-17).

The next section details the warfare between the invading Israelites and the native Canaanites (5:13–12:24). The most important battles were against Jericho (5:13–6:27), Ai and Bethel (8:1-29), an alliance of southern cities (10:1-43) and an alliance of northern cities (11:1-15). The conquest of Canaan was a formative event in Israel's history. Now the Israelites could describe

themselves as the inhabitants of the land God had promised to their forefathers. One could now refer to Israel as a land, not just a people.

The longest section concerns the dividing of the land among the people (13:1–21:45). Even though much of the land had not yet been conquered, Joshua assigned each tribe the territory that would be its inheritance.

The book concludes with a series of postscripts (22:1–24:33). The tribes who wished to settle east of the Jordan returned to their lands (22:1-34). Like Moses, Joshua made a farewell address and gathered the people together to renew the covenant (23:1–24:27). Finally, Joshua’s death is recorded, along with an appraisal of his distinguished career (24:28-33).

## How to read this book

In Judges, the book following Joshua, Israel’s spiritual decline and eventual collapse is described in gruesome detail. But the period of Joshua’s leadership was one of the high points in Israel’s history (24:31). As you read this book, keep in mind one of its major themes: Joshua’s leadership.

Joshua was a young man when Moses appointed him as one of his ministers, or attendants, during the wilderness journey. Read the following passages which tell of some of his services during those years: Exodus 17:8-16; 24:12-13; Numbers 13:1-16; 14:26-35. At the close of Moses’ career, God chose Joshua to be his successor (Num 27:18), and Moses transferred the mantle of leadership to his faithful attendant and friend (Deut 34:9)....

Read what God said of Joshua in Numbers 27:18 (cf. Deut 34:9). Joshua feared God, believed God, obeyed God, and gloried God. He was a great ruler, commanding the respect of all his subjects (Deut 34:9), maintaining order and discipline, putting the worship of God central in the nation’s government. (Irving L. Jensen, *Jensen’s Survey of the Old Testament*, pp. 144-145)

## Learning about God

The book of Joshua illustrates many important aspects of God’s role and his nature:

- God is Creator. All of creation is subject to God’s sovereign control: He blocked the waters of a river (3:14-17), shattered the walls of a city (6:20), sent hail from heaven (10:11) and lengthened the hours of a day (10:13-14) — all to accomplish his purpose.
- God is faithful. By leading Joshua and the Israelites into the Promised Land, God was fulfilling the promises he had made to Abraham (Genesis 17:1-14), Isaac (26:24) and Jacob (28:10-22). God gave each tribe a sizable inheritance (Joshua 13–21). He gave special inheritances to the Levites (21:1-42) and to Caleb (14:6-15) and Joshua (19:49-50). Nobody was left out; God’s faithfulness was complete (21:45). Even

Joseph's bones were finally laid to rest, fulfilling earlier promises (24:32; see Genesis 50:24-26 and Exodus 13:19).

- God hates sin.

God waged war against the pagan Canaanites and against any who sinned in Israel. God is constantly at war with sin because it is an affront to his holiness and because it destroys people whom He loves and desires to bless (cf. Rom. 6:23). In the book of Joshua, God waged war with sin wherever he found it... Given more spiritual privilege, His people shouldered more spiritual responsibility. God's love for Israel led Him to purge out the sin in the camp so that it would not destroy the whole nation. God evidently dealt with Achan as severely as He did [Joshua 7] in order to give His people a clear demonstration of His hatred for sin at the beginning of this new era in their national life. (Thomas L. Constable, "A Theology of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck, p. 105)

- God is our eternal leader. Moses, the great servant of God, had died. The leadership of Israel now passed to Joshua. God reserved for himself the right to appoint the successor of Moses. Joshua was in some ways similar to his predecessor, but in other ways different. This transition challenged the faith of Israel. The Israelites rose to the challenge and accepted Joshua. They told him: "Just as we fully obeyed Moses, so we will obey you" (1:17). It is always unsettling to have a change of leadership, and not only at the national level. Even the members of a small church congregation can become accustomed to their leader's way of communicating. Even though the change of a leader or minister can be disorienting, like Israel we must remember that the same ultimate authority is still in charge. If God can allow for differences in styles of leadership according to the personalities of those he appoints, we should be able to adjust.
- Jesus Christ is revealed in the book of Joshua by type. "Joshua ('Jehovah is Savior') prefigures Christ as the Captain of our salvation (Heb 2:10-11), leading His people in the power of His Spirit. Joshua succeeded Moses, who pictures Christ as the obedient Servant (Heb 3:5)" (*The New Unger's Bible Handbook*, p. 120).

## Other topics

**Inheritance:** The many passages describing the inheritances of the various tribes, when read in the light of God’s faithfulness to us, are highly encouraging (21:45). Every tribe had an inheritance (24:28). Likewise, there is a place reserved for faithful Christians in God’s kingdom (John 14:1-3).

**Rest:** Through Joshua, God gave that generation rest from war (11:23), but the people did not have permanent peace because of recurring sins. The theme of lasting peace was foreseen by the prophets, who looked forward to a time when nations would “beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore” (Isaiah 2:4; see also Micah 4:3).

**Ark of the Covenant:** The ark of the covenant or “ark of the Testimony” (Exodus 25:22) symbolized the presence of God. The ark reminded the people that it was God who enabled them to enter (3:1–4:24) and to conquer (6:1-21) the Promised Land.

## What this book means for you

Although Joshua is speaking of military battles and geographic territory, we can apply the principles by which God worked there to the spiritual battles we face and the spiritual territory we have yet to possess. In the light of Joshua, Christians should ask themselves:

- How much progress am I making in my Christian life?
- What are the spiritual enemies which hinder my progress?
- How much do I obey what God’s Word teaches me in my daily life?
- Do I take God at his word and believe him, even when it would seem foolish to do so?
- At what points am I tempted to compromise my Christian faith?  
(John Balchin et al., *The Compact Survey of the Bible*, pp. 39, 41)

Your answers to these questions will show you where you stand with God. Like Joshua and the Israelites (1:16-18), you can renew your commitment to God and his Word.

In Canaan there were “seven nations greater and mightier” than Israel (Deuteronomy 7:1, NKJV) that had to be dispossessed and destroyed. But just as no nation could defeat Joshua and Israel under God, so no being in the spirit realm (Ephesians 6:12) can withstand the power of Jesus Christ, who has defeated Satan (Matthew 4:1-11) and is now at God’s “right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion” (Ephesians 1:20-21).

Christians must remember that spiritual victory lies in obedience to God through the power of his resurrected Son, Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:51-57; see also Isaiah 25:8).

## 28. JOSHUA: CONFLICT AND CONQUEST

### Joshua as leader: chapter 1

Joshua is one of the Bible's great books of courage and faith. God told Joshua: "Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them — to the Israelites" (verse 2). The keynote in God's encouraging address is the repeated call to be strong and courageous (verses 6-7, 9).

The basis of Joshua's confidence and strength was God's promised presence and power (1:6). But the key to Israel's success in the Conquest, Joshua's effective leadership, and God's saving presence with His people would be Israel's fidelity to the book of the law. (Thomas L. Constable, "A Theology of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck, p. 97)

The Israelites promised obedience: "Whatever you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go" (verse 16). Sadly, this expression of faith was to prove shallow. Consequently, much of the land was subdued only by toilsome warfare.

### The faith of Rahab: chapter 2

Rahab, a prostitute in Jericho, decided to protect the Israelite spies because she recognized the God of Israel as the true God. The Scriptures commend her faith: "By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient" (Hebrews 11:31).

Rahab's faith was well founded (Joshua 2:8-11) and brought her great honor. Through her son Boaz, she became an ancestor of David and of Jesus

Christ (Matthew 1:5-6, 16).

The example of Rahab illustrates how God often uses people with simple faith to accomplish his will. It does not matter to God what kind of past they may have had. “Many would assume that Rahab — a pagan, a Canaanite, and a prostitute — would never be interested in God. Yet Rahab was willing to risk everything she had for a God she barely knew. We must not gauge a person’s interest in God by his or her background, life-style, or appearance” (*Life Application Bible*, NIV, commentary on Joshua 2:8-13).

### **Crossing the Jordan: chapter 3**

It was springtime, and the Jordan River — usually about 100 feet wide — had swollen to a width of roughly a mile and was overflowing its banks. This seasonal flooding was caused by the melting snows on Mt. Hermon feeding the headwaters of the Jordan.

As the priests stepped into the water, God miraculously held back the floodwaters. The Israelites then crossed over, opposite the city of Jericho (verses 15-16; see also Psalm 114:5).

### **The Promised Land: chapter 4**

The Israelites crossed the Jordan on the 10th day of the first month (verse 19). This was the final step in a journey they had begun on the same day 40 years earlier. Then, by selecting the Passover lambs (Exodus 12:2-3), they had made their first response of faith to the God who was leading them to salvation from Egypt. Now, by entering the land God had promised their forefathers — Abraham, Isaac and Jacob — they consummated their covenant with God. To commemorate this event, God commanded the Israelites to build two monuments — one where the priests had stood in the water (Joshua 4:9) and the other at Israel’s campsite at Gilgal (verse 20).

The Israelites now entered a new phase in their relationship with God. Moses had continually exhorted the people to take possession of the land (Deuteronomy 1:21; 3:18; 4:1; 8:1; 11:8, 31). He also delineated their additional responsibilities — under the terms of their covenant with God — once they possessed the land (Deuteronomy 12:10, 29-31; 18:9; 19:1; 27:3). As the Israelites began to possess the land, so these responsibilities outlined in Deuteronomy became incumbent upon them.

The Jordan crossing also resonates historically with the Israelites’ earlier crossing of the Red Sea. Then, God had miraculously allowed the Israelites to escape from Egypt; now, he miraculously enabled them to enter the Promised Land. These experiences of Israel foreshadow Christian baptism (1 Corinthians 10:1-2). Baptism pictures Jesus Christ enabling repentant

individuals to escape from the bondage of sin and to enter into a new phase in their relationship with God.

## **Circumcision renewed: chapter 5**

The rite of circumcision, the sign of God’s covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17), had not been practiced during Israel’s 40 years in the wilderness.

Joshua now supervised the circumcision of the males of the new generation at a place they named Gibeath Haaraloth (meaning “hill of foreskins”), which was later renamed Gilgal (Joshua 5:9). This act marked the renewal of the relationship between God and his people.

“The reproach of Egypt” (verse 9) refers to Israel’s national disgrace of enslavement in Egypt and homelessness in the wilderness of Sinai. God “rolled away” this reproach when he had the Israelites circumcised at Gilgal (the name Gilgal is related to the Hebrew word *galal*, which means “roll” or “roll away”). Israel’s bondage was completely removed. Since circumcision represented a renewal of the covenant, the Israelites were now ready to keep the Passover — the annual festival that commemorated their deliverance by God from slavery in Egypt (verse 10).

## **The fall of Jericho: chapter 6**

Israel conquered the walled city of Jericho by faith and obedience to God, not through human wisdom and power. While God explained to Joshua what would happen (verse 5), the account does not tell us that God told the Israelites why he was having them march around the city for seven days. Humanly speaking, it may have appeared to be an exercise in futility. In fact, it was not until the seventh day that Joshua exhorted the people: “Shout! For the Lord has given you the city!” (verse 16).

The Bible explains that the fall of Jericho was a miracle of faith: “By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people had marched around them for seven days” (Hebrews 11:30).

Joshua was an army commander, but first and foremost he was a spiritual leader who relied on the power of God. From a military point of view, the entire spectacle must have seemed ridiculous. But Joshua lived by faith and not by sight (see Habakkuk 2:4 and 2 Corinthians 5:7). After all, God had already told him that Jericho would be taken — the enemy was already defeated.

Christians also fight against a defeated enemy. Our enemy, Satan the devil, has been defeated by Christ: “Since the children have flesh and blood, [Christ] too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death — that is, the devil — and free those who



all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death” (Hebrews 2:14-15; see also 1 John 3:8).

This should give us tremendous encouragement. Although we still fight battles every day, we have God’s assurance that the greater war against Satan has already been won. On the individual level, this means that we do not have to be paralyzed by the power of a defeated enemy. We can overcome Satan through the power of Jesus Christ (Revelation 12:11).

### **The curse of Jericho**

After the destruction and burning of Jericho, God, through Joshua, pronounced a solemn oath over its ruins: “Cursed before the Lord is the man who undertakes to rebuild this city, Jericho: At the cost of his firstborn son will he lay its foundations; at the cost of his youngest will he set up its gates” (Joshua 6:26).

The site of the city of Jericho lay abandoned for several centuries, until the reign of King Ahab (circa 870-850 B.C.). At that time, the curse was fulfilled when Hiel, a man of Bethel, rebuilt Jericho: “He laid its foundations at the cost of his firstborn son Abiram, and he set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub, in accordance with the word of the Lord spoken by Joshua son of Nun” (1 Kings 16:34).

### **Achan’s sin: chapters 7-8**

After they conquered the city of Jericho, the Israelites had a route into Canaan. However, the central highlands were still protected by the strategic city-fortress of Ai. The Israelites attacked the city, but were put to flight by the men of Ai, who killed about 36 Israelite soldiers (Joshua 7:4-7). God revealed to Joshua the reason for this humiliating defeat (verses 10-11). When confronted, Achan confessed his guilt (verses 20-21).

Achan had exercised the fighting-man’s right, in the ancient world, to plunder the ruins of a conquered city, something that God did allow the Israelites to do in subsequent military campaigns. However, God had specifically pronounced everything in the first Canaanite city to be conquered, Jericho, as “devoted to the Lord” (Hebrew: *cherem*, meaning “something consecrated for destruction by God”). To plunder the city was to steal from God.

Achan’s sin illustrates how the actions of a single person can affect the family and the nation. The sin of the individual does affect other people. There are no victimless crimes, no private sins. Knowledge of sin may be kept secret, but the impact of sin is widespread. All of us need to be reminded of this from time to time. It is good to consider how devastating the sin of

one person can be to the well-being of a family, church, business or other social group.

Following Achan's execution, God again directed Israel to attack Ai, this time by way of ambush (Joshua 8:1-8). God commanded Joshua to stretch out his javelin toward the city until all its inhabitants were destroyed (verses 18, 26). This act brings to mind Moses' uplifted hands in the victory over the Amalekites (Exodus 17:11-13).

Note that although the city of Ai, its king and its people were consecrated by God for destruction, the plunder and livestock were not (Joshua 8:2, 27).

Joshua knew that Israelite swords and spears had not won the battle. The God of Israel had conquered Ai. The psalmist would later echo this truth in a song of praise to God: "It was not by their sword that they won the land, nor did their arm bring them victory; it was your right hand, your arm, and the light of your face, for you loved them" (Psalm 44:3).

For the Christian, the lesson of Ai is clear: We can triumph where, in the past, we have failed — if we rely on God (Proverbs 24:16; Ephesians 6:10-18). However, we must first repent of our sins and respond to God's correction.

After the conquest of Ai, Joshua led the Israelites in reconfirming their covenant with God by performing the ceremony of blessings and curses as prescribed by Moses (Joshua 8:30-35; see also Deuteronomy 27-28).

## **Gibeon tricks Israel: chapter 9**

Gibeon was a strategically important city about 5 miles northwest of Jerusalem. Its inhabitants, the Hivites, resorted to trickery, pretending to have come "from a distant country" (verse 6).

Their pretense of friendship deceived the leaders of Israel, who then made a treaty with them. For Israel, it was a fundamental mistake because they "did not inquire of the Lord" (verse 14).

Too late, the Israelites discovered that the Gibeonites lived in the Promised Land. But Israel's vow was not nullified by the Gibeonites' trickery. For this deceptive act, however, Gibeon was put under a curse (verse 23).

## **Joshua's long day: chapter 10**

The name Adoni-Zedek occurs in connection with the first mention of Jerusalem in the Bible (verse 1). He was the head of a coalition that decided to attack the Gibeonites because of their treaty with Israel. Due to the obligations of the treaty, Joshua came to Gibeon's rescue.

In one of the most remarkable battles in Israel's history, all five Amorite kings were executed and their armies decimated (verses 16-28). Joshua's army

then went on to conquer all the strategic cities of the south (verses 29-43).

God used nature to aid Israel in this victory (verses 12-14). Some scholars believe that Joshua's "long day" was caused by a miraculous slowing of the earth's normal rotation. Others conclude that some unusual refraction of the sun's rays produced additional hours of light. We do not know exactly how God did it, but we do know that he performed a miracle. Miracles do not depend upon scientific explanation.

### **The northern conquest: chapter 11**

Jaban, king of Hazor, formed a northern confederacy. Although it was more powerful than the southern alliance, it met with no greater success.

Following God's instructions, Joshua hamstringed the enemy horses and burned their chariots (verses 6, 9) so that Israel would continue to trust in the Lord and not in captured implements of war. Hazor, the capital of the territory, was destroyed by fire.

The defeated kings: chapter 12

Verses 1-6 review the Israelite conquests in Transjordan during the time of Moses, "from the Arnon Gorge to Mount Hermon, including all the eastern side of the Arabah" (verse 1). The roster of 31 conquered kings in verses 7-24 identifies those defeated during the time of Joshua.

### **Transjordan: chapter 13**

Verses 1-7 introduce the next section of the book — possessing the land. Israel had been a homeless people for 40 years. Now God was giving them their inheritance.

God told Joshua, "You are very old, and there are still very large areas of land to be taken over" (verse 1). In several places, the Israelites — for lack of faith — could not drive out local populations. Jerusalem was a case in point: "Judah could not dislodge the Jebusites, who were living in Jerusalem; to this day the Jebusites live there with the people of Judah" (Joshua 15:63).

The rest of Joshua 13 discusses the land east of the Jordan (verses 8-14), the tribe of Reuben (verses 15-23), the tribe of Gad (verses 24-28) and the half-tribe of Manasseh (verses 29-33).

### **Caleb's request: chapter 14**

Joshua, Eleazar and the tribal chieftains distributed the land by lot (verses 1-5; Numbers 26:55; 33:54; 34:13). The ever-faithful Caleb requested the territory of Hebron. Although the city of Hebron later became Levitical property (Joshua 21:9-13), Caleb kept the fields and villages around the city.

## **The tribe of Judah: chapter 15**

Judah's large allotment included the land already granted to Caleb (verse 13), as well as a part of Jerusalem (verses 8, 63; Joshua 18:28). The size of Judah's territory reflected the tribe's traditional leadership role. It included much of the southern desert.

## **The tribe of Ephraim: chapter 16**

The general borders of the land given to the sons of Joseph stretched northwest from Gilgal. Although Joseph was one of Jacob's sons, he did not have a tribe named after him. Instead, as the oldest son of Jacob's wife Rachel, Joseph received a double portion of the inheritance.

This double portion was given to Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, whom Jacob considered his own (Genesis 48:5). The largest territory and the greatest influence in the northern half of Israel belonged to their tribes. The Ephraimites received some of the best land (Joshua 16:1-4), but failed to conquer all of it. For example, they could not expel the Canaanites from Gezer (verse 10), a strategically important city 18 miles northwest of Jerusalem.

Earlier, Joshua had defeated the king of Gezer (Joshua 12:12), but the Canaanites recaptured the city. It remained under Canaanite control until the time of Solomon (1 Kings 9:16).

Ephraim failed to drive out all of the Canaanites, just as Judah had failed to drive out the Jebusites (Joshua 15:63). Moses had warned that such failure would eventually turn the Israelites from following God (Deuteronomy 7:1-5).

## **The tribe of Manasseh: chapter 17**

Manasseh was given more land than any other tribe. In addition to its territory east of the Jordan, it controlled the northern part of the central hill country up to the Valley of Jezreel.

Ephraim and Manasseh's complaint and plea of weakness (verses 14-18) showed a lack of faith. They looked at the power of the Canaanites' iron chariots in the Valley of Jezreel instead of the power of God. In contrast, Joshua's courageous answer (verses 15, 17-18) demonstrated his faith in the promise God had given him earlier (Joshua 1:5-6).

## **The other tribes: chapters 18-19**

Seven tribes had still not claimed their allotted territory (Joshua 18:2). Joshua responded to their lack of faith by urging them to explore the land and claim their possession.

The remainder of Joshua 18 and 19 describes the territorial boundaries of these seven tribes as follows: Benjamin (Joshua 18:11-28), Simeon (Joshua 19:1-9), Zebulun (verses 10-16), Issachar (verses 17-23), Asher (verses 24-31), Naphtali (verses 32-39) and Dan (verses 40-48).

### **The cities of refuge: chapter 20**

Six designated cities provided refuge for those who had committed unintentional homicide (see Numbers 35:9-28 and Deuteronomy 19:1-13). Specifically, these cities gave protection from the “avenger of blood” (Joshua 20:3-5), the deceased person’s nearest relative who was permitted to avenge the death.

### **Levitical cities: chapter 21**

God was the special inheritance of the Levites. Thus, the Levites were prohibited from owning rural land like the other tribes. (Compare Deuteronomy 10:9, Joshua 13:14, 33 and 14:3-4.) The three Levitical families — the Kohathites (Joshua 21:9-26), the Gershonites (verses 27-33) and the Merarites (verses 34-40) — were given 48 cities throughout the land, ensuring that the religious leaders were dispersed among the tribes. This distribution also fortified the worship of the true God against regional idolatry.

### **Return to Transjordan: chapter 22**

Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh returned home to their own lands east of the Jordan (see Numbers 32:20-22 and Joshua 1:12-18). Joshua thanked them for their faithful role in the conquest (Joshua 22:1-6).

As they left, however, a misunderstanding caused a national controversy. The departing tribes built what appeared to be an altar on the frontier just west of the Jordan River (verses 10-12). The other tribes perceived this as a blatant violation of God’s law, which permitted only one sanctuary (Deuteronomy 12:13-14). As it turned out, the “altar” was not to be used for burnt offerings and sacrifices, but rather as a memorial or witness (Joshua 22:21-29, 34). It testified that the 12 tribes, although separated by the Jordan River, were one people under God.

### **Joshua’s farewell: chapters 23-24**

Joshua’s farewell speeches are comparable with those of Moses (Deuteronomy 31–33). Having reached the end of his long life, Joshua reminded the Israelites of God’s goodness and faithfulness. He encouraged them to continue to obey God, and warned them of the dangers of idolatry and apostasy.

At Shechem, Joshua reviewed the history of the children of Israel from the time of Abraham to the time of the conquest (Joshua 24:1-13). Once again, he challenged the people to serve God only (verses 14-15).

Throughout his lifetime, this great spiritual leader and military commander had remained wholly committed to God. The Israelites' enthusiasm in renewing their covenant with God (verses 16-18) was a fitting tribute to Joshua's leadership. "And the people said to Joshua, 'We will serve the Lord our God and obey him'" (verse 24). Indeed, verse 31 shows the power of Joshua's spiritual influence: "Israel served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him." Joshua had been a living example of God's way of life, and he wanted that to be his legacy.

For what do you wish to be remembered, and what do you want to pass on to your family and friends? A Christian can leave nothing better than the mandate to love and obey God, and the memory of someone who did so.

## 29. EXPLORING JUDGES

### What's in a name?

Judges records the history of Israel during the generations that came after Joshua. One passage summarizes what happened:

Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the Lord had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them. But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. (2:18-19)

These “judges” (*sbophetim* in the Hebrew Bible and *kritai* in the Septuagint) were not officials like judges today. Their main task was to “obtain justice for the tribes of Israel in the face of their enemies, annihilate or drive out their oppressors, and so bring salvation, rest and peace to the land” (*The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, p. 363). Very little is said about how these judges led the nation once they had delivered it.

Scholars sometimes distinguish between the “major” judges, whose feats are related at length in the book, and the “minor” judges, whose leadership is covered in only one or two verses.

Six judges played a significant role during this turbulent period in Israel's history.

### Major Judges

Othniel (3:9)

Ehud (3:15)

Deborah (4:4)

Gideon (6:11)

Jephthah (11:1)

Samson (13:24)

## Minor Judges

Shamgar (3:31)

Tola (10:1)

Jair (10:3)

Ibzan (12:8)

Elon (12:11)

Abdon (12:13)

As listed above, six so-called minor judges are mentioned in the book, although very little is said about them.

## Outline

After a prologue (1:1–3:6) describing the events immediately after Joshua’s death, the book is organized as a series of progressively longer stories, each concerning one of the major judges sent by God to deliver Israel from slavery. Brief descriptions of minor judges are sometimes inserted between these stories.

The first episode establishes a pattern that is repeated in the other stories: The Israelites sin, and so God allows them to be enslaved; they repent, and God sends a judge to deliver them (3:7-11). The first deliverer was Othniel, a nephew of Caleb, who judged Israel 40 years, or one generation.

After Othniel died, the Israelites started doing evil again, so God allowed the Moabites to enslave them. When the Israelites cried out to God, he raised up another judge, Ehud. Ehud assassinated the Moabite leader and then led Israel to victory (3:18-30). After Ehud came Shamgar (verse 31).

Then the Israelites sinned again and were subjugated by the Canaanites. Deborah and Barak eventually delivered them (4:1-24) and then sang a song to commemorate their victory (5:1-31). The Midianites were the next to enslave the backsliding Israelites, who were eventually delivered by Gideon (6:1–8:35). An interlude concerning Gideon’s wicked son Abimelech (9:1-57) is followed by accounts of two minor judges, Tola and Jair (10:1-5).

Israel returned to idolatry and was conquered by the Ammonites and Philistines. When the Israelites forsook idolatry, God gave them a victory through Jephthah (11:1–12:7). After Jephthah came three minor judges: Ibzan, Elon and Abdon (12:8-15). The last major judge mentioned in the book is Samson, whose story covers four chapters (13:1–16:31).

The book of Judges concludes with an epilogue relating two events that occurred during the period of the judges and illustrate the immorality of the nation at that time (17:1–21:25).

## How to read this book

On one level, you can read the book of Judges as a history book about great Israelite leaders God sent to rescue his people from foreign oppression.



In this sense, the book contains some of the most spectacular and inspirational stories in the Old Testament: With primitive weapons, Deborah and Barak destroyed Sisera's army of 900 chariots (4:13-16). Gideon's small band of warriors crushed the Midianites (7:19-22). Jephthah inflicted a massive defeat on the Ammonites (11:29-33). And, in perhaps the most famous story, Samson destroyed the Philistines in the temple of their god Dagon (16:23-30).

On another level, however, the book of Judges clearly describes the spiritual deterioration of a people who had forgotten what God had done for them. As you study the book, note how the Israelites failed to learn from their mistakes. Observe their tragic downward spiral into sin.

This dark age of Israel's history culminates in the last five chapters of Judges (17–21), which relate some of the most gruesome stories in the Bible — episodes of idolatry, theft, rape, murder and civil war. In the end, “every one did what was right in his own eyes” (21:25, NKJV). As we shall see, one reason for this barbaric state of affairs was Israel's failure to obey God's command to conquer all the land and drive out the Canaanites.

The Israelites held the mountains, but the foreign-held valleys, cutting through the land, separated the tribes. Soon each group of isolated Israelites began operating independently. The next generation lost its sense of national identity.... Though descended from 12 brothers, [the Israelites] spent more time fighting each other than the foreign oppressors.... Though [the Israelites] forgot [God], he did not forget them. He gave innumerable new beginnings. Again and again he sent ‘judges’ to rescue them. He would not let them go. God is the real hero of Judges” (*The New Student Bible*, NIV, pp. 228-229).

## Learning about God

Although anarchy existed in Israel during much of the period of the judges, the book leaves no doubt that God was still working out his purpose. The book tells us that:

- God is Judge and Deliverer. When the Israelites fell into idolatry, God caused other nations to defeat and enslave them (2:11-15). But when the Israelites cried out to God for help, he delivered them (2:16-18).
- God is Sovereign. This theme is emphasized throughout Judges. Perhaps this is most clearly seen when God told Gideon to reduce the size of his army “in order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her” (7:2). On occasion, God

manifested his supremacy in surprising ways: He empowered Samson to slay 1,000 Philistines with a donkey's jawbone (15:14-15). He caused the Kishon River to sweep away the Canaanite army (5:21). He used a non-Israelite woman to kill a Canaanite leader with a tent peg (4:21-23).

- God is patient and gracious. The book of Judges is a monument to God's patience with his people. The refrain "The Israelites once again did evil in the eyes of the Lord" recurs like a monotonous litany. Yet, every time the Israelites repented, God forgave them and sent a deliverer.
- God is righteous. Even as God extends his graciousness and patience toward us, he commands us to be righteous. The judges God used to deliver Israel, for the most part, led the people in God's ways. The wickedness of a nation that had forsaken God, especially as portrayed in Judges 17–21, is in stark contrast to God's holiness.

## Other topics

**Idolatry:** The book of Judges vividly illustrates the consequences of sinning against God. Israel's major sin was idolatry, especially the worship of the Canaanite storm and fertility god, Baal (2:11-13, 19; 3:7; 8:33; 10:6). God had repeatedly warned the Israelites against idolatry (Deuteronomy 4:15-19; 5:7-10; 12:2-3). The judges God used to deliver Israel got rid of the idols, and during those times Israel had peace. But as soon as these judges died, Israel relapsed into idolatry. This epitomized their rejection of God.

**Moral leadership:** During much of this period of the judges, Israel lacked strong spiritual direction. Against this bleak background, God inspired certain individuals to lead the nation. In the New Testament, we read of some of these heroic leaders: "Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah...who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised...and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies" (Hebrews 11:32-34).

## What this book means for you

The basic message of Judges is simple: Sin leads to slavery; repentance leads to redemption. The book rams its message home as story after story follows the same pattern: The Israelites abandon God, so he allows them to become enslaved. Then they repent and God delivers them.

This provides a fitting background for the teaching of the New Testament — that because Jesus Christ died for your sins and was resurrected, you can,

when you look to him, be delivered from the bondage of sin and receive eternal life (Acts 3:19; Romans 5:21).

The period of the judges was one of the “dark ages” of Israel’s history and the irregularities and problems contained therein must be set against this general background. In its own way it is a faithful witness to the fact of man’s frailty and to his need not of a merely temporal deliverer, but of an eternal Saviour who can effect a perfect redemption. (Arthur E. Cundall, *Judges*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 7, p. 45)

## **30. THE BOOK OF JUDGES: VARIATIONS ON A THEME**

The Old Testament book of Judges tells the story of what could be called the “Dark Ages” of the chosen people. When the book opens, the 12 tribes of Israel are on the edge of national success. Under Moses and his successor Joshua, they have been liberated from slavery and have begun to occupy and settle in their Promised Land.

But something goes terribly wrong. By the time the book closes, central leadership has broken down and the tribes are at each other’s throats. The people are oppressed on every side by enemies and in danger of national extinction. This book contains some of the most gruesome stories in the Bible — episodes of idolatry, theft, rape, murder and civil war.

What went wrong? In the book of Judges, God himself explains it:

I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land that I swore to give to your forefathers...yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this? Now therefore I tell you that I will not drive them out before you; they will be thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you. (Judges 2:1-3)

This is exactly what happened:

The Israelites held the mountains, but the foreign-held valleys, cutting through the land, separated the tribes. Soon, each group of isolated Israelites began operating independently.... The next generation lost its national identity.... Though descended from 12 brothers, the Israelites spent more time fighting each other than the foreign oppressors. (*New Student Bible* 1)

## Variations on a theme

Although anarchy existed in Israel during much of the period of the judges, the story shows that God was still working out his purpose with them. The entire story is a monument to God's patience, love and mercy. Time after time, the people became trapped in a downward spiral toward moral degeneracy, and the refrain, "The Israelites once again did evil in the sight of the Lord", recurs like a monotonous litany throughout the book. Yet, every time the Israelites repented, God forgave them and sent a deliverer (a "judge" — hence the name of the book).

The central section of the book (chapters 3:7-16:31) tells us of six judges God raised up to deliver his people from their enemies. These stories — with their pattern of Israel's sin, sorrow, repentance and restoration — illustrate what is often called the "cycle of sin." At first glance, the stories seem to follow the same theme. But there are subtle and important differences. These small divergences are important, like when a musician plays variations on a theme.

First we hear what could be called the "base" theme. Then it is played again, with a few variations. As the variations are developed, the base theme recedes further and further into the background, and may even be no longer recognizable to the untrained person. But the trained listener can appreciate what is happening.

The chronicler of Judges uses much the same technique, and we need to read carefully to appreciate the lesson. These are not just stories — they are variations on a theme.

The first story is of Othniel (Judges 3:7-11). He was the nephew of Caleb, one of the nation's founding heroes (see Numbers 14:6,30). This short account of Othniel is the "base theme" — the one by which to view the others. As you read it, look for the following sequence:

1. The Israelites do evil (verse 7).
2. God allows them to become the captives of their enemies (verse 8).
3. The Israelites repent and cry out to God for help (verse 9).
4. God raises up a judge or deliverer (verse 9).
5. God delivers the enemy leader into the hand of the judge (verse 10).
6. The land has rest and peace under the judge's leadership (verse 11).

The stories of the other five judges also have the first two elements: the people sinning and becoming captives. However, the later stories get progressively further from the model story as far as the other four elements are concerned. This progressive departure from the model story is a literary device that the author uses to reflect the moral decline of Israel.

The second story, of Ehud, follows the model story almost exactly (Judges 3:12-30).

In the third, however, Barak, a capable military leader, displays an initial lack of faith (Judges 4:8). Having been told by Deborah, a prophetess and judge, that God would deliver the enemy into his hands, Barak is still not prepared to deliver Israel until he has the additional assurance of Deborah's presence at the battle (Judges 4:4-8). Consequently, the honor of killing the enemy leader, Sisera, goes not to Barak but to a non-Israelite woman, Jael (verses 9, 15-21).

The next judge, Gideon, requires even more than the support of a godly prophet or prophetess. He requests several specific signs from God before he is prepared to accept responsibility (Judges 6:17,36-37,39). With the background of Barak's experiences in mind, it is not surprising that the glory of capturing two of the Midianite leaders, Oreb and Zeeb, goes not to Gideon but to the rival tribe of Ephraim (Judges 11:30-31).

Jephthah's story deviates even further. The people, rather than God, elect Jephthah as their leader (Judges 11:1-40). And although God does grant Jephthah victory over his enemies, Jephthah's triumphant return home is transformed into personal disappointment and anguish because of a rash vow he had made (Judges 11:30-31). Moreover, the land does not have peace under Jephthah's leadership.

The final episode, that of Samson (Judges 13-16), represents the most radical departure from the ideal model of deliverance. The people do not even cry out to God for help, the land does not have rest under Samson's leadership and Samson himself is a self-willed man, who at first seems more intent on fulfilling his own agenda than being a servant of God.

If Barak is to be criticized for depending too much on the presence of a faithful prophetess, Deborah, how much more so Samson, who puts too much trust in a Philistine woman, Delilah (Judges 16:21). Samson eventually delivers his people, but only after he himself is captured, blinded and enslaved by his enemies.

So what we have is a sad sequence of decline and moral decay. When the book opens, the Israelites were serving God under Joshua and the elders who outlived him. But it closes on this tragic note: "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

## **Jesus Christ breaks the cycle of sin**

Old Testament scholar Arthur Cundall identifies the central message of the book of Judges: "The period of the judges is a faithful witness to the fact

of man's frailty and to his need not of a merely temporal deliverer, but of an eternal Saviour who can effect a perfect redemption."

Cundall's comment could also apply to the history of the modern world. We live in a society that is supposedly so much more sophisticated and enlightened than that of ancient Israel. And yet much of our behavior has been just as barbaric and faithless as that of the Israelites. Our society, just like theirs, continues to be "a faithful witness to the fact of man's frailty and of his need for an eternal Saviour."

The good news of the gospel is that there is an eternal Savior who has already broken the cycle of sin by offering a perfect redemption for the whole world. He is the God-man, Jesus Christ. And the basic message of the Old Testament book of Judges — that sin leads to slavery while repentance leads to redemption — provides a fitting background for the New Testament teaching: because Jesus died for our sins, God grants us repentance and delivers us from spiritual slavery.

## **31. JUDGES: THE MISERY OF SIN**

### **Partial conquest: Judges 1**

After Joshua's death, the Israelites asked God, "Who will be the first to go up and fight for us against the Canaanites?" (verse 1). God chose Judah to do battle and promised, "I have given the land into their hands" (verse 2). Judah may have shown a lack of faith by relying on Simeon for additional support (verse 3).

Although Judah conquered several areas in the Negev and western foothills, as well as cities such as Hebron and Debir, their victory was incomplete. Jerusalem, for example, was either not taken completely, or later recaptured by its inhabitants (verses 8, 21). The Jebusite fortress was not taken until the time of David (2 Samuel 5:6-7).

Nor did the other tribes completely drive out the Canaanites. Israel's failure to destroy this immoral people led to her spiritual decline in the period of the judges.

### **The covenant broken: Judges 2:1-3:6**

The Israelites had broken their covenant with God. This infraction was so serious that God sent an angel to communicate the dire consequences:

I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land that I swore to give to your forefathers. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars.' Yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this? Now therefore I tell you that I will not drive them out before you; they will be thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you. (Judges 2:1-3)



## Israel's failures

- Manassah failed at Beth Shan, Taanach, Dor, Ibleam and Megiddo (Judges 1:27)
- Ephraim failed at Gezer (verse 29)
- Zebulun failed at Kitron and Hahalol (verse 30)
- Asher failed at Acco, Sidon, Ahlab, Aczib, Helbah, Aphek and Rehob (verses 31-32)
- Naphtali failed at Beth Shemesh and Beth Anath (verse 33)
- Dan failed against the Amorites (verse 34)
- The house of Joseph also failed to drive out the Amorites (verses 35-36)

This event marked a fundamental change in Israel's relationship with God. God had made a sacred covenant with the Israelites at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19:5-8; 24:1-8). He had wanted to make Israel a holy nation. For their part, the Israelites were to love God and obey his law (Deuteronomy 6:5; 30:16; Joshua 22:5). They were to follow God's command not to make any treaties with the peoples of the land (Exodus 34:11-16; Deuteronomy 7:1-5).

Now that Israel had rejected and disobeyed God, his agreement to help them conquer the land was not binding. However, his promise to make Israel a nation through whom the whole world would be blessed would yet be fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

When the elders who outlived Joshua also died, the people began to turn aside from God. This younger generation of Israelites abandoned the faith of the previous generation and began to worship the deities of the Canaanites (Judges 2:10-15). The major cause of this period of decline in Israel's history was idolatry — turning away from God to follow false gods.

God forcefully condemns idolatry, as is witnessed by the first two commandments: "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them" (Exodus 20:3-5).

The remainder of this section (Judges 2:10–3:6) describes the organization of the book of Judges as a whole. The people's behavior followed a ruinous cycle of sin, repentance and sin again. Israel disobeyed God and worshiped the local pagan idols; God punished them at the hands of their idolatrous oppressors; Israel cried out to God for help; God sent a judge to deliver them; Israel obeyed God until the judge died; and, finally, Israel's old pattern

of sin and idolatry reasserted itself, thus starting the cycle again.

As we progress through the book of Judges, we will see that the cycle of sin was a downward spiral. This should serve as a warning for Christians today who may be lulled into the same pattern of spiritual decline.

As we study the book of Judges, we will learn that our immediate environment can affect our relationship with God. The Israelites did not set out to be idolaters. But when they intermarried with the people of the surrounding nations, against God's command, they began to accept the pagan Canaanite gods and goddesses — and the immoral practices associated with them — into their homes.

Christians living in today's society face a similar danger. We should not become entangled in the sinful practices of this world. The apostle John warned:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world — the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does — comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever. (1 John 2:15-17)

### **Episode one: Othniel: Judges 3:7-11**

The story opens with the words, “The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord; they forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs” (verse 7). It may be hard for us to believe that Israel would substitute the worship of the great God for worship of pagan idols of wood and stone. But before we condemn them, we should remind ourselves that we are guilty of the same sin when we put other activities and priorities before our relationship with God. What are your idols? They may not be made of stone, but to God they are just as sinful.

For their idolatry, God delivered Israel into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim, king of Aram Naharaim (verse 8). Rishathaim is not found anywhere else in ancient literature, but it means “wicked.” The Israelites served Cushan for eight years. They probably paid tribute to this foreign king in exchange for their security.

When the Israelites repented and cried out to God for help, he raised up Othniel to deliver them. Othniel had a rich spiritual heritage. His uncle was Caleb, a man of unwavering faith in God (Numbers 13:30; 14:24). Othniel was also a brave soldier. In Judges 1:12-13, we read that he volunteered to lead an attack against a fortified city. Othniel's leadership brought the people

back to God and freed them from the oppression of Cushan. Unfortunately, it was not long after Othniel's death that the Israelites fell back into their sinful ways.

### **Episode two: Ehud: Judges 3:12-30**

“Once again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord” (verse 12). This time, God sent Eglon, king of Moab, against Israel. Allied with the Ammonites and the Amalekites, Eglon defeated Israel.

The nomadic tribes of Moab, Ammon and Amalek lived near one another, southeast of Canaan. These tribes were notorious raiders who possessed great military skill. The Moabites were descendants of Moab, the son of Lot's elder daughter (Genesis 19:37). They posed a constant threat to Israel. Jephthah, one of the later judges, reminded the Ammonites that they and the Moabites had refused to give Israel permission to travel through their land (Judges 11:14-17). When the Israelites were preparing to enter the Promised Land, they were seduced by the Moabite and Midianite women to participate in idolatrous practices (Numbers 25:1-18).

After 18 years of Moabite oppression, God raised up Ehud to deliver the Israelites (Judges 3:14-17). The text here contains three seemingly irrelevant details: Ehud is left-handed, his sword is doubled-edged and 18 inches long, and Eglon is very fat. Since biblical narrative usually does not include many descriptive details, one can assume that these details have relevance in the forthcoming plot. And indeed they do.

Because Ehud was left-handed, he strapped the sword on his right thigh. A movement with his left hand to his right thigh was less likely to be interpreted by Eglon as reaching for a weapon. The sword was short enough to be concealed, yet long enough to do its job. Eglon's large, cumbersome body made him an easy target for Ehud. After killing Eglon, Ehud led the Israelites to a great victory at Seirah (verses 26-30). Ehud's courageous faith brought peace to the nation of Israel for two generations.

### **Episode three: Deborah: Judges 4-5**

After Ehud died, the Israelites again sinned against God, who then gave them “into the hands of Jabin, a king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor” (Judges 4:2). Joshua had defeated an earlier King Jabin, and had burned the city of Hazor to the ground. But the Israelites had failed to expel all the Canaanites from the land, to their later cost. The city of Hazor had been rebuilt by the time of this later Jabin, who oppressed the Israelites for 20 years.

God responded to Israel's cry for help and used Deborah, a faithful

prophetess who was judging Israel at that time, and Barak, a military commander, to deliver the nation. This detailed story is told twice: once in skillfully narrated prose (verses 4-24) and once in a magnificent poem known as The Song of Deborah (Judges 5:1-31). This song resembles another victory hymn, The Song of Moses and Miriam, or The Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:1-18).

Deborah told Barak to raise an army and go to Mt. Tabor, for God would give Israel a great victory over the Canaanites. Barak agreed to do so only if Deborah would accompany him. Deborah agreed, but told Barak that because of his lack of faith in God's promise of victory, the honor of killing Sisera, who commanded Jabin's army, would fall not to Barak but to a woman (Judges 4:6-9).

Deborah and Barak summoned the Israelites from Kedesh. Not all the tribes responded (Judges 5:13-18). However, Barak was able to assemble some 10,000 men, chiefly from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun. Sisera countered by gathering his troops in the Kishon basin, relying on his 900 iron chariots to overwhelm Barak's force.

But God decided the battle in Israel's favor. He demonstrated his superiority over the Canaanite storm god, Baal, by causing an unexpected thunderstorm to transform the Kishon basin into mud, thus immobilizing the Canaanite chariots. Deborah roused Barak to attack, and he routed Sisera's army. The Israelites would later sing, "The river Kishon swept them away, the age-old river, the river Kishon" (verse 21).

Sisera had managed to escape the initial onslaught of Barak's army and fled to the tent of Heber the Kenite, a friend of Jabin. Heber's wife, Jael, welcomed Sisera and gave him some milk to drink. Sisera, believing he was safe, fell sound asleep. Jael then picked up a tent peg in her left hand and a hammer in her right hand, and drove the peg through Sisera's temple. This act fulfilled Deborah's prophecy and immortalized Jael in Hebrew poetry (verses 24-27).

Shamgar, referred to in Judges 3:31 and 5:6, fought around this time against another enemy of Israel — the "Sea Peoples," a group that included the Philistines. The Israelites eventually gained the upper hand over their enemies, and that region of the land had peace for 40 years (Judges 4:23; 5:31).

## **Deborah**

Some have tried to understand God's selection of Deborah by reasoning that he could not find any man suitable for the job, so he was forced to use

Deborah. While this reasoning may serve to keep male egos intact, it ignores the testimony of Scripture. God is able to use whoever he wants. He does not appoint leaders by using human criteria.

When Samuel considered Eliab a suitable successor to King Saul, God corrected Samuel's limited perception: "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

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Some find it surprising that God used a woman as a judge of Israel. But we should not allow preconceived ideas or prejudices to get in the way of respecting those whom God appoints to lead us. Barak, a man of faith, loyally followed the individual God chose.

The account in Judges reveals that Deborah's personality drew people together. She was also a prophetess and led the people to obey God. God used Deborah to influence Israel to remain faithful long after the battle was over. Leaders inspired by God are concerned with the spiritual well-being of those they are called to serve. Deborah certainly was.

### **Episode four: Gideon: Judges 6-8**

Unfortunately, the Israelites again reverted to their sinful ways and "did evil in the eyes of the Lord" (Judges 6:1). This phrase recurs often in the book of Judges. The Israelites' sin was not only "in the eyes of the Lord," it was also against the Lord. When we sin, although we harm ourselves and others, our sin is ultimately against God because it rejects his laws and his authority over us. God alone, through the death of his Son, Jesus Christ, provides for our forgiveness. David prayed to God, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Psalm 51:4). When we acknowledge that we have sinned against God, we begin to experience God's forgiveness.

This time, God used the Midianites to punish the Israelites. The

Midianites were desert dwellers descended from Abraham through his second wife, Keturah. They proved to be a thorn in Israel's flesh on more than one occasion. During Israel's wanderings in the wilderness, the Midianites conspired with the Moabites to hire Balaam to curse the Israelites (Numbers 22:4-7). When that plot failed, Midianite and Moabite women seduced the Israelites into worshipping Baal, thus causing God to be angry with Israel (Numbers 25:1-9).

Now that the Israelites were settled, the Midianites used different tactics. They swept in from the desert on their camels, destroying the crops and ravaging the land before retreating: "Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the Lord for help" (Judges 6:6).

Once again, the Israelites waited until the situation was desperate before turning to God for help. This recurring theme in the book of Judges teaches us an important lesson. We, like the ancient Israelites, get ourselves into trouble when we leave God out of our lives. And often we make the problem worse by exhausting all other alternatives, turning to God only as a last resort.

We cannot go contrary to God's ways and expect to avoid the consequences of our actions. The apostle Paul wrote: "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows" (Galatians 6:7). But if we turn to God in humility and repentance, he is ready and willing to give us the help we need, as he helped the ancient Israelites when they repented.

However, God also wants us to understand why we get into difficulties. So, before sending the Israelites a deliverer, God sent a prophet to show why the Midianites had been allowed to oppress them:

"This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: I brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. I snatched you from the power of Egypt and from the hand of all your oppressors. I drove them from before you and gave you their land. I said to you, 'I am the Lord your God; do not worship the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live.' But you have not listened to me" (Judges 6:8-10).

God continued to show mercy to the Israelites and raised up a man named Gideon to deliver them. One day, when Gideon was threshing wheat in the confines of a winepress (he was hiding the crop from the Midianites), an angel appeared to him, calling him a "mighty warrior" (verse 12). Gideon was not the brash, self-confident type. He described himself as the least important member of the weakest clan in Manasseh (verse 15).

Throughout the period of the judges, God chose unlikely people and means to deliver Israel. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul wrote, concerning the church, "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame

the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong” (1 Corinthians 1:27).

Like Moses, Gideon needed encouragement before he was ready to begin his task. God told Gideon, “I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together” (Judges 6:16). Gideon asked for a sign that God was with him. Gideon placed an offering of goat meat and unleavened bread on a rock, and when the angel touched the offering with the tip of his staff, fire flared from the rock, consuming the offering.

Gideon was now prepared to accomplish his first task — tearing down his father’s altar to the pagan god Baal — but only at night. He was still afraid of his family and the local townsmen (verse 27). Gideon had taken his first cautious step of faith. When the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples joined forces against Israel, “the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon, and he blew a trumpet, summoning the Abiezrites to follow him. He sent messengers throughout Manasseh, calling them to arms, and also into Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali, so that they too went up to meet them” (verses 34-35).

Even after this, Gideon needed further evidence that God was with him, so God patiently gave him two more signs (verses 36-40).

## **Gideon: putting out fleeces**

Gideon said to God, “If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised — look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said.”

And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew — a bowlful of water. Then Gideon said to God, “Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece. This time make the fleece dry and the ground covered with dew.” That night God did so. Only the fleece was dry; all the ground was covered with dew. (Judges 6:36-40)

Demanding signs should not be viewed entirely as an indication of a lack of faith by Gideon. After all, he had a unique calling and wanted to be certain of God’s will. Gideon’s request may be understandable considering the magnitude of his mission and the seeming impossibility of accomplishing it.

Today, however, God guides Christians through his Word and Spirit (John 16:13-15; 2 Timothy 3:15-17). Putting out fleeces is not the decision-making method God has given us: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests

to God” (Philippians 4:6).

God is always willing to spend time working with his people, but eventually he expects results. Having bolstered Gideon’s faith, God now impressed upon him that it was only through faith, not military strength, that Israel would prevail over Midian.

God commanded Gideon to dismiss all of the fearful men, upon which 22,000 men left, and 10,000 remained (Judges 7:3). God then told an undoubtedly bewildered Gideon, “There are still too many men” (verse 4). God eventually left Gideon with an army of just 300 men.

In the night, Gideon arranged his meager troops around the valley in which the Midianites were camped. At Gideon’s signal, they lit torches, blew trumpets and shouted, “A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!” (Judges 7:20).

Gideon’s army watched as the Midianites panicked and retreated in disorder, without a single Israelite needing to draw a sword (verse 22). Gideon may have been fearful at first, but he grew as God worked through him. In the remainder of the story, three incidents show how he developed confidence and wisdom.

The first incident involved the leaders of Ephraim, whom Gideon had not initially asked to join in the fight against Midian (Judges 8:1). Later, during the heat of the battle, Gideon called on them to join in the pursuit of the escaping Midianites. After the battle, the Ephraimites angrily confronted Gideon. Being God’s appointed judge, Gideon could have told them he was following God’s orders. Instead, he assured them diplomatically that their contribution had been even greater than his own. Gideon pointed out that their rear-guard action led to the capture of two enemy officers, thereby leaving the Midianites without effective military leadership (verses 2-3). By complimenting the Ephraimites, rather than justifying himself, Gideon avoided a potentially volatile situation. Gideon’s action exemplifies the wise saying: “A gentle answer turns away wrath” (Proverbs 15:1).

The second incident concerns the men of Succoth and Peniel, who refused to help Gideon pursue the Midianites. But Gideon had learned that God’s work would always succeed, with or without the help of any particular human being. Undeterred, Gideon overtook and vanquished the Midianite army, which considerably outnumbered his own.

The third incident illustrates Gideon’s acknowledgment of God as the true king of Israel (Judges 8:22-23). Though the people wanted to make Gideon their king, Gideon refused, reminding them that God was their true king. Gideon understood the importance of putting God first — for the sake of the nation as well as each individual citizen.



These incidents illustrate the extent to which Gideon had grown. He started as a man who doubted he could fulfill his God-assigned role. He ended as a great man of faith, accomplishing his tasks with tact, determination and humility.

### **Abimelech: the man who would be king**

When Gideon died, one of his sons, Abimelech, attempted to usurp the title King of Israel — an office and position reserved for God (Judges 9). Abimelech's short reign was marked by treachery and bloodshed. It was a foretaste of what would happen to the Israelites if they rejected God as their king.

Abimelech was a son of Gideon (Judges 8:31), but he did not share his father's love for God. In sharp contrast to the judges who acknowledged God as the only true king over Israel, Abimelech aggressively sought the throne of Israel for his own ends. Viewing his 70 brothers as potential rivals, Abimelech murdered all but one of them. He was supported in this wickedness by his mother's family and the leaders of Shechem. Only Jotham, the youngest, escaped. Abimelech then had himself crowned king (Judges 9:5-6).

When news of this reached Jotham, he climbed up to a rock ledge on the south side of the nearby Mt. Gerizim, and cried out God's warning to the people of Shechem below (verse 7). From this natural pulpit, Jotham related a fable about trees vying for supremacy: "One day the trees went out to anoint a king for themselves" (see verses 8-15). The olive tree, the fig tree and the vine rejected the offer of kingship. They were content to grow where God had planted them and to produce the kind of fruit God desired. The implication here is that these righteous trees refused to tear their roots from the soil and soar above the other trees in a presumptuous act of self-promotion.

"Gideon...represented one of the good trees invited to become king [Judges 8:22], though exact identifications are not needed. Noble, capable leaders like Gideon believed that the theocracy, not a monarchy, was the best form of government" (*The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, pp. 439-440).

The thornbush represented Abimelech, who craved power and prestige (Judges 9:15). Its invitation to "take refuge in my shade" refers to the traditional role of the king, who offered special protection to those traveling on his behalf. They were said to be "in his shade" (Hosea 14:7; see also Isaiah 30:2 and Daniel 4:12). In reality, as the original audience knew, a thornbush cannot give shade.

Jotham's point was this: a productive person would be too busy doing good to want to bother with power politics. A worthless person, on the other hand, would be glad to accept the honor — but he would destroy the people he ruled. Abimelech, like a thornbush, could offer Israel no real protection or security. (*Life Application Bible*, NIV, commentary on Judges 9:7-15)

The words “let fire come out of the thornbush and consume the cedars of Lebanon” (Judges 9:15) refer to the wrath of Abimelech, which would come upon the leaders of Shechem. This is exactly what happened: Abimelech eventually destroyed Shechem (verse 45) and burned its leaders in the city tower (verses 46-49). God's prophecy against Abimelech (verse 20) also came true: This renegade Israelite was finally killed at Thebez (verses 50-54). His brief flirtation with kingship had cost him his life.

Throughout Israel's history, Abimelech was remembered as the man who was killed by a woman (2 Samuel 11:21). The man who would be king became an object of scorn and derision.

### **Episode five: Jephthah: Judges 10:1-12:7**

Tola and Jair (Judges 10:1-5) were among the so-called “minor” judges. They performed judicial functions in Israel and were responsible for administering and maintaining the law within the society. The “major” judges, on the other hand, were predominately military leaders who delivered Israel from external enemies.

The next of these major judges was Jephthah, an unlikely prospect for a godly leader (he was the son of a prostitute). But he was a mighty warrior, and God used him to drive back the Ammonites (Judges 11:1-33).

Unfortunately, Jephthah made a rash vow to God (verses 30-31). The nature of Jephthah's vow has been vigorously debated by scholars over the years. Opinion is still divided on this issue. Those who claim Jephthah had human sacrifice in mind when he made the vow argue that:

1. He was from an area where heathen religion and human sacrifice were common. In his eyes, it may not have seemed like a sin.
2. Jephthah probably did not have a background in religious law. If so, he would have been ignorant of God's command against human sacrifice.

On the other hand, those who believe that Jephthah would never have made a vow involving human sacrifice claim that:

1. As leader of the people, Jephthah must have been familiar with God's law, which clearly forbade human sacrifice (Leviticus 18:21; 20:1-5).
2. During this period, the standard Israelite house accommodated

livestock as well as the family (Robert G. Boling, *Judges*, The Anchor Bible, Vol. 6A, p. 208). Jephthah may not have thought through what might happen if he returned in triumph. Shockingly, his daughter came out, not a farm animal.

Whatever Jephthah had in mind when he made the vow, did he sacrifice his daughter? Some think he did, because his vow was to make a burnt offering. This view predominated among Jews and early Christians alike: “With regard to Jephthah’s vow, the view expressed so distinctly by Josephus...was the one which generally prevailed in the earlier times among both Rabbins [Rabbis] and fathers of the church, [namely] that Jephthah put his daughter to death and burned her upon the altar as a bleeding sacrifice to Jehovah” (C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 2, p. 388).

Other scholars conclude that Jephthah did not sacrifice his daughter. They offer three major arguments:

1. Even during their worst periods of spiritual collapse, there were certain abominations the Israelites would not tolerate — for example, the Gibeonites’ gang rape of the Levite’s concubine (Judges 19–20). Undoubtedly, human sacrifice would have been another such abomination.
2. No legitimate priest would have helped Jephthah carry out his vow if a human was to be the sacrifice.
3. Judges 11:39 says that Jephthah’s daughter never married, not that she died. This implies that she was set apart for service to God, and not killed.

In any case, Jephthah’s vow brought him terrible grief. This should caution us today. It is so easy, in the heat of the moment or during an intense personal trial, to make foolish promises to God that one deeply regrets later. “Making spiritual ‘deals’ only brings disappointment. God does not want promises for the future, but obedience for today” (*Life Application Bible*, NIV, commentary on Judges 11:34-35).

### **Episode six: Samson: Judges 12:8-16:31**

Three judges are mentioned following Jephthah’s death: Ibzan, Elon and Abdon (Judges 12:8-15). Although we know little about any of them, it is evident that the unrest in Israel continued and that “the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord” (Judges 13:1). Consequently, God delivered the Israelites into the hands of the Philistines.

The Philistines lived on the west side of Canaan, along the Mediterranean

coast. From the time of Samson until David, the Philistines were the major enemy force in the region and posed a constant threat to Israel. They were fierce warriors, having the advantage over Israel in numbers, tactical expertise and technology. For example, they knew how to make weapons out of iron (1 Samuel 13:19-22).

An angel of the Lord visited the parents of Samson, informing them that they would have a son who would begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines (Judges 13:2-5). According to the angel, Samson was to be a Nazirite, a person who took a vow to be set apart for God's service (verse 5). Although a Nazirite vow was sometimes temporary, in Samson's case it was for life. A Nazirite was not to cut his hair, touch a dead body, eat grapes or drink anything containing alcohol (Numbers 6).

Most of the judges God used were unlikely heroes. Ehud was a Benjamite (Hebrew: *ben-btayemini*, which means "son of my right hand") who was left-handed (Hebrew: *'itter yad-yemino*, which means "handicapped in his right hand"). Shamgar used not a sword or spear, but an oxgoad to deliver Israel. In a male-dominated society, it was Deborah, a woman, who inspired Israel's victory over Sisera's army, and Jael, a gentile woman, who slew Sisera — with a tent peg. Gideon came from the weakest clan in Manasseh, and Jephthah was an outcast son of a prostitute.

As a man dedicated to God from before birth, and one whom God's Spirit imbued with superhuman strength, Samson seems to be an ideal hero. Yet, even here, it was Samson's weakness — his attraction to Philistine women — that God used to deliver Israel.

Samson wanted to marry a Philistine woman from Timnah, against his parents' wishes. However, "his parents did not know that this was from the Lord, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines" (Judges 14:4). One day, on his way to Timnah, Samson was attacked by a lion. Samson, empowered by the Spirit of God, simply tore the lion apart with his bare hands (verse 6). Sometime later, Samson was surprised to see a swarm of bees and some honey in the lion's carcass.

At the beginning of the seven-day wedding feast, Samson posed a riddle concerning this unusual sight to his 30 companions: "Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet" (verse 14). The stakes were high — if the companions solved the riddle, Samson would owe each of them a set of clothing, which was expensive in those days.

The companions were unable to solve the riddle, so they threatened Samson's wife: "Coax your husband into explaining the riddle for us, or we will burn you and your father's household to death" (verse 15). Samson's

frightened wife finally cajoled the answer from him and promptly told his companions.

When the companions gave Samson the right answer, he immediately realized his wife had betrayed his secret. In his fury, he stormed up to the Philistine city of Ashkelon, killed 30 men, stripped them and gave their clothes to the 30 companions. Still burning with anger, Samson left his wife in Timnah and returned to his father's house. In the meantime, Samson's wife was given to his chief companion.



When Samson found this out, he determined to wreak full vengeance upon the Philistines. Samson was ruthless, using any available means to achieve his ends. Note the cruel way he used foxes to destroy the Philistine agriculture (Judges 15:4-5). The Philistines retaliated by burning Samson's wife and her family — ironically, the fate she had hoped to avoid by seducing Samson's secret riddle from him. This action only served to anger Samson further. He slaughtered many Philistines in a series of direct, one-man attacks.

Eventually, the Philistines marched in force into Judah, demanding that Samson be handed over to them. Samson allowed the men of Judah to bind him and give him to the Philistines.

Once in the Philistine camp, however, Samson was again empowered by the Spirit of God. He flexed his muscles and the ropes snapped. Then he seized the most unlikely weapon of all — the jawbone of a donkey — and slew 1,000 men. This herculean effort left Samson extremely thirsty. He prayed to God: “You have given your servant this great victory. Must I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?” (verse 18). God responded to Samson's prayer by opening up a spring. “When Samson drank, his strength returned” (verse 19).

On a later occasion, Samson decided to spend the night with a prostitute in the Philistine stronghold of Gaza. The Philistine military made sure that Samson could not escape from the city and waited until dawn for a chance to kill him.

Unlike Ehud and Jael, Samson could not be accused of subtlety in dealing with his enemies. But what he lacked in subtlety, he made up for in strength. In the middle of the night, Samson “got up and took hold of the doors of the city gate, together with the two posts, and tore them loose, bar and all.

He lifted them to his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that faces Hebron” (Judges 16:3). An unusual method of escape, no doubt, but one that highly embarrassed the Philistines.

Unfortunately, Samson was still obsessed by Philistine women. A woman named Delilah had Samson’s eye at this time. Unknown to Samson, each of the Philistine rulers had promised to give Delilah the vast sum of 1,100 shekels of silver apiece, if she could find out the secret of Samson’s strength.

Like water eroding stone, Delilah slowly wore down Samson’s resistance. Eventually, he told her the secret: “‘No razor has ever been used on my head,’ he said, ‘because I have been a Nazirite set apart to God since birth. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man’” (verse 17).

So one fateful day, Delilah soothed Samson to sleep on her lap and got a man to shave Samson’s head. When Samson awoke, his strength had departed, and the Philistines overpowered and blinded him (verses 19-21).

The Philistines threw Samson into prison and put him to work, grinding at a mill. As Samson worked long, arduous hours at the mill, he undoubtedly reflected on his life, on how he had allowed his weaknesses to come between him and God. Yet Samson also knew that God was merciful and forgiving.

The Philistine rulers decided to organize a great celebration in honor of Dagon, their god of grain and chief deity. “How vividly the Philistines remembered Samson’s ‘reign of terror’! It had been a time of devastation and death, and even Dagon’s grain was put to the torch (15:5). But this was replaced by laughter and feasting as the drunken Philistines called for the once invincible Samson to appear before them (v. 25). The word translated ‘entertain’ (*sa-haq*) is literally ‘play with,’ ‘amuse.’... Clearly the Philistines intended to mock Samson as he performed for their amusement (cf. Gen 21:9)” (*The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 479).

But God, the only God, had delivered Samson into the hands of the Philistines in order to fulfill his purpose — as they were about to find out! With the help of a servant, Samson located the two central pillars of the temple. In one last fervent prayer, he asked God, “Please strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines” (Judges 16:28). Then, with a mighty push, Samson dislodged the supporting pillars, causing them to slide off their stone bases. “And down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it” (verse 30).

In spite of Samson’s past, God still answered his prayer and destroyed the pagan temple and worshippers. God still loved him. He was willing to hear Samson’s prayer of confession and repentance and use him this final time. One of the effects of sin in our lives is to keep us from feeling like praying. But perfect moral behavior is not a condition for prayer. Don’t let guilt feelings over sin keep you from your only means of restoration. No matter how long you have been away from God, he is ready to hear from you and restore you to a right relationship. Every situation can be salvaged if you are willing to turn again to him. If God could still work in Samson’s situation, he can certainly make something worthwhile out of yours. (*Life Application Bible*, NIV, commentary on Judges 16:28-30)

## The Danites move north: Judges 17-18

The last five chapters of Judges relate two episodes that occurred early in the period of the judges.



Both events illustrate an almost complete disregard for God’s law. One statement recurs frequently in these episodes: “In those days Israel had no king” (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). Twice it is followed by the

ominous addition: “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6; 21:25, NKJV). Although the books of Samuel and Kings later show that a king was not the solution to Israel’s problems, the book of Judges assures us that Israel’s premonarchal history was no golden era either.

The first episode concerns an Ephraimite named Micah, who stole a large quantity of silver from his mother. When she pronounced a curse on whoever stole the silver, Micah confessed and returned the money. Supposedly dedicating the returned money to God’s use, Micah’s mother made an idol from the silver — something expressly forbidden by God’s law. Then Micah set up a shrine in his home and hired a Levite — a grandson of Moses — somehow thinking this would legitimize this pagan form of worship.

At this time, the Danites had been unable to drive out most of the inhabitants from the territory that had been allotted to them, so they looked to settle somewhere else. The Danites sent five warriors to scout out potential

settlements. These scouts, who spent a night at Micah's house during their travels, eventually found a suitable land, inhabited by unsuspecting locals, at Laish. The scouts reported back to the Danites, and much of the tribe decided to move there and invade.

On the way, they passed by Micah's house, where the scouts had previously spent the night on the way to Laish. The Danites seized all the household gods and told the Levite to be a priest for them instead. The Levite readily acquiesced. Micah, angry at what had happened, gathered some men together and pursued the Danites. But when the Danites refused to return the idols and threatened to attack him, Micah realized he was hopelessly outnumbered and gave up. The Danites successfully attacked the people of Laish, rebuilt the city and renamed it Dan. This city, about 100 miles north of the Danites' allotted territory, was now the northernmost Israelite city.

Nobody in this entire episode was at all interested in following God's ways. And yet the next episode is even worse.

### **Civil war: Judges 19-21**

Another Levite, his concubine and his servant were traveling from Bethlehem toward the hill country of Ephraim. On the way, they stopped for the night in the Benjamite city of Gibeah, where only an Ephraimite resident offered them lodging. That night, some Gibeonite men pounded on the Ephraimite's door, demanding he bring out the Levite so they could sexually abuse him. Gibeah had become like the city of Sodom, which God destroyed (Genesis 19).

To save themselves, the host and the Levite callously threw out the Levite's concubine. The Gibeonites raped and abused the woman until dawn. When the Levite opened the door the next morning "to continue on his way" (Judges 19:27) and found his concubine lying on the threshold, his crass response reflected his own depravity: "Get up; let's go" (verse 28).

Many scholars believe that the phrase "But there was no answer" (verse 28) implies that the woman was dead. Some disagree, claiming the Hebrew text is deliberately vague here, allowing for the possibility that the woman was still alive until the Levite dismembered her and then sent the body parts to the 12 tribes (verse 29) (see, for example, Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 238-239).

When the other Israelite tribes heard of the Gibeonites' sin, they demanded that the tribe of Benjamin hand over the guilty men for execution. The Benjamites refused. The resulting civil war between Benjamin and the other 11 tribes ended with heavy casualties on both sides. The tribe of Benjamin was virtually annihilated (Judges 20:46-48). Regretting their actions,



the Israelites strove desperately to find some way to preserve the tribe of Benjamin. They eventually resorted to the dubious means of killing the men of Jabesh Gilead (who had refused to fight against Benjamin) along with their wives and children. They spared only the virgin women of the city, and gave them to the surviving Benjamites. Those Benjamites still without wives kidnapped, with the Israelites' approval, young women from Shiloh.

These last five chapters of Judges are a catalog of the sins God warned against. They illustrate dramatically the inevitable penalties — the suffering, heartache and misery — of sin.

### **God's faithfulness**

The period of the judges — “Israel's iron age,” as it has been called (in a spiritual, not economic, sense) — was a period of adaptation to the conditions of life in Canaan, a period of struggle for national survival. If we were restricted to the book of Judges, the struggle might appear foredoomed to defeat; how defeat was turned into victory is told in the sequel, in the books of Samuel.

Religiously, [Judges] is presented as a period during which the nation was being fashioned by its God in the furnace of affliction to be His chosen instrument for the furtherance of His purpose in the world.

Unedifying as the details of many of the individual episodes may be thought, together they portray the God of Israel's unceasing faithfulness to His covenant with His people, in spite of their recurrent unfaithfulness, as He deals with them in mercy and judgment, showing them what is practically involved for them in being His people and having Him as their God.

Later generations looked back to the period of the judges as one during which God acted signally for the defense of His people. Thus Samuel, in his farewell address to Israel, reminds them how God....” sent Jerubbaal and Barak....and delivered you out of the hand of your enemies on every side; and you dwelt in safety” (1 Samuel 12:8-11). Other incidents in the period of the judges are referred to in 2 Samuel 11:21; Isaiah 9:4; 10:26.

But the most outstanding tribute to the men of this period is paid in Hebrews 11:32ff., where “Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah” are named among those who “through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises,...escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight” (F.F. Bruce, “Judges,” in *The Eerdmans Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed., pp. 254-255).

The book of Judges closes with the words “all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25, NRSV). Is this happening today, too?

## 32. EXPLORING RUTH

### What's in a name?

Ruth is the leading character in this book, which is named after her. The name Ruth means “mercy.” The story shows that God’s grace and mercy extend beyond Israel to include all peoples.



### Outline

Ruth can be read as a drama in four acts, with a prologue and epilogue attached. The prologue tells us how Naomi, her husband and two sons went to Moab, where her sons married. Eventually, Naomi’s husband and sons died, and she decided to return to Bethlehem in Judea (1:1-7).

In the first act, Naomi tells her Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, to stay in Moab. Orpah eventually agreed, but Ruth refused to

leave Naomi and accompanied her to Bethlehem (1:8-22). The next act sees Ruth gathering barley in the fields of Naomi's relative, Boaz, who showed special concern for Ruth (2:1-23).

The third act takes place at the threshing floor where, at Naomi's instigation, Ruth hides until Boaz falls asleep and then quietly lies down by his feet. When Boaz awakes, Ruth expresses her desire to marry him according to the custom of the kinsman-redeemer. But Boaz tells her that another man has a prior claim (3:1-18). Finally, at the city gate, the other relative renounces his claim, and Boaz marries Ruth (4:1-12). The epilogue relates Naomi's joy at this turn of events and then lists some of Ruth's descendants, including David (4:13-18).

## How to read this book

In stark contrast to Judges, the book of Ruth shows us a community that did what was right in God's eyes. It is

the story of God's grace in the midst of difficult circumstances. Ruth's story occurred during the time of the judges — a period of disobedience, idolatry, and violence. Even in times of crisis and deepest despair, there are those who follow God and through whom God works. No matter how discouraging or antagonistic the world may seem, there are always people who follow God. He will use anyone who is open to him to achieve his purposes. (*Life Application Bible*, NIV, Introduction to Ruth)

## Learning about God

Our fascination with the characters of Ruth, Naomi and Boaz notwithstanding, "God is the primary actor in the drama" (Edward F. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth*, The Anchor Bible, Vol. 7, p. 29). Even though human beings are free moral agents, God's unseen hand directs events to accomplish his purpose, transforming Naomi's sorrow into exultant joy and rewarding Ruth's commitment to Israel's God and community with an enduring place of honor in its heritage.

In Boaz, we see a foreshadowing of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. "Ruth's inability to do anything to alter her estate typifies absolute human helplessness (Rom. 5:6); and Boaz's willingness to pay the complete price (4:9) foreshadows Christ's full payment for our salvation (1 Cor. 6:20; Gal. 3:13; 1 Pet. 1:18, 19)" (*The Spirit-Filled Life Bible*, NKJV, Introduction to Ruth).

## Other topics

- Steadfast love: According to rabbinic tradition, the main theme of Ruth is steadfast love (Hebrew: *chesed*, meaning “faithfulness born out of a sense of caring and commitment”). All the main characters in the book — Ruth, Naomi and Boaz — acted with *chesed*.
- Salvation: The story of Ruth takes place between the seasons of Passover and Pentecost. (Pentecost came at the end of the grain harvest season.) In the Hebrew Bible, Ruth is one of the Megilloth (Festival Scrolls) and is read during Pentecost. In accepting the God of Israel, Ruth foreshadows the gentiles becoming a part of spiritual Israel, the church. This became possible only after the Pentecost that followed Christ’s ascension (Acts 2).

## What this book means for you

If the most effective teaching is by example, this book can teach us much about how to live:

The religious truths found in this book relate more to practical life than to abstract theology. Loyalty, love, kindness, the value of persons, and the need to understand one another stand out. In the midst of the chaos then in the land, meaning could be found by returning to the first principles of simple truth. The book of Ruth tells us that no matter how bad things may be, goodness can exist, if we are willing to make the effort. (Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Baker’s Bible Handbook*, p. 166)

## **33. RUTH: ROMANCE AND REDEMPTION**

### **Naomi and Ruth: Ruth 1**

“In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man’s name was Elimelech, his wife’s name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion” (verses 1-2).

Eventually, Elimelech died and Naomi was left with her two sons, who took Moabite wives, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After about 10 years, Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi had lost both her husband and her sons. When Naomi heard that the famine in Judah had ended, she had no reason to stay in Moab and decided to return home (verses 5-6). She told her daughters-in-law: “Go back, each of you, to your mother’s home. May the Lord show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband” (verses 8-9).

Naomi then kissed her daughters-in-law good-bye, but they were reluctant to leave. Naomi wanted Orpah and Ruth to start a new life — to marry again — but she told them she could not provide them husbands, and so again she urged them to return home (verses 11-13). Naomi’s comment here refers to the biblical custom of Levirate marriage, by which a dead man’s unmarried brother was obligated to care for his widow (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). Naomi could provide no new brothers-in-law for the women to marry.

Orpah was convinced by Naomi’s plea, and tearfully kissed her mother-in-law good-bye. But Ruth pleaded with Naomi, “Don’t urge me to leave you

or turn back from you” (Ruth 1:16). Unlike Orpah, she did not return to her own people and gods, but chose Naomi’s people and, significantly, Naomi’s God. In one of the most famous passages of the Bible, Ruth pledged to Naomi: “Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me” (verses 16-17).

As God’s chosen nation, Israel was to be God’s servant as a light to the nations in witness to him. Sadly, the nation often fell short, but God’s purpose for his people did not. In the story of Ruth — which was set in the time of the judges, a period of much unfaithfulness to God — we see that Ruth became a member of the community of God largely because of the examples of faithful people in that community.

This is a great lesson for us today. The Israelites were not the only people God loved. God chose the Israelites to be the people through whom the rest of the world would ultimately come to know him. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ made this possible: “He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:14). Through Christ, the entire world can come to know God.

The book of Ruth, which is the festival scroll read at Pentecost, foreshadows what the Day of Pentecost began to make possible — gentiles becoming part of spiritual Israel, the church. On the Pentecost after Christ’s resurrection, the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus’ followers, thus beginning the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy: “I will pour out my Spirit on all people” (Joel 2:28; Acts 2:17). Later, during his meeting with the Roman centurion Cornelius, the apostle Peter acknowledged: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts people from every nation who fear him and do what is right” (Acts 10:34-35).

None of us should feel disqualified to serve God because of our sex, race, color or national or ethnic origin. The gentile Ruth, for example, became a great-grandmother of King David, through whom Jesus was descended. God can use anyone to do his work and to prepare for his kingdom. The Day of Pentecost also pictures the church, foreshadowed in the book of Ruth by the community of Bethlehem, being a light to the world.

When Naomi eventually returned with Ruth to Bethlehem, she was warmly greeted, but she felt discouraged, saying: “Call me Mara [bitter], because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi [pleasant]?” (Ruth 1:20-21).

Naomi was a righteous woman who had suffered the great anguish of losing her husband and two sons. Orpah and Ruth had shared her grief, but

Naomi still considered herself to be the most bitterly unfortunate of the three (verse 13). However, she would gradually come to understand that, despite the tragedies she had undergone, God had not abandoned her. Naomi would yet experience great joy in her life and in her God.

The chapter closes, as do the next two chapters, with a succinct summary of the preceding action, which simultaneously sets the stage for what is about to unfold: “So Naomi returned from Moab...arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning” (verse 22).

## **Levirate marriage**

The book of Ruth is permeated with ancient Israelite customs that seem strange to us: the gleaning of grain by the poor (Ruth 2:2), inheritance laws (Ruth 4:9-10), the removal of sandals in business exchanges (Ruth 4:7). Another custom alluded to in the story is that of levirate marriage (Ruth 1:11-12).

If a married man died without any children to carry on his name and inheritance, it was his unmarried brother’s responsibility to marry the widow. The purpose: “The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel” (Deuteronomy 25:6). This is known as a levirate marriage, from the Latin word for brother-in-law, *levir*.

According to *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, “Levirate marriage existed in Ugarit, in the Middle Assyrian (no. 33) and Hittite law codes (no. 193), and possibly in the Nuzi texts” (vol. 4, p. 567). It was a common middle eastern custom.

The earliest biblical example of a levirate relationship is complex. It concerns Judah’s sons: Er, Onan and Shelah (Genesis 38). When Er died, Judah told Onan to have children by his brother Er’s widow, Tamar, so that Er’s name would carry on. Onan, knowing that any children borne by Tamar would legally be Er’s, slept with Tamar but selfishly ensured that she did not have any children. God was displeased and put Onan to death. Judah did not then give Tamar to Shelah as his wife, lest Shelah die also.

When Tamar realized that Judah would not allow Shelah to fulfill the obligations of levirate marriage, she disguised herself as a prostitute and sat where she knew Judah would approach. Judah did not recognize her and purchased her services. In due course, Tamar became pregnant and bore Judah twin sons, Perez and Zerah.

We do not know why Tamar embarked upon this action, but we are told that Judah acknowledged, “She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn’t give her to my son Shelah” (verse 26). She had been faithful to her family obligations, whereas Judah had not been. Through her son Perez, Tamar

became an ancestor of Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:3, 16).

In the book of Ruth, Naomi told Ruth and Orpah that she had no other sons who could perform the duties of levirate husbands (Ruth 1:11). Boaz was a near relative of Ruth's late husband, Mahlon. Boaz performed the duties of kinsman-redeemer (Hebrew: *go'el*) by marrying Ruth and buying the property that had belonged to Mahlon's father, Elimelech (Ruth 4:9-10).

The son of Boaz and Ruth would thus become the legal inheritor of Elimelech's property, a "son" of Elimelech and Naomi (verse 17). This seems to be an extension of levirate marriage as discussed in Deuteronomy, but many details concerning the transaction remain unknown.

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### Letting her light shine

Ruth is rightly remembered for her pledge of total devotion and loyalty to Naomi (Ruth 1:16-17). Ruth clung to Naomi even at the cost of renouncing her people and her gods in favor of Naomi's people, the Israelites, and Naomi's God, Yahweh: "Your people will be my people and your God my God" (verse 16). The totality of this commitment is emphasized by its terseness (merely four words in the Hebrew: *'amekb 'ami we'lohai'elohai*, which literally means "your people my people; your God my God"). Yet Ruth extended her commitment still further, beyond death itself: "Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried" (verse 17).

These words may sound anticlimactic compared to accepting Naomi's people and her God. But to understand their significance, we must appreciate the cultural mind-set of the ancient Near Eastern peoples. All the death accounts of the patriarchs mention the burial, often at length (Genesis 23:1-20; 25:8-10; 35:19-20, 28-29; 49:29-33; 50:1-14, 24-26). When a patriarch died, he was "gathered to his people." Jacob and Joseph died in Egypt, but their bones were laid to rest in the Promised Land. The location of burial was important to them.

Ruth concluded her pledge by calling down God's punishment on herself if "even death" (Ruth 1:17, NRSV — a preferred reading to "anything but death") parted her from Naomi. Even after the death of Naomi, Ruth would live, die and be buried in Bethlehem. In so doing, Ruth identified herself with Naomi's community in the most absolute manner possible.

Ruth was willing to forgo everything — her future in Moab, her people, her gods and even her ancestral burial plot — to be joined with Naomi. Yet as we remember Ruth, as we acknowledge and strive to emulate her devotion, her loyalty, her total commitment, let us not forget that other remarkable woman, Naomi. As F.B. Huey, Jr., explains, "Naomi's consistent living must have so impressed her daughter-in-law to cause her to abandon her homeland and her gods" ("Ruth," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 524).

What sort of woman was this Naomi, to inspire such affection in a daughter-in-law? What relationship with God must she have had to cause Ruth to forsake the gods of Moab and worship Naomi's God alone?

The biblical account is sparse, but it witnesses to the powerful effect Naomi had on those around her. Even during her more sorrowful moments, she put the welfare of others first. Naomi's example brought Ruth into the Israelite community of faith, foreshadowing the day when gentiles would be grafted into spiritual Israel, the church.

Naomi is also an example for us all. Jesus Christ, the "light of the world" (John 9:5), told his followers: "You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14). William Barclay comments, "It may well be said that this is the greatest compliment that was ever paid to the individual Christian, for in it Jesus commands the Christian to be what he himself claimed to be" (*The Gospel of Matthew*, rev. ed., The Daily Study Bible Series, vol. 1, p. 122). A Christian is not merely a follower of Christ, but a Christlike person.

The Christian is further commanded: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (verse 16, NKJV). Naomi's light shone, and Ruth glorified God; we should let our lights shine so that others may glorify God.

## Ruth meets Boaz: Ruth 2

In Israel, the barley harvest began in the spring. The community in Bethlehem observed God's law concerning harvesting: "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest.... Leave them for the poor and the alien" (Leviticus 19:9-10).

Ruth was both poor and an alien. She had few prospects in Judah, as Naomi had warned her. However, she was able to provide for Naomi and herself by working hard gleaning the grain left by the harvesters (Ruth 2:2).

There is an almost idyllic quality to the Bethlehem community described in Ruth, which — especially when one considers it existed during the turbulent period of the judges — testifies powerfully to the difference a few people living God's way can make. Bethlehem would later become famous, first as the "town of David" and later as the birthplace of the Messiah (Luke 2:4-7).

"As it turned out, [Ruth] found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech" (Ruth 2:3). Boaz was a "man of standing [Hebrew: *'ish gibbor chail*, implying Boaz was physically impressive and had noble character]" (verse 1).

Boaz asked his foreman who the stranger gleaning in the field was. The foreman replied that she was the young woman who had accompanied

Naomi back from Moab. Boaz then told Ruth to continue gleaning in his field, and helped her far beyond the demands of the law. He even ordered his harvesters to make Ruth especially welcome, enabling her to gather extra barley.

Ruth then asked Boaz, “Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me — a foreigner?” (verse 10). Ruth’s expression about finding favor in Boaz’s eyes, used by her on three occasions (verses 2, 10, 13), was a culturally appropriate way of showing respect. Ruth thus displayed the type of attitude the apostle Paul later taught Christians to have, when he said, “In humility consider others better than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3).

Boaz, in turn, was impressed by Ruth’s reputation: “I’ve been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband — how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May the Lord repay you for what you have done” (Ruth 2:11). A good reputation, founded on God-centered character, is of great value (Proverbs 22:1; Ecclesiastes 7:1).

At the end of the day, Ruth returned home to Naomi with an exceptionally generous amount of grain. Naomi immediately realized someone had taken special care of Ruth, and upon hearing that it was Boaz, she exclaimed, “The Lord bless him!” and “He [the reader is made to ask to whom Naomi is referring — Boaz or Yahweh] has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead” (Ruth 2:20). Naomi’s bitterness toward God had begun to lessen. She now gladly encouraged Ruth to continue to glean in Boaz’s field.

### **Naomi’s plan for Ruth: Ruth 3**

Ruth continued to glean in Boaz’s field for about seven weeks, until the end of the barley and wheat harvests, around the time of Pentecost. Naomi had earlier hoped that Ruth would find “rest” (Hebrew: *minuchah*) in the home of another husband in Moab (Ruth 1:9). Now Naomi said to Ruth, “Should I not try to find a home [Hebrew: *manoach*, which, like the related word *minuchah*, means “a condition of rest and security attained by marriage”] for you, where you will be well provided for?” (Ruth 3:1). Naomi’s hopes for Ruth now centered upon Boaz, who might act as a “kinsman-redeemer” (verses 1-9).

A kinsman-redeemer was a relative who could redeem a poor person’s inheritance (Leviticus 25:25). In certain circumstances, where there was no heir, a near relative could act as kinsman-redeemer by marrying the relative’s widow to redeem the inheritance. A relative was not obligated to act as kinsman-redeemer, however. If no relative chose to help, the widow would probably live in poverty.

Naomi therefore suggested to her daughter-in-law a plan of action: “Wash and perfume yourself, and put on your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don’t let [Boaz] know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do” (Ruth 3:3-4).

Ruth did as Naomi told her. Something startled Boaz in the middle of the night, and he awoke to discover a woman lying at his feet. Boaz asked who she was. Ruth identified herself and then seized the initiative: “Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer” (verse 9). Ruth was boldly asking Boaz for a pledge from him to marry her. This same expression is used for God’s relationship with Israel: “I spread the corner of my garment over you” (Ezekiel 16:8). Ruth’s action was in accord with the law of levirate marriage, which required the initiative of the widow in seeking the marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5, 7-10).

Boaz felt honored by Ruth’s request because she was “a woman of noble character [Hebrew: *’esheth chail*, the term applied to the ‘Proverbs 31 woman’]” (Ruth 3:11). Boaz informed her, however, that Naomi had a closer relative. This man had the first option to marry Ruth and redeem Naomi’s inheritance. Boaz assured Ruth that if this other relative was not prepared to act as kinsman-redeemer, then he certainly would be. Ruth would now have to wait until the matter was settled with the other relative.

## Ruth, Boaz and Christ

To appreciate how Boaz foreshadowed Christ, we must first understand the significance of an ancient Israelite law concerning the kinsman-redeemer (Hebrew: *go’el*). This law helped ensure that inherited land remained within the family. It stated, “If one of your countrymen becomes poor and sells some of his property, his nearest relative is to come and redeem [Hebrew: *ga’al*, the same root as *go’el*] what his countryman has sold” (Leviticus 25:25).

Both words, *go’el* and *ga’al*, occur frequently in chapters 2 and 3 of Ruth. Since Boaz was a kinsman (*go’el*) of Naomi, he was eventually able to redeem (*ga’al*) her land through marriage to Naomi’s daughter-in-law Ruth. (Presumably, Naomi and her husband had previously sold the land before they moved to Moab.)

The concern Boaz displayed as kinsman-redeemer to the widow reflects an aspect of God’s own character. “Yahweh is the *go’el* of the fatherless and widow and pleads their cause” (*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, p. 353; see also Proverbs 23:10-11 and Jeremiah 50:34).

In the New Testament, we see the ultimate kinsman-redeemer in Jesus Christ, who redeemed us from sin by dying for us (1 Peter 1:18-19). In many

respects, Boaz typifies Christ. Donald A. Leggett writes, “In the actions of Boaz as goel we see foreshadowed the saving work of Jesus Christ, his later descendant.”

Dr. Leggett goes on to explain: “As Boaz had the right of redemption and yet clearly was under no obligation to intervene on Ruth’s behalf, so it is with Christ. As Boaz, seeing the plight of the poor widows, came to their rescue because his life was governed by Yahweh and his laws, so also of the Messiah it is prophesied that his life would be governed by the law of God and that he would deal justly and equitably with the poor and with those who were oppressed (Ps. 72:2, 4, 12, 13; Isa. 11:4)” (*The Levirate and Goel Institutions in the Old Testament With Special Attention to the Book of Ruth*, Mack Publishing, 1974, p. 298).

### **Boaz marries Ruth: Ruth 4**

Boaz went to the city gate, the traditional center of business and civic activity. The husband of the idealized “Proverbs 31 woman” is said to be “respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land” (Proverbs 31:23). Boaz knew he was likely to find the other relative here, and it was also a suitable place to find citizens to witness the business transaction.

Boaz presented the case to the relative. He explained that the relative had the first right to redeem Elimelech’s land. The relative agreed to do so, but when Boaz told him that buying the land obligated him to marry Ruth, he promptly backed down — as Boaz hoped he would. Perhaps the relative feared that if he would have a son by Ruth, his investment in the new property would be transferred from his family to the family of Elimelech. Whatever the reason for the man’s refusal, the right to marry Ruth now passed to Boaz. This transaction was witnessed by all the people at the gate.

In due course, Boaz married Ruth and she bore him a son, Obed. Obed later became the father of Jesse and the grandfather of David (Ruth 4:17). Through David, Ruth became an ancestor of Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:5, 16).

This was also a reversal of fortune for Naomi. Although the sorrow of her previous loss undoubtedly never left her, Naomi could now rejoice in Ruth’s happy family life and share in the joy of raising a new son, Obed (Ruth 4:14-17).

The book of Ruth is unquestionably a delightful story. Edward F. Campbell, Jr., writes,

The speeches fit the characters who speak them.... Boaz and Naomi talk like older people. Their speeches contain archaic morphology [word forms] and syntax [word order].... Ruth is pleased by every good thing done for her; Naomi moves as though she were

gradually realizing that things are not as bitter as she had thought. As for Boaz, he moves through the story like the patriarch he is, warmly greeting his workers in the field, ceremoniously blessing Ruth in the name of Yahweh, recovering his aplomb quickly at the threshing floor so as again to bless Ruth, conducting the hearing at the gate methodically, but with alacrity. (*Ruth*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 7, p. 17)

This story, short and delightful as it is, contains important spiritual lessons. Like Naomi, we should not turn our backs on God when tragedy strikes our lives. We may feel anger at God and express our emotions in honest prayer to him, and still remain righteous — looking beyond the short term toward his eternal plan. God will reward the righteous in due time.

The events recorded in Ruth were part of God's preparations for the births of David and of Jesus, the promised Messiah. Just as Ruth was unaware of this larger purpose in her life, we will not know the full purpose and importance of our lives until we are able to look back from the perspective of eternity. We must make our choices with God's eternal values in mind... Because of Ruth's faithful obedience, her life and legacy were significant even though she couldn't see all the results. Live in faithfulness to God, knowing that the significance of your life will extend beyond your lifetime. (*Life Application Bible*, NIV, commentary on Ruth 4:16-17)

## 34. EXPLORING 1 & 2 SAMUEL

### What's in a name?

It may seem strange that the books of Samuel are named after a figure who is less prominent than Saul and David in the latter half of 1 Samuel and who does not even appear in 2 Samuel. But we must remember that Samuel (Hebrew: *Shemu'el*, meaning “name of God” or “heard of God”) was the last judge of Israel and anointed the nation's first two kings, Saul and David. Samuel also established the role of the prophet as the moral conscience of the nation. Thus, Samuel's legacy indirectly dominates both 1 and 2 Samuel.

### Outline

The books of Samuel, which cover a period of about 110 years, have a rich literary structure.

1. The story (1 Samuel 1:1–7:17) combines several wonderful elements:
  - A moving portrait of Samuel's mother (1:1-28).
  - An exquisite poem, “Hannah's Prayer” (2:1-10).
  - A contrast between the innocent child Samuel and the corrupt priesthood of Eli and his sons (2:11–3:21).
  - An irony-filled narrative concerning the ark (4:1–7:1).
  - A stirring passage in which the Israelites, under Samuel's leadership, follow God, who then delivers them from the Philistines (7:2-17).
2. The Rise of Saul (8:1–12:25) contains two warnings by Samuel of the dangers of kingship (8:1-22; 12:1-25); these warnings surround two generally complementary portraits of Saul (9:1–10:16; 11:1-15). The center of this section foreshadows Saul's eventual demise. After a prophetic judgment speech by Samuel, Saul is proclaimed king and is found hiding from his responsibilities (10:17-27).
3. Next comes the Fall of Saul and the Rise of David (13:1–31:13). The

section begins with Samuel proclaiming God's rejection of Saul's dynasty and then Saul himself (13:1–15:35), and ends with an apparition of Samuel prophesying Saul's death, followed by the death account itself (28:3–31:13). In between, several stories illustrate David's rise in stature and Saul's simultaneous decline:

- The anointing of David to replace Saul (16:1-23).
- David, not Saul, fighting Goliath as Israel's champion (17:1-58).
- Two of Saul's own children, Jonathan and Michal, earning their father's hatred for helping David (18:1–20:42).
- Saul's slaughtering of the priests who also helped David (21:1–22:23).
- Saul's attempts to hunt down and kill David contrasted with David's sparing of Saul's life (23:1–26:25).
- David's highly successful raids against Israel's enemies (27:1–28:2).

4. The Accession and Reign of David (2 Samuel 1:1–20:26) can be divided into four sections, each followed by a four-verse list:

- David's accession to the throne of Judah (1:1–3:1), followed by a list of his children born in Hebron (3:2-5).
- David's accession to the throne of all Israel (3:6–5:12), followed by a list of those of his children born in Jerusalem (5:13-16).
- A short summary of the early, triumphant years of David's reign (5:17–8:14), followed by a list of his cabinet (8:15-18).
- A longer narration of the later, more turbulent years of David's reign (9:1–20:22), followed by another list of his cabinet (20:23-26).

5. The Epilogue (21:1–24:25) begins and ends with accounts of natural disasters caused by God's anger (21:1-14; 24:1-25). In between are two lists of David's greatest warriors (21:15-22; 23:8-39) and two of David's poems praising God's graciousness (22:1-51; 23:1-7).

## How to read this book

An impressive cast of characters grace the pages of 1 and 2 Samuel: Hannah, Eli, Samuel, Saul, Jonathan, David, Michal, Goliath, Abigail, Abner, Joab, Nathan, Bathsheba, Uriah, Ahithophel, Absalom and many others.

These books were masterfully written. Samuel "achieves the maximum effect with the greatest economy of words. Its narratives are masterpieces of historical writing, and in its characterizations, both of the principal and of the minor actors, it presents 'an incomparable gallery of historical portraits'" (S. Goldman, *Samuel*, Soncino Books of the Bible, p. ix).

The fascinating vignettes that make up the books of Samuel preach powerful sermons to us. The faithfulness of Hannah in giving up her son to God's service as she promised (1 Samuel 1:21-28), the faith and courage of David when facing Goliath (1 Samuel 17), the loyalty of Jonathan to David



(1 Samuel 20) — these should inspire us to display the same qualities in our lives.

## Learning about God

The books of Samuel highlight various aspects of God’s character.

- God directs history. As you study these books, you will see men and women in the foreground, making choices for good or evil. Yet you will also see God in the background, constantly guiding events to accomplish his purpose. “God is active in history to work out his purposes. He could impose his will on us, but he chooses not to do so. Rather, he weaves his purposes through our acts in such a way that our good is affirmed and our evil is judged” (Walter A. Ewell, ed., *Baker’s Bible Handbook*, p. 169).
- God cannot be manipulated. The Israelites took the ark of the covenant from Shiloh into battle with them against the Philistines, confident that God would not allow the ark to be captured. They were tragically mistaken (1 Samuel 4:3-11).
- God blesses and protects. He has promised to see us through even our most difficult times of trouble (Deuteronomy 31:6). For example, God continually protected David from Saul and his assassins (1 Samuel 18:10-12; 19:18-24).

There are nine epithets for God in 2 Samuel 22:2-3: rock [*sela*], fortress, deliverer, rock [*tsur*], shield, horn, stronghold, refuge, and savior. Each of these titles refers to the protective aspect of Yahweh’s work on behalf of David. David’s refuge was not in his own prowess, nor did he attempt to usurp the throne for himself (as did his son Absalom). Instead, he chose to trust in Yahweh to work out His divine purposes. (Homer Heater, Jr., “A Theology of Samuel and Kings,” in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck, pp. 145-146)

- God loves and forgives. On numerous occasions in the books of Samuel, God mercifully forgave those who sinned against him. No one knew this better than King David, who committed adultery and premeditated murder (2 Samuel 11). Yet, God restored David to an intimate relationship with him (12:13-25).

We also see the work of Christ prefigured in Samuel. In his three roles as prophet, priest and judge, Samuel foreshadowed these aspects of Jesus Christ’s all-encompassing work. The same compliment is given to Samuel as was given to Jesus: He grew “in stature and in favor with the Lord and with men” (1 Samuel 2:26; compare with Luke 2:52).

As prophet, Samuel was the moral conscience of the nation. This role was continued by prophets such as Nathan, Elijah and Jeremiah, and eventually Jesus. As priest, Samuel intervened on behalf of the people (1 Samuel 7:8-11). Christ is our High Priest and intervenes for us (Hebrews 4:14-16). Samuel was the last judge over Israel before the people's request for a king was granted. Jesus Christ is the ultimate Judge, as well as the King of kings (Philippians 2:9-10; Revelation 19:16).

## Other topics

**The Davidic covenant:** God made an unconditional covenant with David: "Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever" (2 Samuel 7:16). This promise is fulfilled forever in the kingship of Jesus Christ, the Son of David (Luke 1:32-33; Revelation 11:15).

**Prayer:** The books of Samuel illustrate the value of fervent prayer. God answered Hannah's prayer. God accepted Samuel's prayer on behalf of the Israelites and saved them from the Philistines. In David's time, two national disasters were averted through prayer (2 Samuel 21:14; 24:25). The prayers of the righteous were powerful and effective then, and they still are now (James 5:16).

**The Lord's anointed:** An important lesson we can learn is that we should honor the office of leaders God has placed in authority. Perhaps the classic Old Testament example of this godly trait is David's attitude toward Saul. In spite of Saul's sinful behavior against God, David still showed great respect for Saul's office as God's anointed king. David could have killed Saul on two occasions (1 Samuel 24:1-15; 26:1-12), but he knew it was wrong to kill the leader God had placed on the throne of Israel. As David told Abishai, "The Lord forbid that I should lay a hand on the Lord's anointed" (26:11).

## What this book means for you

The detailed portraits in the books of Samuel, particularly the story of David, demonstrate that even though we sin and have to suffer the consequences, God still forgives us and works through us to accomplish his plan of redemption. This is why David could ask God: "Restore to me the joy of your salvation.... Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you" (Psalm 51:12-13).

## 35. SAMUEL AND SAUL

### **Birth of Samuel: 1 Samuel 1:1-2:11**

The book of 1 Samuel begins at a time when the judges still ruled Israel. Samuel was Israel's last judge and the first priest and prophet to serve during the time of a king. Samuel's mother was Hannah, a godly woman who had long prayed for a son. Each year she went with her husband, Elkanah, to Shiloh to worship and sacrifice to God (1 Samuel 1:3-5). Shiloh, about 20 miles north of Jerusalem, was the center of religious worship in Israel's early history (see Joshua 18:1 and Judges 21:19).

Unfortunately, Hannah was unable to have children. Childlessness was a social stigma in ancient Israel, and Hannah became despondent, especially when Peninnah taunted her (1 Samuel 1:6-7). Hannah pleaded with God to give her a son, promising to give him back to God, possibly as a Nazirite (compare verse 11 with Numbers 6 and Judges 13:3-5). God eventually answered Hannah's prayer and she conceived (verse 20).

In a prayer of thanksgiving (1 Samuel 2:1-10), Hannah praised God for giving her a son. Centuries later, Mary, the mother of Jesus, would model her own song of praise — called the Magnificat — after Hannah's prayer (Luke 1:46-55). Elkanah and Hannah returned home to Ramah (1 Samuel 2:11), but Samuel remained at Shiloh to assist Eli in the Lord's sanctuary. The fact that Samuel wore a linen ephod — a garment worn only by priests — shows that he was a priest in training (verse 18).

### **The sins of Eli's sons: 1 Samuel 2:12-26**

In this passage, Samuel's faithfulness and rapid rise into God's favor

contrast sharply with the wickedness and ultimate demise of Eli's two sons. Although Hophni and Phinehas were priests, they treated God's offerings with contempt. Verses 12-17 describe their scandalous behavior. Not only did they take the sacrifices before they were offered to God, but they also ate the meat before the fat was burned. This was against God's law (Leviticus 3:3-5). As if this were not enough, they also sexually violated the women who served as temple aides (1 Samuel 2:22).

Eli knew about his sons' wicked behavior, and even confronted them (verses 22-23), but he did not remove them from their duties. Finally, God's patience reached a breaking point and the entire priestly line of Eli faced divine judgment. A man of God brought a tragic message. Eli's priestly reign was about to end, and his sons would die on the same day (verses 27-36). Eli's successor is not identified here. But for now, Samuel was the religious leader of Israel. Later, King David appointed as priests Zadok and Ahimelech (2 Samuel 8:17), whose families seem to have had roots going back to the sanctuary at Shiloh and beyond that to Aaron (1 Chronicles 6:3-8; 24:1-3).

### **God calls Samuel: 1 Samuel 3**

Samuel received a dramatic revelation in which God repeated his judgment against the house of Eli (verses 1-18).

The old era of the "judges" has ended, and a new age of divine communication with humankind has broken forth — the age of the prophet.... The section concludes with a statement about Samuel's increasing importance as a religious leader in early Israel (verses 19-21). His fame as a spokesman for God now extends to the limits of Israel. His priestly upbringing, now strengthened by God's call, prepares Samuel for his historic leadership of God's people. His stature as the spiritual leader of his people must now extend to the political realm, where he must answer the rising demand for a king. Thus there is little doubt within the Old Testament about Samuel's importance. He guides Israel from the time of the judges to the time of the monarchy. (Frank Johnson, *1 and 2 Samuel*, Genesis to Revelation Series, book 5, pp. 8-9)

### **The Ark is captured: 1 Samuel 4**

The Philistines defeated Israel at Ebenezer (verses 1-2). The Israelites recognized that God had caused their defeat, but they did not know why. They sent men to Shiloh, who brought back the ark of the covenant. They believed that if the ark was with them in battle, it would save them from their enemies (verse 3).

They were sadly mistaken. The Philistines slaughtered the Israelites in

battle and captured the ark, killing Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, in the process (verse 11). About 400 years later, the prophet Jeremiah would remind the people in Jerusalem of this event, telling them that God punished the Israelites for their wickedness (Jeremiah 7:12-15). Jeremiah warned that the presence of God's temple in Jerusalem no more guaranteed safety than the ark at Shiloh had.

One Benjamite, when he saw the ark captured, ran from the battle toward Shiloh and told the news to Eli: "Israel fled before the Philistines, and the army has suffered heavy losses. Also your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been captured" (1 Samuel 4:17).

This format of message — with each line bearing worse news than the last — occurs again in 2 Samuel 1:3-4. The mention of the ark was too much for Eli. He fell backward from his chair and broke his neck. God's prophecy to Samuel had been fulfilled (1 Samuel 3:11-14).

### **The return of the Ark: 1 Samuel 5-6**

The Philistines thought that by capturing the ark they had made the God of Israel subservient to their gods. They placed the ark in the temple of Dagon in Ashdod. When they awoke the next morning, they found their god Dagon fallen on the floor before the ark. They put Dagon back in his place, but the next morning they found him fallen again before the ark, this time with his head and hands broken off. Although Israel's defeat was God's punishment of Eli and his sons, and of the people for their general wickedness, it also served another purpose — God used the capture of the ark to demonstrate his supremacy in the land of the Philistines.

God brought diseases upon the people of Ashdod, so they moved the ark to Gath, but the same thing happened there. The Philistines eventually decided to hitch two cows to a cart on which they placed the ark, and let the cows take it wherever they would. The cows went straight to the Israelite territory of Beth Shemesh, proving beyond doubt to the Philistines that God had inflicted the diseases upon them (1 Samuel 6:7-12).

Many of the men of Beth Shemesh showed disrespect for the ark of God, even looking inside it. God struck these men down. The ark was then taken to Kiriath Jearim to the house of Abinadab (1 Samuel 7:1).

### **Victory over the Philistines: 1 Samuel 7**

The ark remained at Kiriath Jearim for 20 years. Under Samuel's leadership, the Israelites "put away their Baals and Ashtoreths, and served the Lord only" (verse 4). This was a high point during the period of the judges.

Samuel gathered the people together at Mizpah for a day of fasting and rededication to God. When the Philistines heard about this, they decided to attack them. Samuel prayed to God on behalf of Israel, and God threw the Philistines into such disarray that they were routed by the Israelites (verses 7-11). Samuel continued as judge, and Israel subdued the Philistines.

### **Israel demands a king: 1 Samuel 8**

When Samuel grew older, he appointed his sons as judges, but they became corrupt. The people of Israel took this occasion to demand a king so they could be like all the other nations. They were not satisfied with being God's chosen people. Samuel was offended at their demand, but when he prayed to God, God told him: "It is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods" (verses 7-8).

In the light of the previous chapter, where Israel prospered under God's chosen prophet and judge, the Israelites "could perpetrate no greater breach of trust, no more arbitrary exercise of self-will, no more senseless deed of vanity than to demand for themselves a human king" (P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *1 Samuel*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 8, p. 151). Under God's instructions, Samuel warned the people what would happen to them if they had a king, yet they demanded one anyway. So God told Samuel to yield to their demands.

### **Israel's first king: 1 Samuel 9-10**

The book now digresses to tell the story of a tall, young Benjamite named Saul, who was searching with a servant for his father's lost donkeys. They reached a town where a respected seer (prophet) happened to be. The servant suggested they ask the seer if he knew where the donkeys were, but Saul had no offering to give the seer. Fortunately, the servant had a quarter shekel of silver, and so they approached the seer.

The seer was Samuel. God had told Samuel that a young Benjamite would approach him, and that Samuel was to anoint him king. God had been overseeing all the previous, seemingly insignificant events.

Samuel showed special favor to Saul, of which Saul considered himself unworthy. Samuel anointed Saul king and told him what was to happen in the near future (1 Samuel 10:1-7). Then he told Saul: "Go down ahead of me to Gilgal. I will surely come down to you to sacrifice burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, but you must wait seven days until I come to you and tell you what you are to do" (verse 8).

Saul returned home, having seen all that Samuel prophesied fulfilled along

the way. But Saul kept silent about being anointed king.

Samuel summoned the Israelites together in order to formally choose a king. His summons (verses 17-19) was in the form of a prophetic judgment speech, almost suggesting that the gift of a king would be punishment enough for Israel's rejection of God. Samuel then commanded the people, "Present yourselves before the Lord by your tribes and clans" (1 Samuel 10:19). First, the tribe of Benjamin was chosen. Then, the clan of Matri was chosen among the Benjamites. Finally, Saul, son of Kish, was chosen to be king. The same progressive method of selection had been used to discover Achan as the one who had taken forbidden booty from Jericho (Joshua 7).

Saul was chosen king, but he was nowhere to be seen. Eventually, he was found hiding among the baggage, fearing to fulfill his God-appointed commission. When they discovered him, the people found that he was a head taller than anyone among them, and immediately hailed him king. Some troublemakers despised Saul openly, but Saul did not stop them.

### **Saul's first action: 1 Samuel 11**

Saul went back home and was plowing behind a team of oxen one day when messengers from Jabesh Gilead told him their town was besieged by the Ammonites. Then the Spirit of God came upon Saul, spurring him to unusually confident action. He commanded all the Israelites to rally behind him, and they thoroughly routed the Ammonites. Then everyone reaffirmed Saul as king (verses 14-15).

This episode is similar to many of the episodes in Judges, but with two important differences: All of Israel is involved, and Saul is publicly reaffirmed as king, not judge.

### **Samuel's farewell: 1 Samuel 12**

Samuel got the people to acknowledge his fairness as a judge (verses 1-5). Then he recounted God's numerous interventions on behalf of his people (verses 6-11), and of their own ingratitude by demanding a king (verses 12-19). Samuel also assured the people that despite all this, God had not rejected them, and that he, Samuel, would continue to pray for them and instruct them in the right way (verses 20-23). Samuel concluded his address with a warning to serve God wholeheartedly (verses 24-25).

Like Joshua, Samuel led the whole nation in seeking after God (compare Joshua 24:31 with 1 Samuel 7:2-4). Samuel's speech has many similarities with Joshua's farewell address at Shechem (Joshua 24). Samuel's exit as leader marked the end of an era. The time of kings had begun. However, Samuel's legacy continued during the reigns of the Israelite kings when a series of

prophets became the moral conscience of the nation, boldly showing the people God's way (see, for example, 2 Samuel 12:1-14).

### **Saul's dynasty doomed: 1 Samuel 13**

Years passed. Then we read that Saul's son Jonathan successfully attacked the Philistine outpost at Geba. This galvanized the Philistines into action. They gathered a large army and marched to Micmash. Saul remained at Gilgal with a much smaller army.

Samuel had told Saul to wait until he came and performed a sacrifice. But Saul feared to wait for God's intervention, and he made the sacrifice himself. Just as he finished, Samuel arrived and denounced Saul's action. In the Hebrew, this denunciation revolves around a play on the root word *tsawah*, meaning "command" or "appoint." By failing to keep the appointment with Samuel, Saul simultaneously failed to accomplish what God expected from his appointed king. Saul's sons would therefore not succeed him; rather, God would appoint a man after his own heart (verses 13-14; Acts 13:22).

### **Saul and Jonathan: 1 Samuel 13:16-14:52**

The Philistines had a technological advantage over Israel (1 Samuel 13:16-22), but Jonathan was undaunted. He said to his armor-bearer: "Come, let's go over to the outpost of those uncircumcised fellows. Perhaps the Lord will act in our behalf. Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few" (1 Samuel 14:6).

Jonathan had faith in God, and God worked through him to start a panic in the Philistine army (verses 7-15). Saul and his men pursued the Philistines (verses 16-23), but their victory would have been greater were it not for a foolish oath of Saul — reminiscent of Jephthah's rash vow (Judges 11) — that nearly cost the life of his son Jonathan (1 Samuel 14:24-45). Throughout Saul's reign, there was war between the Israelites and the Philistines (verses 46-52).

### **God rejects Saul as king: 1 Samuel 15**

Saul's insecurity had at first manifested itself in his hiding among the baggage and, later, in his impatience with Samuel. Now Saul spared Agag, king of the Amalekites, as well as Amalekite livestock, violating God's command (verses 9-11). Because of Saul's continued disobedience, Samuel told him, "The Lord has rejected you as king over Israel!" As Samuel left, "Saul caught hold of the hem of his robe, and it tore. Samuel said to him, 'The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it...to one better than you'" (verses 26-28). Samuel would soon anoint the young David as Saul's successor.



## Saul and Achan

When Saul spared Agag and allowed the people to plunder the Amalekites, he committed essentially the same sin as Achan when he took spoils from Jericho. To appreciate this fact, we need to understand an important concept to the ancient Israelites — the *cherem*. The Hebrew verb *charam* means “utterly destroy.” The related noun, *cherem*, means “something that has been devoted to destruction, even consecrated for destruction by God.” When God declared something to be *cherem*, he intended it to be totally destroyed. This concept underlies the stories of both Achan and Saul.

Joshua said that the entire city of Jericho was to be a *cherem*, devoted to destruction by God (Joshua 6:17). Joshua warned the Israelites quite specifically: “Keep yourselves from the accursed things [Hebrew: *cherem*], lest you become accursed [*charam*] when you take of the accursed things [*cherem*], and make the camp of Israel a curse [*cherem*]” (verse 18, NKJV).

Achan disobeyed. He stole from among the accursed things, or things that had been doomed by God for destruction, and consequently became doomed for destruction himself. Indeed, until the Israelites put him to death, the entire camp of Israel became a *cherem*. After Achan and his family were killed, their bodies were burned (Joshua 7:24-25), an uncommon practice in Israel.

Like Achan, Saul was aware of God’s clear command. He was told: “Go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy [*charam*] everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys” (1 Samuel 15:3). Saul failed to follow this clearly stated command. Ironically, Saul spared — the Hebrew verb means “had pity on” — not the infants and women, but the king, Agag. Saul’s men also “spared” not the weak but the best of the sheep, cattle, fat calves and lambs (verse 9).

Achan and Saul committed the same sin — taking of the *cherem*. Unlike Achan, Saul did not immediately confess when confronted. He gave four different versions of what happened (verses 13, 15, 20-21, 24). Because Saul had rejected God’s word concerning the *cherem*, God rejected him as king. Later, Saul and his sons died violent deaths. Like Achan and his family, their bodies were burned (1 Samuel 31:12).

## 36. LESSONS FROM THE LIFE OF KING DAVID

*For an overview of what will be covered in this section,  
read 1 Samuel 16:1–1 Kings 2:12.*

Uneasy and anxious, the officers and officials stood in a half circle around the aging king. A messenger, still panting hard after running from the battlefield, stood before them. The king's careworn face focused intently on the messenger. "My lord the king, hear the good news! The Lord has delivered you today from all who rose up against you" (2 Samuel 18:31).

Smiles spread across the faces in the group. The tension of a few moments before disappeared. Everyone was visibly relieved. Everyone — except the king. "Is the young man Absalom safe?" he asked (verse 32). Silence again fell over the group, but this time it was a confused silence. The king's attention still centered on the messenger. He waited to hear whether his son, the son who had seized power from him, the son who tried to destroy him, was still alive. "May the enemies of my lord the king and all who rise up to harm you be like that young man," the messenger replied (verse 32).

The words thrust themselves at King David, striking him like the blow from a spear. His eyes became vacant and his shoulders slumped forward. His head dropped into his hands. A great emptiness welled up in his stomach. Suddenly, he turned and walked away. When he reached his private chamber above the gateway, he wept. "O my son Absalom!... O Absalom, my son, my son!"

The death of Absalom was a double tragedy. First, because David was a man of strong passions, a man who loved Absalom even when Absalom

made himself an enemy. And second, because David recognized his own shortcomings; he saw his own guilt in the death of his son.

Absalom's death was a result of David's own sins. Years before, he had committed adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, one of his loyal soldiers. Then, when Bathsheba became pregnant, he arranged to have Uriah killed in battle at Rabbah (2 Samuel 11–12). For these great sins, God had determined to punish David, making him experience the fruit of such actions. David was to be the victim of violence within his own family:

'Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own.' This is what the Lord says: 'Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity upon you. Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight'" (2 Samuel 12:10-11).

Years later, David's son Amnon raped his half-sister Tamar, beginning the fulfillment of that prophecy. Amnon had sinned because he failed to control his sexual desire, much as David had failed to control his lust for Bathsheba. David found himself emotionally unable to punish Amnon, the firstborn son and heir apparent.

It was this failure of justice that set Absalom, Tamar's brother, at odds with David. Since David wouldn't act, Absalom did. He felt David was wrong, so he took matters into his own hands, murdering Amnon. Once again, uncontrolled sexual desire had led to murder. Once again, David had been faced with the painful results of sin. And once again, David had failed to act, unable emotionally to punish his son for a sin he himself had also committed.

Absalom fled from David, but returned three years later. At that time, undoubtedly still harboring bitterness toward his father, Absalom began to plot against him. There was an irony in the way Absalom gathered support among the people. He would "stand by the side of the road leading to the city gate" (2 Samuel 15:2), empathizing with those individuals who sought justice. Just as Absalom believed he and his sister were the victims of injustice, he convinced others that they would remain victims until he was their judge.

Once the rebellion had begun and David had fled Jerusalem, Absalom "lay with his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel" (2 Samuel 16:22). It was another bitter irony for David, who so long before had taken another man's wife. This act made reconciliation impossible. In the ancient Near East, taking the concubines or wives of the king signified a transfer of power. David could never publicly be reconciled to Absalom. And yet, because of

his great love as well as his guilt, David wanted Absalom to live.

The death of Absalom is a pivotal point in the life of David. In one sense, David's reaction to Absalom's death defines and symbolizes the character of David. He was a man of passion, a man of great emotion. He intensely felt life's joys and sorrows, triumphs and defeats. That passion was evident at the death of Saul and Jonathan, so many years before. Saul was another man David loved, another man who had made himself David's enemy. Although Saul had twice tried to kill David, David remained loyal to him. More than that, David loved Saul as a father. When Saul and Jonathan died, David sang a lament praising both for their heroic deeds and for their service to Israel.

## **A man after God's heart**

David lived with an energy and enthusiasm that often surprised or confused others. While the ark of the covenant was being transported to Jerusalem, "David, wearing a linen ephod, danced before the Lord with all his might" (2 Samuel 6:14). He rejoiced wholeheartedly, knowing that the presence of the ark in Jerusalem symbolized the presence of God in the capital of Israel. His mind and heart were fixed on that thought, not on his own dignity.

But his wife Michal, the daughter of Saul, despised David when she saw him dancing in the streets. David was dressed in the simple linen ephod of the priests, a garment she deemed unbecoming to a king. Even worse, to her he seemed undignified, "leaping and dancing" (verse 16). Michal focused on the petty and insignificant. She couldn't understand why David did what he did. But David saw what really mattered.

In a sense, this difference in David's attitude is what set him apart from others. David wasn't just a passionate man, but a man passionate about the right things. Though men and women may not have seen it, God certainly did. He chose David to be king because of that difference.

Years before, when Samuel went to Bethlehem to anoint one of the sons of Jesse to become king in Saul's place, he thought God had chosen Eliab. Like Saul, who was "a head taller than any of the others" (1 Samuel 9:2), Eliab was tall. But just as height had not made Saul a good king, height didn't make Eliab qualified to rule. God wasn't impressed by Eliab's stature. God looked at the sons of Jesse differently: "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him [Eliab]. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

God saw what was in David's heart. God saw that David was a man who was more concerned with God's will than his own. That's why God chose

him: “The Lord has sought out a man after his own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14; see also Acts 13:22).

## David and Saul

Although imperfect, David demonstrated both desire and commitment to fulfill God’s will throughout his life. Even after David was anointed to be king, knowing he would rule in Saul’s place, he refused to usurp Saul’s God-given authority as king. Instead, David waited for God to place him on the throne. That wait may have been as long as 17 years. During many of those years, Saul unjustly persecuted David, seeking to kill him.

During that time, David had opportunities to kill Saul, but refused to lift his hand against him. He knew Saul had been God’s anointed. He respected God’s prerogative. So he waited. Twice those opportunities came. Twice men loyal to David failed to understand why David didn’t kill Saul.

The first time, David and his men were hiding in the back of a cave — hiding because Saul and his army of 3,000 were pursuing them. Unaware of the presence of David’s small band of men, Saul “went in to relieve himself” (1 Samuel 24:3). David’s men encouraged him to kill Saul, thinking God had delivered Saul into David’s hands. David refused to lift his hand against Saul, but he did cut off a corner of his robe. Later, even though he had only cut Saul’s robe, “David was conscience-stricken. . . . He said to his men, ‘The Lord forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the Lord’s anointed, or lift my hand against him; for he is the anointed of the Lord’” (verses 5-6).

The second time David had an opportunity to kill Saul occurred when Saul was again pursuing him. Saul and his men were encamped in the wilderness not far from David. While they slept, David and a loyal captain, Abishai, crept up close to Saul’s camp. Abishai volunteered to kill Saul, but David stopped him, asking, “Who can lay a hand on the Lord’s anointed and be guiltless?” (1 Samuel 26:9). Instead of killing Saul, David took the spear and water jug near Saul’s head.

David was angry that Abner, Saul’s military commander, had left Saul exposed to danger while he slept. After David and Abishai reached the hill opposite Saul’s camp, “he called out to the army and to Abner” (verse 14). David rebuked Abner, asking: “You’re a man, aren’t you? . . . What you have done is not good. As surely as the Lord lives, you and your men deserve to die, because you did not guard your master, the Lord’s anointed. Look around you. Where are the king’s spear and water jug that were near his head?” (verses 15-16).

David was concerned for the safety of Saul, despite the fact that Saul hunted him to kill him. David was careful to seek God’s will, not his own.

David trusted God, knowing that when God was ready, he would put David on the throne of Israel. David accepted God's will, even when it hurt.

After he had committed adultery with Bathsheba and arranged for Uriah's murder, the son born of Bathsheba became ill. David fasted and prayed for his son seven days, but the child died on the seventh day. The servants were afraid to tell David. They had urged David to eat while the child was still alive. They were afraid of what he would do when he found out his son had died: "For they thought, 'While the child was still living, we spoke to David but he would not listen to us. How can we tell him the child is dead? He may do something desperate'" (2 Samuel 12:18).

David surprised them. When he discovered that his son had died, he bathed, changed clothes and ended his fast. His servants were confused. It seemed to them that his grief should have been greater after the child died. But David's fast was not a ritual or a show of grief. It was an earnest appeal to God to allow the child to live. When the child died, David had God's answer, and he accepted that answer. After the answer came, David worshiped God (verse 20).

## David and Goliath

Perhaps the best-known story about David is his encounter with the Philistine giant, Goliath. This story demonstrates another trait of David that made him so dear to God. This story shows how great David's faith was. Goliath, who was almost 10 feet tall, had ridiculed the armies of Israel, making them look cowardly and foolish. At that period in history, it was customary among some peoples in the region to select champions to fight in place of the armies. When both armies agreed to abide by the outcome of personal combat between two champions, neither needed to engage in battle.

Goliath, taunting Israel every morning and evening, offered himself as the champion of the Philistines. For 40 days he asked the Israelites to provide a worthy opponent, but no one dared face a warrior of that size (1 Samuel 17:1-11, 16). All were afraid; all lacked faith.

At the time, David was too young to be in the army. He was left to tend his father's sheep. His father sent him to the Valley of Elah, where Saul and Israel's armies were gathered, to take roasted grain and bread to his three older brothers, and cheese to their commander.

When David arrived, he heard the taunts of Goliath. He was outraged and indignant. It was not the proud and boastful indignation of youth, but righteous indignation at the insult to God and at the reproach on Israel. David asked, "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" (verse 26).

David wasn't a warrior, and he knew it. But David had a weapon Goliath didn't have — faith in God. He was willing to face Goliath because he was unwilling to see the Philistine giant mock the living God. David knew that it wasn't his fight, but God's. He trusted in God for protection when he faced Goliath: "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied" (verse 45).

Then, unlike the men of Israel who had fled from Goliath (verse 24), David ran toward the giant. He didn't wait for Goliath to approach him, but ran forward, eager to take away the reproach from Israel. God was with David and with Israel, defeating the arrogant giant and routing the shocked Philistine army.

## Repentance

King David was the only person described by God as "a man after my own heart" (Acts 13:22). Yet, David wasn't without sin. How could God call an adulterer and murderer a man after his own heart? The answer is the greatest lesson we can learn from the life of David — repentance. Although David sinned, he always repented.

After David committed adultery with Bathsheba and arranged to have Uriah killed, the prophet Nathan confronted him with his sins. David didn't excuse himself, as Saul had done when he spared the best of the Amalekite livestock against God's will (1 Samuel 15:3, 9). When David was confronted with his adultery and murder, his answer was simple and straightforward: "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Samuel 12:13).

Later, David wrote one of his most moving psalms to express his remorse. In Psalm 51, David asked God to forgive him and to extend mercy to him. But more than that, the psalm gives us further insight into David's passionate approach to life: "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me" (Psalm 51:1-3, NKJV).

## **37. DAVID AND URIAH: ARE YOU LOSING FAITH?**

### **Reading between the lines: David and Uriah**

The story of David, and the books of Samuel in general, are considered by many scholars to be, aesthetically, the best biblical narrative. One reason is the large quantity of speech and dialogue. The Bible tends to avoid formal character portraits, so characters come alive through their speech. Nowhere does this happen better than in the story of David.

Confrontations and sharp exchanges of dialogue abound in the entire story, but we will concentrate on a passage that more subtly shows the differences between three personalities through their speeches and actions. The insights presented here are elaborated further in Meir Steinberg's book *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*.

King David, who should have been leading his troops into battle (2 Samuel 11:1), has remained in Jerusalem and committed adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Bathsheba has become pregnant. If something isn't done, Bathsheba will be found guilty of adultery, and killed. David could lose the respect of his citizens and soldiers, and he could also be put to death for his sin.

First, David recalls Uriah from the front, hoping that he will sleep with Bathsheba, assume that the child is his own, and David's affair will be covered up. Whether or not Uriah heard of David's adultery, he refused to go home to his wife. Moreover, he bluntly told the king that he (unlike David, the reader might observe) would not enjoy the comforts at home with his wife



when it was time to be fighting Israel's enemies (verse 11).

David now became desperate to have Uriah killed, and this is where we pick up the story. David wrote a message, to be carried by Uriah himself, to Joab: "Put Uriah in the front line where the fighting is fiercest. Then withdraw from him so he will be struck down and die" (verse 15).

David's action was risky, almost to the point of irrationality. First, since it is likely that several of David's courtiers knew of his affair, there was a chance that Uriah might also find out. Having had his suspicions aroused, Uriah might open the letter to Joab and foil the plot. Second, the plan was itself perilous. It would involve giving other soldiers an unusual order in such a manner that Uriah wouldn't hear about it.

Joab carried out the spirit of the plan — ensuring Uriah's death — by somewhat different means. He besieged the city in such a manner that the men in Uriah's section would almost certainly come under a fatal assault by the enemy. This made Uriah's death seem to the Israelites just another war casualty.

Joab then sent a messenger to David to tell him what happened. This is what Joab told the messenger:

When you have finished giving the king this account of the battle, the king's anger may flare up, and he may ask you, "Why did you get so close to the city to fight? Didn't you know they would shoot arrows from the wall? Who killed Abimelech son of Jerub-Besheth? Didn't a woman throw an upper millstone on him from the wall, so that he died in Thebez? Why did you get so close to the wall?" If he asks you this, then say to him, "Also, your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead." (verses 19-21)

Notice how Joab's message gives us insight into not only Joab but also David. Joab is brutal in his practicality. He knew from his military experience that his method of besieging the city would result in failure and several casualties, but it was the most practical method of eliminating Uriah without causing suspicion. Joab also knew that David, when he heard a straightforward report of the battle, would be angry at what would seem like Joab's lack of military wisdom.

The way Joab intended, via the messenger, to answer David's indignant anger was also brutally to the point: "Also, your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead." David would have understood that Joab's strange military strategy was not a failure of military judgment but something necessitated by the king's desire to eliminate Uriah. Joab's message shows him to be quite prepared to justify his methods to David. He may even, by describing Uriah the Hittite

as “your servant,” be scolding David for having given him such an order.

Just as Joab did not obey David’s order precisely, so the messenger took liberties with Joab’s message. The messenger, presumably not realizing that David wanted Uriah killed, could not understand why Joab would want the stupidity of his military maneuvers revealed to the king. So he changed the report. He told the king: “The men overpowered us and came out against us in the open, but we drove them back to the entrance to the city gate. Then the archers shot arrows at your servants from the wall, and some of the king’s men died. Moreover, your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead” (verses 23-24).

In this scenario, rather than the troops having been deliberately placed near the wall vulnerable to attack, the Israelites approached the wall only in the heat of a counterattack against the enemy. David would thus have no reason to ask why the soldiers were near the wall. Fortunately, the messenger mentioned that Uriah was among the casualties, the piece of information David wanted most.

David now sends the messenger back to Joab with an ambiguous message of his own: “Don’t let this upset you; the sword devours one as well as another. Press the attack against the city and destroy it” (verse 25). To a messenger who knew nothing of David’s scheme to kill Uriah, David would seem to be saying: “Don’t worry about this temporary military setback. It could happen to anyone. Just win the next battle.”

To Joab, who is aware that it was the king’s desire for Uriah’s death that necessitated this military setback, and who may not be too happy about it, David’s message could convey an entirely different meaning: “Don’t be angry at me for causing you to suffer a military defeat. If you lost a few good men because of me, you would probably have lost them sooner or later due to the very nature of war.”

The skillful use of dialogue throughout this narrative has brought the characters to life. David’s passion to ensure Uriah’s death led him to give foolish orders. Once that had been accomplished, he became quite philosophical about the numerous other deaths that accompanied it. Such a reaction was out of character for David, who normally displayed the utmost concern for his men. Most certainly, this was a spiritual low point in David’s life.

Joab, however, acted quite characteristically. He employed his usual calculating powers in doing David’s dirty work with ruthless efficiency. He also proved quite capable of letting the king know his disdain for having had to do this particular job.

It is this method of revealing character through dialogue, occurring

throughout both books of Samuel, that makes the story of David the artistic height of biblical narrative.

### **Are you losing faith?**

Amman is the modern capital of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Today, it is a bustling city of more than three million people, and one of the major crossroads of the Middle East.

In Bible times, it was also important, although it was not as big as it is today. The Bible tells us that Amman (then known as Rabbah) was the place where King David of Israel sent Uriah the Hittite to certain death. It is an ugly story, but one that teaches us an important lesson.

We read in 2 Samuel 11:1 that David sent Joab to lay siege to Rabbah. David, however, remained in Jerusalem, and there he made a tragic mistake. We have already covered the story, but let's quickly review it. David saw Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, one of his trusted officers, bathing, and he lusted after her. Then David committed adultery with Bathsheba, and later she discovered that she was pregnant (verses 2-5).

Then David made the situation even worse. He called Uriah back from the war so Uriah could spend the night with his wife. David hoped Uriah would then think Bathsheba had become pregnant by him. But that didn't work. Uriah was a loyal soldier who identified with the hardships of the men at the front. He refused to go home to his wife (verse 9).

David could not persuade Uriah to change his mind. So David arranged for Uriah to be sent back to the war. David instructed that Uriah be assigned to the most dangerous part of the battle, and then be abandoned by his men to be killed (verses 14-15). The plan worked. Uriah was killed, probably while storming the old citadel that is now surrounded by modern Amman. So David was able to marry Bathsheba.

Despite this ugly incident, God loved David. He loved him for his courage — David slew Goliath when everyone else was afraid. God loved him for his loyalty — David risked his life to save his sheep from a lion. David was a good shepherd, willing to lay down his life for his sheep. God could identify with that.

So what happened to cause this courageous, loyal, God-fearing man to so tragically betray his faithful servant Uriah? That was not like David. But then, supposedly converted people sometimes do very unconverted things. David had allowed his spiritual condition to deteriorate. God recorded this incident for us, not to embarrass David, but to teach us a lesson: What happened to David could happen — is happening — to some people reading this feature.

David had slipped a long way. This was not just a bad day — a momentary lapse. It is obvious that David had embarked on a course that was leading him further and further from God. Think about it. Adultery and murder are serious sins, but David could have repented when he realized what he had done. But he didn't repent immediately.

Bathsheba did not know she was pregnant until some time later. David had ample time to come to his senses and acknowledge the sin. But what did he do? He compounded it. Leaving God out of the picture, he tried to cover up the problem, first with subterfuge and then with murder.

David was in serious spiritual trouble. Unfortunately, some who are reading this feature have gotten themselves into the same condition David was in. They, too, are in deep spiritual trouble. They began to live God's way, but now they are ready to give it up. They started out well, with hope and enthusiasm. But something has happened. The spark is gone.

Are you that way? Are you just going through the motions of living a Christian life? Do you feel hopeless, discouraged, condemned? Are you about to lose out?

If so, you are on the verge of ruining the most wonderful and important relationship that any human could be given — your relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ our Savior. The tragic thing about all this is that no one is to blame but yourself. You know that, but you don't know what to do. God knows about your situation, too, and he *does* know what to do! Look what he did for David.

God was not prepared to give up on David. He must have watched with great concern as David's spiritual life collapsed. We can only imagine David's state of mind in those awful weeks or months — his despair, his growing feeling of alienation from God, the hollowness as the Holy Spirit within him began to be quenched.

David did not look for God, so God went looking for him. God sent Nathan the prophet to try to bring David to his senses (2 Samuel 12:1-15). It worked. David heeded Nathan's correction and repented. He admitted, "I have sinned against the Lord" (verse 13).

God was not about to stand by and let this wonderful man destroy himself spiritually. Think about this if you have allowed yourself to get into David's condition. Do you feel cut off — that your prayers are going unheard? Are you losing your zeal for God and his way? Do you find yourself drifting back into your old ways and lacking the will to do anything about it? Do you feel that God has lost interest in you, and that you really can't blame him, given your lack of interest in him?

Then remember how God came looking for David. Also consider Christ's parable of the lost sheep (Matthew 18:10-14). In it, the shepherd leaves the 99 sheep and goes looking for the one that is lost. Here's how it ends: "Your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost" (verse 14).

David was one of those little ones — and so are you. That means that somewhere out there, God, like a shepherd, is looking for you. So do what David did. Admit the problem, whatever it is. And pray. Yes, it's hard if you have gotten away from it. But don't be too proud to ask for help.

After David repented, he wrote Psalm 51, which shows how deeply he understood the seriousness of his sins. He realized how badly he had let God down, and now he wanted to be restored to full favor. He prayed: "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me" (verses 10-11).

David wanted once more to experience God's salvation. "Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me" (verse 12). He wanted to have back everything he had so nearly thrown away.

Why? Not just for himself. David understood his calling. Notice the next verse: "Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you." David asked God to restore him to faithful service.

Even if you have lost faith, God won't give up on you. As Paul tells us, "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). You don't have to give in to feelings of despair and hopelessness. There is a way out. Ask God to work with you as he did with David.

## 38. BATHSHEBA: MOTHER AND QUEEN

By Sheila Graham

The following story is based on 2 Samuel 11–17 and 1 Kings 1–2.

Dozing beneath the tapestries hung to shade the roof, the teenage girl smiled and opened her eyes at the sound of familiar voices. She peered through the wall hangings to see her grandfather Ahithophel greet King David in the courtyard below. The powerful king of Israel almost ran in his eagerness to embrace her grandfather, a close friend and counselor to the king.

Although she had seen David many times, and heard the adventurous stories that her father, Eliam, one of David's 30 mighty warriors, told about the king, it was always a thrill to see the man God had chosen to rule Israel. She noticed how strong and handsome King David was, so like her own father standing tall and militarily straight by the king's side. Then she noticed another warrior stride up — Uriah the Hittite.

Bathsheba felt her face redden as she quickly drew back within the woven coverings. She thought of the arrangements her father was making for her to marry Uriah, and she certainly didn't want Uriah to see her staring down at him.

No doubt the king and his men had come to discuss some military matter with her grandfather, perhaps to use his keen insight to plan a battle against the Ammonites. She hurried on down the steps to see if her grandmother might need help in preparing food for their royal visitor and his men. But not today. After about an hour with David, Ahithophel returned to his house alone. The king, along with Ahithophel's son (Eliam), Uriah and the other

soldiers, had to leave Giloh to return to Jerusalem.

Bathsheba handed her grandfather a cool cup of water as he relaxed before his meal. “My beautiful Bathsheba, and as usual, as kind and thoughtful as you are beautiful,” Ahithophel said as he accepted the cup with a smile. “Before long, my little girl, you will be a happily married woman. What do you think about that? Will you still come to see your grandfather once you’re married to the mighty Uriah?”

“Of course, grandfather. You know I will never love anyone as much as I love you,” said Bathsheba, pulling back her long hair as she knelt to kiss him on the top of his head. “A likely story, my girl, with such a man as Uriah as your husband,” Ahithophel retorted with a laugh. “Many of the daughters of Israel must envy you, marrying King David’s finest warrior.”

Ahithophel’s smile faded as he continued: “And, not only is Uriah courageous in battle, he is a disciplined and dedicated man. I have high hopes for him. He will go far in Israel. That is what is most important, child. I would not be pleased to have my granddaughter marrying anyone less.”

Almost a year later, Bathsheba had time to think of her grandfather’s words many times. Adjusting to the life of a soldier’s wife wasn’t easy. Now she understood her own mother’s loneliness and constant worry when her father was gone for months to the battlefield. Daily she prayed to God to bring Uriah home safely.

One spring day, around the community well, she anxiously listened to the talk of the other soldiers’ wives. As they discussed the day’s rumors from the war, she wished she could feel as calm as they appeared. That evening at her apartment next to the palace, Bathsheba carried water to the roof and prepared to bathe. The time of her purification was over. She undressed and carefully washed herself as instructed by her mother some years before.

High above her, King David paced back and forth on the roof of his palace. Maybe he made a mistake not going with Joab and the army to Rabbah, he thought. As he made yet one more turn walking around the roof, he suddenly spotted Bathsheba. There’s a woman down there, he thought, and she’s taking a bath! He found when he knelt down he could see her even better through the tapestries.

David was stunned. He had not seen such exquisite beauty. He couldn’t take his eyes off her. As soon as Bathsheba had completed her bath and wrapped herself in a robe, David hurried downstairs. Who was this beautiful woman? He must know. “David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, ‘Isn’t this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite?’ Then David sent messengers to get her” (2 Samuel 11:3-4).

Bathsheba was bewildered. Why was she being hurried by the king's servants through the back alleys from her house to the palace? She hoped this unexpected invitation from the king didn't mean something had happened to Uriah. When the servants reached the king's private rooms, they quickly released Bathsheba, bowing as they left.

"Bathsheba, my dear. Please come in. How gracious of you to accept my invitation on such short notice. Would you like some wine?" "She came to him, and he slept with her" (verse 4). David was the king; Bathsheba was a subject; it could have been difficult, even dangerous, to refuse.

Several weeks after her sexual relations with King David, feeling queasy and trembling, Bathsheba sat on the edge of the bed she had shared with Uriah and wept. There could be no doubt. She sent her terse message to the king, "I am with child." Under Israel's law, she knew she could receive the death penalty for adultery. She did not know, however, that her message to King David would mean her husband's death, not her own.

Motivated by his guilt and his concern for Bathsheba, after several unsuccessful attempts to have Uriah return to his wife's bed, David tried to cover up the sin by having Uriah killed in battle. Bathsheba's life would never be the same, nor would David's. Though David married Bathsheba and sorrowfully repented of his adultery with her and the murder of Uriah, this couple would see one tragedy after another strike their families.

David and Bathsheba's child would die soon after birth. David's son Amnon, by one of David's other wives, raped his half-sister Tamar. To avenge his sister, another of David's sons, Absalom, killed Amnon.

Perhaps as a result of being embittered by David's treatment of Uriah and Bathsheba, Ahithophel turned on his old friend and helped David's son Absalom as he attempted to forcibly take the throne from his father. It was on Ahithophel's advice that Absalom violated his father's concubines on the roof of the palace in the sight of all Israel (2 Samuel 16:21-22).

A few years after Absalom's rebellion and death, when it was obvious David was near death himself, David's son Adonijah attempted to have himself crowned king. Seeing the danger, the prophet Nathan, the same man God used to confront David with his sin, knew where to turn — Bathsheba.

Why did Nathan go to Bathsheba? Because over the years he had gained great respect for this woman. He knew David had confidence in his wife. The prophet had noted the good influence Bathsheba had on her children. Quietly, Bathsheba listened to Nathan's plan. She then went before the ailing king and asked, "Has not the king promised that our son Solomon would be his successor?"



After also hearing from Nathan about Adonijah's premature "coronation" celebration, David realized he must act quickly to save all their lives. At David's command, Solomon was immediately crowned king of all Israel.

Trusting to a fault, Bathsheba was later used by Adonijah to try to get permission from Solomon to take Abishag, who had "waited on" David (1 Kings 1:4), as a wife. Solomon saw that Adonijah was trying to strengthen his position as heir to the throne; Solomon decided that was reason enough to have him killed.

It is obvious from Solomon's warm greeting of his mother how much he loved and honored her. Looking to her as an important adviser, Solomon had a throne for her placed at his right hand — the first king of Israel to have a queen mother in his administration.

Overcoming the ignoble beginning of their lives together, patiently suffering the consequences of their sin, both Bathsheba and David learned from their mistakes and grew in the knowledge and righteousness of God. Although there is some controversy over whether the Lemuel of Proverbs 31 refers to Solomon, if rabbinical commentators are right, the imperial mother here advising her kingly son is Bathsheba.

## 39. THE TRIAL OF JOB

By Paul Kroll

Have you experienced pain and suffering?  
Then you have shared Job's anguish and perhaps his wonderment.  
Like Job, you also may find God much closer than you thought.

The book of Job in the Bible is the story of a devout man who lived thousands of years ago. But tragedy hovers over this righteous man. When the book opens, we notice Job is about to lose everything — children, property and wealth, good name and even his health.

Why will Job suffer such tragedies? Because God is about to challenge the devil with Job's obedience and faith.

### **The big dare**

The introduction to the book of Job tells us the background of God's challenge and Job's suffering. Scene I invites us behind the curtain to the universe-ruling throne of God. In this drama, angelic beings are delivering reports on their activities. Satan is among them. The Evil One has been roaming the earth, surveying his domain (Job 1:6-7; 1 John 5:19; Revelation 12:9).

Job's troubles begin after God presents him to Satan as shining example of virtue. "Have you considered my servant Job?" God asks Satan. "There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil" (Job 1:8).

God will soon allow Satan to afflict Job, but God is not punishing Job for sin. God himself says Job is "blameless and upright." Job suffers because he

is among the best, not because he is the worst.

Satan rejects God's view of Job's good character. He implies that Job has a selfish motive, a cynical reason for obeying and trusting God (verses 9-22). "Does Job fear God for nothing?" Satan asks. Satan insinuates that Job is simply out for what he can get from God. Job is only a fair-weather friend, Satan insists. "Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has?" Satan argues. "You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land."

### **Satan's challenge**

Satan sneers at the good example. Job doesn't love you, Satan implies. Take away Job's many blessings and you'll find that he's no friend of yours. Satan tries to make a bet with God. "Stretch out your hand and strike everything he has," Satan dares God, "and he will surely curse you to your face."

Really? Does Job love God only for selfish reasons? Do we? "Well — let's see," is God's reply. He tells Satan, "Everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger."

With God's permission, Satan grabs a handful of dirty tricks from his bag of suffering. He flings them at Job, and the world caves in on this innocent man. Job's herds and property are either carried off by raiders or destroyed by natural disasters.

But Satan is proven wrong. After these terrible tragedies strike Job, he tears his robe and shaves his head. He falls to the ground in worship, saying, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised." The author of the book of Job is careful to point out, "In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing."

### **The second dare**

Time elapses. One day, another angelic report takes place in heaven. God reaffirms to Satan his contention that Job truly loves God and his ways (Job 2:1-7). Satan again scoffs at Job's faith in God. "A man will give all he has for his *own* life," jibes Satan. "But stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face."

God again expresses confidence in Job. "Well, then, he is in your hands; but you must spare his life."

The devil immediately strikes poor Job with horrible sores over his entire body. The fall of the house of Job is complete. It appears he has become — without his knowledge or permission — the guinea pig in one of history's greatest tests.

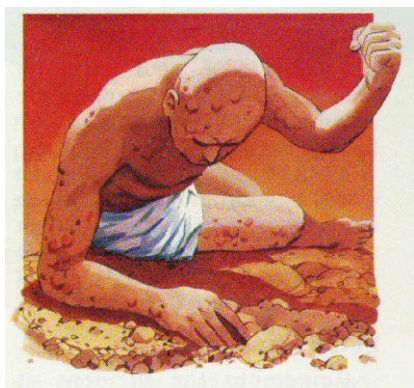
Job is now on trial. He must answer a vital question. How will he, who

had faithfully trusted God for help and protection, react to suffering that seems senseless and unjust? Will righteous Job reject God, or maintain his faith?

So far, Satan has lost every round. He has been proven wrong about Job's faithful relationship with God. But can Job endure? Will he continue to trust in God as the seemingly endless suffering rolls on, with only pain and death in sight? Will Job persevere even though God seems to have forsaken him? That is the issue at stake.

Job can be seen as a metaphor of the suffering believer. How Job reacts to God's test says something about how we should react to trials. The book asks us to consider *our* faith. Would we continue to trust God, to love God with all our heart, soul and mind (Matthew 22:37-38) — even while suffering for reasons we don't understand?

## On the ash heap



Scene 2 of this great drama takes place on an ash heap in the land of Uz, here on earth (Job 2:8). Job is suffering pain and anxiety. He is emotionally alone, tormented, confused, angry. His three friends who came to comfort him are instead emotionally and verbally persecuting him.

The human actors in the drama do not know that God is deeply involved in Job's life at this precise moment. They have no understanding of what

God is trying to accomplish nor why Job is suffering so terribly. Nor do they grasp that a cosmic issue is at stake.

Job himself does not understand why this evil is happening to someone who has faith in God. Why has a good God allowed such terrible things to happen to a decent, God-fearing human being? Job, in short, is asking, "Why me, Lord?"

On the ash heap, the issues are very human, confused and not completely understood. The principal human characters all have incomplete and distorted knowledge. They make partial or even incorrect judgments about God's activities. Or they misapply general observations to Job's specific situation.

The introduction has given us a sneak preview of the heavenly perspective on Job. We know God is much pleased with and concerned about him. No

matter that God has temporarily suspended Job's protected condition. There is a reason.

Job is not a victim of time and chance, but a part of God's orchestrated purpose. Job has no inkling he is the star actor in a God-directed morality play on earth. As far as Job knows, God has disappeared from his life.

### **Job's primal scream**

Job desperately tries to solve the mystery behind his suffering. He struggles on his own, looking for clues. None appear. Job prays expectantly. God will surely speedily intervene in his life — heal him of his disease, explain to him what in the world is going on. But nothing happens. The horribly painful disease reduces Job's strength. He grows weaker and weaker. He becomes more confused.

Job's language sometimes borders on the irrational and incoherent. At times he appears almost delirious. Opposing attitudes clash in his speeches. Job appeals to God to act before it is too late. At times he even challenges God. Please help me, he cries. Come to me quickly. "I will soon lie down in the dust," Job cries out, "you will search for me, but I will be no more" (Job 7:21).

Through his agony Job becomes increasingly confused, perplexed, discouraged, without hope. In his worst nightmare, Job sees death coming around the corner of his life, ready to run him down. Job knows he is finished — through. He sees himself doomed to die a broken, lonely, hated and despised person. Job's hopelessness is painted throughout the book. In one place he moans, "My spirit is broken, my days are cut short, the grave awaits me" (Job 17:1).

Even though Job has done nothing wrong and pleads desperately for help, God still chooses to stay hidden. "I cry out to you, O God, but you do not answer," Job wails (Job 30:20). Job's tragic circumstances challenge and contradict everything he has always believed about God as a rewarder of the good. Life has gone crazy for Job, and he has been locked up in the padded cell of his own mind.

### **Wrestling with God**

Job can only assume God is persecuting him, hiding from him. He lashes out at God in pain and anguish. "If I have sinned, what have I done to you, O watcher of men? Why have you made me your target?" Job complains (Job 7:20).

We should not mistake Job's terrible discouragement, his lashing out at God, for disbelief. God's existence is not in question. Job knows that somewhere in the universe God must be alive. "Though he slay me, yet will I hope

in him,” Job cries out in despairing belief (Job 13:15). Still trusting in God as his Advocate, Job insists, “I know that my Redeemer lives” (Job 19:25).

Meanwhile, Job’s friends are shocked at his outbursts. Surely, the comforters think, the fire of God is about to burn up this man. They are afraid to admit that no cause-and-effect reason exists for Job’s painful trial. That would imply they live in a senseless world. How could God be just and strike Job unjustly?

## **Blame the victim**

Their answer? Job obviously must have sinned terribly against God. Yes, that’s it — Job’s sins are the cause of his suffering. God is off the hook. The friends put forth the old “if you are suffering you must be sinning” answer to suffering. It is blame-the-victim time. Although at first they came to console Job, they end up attacking him as a hideous sinner.

Eliphaz accuses: “Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless?” (Job 22:5). He and the other two friends completely misread Job’s spiritual condition and God’s purpose. They, too, try to find the perpetrator of the crime — the cause of Job’s terrible suffering. But they accuse the wrong person — innocent Job.

Part of what the friends say about the relationship of sin and cursing, virtue and reward is true. Sin does have consequences — we do reap what we sow (Psalm 1; Galatians 6:7). But Job’s friends misapply their remarks in Job’s case. They take a general principle and nail it to a specific person — Job — and the specific trial he is undergoing. They will soon be shocked to discover how wrong they are (Job 42:7-8). Sometimes people suffer from the sins of *others*.

On the ash heap, all the drama’s actors, Job especially, have been asking questions of God and imputing motives to him. Job has already prosecuted God. The friends have been, let us say, mistaken witnesses against Job.

## **From the storm**

Throughout the dialogues between Job and his friends, Job especially had claimed vast knowledge of the way things work — or should work — in this world. Job said of a hoped-for encounter with God, “I have prepared my case, I know I will be vindicated” (Job 13:18).

In scene 3, God storms into Job’s presence. Now, it’s my turn, he says. I will cross-examine you. Out of the raging storm, God begins to challenge Job’s claim to understanding: “Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?” (Job 38:2). Who is ignorantly accusing me of doing wrong?

From the whirlwind, God demands of Job, “Will the one who contends

with the Almighty correct him?” (Job 40:2). God tells Job he doesn’t know what he’s talking about when he questions God’s fairness. He isn’t going to answer any of Job’s “Why?” questions. God has come to cross-examine. “I will question you, and you shall answer me,” he tells Job twice (Job 38:3; 40:7).

How does God answer Job? He sidesteps every question Job had. Instead, God gives Job a wilderness appreciation tour, recounting the majesties of nature from hail to horses (Job 38:22; 39:19). Is this relevant? Indeed, it is.

God’s point to Job, Philip Yancey wrote in *Disappointment With God*, is this: “Until you know a little more about running the physical universe, Job, don’t tell me how to run the moral universe.”

Aaagh! How stupid I was, thinks Job. He smacks his brow and puts his hand to his mouth. Job finally understands the error of his hasty conclusion (Job 40:4). He grasps that his position is built on ignorance. He realizes God is quite capable of running the universe correctly.

## **A bigger God**

Job now knows that whatever has happened to him — in some way he can’t fully understand — will work out for his benefit, for everyone’s benefit (see Romans 8:28). Job can say to God, “I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted” (Job 42:2).

Job is now convinced of God’s infinite wisdom in dealing with him as he sees fit. Job now knows there is a purpose for his suffering — God’s purpose. That is quite enough for him. The mighty voice of God thundering out of the whirlwind puts everything into perspective for Job. It says: God is alive; God is here; God cares; God is capable.

Job has been given an answer, not the one he expected, but one much more important. It does not matter that he was not given a chance to present his own case. When God appears, Job’s questions melt away precisely because God has now revealed himself.

Surprisingly, God does not condemn Job for railing against him and accusing him. God only corrects Job’s misconception about his ability to rule the creation. God does reprimand Job because Job condemned him for injustice. Out of the storm, God batters Job with these questions: “Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?” (Job 40:8). But God does not accuse Job of sin. God neither calls him self-righteous nor a blasphemer.

## **God won’t condemn**

Does this mean that we might also dare express our frustration, our anger — even call God to account in our ignorance and confusion — without being

condemned by God? Shocking though it may be — yes, we can. In Yancey’s words: “One bold message in the Book of Job is that you can say anything to God. Throw at him your grief, your anger, your doubt, your bitterness, your betrayal, your disappointment — he can absorb them all.” God is much bigger than we are.

Job also recognizes how big and how great God is. After hearing God’s argument, Job says, “I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:6). But repent of what? Of some specific sin? Not quite. Job explains, “Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know” (verse 3).

It wasn’t that Job had to overcome a specific sin, but rather that he had to grow in understanding. Job had been too hasty in concluding God was unjust or unable to rule in the right way.

Job now had a deeper, clearer perception of his Creator. But this new awareness was only a by-product of the real purpose of Job’s suffering — the testing of his faith and love. In this case, God needed to know something about Job, and Job needed to know something about himself and about God.

## **The why of suffering**

The book of Job teaches us that suffering may occur for reasons that we don’t understand unless or until God reveals them to us (see John 9:1-7, for example). Trials may come because God needs to know something about a faithful servant (Genesis 22:1-12). Job’s suffering had such an intent — to prove whether he would love God in spite of everything.

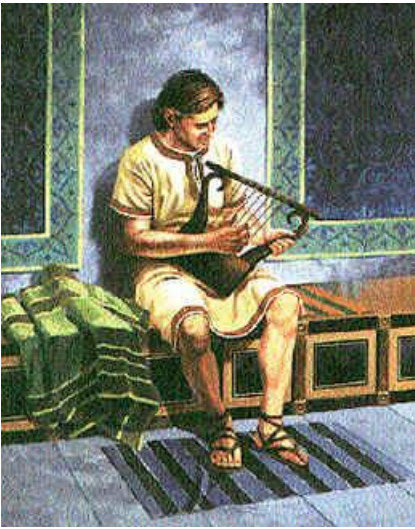
This message of Job has deep implications for our relationship with God. Trials and suffering provide spiritual enrichment and build a relationship between us and God (2 Corinthians 12:7-10; Hebrews 12:4-12; James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 4:12-19). Job also tells us no ironclad relationship exists between suffering and sin. Just because Christians suffer trials or tragedies does not mean God is punishing them for some sin.

The book of Job is about much more than suffering or God’s justice. Job affirmed that God was still God — no matter what — and always worthy of our love, reverence and worship. That was the test on Job, and he passed it. He vindicated both himself and God by remaining faithful. Job proved it is possible for humans to love God unconditionally.

Suffering had been an expansive, faith-demonstrating opportunity for Job. God had grown much bigger; Job had become smaller in his own eyes.



## 40. EXPLORING PSALMS



David plays the *kinnor*, or lyre. This is the most frequently mentioned instrument in the Bible, found in 42 places. It is often called a harp (1 Samuel 16:23) and was the favorite instrument of the Hebrews. It was played mainly in worship services, but also at banquets and celebrations for government occasions (1 Samuel 10:5). It was not played during times of national calamity (Isaiah 14:11).

### What's in a name?

The name Psalms is derived from the Greek title for the book, *Psalmoi*. *Psalmoi* is the plural of *psalmos*, the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *mizmor*, meaning “song.”

The Hebrew title for the book is *tebillim*, the plural of *tebillah*, meaning “song of praise.” Although only Psalm 145 is specifically designated as a *tebillah* in the Hebrew Bible, the entire book of Psalms is a collection of psalms in praise to God.

## Outline

Although there is no story flow from one psalm to the next, many of the psalms are gathered into collections: Psalms 3 – 41, 51 – 72, 108 – 110 and 138 – 145 are collections of psalms of David; Psalms 42 – 49, 84, 85, 87 and 88 are psalms of the Sons of Korah; Psalms 50 and 73 – 83 are psalms of Asaph; and Psalms 120 – 134 are called Songs of Ascents.

There is also a collection of collections, known as the “Elohistic Psalter” (Psalms 42 – 83). In the Elohistic Psalter, God is usually referred to as *‘Elohim*, whereas God is normally called *Yahweh* in the other psalms. When the same psalm has been included in two collections (such as Psalm 14 and 53 or Psalm 40:13-17 and 70), the version in the Elohistic Psalter will often use *‘Elohim* instead of *Yahweh*. This can be seen in most English Bibles, since they usually translate *‘Elohim* as “God” and *Yahweh* as “Lord.” For example, compare Psalm 14:7 with the parallel verse, Psalm 53:6; or Psalm 40:16 with its parallel, Psalm 70:4.

In the Hebrew Bible, as it was finally canonized, the book of Psalms is divided into five smaller books to correspond in number with the books of the law.

Book 1: Psalms 1–41

Book 2: Psalms 42–72

Book 3: Psalms 73–89

Book 4: Psalms 90–106

Book 5: Psalms 107–150

The last psalm in each of the first four books has a concluding doxology (an expression of praise repeated by the congregation during worship services), such as “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen” (41:13; see also 72:18-19; 89:52; 106:48). All of Psalm 150 forms a doxology for all five books of the Psalms, just as Psalms 1 and 2 form an extended introduction.

## How to read this book

The Bible is God’s revelation to humanity. Within the Bible, God has chosen to reveal different aspects of his nature in a variety of ways — such as through law, history, proverbs and prophecy. The Psalms are part of God’s revelation through poetry:

The Psalms as a whole address the relationship between Israel (individually and collectively) and God. And yet by its very nature the relationship with God is not easily expressed within the limitations of human speech. Poetry (rather than prose) is used in the Psalms, for it

is a form of human language that seeks to transcend the limitations inherent in prosaic [nonpoetic] speech and to give expression to that which is ultimately inexpressible. (N.H. Ridderbos and P.C. Craigie, "Psalms," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 3, p. 1037)

We should not read the Psalms like a textbook. The Psalms express truth through the use of metaphors and figures of speech. We need to be sensitive to the use of poetic imagery. Etienne Charpentier writes:

In scientific language, which seeks to convey information, the words say exactly what they signify. In the language of relationships they seek to convey something else: the lover who addresses 'her pet' or 'his angel' is not expressing a situation but a kind of relationship, like the psalmist who calls his God 'my rock, my fortress.' This distinction between two kinds of language is important when we are using the psalms in prayer, and even more generally, when we are reading the Bible. In fact, the word of God is always expressed in the language of relationships and not that of conveying information. Granted, the Bible is concerned to teach us certain things, but above all it seeks to enable us to enter into a personal relationship with God. (*How to Read the Old Testament*, p. 94)

## Learning about God

- God is the Supreme Ruler. James Luther Mays comments on the centrality of God's rulership in the Psalms:

The integrity of psalmic speech in all its forms, praise, prayer, and instruction depends on the proclamation, "The Lord reigns."... In the social sphere, the Lord reigns in justice and righteousness as the power that opposes the disorder of violence, deceit, and greed and draws human beings toward an order of motive and action that makes for shalom [peace]. ("The Language of the Reign of God," *Interpretation*, April 1993, p. 121)

- Jesus is the Righteous Sufferer. The Psalms also prefigure the Messiah, Jesus Christ, in his role as righteous sufferer. The most poignant example is Psalm 22:1, which contains the words Jesus later cried out from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34). Psalm 22 also foreshadows the mocking of the crucified Jesus (verses 7-8; see Matthew 27:39-44; Mark 15:29-32; Luke 23:35-39). Another messianic psalm is Psalm 34, which says: "A righteous man may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all; he

protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken” (34:19-20). Although the criminals crucified with Jesus had their bones broken by the Roman soldiers, this did not happen to Jesus (John 19:31-36). This was a foreshadowing of Jesus’ deliverance from death, and his ultimate triumph.

## Other topics

**Prayer:** The Psalms are a record of people’s prayers to God. John Drane writes:

The belief that ordinary people could have direct access to God was a fundamental part of the Old Testament faith. Not only prophets such as Elijah, or kings such as Solomon, but ordinary people such as Hannah could bring their everyday problems to God.... The book of Psalms contains many examples of prayers that were no doubt used by individuals, as well as by groups of worshippers, to give thanks and to express their trust and confidence in God. (*An Introduction to the Bible*, pp. 310-311)

**Repentance:** When David acknowledged his sins and repented, he experienced forgiveness from God: “I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord’ — and you forgave the guilt of my sin” (32:5). David’s prayers for mercy, especially Psalm 51, which was composed after his sins of adultery and murder, are prime examples of how we should approach God when we have sinned.

**God’s law:** “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes” (19:7-8). The first psalm describes the blessed man whose “delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night” (1:2). The longest chapter in the Bible, Psalm 119, is a magnificent poem of praise for the law. The Psalm emphasizes that God’s law is not only righteous, it is a delight to those who study it.

## What this book means for you

This book encompasses so many subjects that its meaning is almost impossible to summarize:

“The Psalter [another term for the book of Psalms] is so vast in its theological dimensions that any systematizing effort must fall short. It will continue to stimulate our life of faith even in this different age, just as it has done for centuries” (Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms: Part 1, The Forms of*

the Old Testament Literature, vol. 14, p. 36).

In Psalms, we see God the Creator, God the Sustainer of his creation, God the Righteous ruler and God the Redeemer of his people. But we also see people like us in a close relationship with this God.

Perhaps the best part of the Psalms is their accessibility — we can relate to the emotions, the ups and downs, the difficulties expressed so movingly by the authors of the various psalms. We can also relate to the language they used. Although the Psalms are full of figures of speech, these are easily understood and express truths in a memorable way:

- The wicked are like chaff that the wind blows away (1:4),
- the Lord is a refuge for the oppressed (9:9),
- the Lord is my shepherd (23:1),
- my soul thirsts for the living God (42:2),
- righteousness and justice are the foundation of God's throne (89:14),
- the rivers will clap hands and the mountains will sing for joy when God judges the earth (98:8-9),
- God's word is a lamp to the feet and a light for the path (119:105) and
- “those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever” (125:1).

The Psalms call us to join believers throughout the ages in worshiping God, in proclaiming his majesty, in expressing our fears and hopes to him and, most importantly, placing our absolute trust in him, our Creator and Redeemer.

## 41. THE KEY TO BIBLICAL POETRY

How can we increase in biblical understanding? One way is to learn more about biblical poetry. Several books in the Bible are written either totally or predominantly in poetry: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs and Lamentations. Moreover, many parts of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Minor Prophets are also written in poetry. And we shall see that the most important poetic effects in biblical poetry can be appreciated even in an English translation.

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Translating poetry is notoriously difficult. Many translations of Homer's epic poems, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, for example, are in prose rather than poetry. Rhythm, rhyme, repetitive sounds and wordplays are not easily reproduced in a translation. However, the key to appreciating biblical poetry, and indeed most of the ancient Near Eastern poetry, is none of these. It is **parallelism**.

A typical verse of Hebrew poetry is divided into two or more complementary parts or members — and these members parallel each other in some way. In the books of Job, Psalms and Proverbs, the scribes often inserted gaps to separate the different members of each verse. Most English versions of the Bible retain the parallelism of the Hebrew text.

Look at Proverbs 6:20-21:

“My son, keep your father's commands  
and do not forsake your mother's teaching.  
Bind them upon your heart forever;  
fasten them around your neck.”

Both verses divide into two members, with the second member repeating

the thought of the first in different words. The next verse is divided into three parallel members:

“When you walk, they will guide you;  
when you sleep, they will watch over you;  
when you awake, they will speak to you” (verse 22).

Notice that in the above examples, it is not only the *thoughts* that are parallel but also the grammatical structures, especially in verse 22. Furthermore, the terms in one member have corresponding terms in the other member: “keep” and “do not forsake,” “father’s commands” and “mother’s teaching,” “bind” and “fasten” etc.

Parallelism is not simply repetition. The Hebrews used a wide variety of techniques to enable the final member of the verse to complete, intensify or give additional meaning to the earlier members. Biblical scholars have compiled extensive analysis of the grammatical, phonological, lexical and semantic changes used in moving from one line to the next. We will briefly look at some of the more common types.

In staircase parallelism, the second member repeats verbatim the beginning of the first member:

“Ascribe to the Lord, O mighty ones,  
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.  
Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;  
worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness” (Psalm 29:1-2).

This form, also called climactic parallelism, is used to build a series of climaxes in Psalms 29 and 94, for example.

Antithetical parallelism is often marked in English translations by the word *but* dividing the members:

“The Lord abhors dishonest scales,  
but accurate weights are his delight” (Proverbs 11:1).

These sort of contrasts are particularly frequent in Proverbs 10–15, but throughout the Psalms also:

“The Lord watches over the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish” (Psalm 1:6).

In emblematic parallelism, one of the members is a simile or metaphor:

“As the deer pants for streams of water,  
so my soul pants for you, O God” (Psalm 42:1)

and

“Like a lily among thorns  
is my darling among the maidens” (Song of Songs 2:2).

A chiasmic parallelism, a form of envelope structure, inverts the word

order in the second line:

“Long life is in her [wisdom’s] right hand;  
in her left hand are riches and honor” (Proverbs 3:16)

and

“The Lord has dealt with me according to my righteousness  
according to the cleanness of my hands he has rewarded me” (Psalm  
18:20).

External parallelism is where an entire verse is parallel to the next verse,  
or perhaps the first verse is parallel to the third verse and the second verse  
is parallel to the fourth verse:

“Lift up your heads, O you gates  
be lifted up, you ancient doors,  
that the King of glory may come in.  
Who is this King of glory?  
The Lord strong and mighty,  
the Lord mighty in battle.

Lift up your heads, O you gates  
lift them up, you ancient doors,  
that the King of glory may come in.  
Who is he, this King of glory?  
The Lord Almighty —  
he is the King of glory” (Psalm 24:7-10).

Understanding even the basics about parallelism gives us a greater appreciation of the poetic sections of the Bible. If you want to study this subject further, you may wish to read James L. Kugel’s *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, which is a detailed examination of parallelism, and Robert Alter’s *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, which has chapters discussing how parallelism is used to enhance the messages in the books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs and the prophetic books.



## 42. TYPES OF PSALMS

A Hebrew scribe writes on papyrus (below). Scrolls of papyrus were often stored in clay jars for protection (Jeremiah 32:14) and were frequently sealed (Revelation 5:1). Papyrus is translated as “paper” in 2 John 12.

### A Psalm for every occasion

The book of Psalms can be one of the most effective tools in building your relationship with God. If you feel your prayer life is in decline, read the Psalms. They are the emotional outpourings of people in many different situations. They are “a treasury of experiences accumulated by generations of people who lived in the region where the cradle of our own civilization stood” (Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms: Part 1, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature*, vol. 14, p. 36). Reading their prayers can help rejuvenate your own prayer life.



Some psalms are for periods of joy, when you want to praise your Creator or give thanks to him. Others help in those times of depression when you are going through a severe trial. Still other

psalms are confessions of sin and requests for forgiveness. As the apostle John said, “If we confess our sins, [Jesus Christ] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Many people are surprised by how boldly the psalmists speak to God. They do not hesitate to confront him with their everyday problems, to verbalize their frustration, their anger, their resentment or their despair. But that is how God wants us to be when we talk with him — open, honest, not pulling any punches. The *Life Application Bible* states:

Because of the honesty expressed by the psalmists, men and women throughout history have come, again and again, to the book of Psalms for comfort during times of struggle and distress. And with the psalmists, they have risen from the depths of despair to new heights of joy and praise as they also discovered the power of God’s everlasting love and forgiveness. (“Introduction to Psalms”)

Another benefit of studying the Psalms is that it will help make the congregational singing at worship services more meaningful to you. Many of the hymns sung in church services worldwide are based on the Psalms. These hymns are effective since many of the psalms were written to express the thoughts and feelings of the community, the congregation of believers.

As we examine in further detail the different types of psalms — the individual and the congregational, the instructive and the emotional — we shall see that there is a psalm for every occasion.

## **Hymns of praise**

The main element in many psalms is simply praising God. Psalm 145 is a prime example. David begins: “I will exalt you, my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever. Every day I will praise you and extol your name for ever and ever” (verses 1-2).

David then shows how others will exalt God: “One generation will commend your works to another; they will tell of your mighty acts. They will speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty, and I will meditate on your wonderful works. They will tell of the power of your awesome works, and I will proclaim your great deeds” (verses 4-6). David concludes by calling upon everyone to praise God’s name (verse 21).

Several hymns of praise emphasize admiration and wonder at God’s creation. In Psalm 8, David begins and ends with the same words of praise: “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (verses 1, 9). Beginning and ending a thought with the same words is known as the envelope structure, which is common in the book of Psalms. This structure

emphasizes the main point — God’s name is to be praised in all the earth.

While David praises God for the creation, he also marvels that God is so concerned with humans: “When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?” (verses 3-4).

Humans, alone of God’s creation, were made in the image of God. God, the transcendent Creator of the universe, wants us to have an eternal relationship with him. He begins by giving us an important responsibility on his earth: “You made [humanity] a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas” (verses 5-8).

In Genesis, God placed the first man and woman in the garden and told them to work it and take care of it (Genesis 2:15). David here repeats that God has ordained human beings to have responsibility to rule the creation. As such, it is our duty to care for our environment.

In another hymn of praise, David proclaims: “Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness” (Psalm 29:2). Throughout this psalm, David praises God’s power in a series of striking figures of speech: “The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon. He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, Sirion like a young wild ox. The voice of the Lord strikes with flashes of lightning. The voice of the Lord shakes the desert” (verses 5-8).

Some hymns of praise were sung together by the community. Psalm 33, which calls for all to praise God and describes his mighty deeds, ends with the community proclaiming: “We wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. May your unfailing love rest upon us, O Lord, even as we put our hope in you” (verses 20-22).

Psalms 104 and 105 are complementary hymns of praise, both ending with “Praise the Lord” (Psalm 104:35; 105:45). Psalm 104 praises God as the Sustainer of his creation: “He makes springs pour water into the ravines; it flows between the mountains. They give water to all the beasts of the field.... He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate — bringing forth food from the earth: wine that gladdens the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread that sustains his heart” (verses 10-11, 14-15).

God is the Creator and the Sustainer of his creation. He is the Life-giver

and the Provider of sustenance. All God's creatures "look to you to give them their food at the proper time. When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things. When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth" (verses 27-30). Here we also see the activity of the Spirit of God in creating and in renewing the creation.

Psalm 105 praises God for his loyalty: "He remembers his covenant forever, the word he commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant he made with Abraham, the oath he swore to Isaac. He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree, to Israel as an everlasting covenant" (verses 8-10).

The psalm recalls how God demonstrated his faithfulness to his people centuries earlier by sending Joseph before them into Egypt to save them from the famine (verses 16-22). It recalls how God directed his chosen servants Moses and Aaron to perform his signs and wonders to the Egyptians, and how God delivered his people from slavery (verses 26-41).

All these hymns of praise are examples for us: A good portion of our prayer time should be spent in praising God. Jesus began his model prayer, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name" (Matthew 6:9). We, too, would do well to begin our prayers by praising God. We should praise God as the Creator, Sustainer and Life-giver, and as the Ever-faithful One to his people.

## **Songs of thanksgiving**

Whereas the hymn of praise glorifies God for being who he is, the song of thanksgiving emphasizes gratitude for what he has done for us. In Psalm 30, David says: "I will exalt you, O Lord, for you lifted me out of the depths and did not let my enemies gloat over me. O Lord my God, I called to you for help and you healed me" (verses 1-2).

David calls others to join him in praising God: "Sing to the Lord, you saints of his; praise his holy name" (verse 4). He thanks God for having turned his life around: "You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing to you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever" (verses 11-12).

In 2 Chronicles 7:6, David is given recognition for [making] the musical instruments used in the temple. In the postexilic era levitical singers are mentioned as the descendants of Asaph, the 'singing-master' appointed by David (Ezr 2:41; Neh 7:44; 11:22, 23). From passages such as these we have a definite indication that liturgical

music and organization stemmed from David's time. (*Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 2, p. 1504)

Psalm 66 is another typical song of thanksgiving. It begins with an exultation of joy: "Shout with joy to God, all the earth! Sing the glory of his name; make his praise glorious! Say to God, 'How awesome are your deeds! So great is your power that your enemies cringe before you. All the earth



bows down to you; they sing praise to you, they sing praise to your name.' Selah" (verses 1-4). The term *selah* marks the end of a strophe — a musical term for a section of verses. This particular psalm is divided into four strophes: verses 1-4, 5-7, 8-15 and 16-20.

In the second strophe, the psalmist recalls God's mercy to Israel when he parted the waters of the Red Sea, enabling Israel to escape from the Egyptians (verses 5-7). In the third strophe, the composer thanks the God who "has preserved our lives and kept our feet from slipping" (verse 9), and describes how God has tested and refined them through trials (verses 10-12).

This last point is especially important. In the midst of our trials, we often cry out to God for deliverance. And so we should. But we also need to remember that through our trials we develop godly patience. The apostle James wrote: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance" (James 1:2-3).

In the final strophe of Psalm 66, the author thanks God for what he has done for him personally, and acknowledges that God has answered his prayers (verses 16-20). When trouble strikes, how easy it is to forget the blessings God has given us. So when we pray, let us remember what God has done on our behalf, and thank him for it.

Praise and thanksgiving go hand in hand. Psalm 103 begins and ends with the inclusion: "Praise the Lord, O my soul" (verses 1, 22). But much of the psalm is devoted to being thankful for God's blessings: "And forget not all his benefits — who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's" (verses 2-5).

This list of blessings includes two of vital importance: God forgives sins and he heals diseases. Jesus exercised his authority as God to forgive sin and to heal (Matthew 9:2-8). God's forgiving nature is one of the attributes we should be most grateful for: "He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:10-12).

David ends the psalm with a triple invocation to bless God: "Praise the Lord, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word. Praise the Lord, all his heavenly hosts, you his servants who do his will. Praise the Lord, all his works everywhere in his dominion" (verses 20-22), followed by the inclusion: "Praise the Lord, O my soul."

One psalm particularly emphasizes thanking God for his mercy — Psalm 136. It begins: "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever. Give thanks to the God of gods. His love endures forever. Give thanks to the Lord of lords: His love endures forever" (verses 1-3). All 26 verses of this psalm end with the same refrain: "His love endures forever." The Hebrew word translated "love" here is not *ahabbah*, the standard word for "love," but *chesed*. As we mention in our commentary on Ruth, *chesed* means "steadfast love" or "faithfulness born out of a sense of caring and commitment."

Psalm 136 marvels at God's wonders (verses 4-9) and shows how God demonstrated his *chesed* by his blessings upon Israel (verses 10-22). This psalm was a communal song. Those who sang it thanked God, "who remembered us in our low estate...and freed us from our enemies" (verses 23-24).

The psalm concludes with another point we should bear in mind when we pray: "Give thanks to the God of heaven. His love endures forever" (verse 26). Again, this ties in with the hymns of praise — we can thank God that he is the loving Ever-faithful One.

## Psalm superscriptions

Many psalms contain a superscription giving information about the psalm. In the Hebrew Bible, the superscription often counts as the first verse of the psalm. (The Hebrew Bible and English translations will therefore often differ by one verse.)

Many psalms are assigned in the superscriptions to certain individuals, such as David, or certain groups of individuals, such as the Sons of Korah. Thirteen psalms relate the historical background to David's life at the time of

the psalm: Psalms 3, 7, 18, 34, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63, 142. This information enhances our appreciation of the psalm.

Superscriptions often convey information concerning the musical performance of the psalm. Sometimes they name the accompanying tune: “The Death of the Son” (Psalm 9), “The Lily of the Covenant” (Psalm 60) and “Do Not Destroy” (Psalms 57, 58, 59, 75). Unfortunately, we do not know any of these melodies today.

Other superscriptions tell us which instruments accompanied the psalm: stringed instruments (Psalms 4, 61, 76), flutes (Psalm 5), an eight-stringed harp (*sheminith*) (Psalms 6, 12) and an instrument of Gath (*gittith*) (Psalms 8, 81, 84). We can only conjecture how some of these instruments may have looked and sounded.

The category of the psalm is often included in the superscription. The two most common are “psalm” (*mizmor*) and “song” (*shir*). Other categories include: *shiggaion* (Psalm 7), *miktam* (Psalms 16, 56–60) and *maskil* (Psalms 32, 74, 142). The New International Version leaves these terms untranslated from the Hebrew.

Again, it is not known for sure what many of these terms mean. This lack of knowledge is another indication of the gap that exists between our culture and that of the ancient Hebrews. Even if all the superscriptions achieve is to make us realize that there is always more to understand about the Bible, they will have done us a great service.

## Royal Psalms

Scholars often refer to some of the psalms as “royal” psalms. These psalms are not all of one literary type, such as prayers of petition and songs of thanksgiving, but they are linked thematically by their emphasis on how God works through the office of king. The royal psalms can be subdivided into smaller groupings. For example, Psalm 45 is a royal wedding psalm; Psalms 46, 48, 87 and 122 concern the royal city, Zion or Jerusalem. We will concentrate on two categories of royal psalms: the Yahweh-Kingship psalms and the coronation psalms.

Psalm 47 exhibits the traits of the Yahweh-Kingship psalm, declaring, “How awesome is the Lord Most High, the great King over all the earth!” (verse 2). The psalmist praises God as the ruler over all nations, as the King par excellence: “God is the King of all the earth; sing to him a psalm of praise. God reigns over the nations; God is seated on his holy throne. The nobles of the nations assemble as the people of the God of Abraham, for the kings of the earth belong to God; he is greatly exalted” (verses 7-9).

Psalm 93 elaborates on the majesty of God as king: “The Lord reigns, he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed in majesty and is armed with strength. The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved. Your throne was established long ago; you are from all eternity” (verses 1-2).

Psalms 96 – 99 continue the Yahweh-Kingship theme: “Say among the nations, ‘The Lord reigns’” (Psalm 96:10); “The Lord reigns, let the earth be glad; let the distant shores rejoice.... Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne” (Psalm 97:1-2); “With trumpets and the blast of the ram’s horn — shout for joy before the Lord, the King” (Psalm 98:6); and “The Lord reigns, let the nations tremble; he sits enthroned between the cherubim, let the earth shake” (Psalm 99:1).

While the Yahweh-Kingship psalms emphasize that Yahweh, the one true God, reigns supreme, the coronation psalms concern more particularly the role of the human king who reigns on the throne of David, and his relationship with God.

Psalm 2 is an excellent example of a coronation psalm. It describes the kings of the earth vainly banding together against God (verses 1-3). As in the Yahweh-Kingship psalms, God’s supreme kingship is praised: “The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them” (verse 4). Then God declares, “I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill” (verse 6). The king ruling on the throne of David was enthroned by God to fulfill his purpose. God tells the king, “You are my Son; today I have become your Father. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession” (verses 7-8).

One coronation psalm proclaims: “The Lord will extend your mighty scepter from Zion; you will rule in the midst of your enemies. Your troops will be willing on your day of battle” (Psalm 110:2-3).

Psalm 72 is a coronation psalm connected with Solomon. It begins: “Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness. He will judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice” (verses 1-2). The language used throughout this psalm is idealistic; it was never fulfilled by Solomon or any other king: “He will endure as long as the sun, as long as the moon, through all generations.... All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him.... All nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed” (verses 5, 11, 17).

These coronation psalms describe the king as God’s son, and picture him ruling with unlimited justice and power — the same way God is portrayed in the Yahweh-Kingship psalms. No human king could ever fulfill these psalms; they ultimately point to Jesus Christ, the King of kings, who will reign forever (Revelation 11:15; 19:16).



## Songs of confidence

Songs of confidence are aptly named — the individual or community expresses its confidence and trust in the ever-reliable God. Psalm 16, for example, begins: “Keep me safe, O God, for in you I take refuge” (verse 1).

The most famous song of confidence is undoubtedly Psalm 23: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me” (verse 4). The same sentiment is expressed by the community in Psalm 46: “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. *Selah*” (verses 1-3).

As we have already noted, the term *selah* marks the end of a strophe or section of the song. Psalm 46 — which could also be classified as a “Zion hymn,” a subcategory of the royal psalms — is divided into three strophes. The last two stanzas end by reconfirming the community’s absolute trust in God: “The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah*” (verses 7, 11). This is an inspiring message for Christians, whom the apostle Paul reminds, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” Romans 8:31).



In Psalm 52, David contrasts the security of his trust in God with Doeg’s misplaced trust in riches: “The righteous...will laugh at [Doeg], saying, ‘Here now is the man who did not make God his stronghold but trusted in his great wealth and grew strong by destroying others!’ But I am like an olive tree flourishing in the house of God; I trust in God’s unfailing love for ever and ever” (verses 6-8).

Psalm 62 is another song of confidence divided into three strophes. In this psalm, David describes God metaphorically as “my rock and my salvation” (verses 2, 6). As we face the uncertainties of life, these psalms encouragingly point us toward the great God who can be relied upon absolutely (Deuteronomy 31:6).

## Wisdom Psalms

The wisdom psalms contain teachings and principles that are similar to those in the book of Proverbs, but they are expressed in the form of psalms. The wisdom psalms give instruction: “Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret — it leads only to evil” (37:8). The wisdom psalms state general principles: “Better the little that the righteous have than the wealth of many wicked” (verse 16). They praise God’s law: “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple” (Psalm 19:7). They speak about wisdom: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding” (Psalm 111:10).

Psalms 37, 111 and 112 are wisdom psalms with an acrostic pattern; each verse begins with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. This pattern made the psalms easier to recite.

The wisdom psalms, like Proverbs, give an ideal picture. The person who delights in God’s law “is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers” (Psalm 1:3). By contrast, the wicked “are like chaff that the wind blows away” (verse 4). Another psalm describes the God-fearing person: “Wealth and riches are in his house, and his righteousness endures forever” (Psalm 112:3). These psalms give general principles, not absolute laws. This type of teaching will be explained in more detail in our commentary on Proverbs.

## Acrostic Psalms

Acrostic psalms do not have a common purpose in the same way as do the hymns of praise or the prayers of petition.

But they do have something else in common — they all use a poetic device known as the acrostic.

Certain acrostic psalms adhere more completely to the acrostic pattern than others.

Differences also arise between single acrostics and multiple acrostics.

Essentially, an acrostic poem begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and the succeeding lines begin with successive letters of the alphabet.

For example, the lines in Psalm 111 begin with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

Growing up in Western society, where poetry traditionally has a set meter and frequently a rhyming scheme, we may fail to appreciate an important role the acrostic plays in biblical poetry.

Hebrew poetry has neither regular rhythm nor rhyme and is often extremely

emotional.

Imposing an acrostic structure on a poem may either serve as a memory aid or prevent the emotional aspects of the poem from descending into an incoherent jumble of words.

Just as the sentences in this box are somewhat contrived, so the acrostic psalms sometimes sound artificial.

Keeping the story flow going while adhering to an acrostic structure is not easy.

Lamentations is particularly highly structured: Each of the first four chapters is an acrostic poem, the third chapter being a *triple* acrostic.

Most of the other acrostic poems are in the Psalms (Psalms 9 – 10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119 and 145), but one of the most famous acrostics is Proverbs 31:10-31, which exquisitely describes the wife of noble character.

Not every acrostic poem has lines that correspond to the verses in our Bible. Often the lines are two verses long, and occasionally they are one and a half verses long.

Psalm 119 is the supreme example of a multiple acrostic poem; it has eight verses beginning with the first letter of the alphabet, then eight verses beginning with the second letter and so on.

Quite a few of the acrostic psalms, including Psalm 119, are connected with wisdom motifs, such as the majesty of God's law.

Regarding genre, however, the acrostic psalms do not fall into any one category.

Some are hymns of praise, some are songs of confidence and others are penitentiary psalms.

The acrostic psalms can be appreciated on their own merit even without knowledge of the acrostic pattern.

Understanding the special techniques used in these psalms, however, gives us a deeper appreciation of them.

Veins of gold lie hidden in the Bible for those who take the time and effort to dig them out.

While we would like to complete our own acrostic in this section, we cannot find any sensible conclusion, so here is what we came up with instead.

Xylophones might be used in modern hymn services, but possibly did not exist in ancient Israel, which explains why most scholars do not believe they were used originally in the performance of acrostic psalms.

You can see how difficult it is to compose an acrostic, which should give you an appreciation of the skill with which the acrostic poems in the Bible were written.

Zeal and dedication must have been strong traits of their authors.

## 43. PSALMS CAN HELP YOU PRAY

By John Halford

The Psalms show us the Old Testament community of faith relating openly and honestly to the God of Israel. They therefore include important principles of effective prayer for believers today.

The book of Psalms served as both hymnal and prayer book for ancient Israel. It was the record of how the chosen nation once worshiped and prayed to their God. Prayer is one of the most important — and sometimes most difficult — things we learn to do. It is important, because it is an opportunity to talk to God. It is sometimes difficult, though, because it can seem to be an awkward and one-sided conversation.

It was the same in New Testament times. “Teach us to pray,” a disciple once asked Jesus (Luke 11:1). They were used to the formal, congregational prayers of the temple and synagogue. Unlike Jesus, the religious leaders of

the day did not emphasize spontaneous, personal prayer.

Yet the disciples noticed that Jesus seemed to be able to pray at any time and place. The disciples wanted to be able to talk to God like that. You probably do, too. But



perhaps when you try, you don't know what to say. Your attention wanders. You get up feeling your prayers have gone no higher than the ceiling.

The Psalms can help. Other books of the Bible give us a historical record of Israel's relationship with God. Psalms gives us a more intimate look. It is like learning about an event by reading the personal correspondence between the main participants. We begin to appreciate not only what happened, but also the emotions of those involved. This is what makes Psalms helpful as we build our relationship with God.

Seventy-three of the Bible's 150 psalms are attributed to David, whom God called "a man after my own heart" (Acts 13:22). David was a gifted poet and musician, and Israel's greatest king. He lived life to the full, made mistakes, reaped the pain and the suffering, and got deeply discouraged. But David loved God, and even in those moments of agony and despair he continued talking to him.

There are times when we all need to talk about our problems with a close friend to help put them in perspective. This is exactly what David did with God. He was not afraid to express his emotions — fear, sorrow, hope, anxiety, joy, longing and even frustration, impatience and anger. In the Psalms, David poured out his heart to God. When we meditate on these inspirational prayers, we will see that, in the end, David always found strength and comfort in God and was able to express hope and trust in him.

The psalms of David, and the book of Psalms in general, can invigorate your prayers with real, down-to-earth expressions that reflect your own thoughts. You'll think: That's exactly what I want to say! It's reassuring to know that other people have had your problems. God inspired and preserved these prayers and songs so that you, too, could know how to talk to him.

Here are some important principles from the Psalms to help you pray more effectively:

### **1) Don't be afraid to say what's on your mind.**

You should always approach God respectfully, and it is always appropriate to praise him. There are times when you are filled with hope and enthusiasm. You feel close to God, and you appreciate what he has done for you. This is how David felt when he wrote Psalm 65. (Note also Psalms 66 and 67.)

But he didn't always pray like this. For example, look at Psalms 54, 56, 57 and 59. On these occasions, David was in trouble, and he wasted no time in asking for help. On other occasions, David even asked God to hurry up and help him (Psalms 70:1, 5; 38:22; 40:13, 17; 143:7). Once, David actually asked God if he had forgotten him (Psalm 13:1-2). Similarly, you should not be

afraid to tell God precisely what's on your mind. And like David, you can urge God to intervene in your life.

## **2) Don't hide your mistakes.**

Some people feel awkward about praying, especially after they have made a big mistake. Or perhaps they have not prayed for a long time, and they think they aren't worthy of God's love and acceptance.

At times such as these, it is reassuring to read Psalm 51, written when David had sinned about as badly as anyone in the Bible. After committing adultery with Bathsheba, David had her husband Uriah killed (see 2 Samuel 11). David's actions were especially repulsive to God because, as king of Israel, he should have been the moral leader of the nation.

But when David recognized his sin, he went to God in humility and genuine repentance, asking for forgiveness. And God heard. David knew he was a sinner, and asked God to help keep him from continuing to sin. Another time David prayed, "Forgive my hidden faults. Keep your servant also from willful sins" (Psalm 19:12-13).

In the same way, we should admit our sins to God. When we confess, God "is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

## **3) Wait for God's answer.**

Prayer is a spiritual act of worship in which we share our most intimate thoughts with God the Father (Luke 11:2), through Jesus Christ his Son. It is not a magic formula for getting everything we want exactly when we want it (see James 4:3). Of course, we should make our requests known to God (Philippians 4:6), but we should not expect God to answer our prayers our way every time.

David's prayers were not always answered right away. God was working with him across a lifetime, and the relationship was not casual or superficial.

Although God will give you the "desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4), there are also lessons to be learned in enduring a trial, for example. Sometimes we must wait in faith for God to answer in his way and in his time. Psalms gives some fascinating glimpses into the minds of people as they endured trials of their faith.

In Psalm 73, the author, Asaph, expresses anger and impatience at what seems like God's indifference. He even wonders if living God's way is worth it (verse 13). God allows this, because as Asaph sorts out his churning emotions, he calms down and his faith and patience is restored (verses 21-26). You'll find another example of a prayer changing a negative mood in

Psalm 10.

God knows that we have emotions. We do not always have to appear before him cool, calm and collected. A relationship with God is a learning process. Sometimes we need to be guided through life's trials and tribulations, not just "airlifted out" of every situation. This is a vital part of our spiritual growth. During such times of stress, God will help us sort out our negative thoughts and emotions, and give us a peace of mind that "transcends all understanding" (Philippians 4:7).

Never be afraid to pray openly and honestly to God, even during the darkest hours of your life. But be willing — and prepared — to wait for God's answer in God's time.

Remember, also, that God's answer may be no. For example, Paul told the church at Corinth: "To keep me from becoming conceited...there was given me a thorn in my flesh...to torment me" (2 Corinthians 12:7). Paul explained: "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'" (verses 8-9).

We don't know what Paul's thorn in the flesh was, but it hindered his ministry and he asked God to remove it. God refused. Paul acknowledged that this "thorn" kept him humble (verse 7). It reminded him of his daily need for contact with God.

So, while we should present our requests urgently and fervently to God, we must wait patiently while God decides how and when he will answer. As David said, "Be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord" (Psalm 27:14).

#### **4) Have confidence in the outcome.**

When everything around us seems to be falling apart, it's hard to walk by faith. But that's exactly what Christians are called to do (2 Corinthians 5:7). David told God, "Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life" (Psalm 138:7). He learned that no matter how bad things looked, God would eventually assert his will and control.

God will never forsake those who trust him (Psalm 9:10). Even so, there will be times when we will feel rejection, humiliation, frustration and all the emotional weather of an active and spiritually rich human life.

The Psalms can help us understand this, as we share the intimate thoughts of servants of God who have gone before us. They help us talk to God as a friend. They remind us of what we tend to forget when we are discouraged and temporarily disoriented. They are spiritual levees that control the flood of negative emotions and worry, guiding it along safe channels, where it can

be dissipated safely (Psalms 32:6; 69:1).

As we build our relationship and friendship with the same God who listened to the prayers of David and other authors of the Psalms, we will also grow in courage and faith. We will feel confident in asking, “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight” (Psalm 19:14). Like David, we can look beyond the immediate situation and realize “there is a future for the man of peace” (Psalm 37:37).



## 44. THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

One of the best-loved passages in the Bible is Psalm 23. Its simple affirmation of complete trust and confidence in God has inspired countless people from generation to generation.

David's role as shepherd prefigures Jesus Christ (John 10:11, 14). The shepherd metaphor culminates in the book of Revelation: "The Lamb [Jesus Christ] at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 7:17).

Psalm 23 relies on two familiar metaphors for its effectiveness: God as Shepherd and God as Host. This combination would have been particularly effective to its Hebrew audience, since the shepherd motif was closely related to the host motif in ancient Near Eastern thought.

Titled simply "A Psalm of David," this psalm has universal appeal, bringing comfort to all who have experienced periods of deep trouble in life. The first verse summarizes the essence of the psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want."

This statement is only four words long in the Hebrew, yet it says so much. David was a shepherd. He knew that a good shepherd is personally involved with the welfare of his sheep, protecting and providing for them. David portrayed God in the role of a good shepherd, caring for his people. With God as his shepherd, David could want for nothing.

The shepherd metaphor is developed further: "He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul" (verses 2-3).

As Willem A. VanGemeren writes: “The ‘green pastures’ are the rich and verdant pastures, where the sheep need not move from place to place to be satisfied.... The sheep have time to rest, as the shepherd makes them to ‘lie down.’ The ‘quiet waters’ are the wells and springs where the sheep can drink without being rushed” (“Psalms,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 216).

By leading the sheep to green pastures and still waters, the shepherd restores or rejuvenates the sheep. David claims that God similarly restores his innermost being. The effectiveness of this metaphor lies in its simplicity and familiarity. God diligently shepherds his people and lovingly watches over them.

David now extends the metaphor to emphasize the shepherd’s role as the guide of the sheep: “He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake” (verse 3). The shepherd knows the right paths on which to lead the sheep to the green pastures. Similarly, God leads us along the path to eternal life. We need to ask God daily for his direction. As David prayed: “Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight. Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain” (Psalm 119:35-36).

The fourth verse concludes the shepherd metaphor: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” The phrase “shadow of death,” which can also be translated “deep darkness,” is used figuratively of extreme danger. The right path may lead through ravines and river valleys where steep slopes block out the sun; the presence of the shepherd, however, calms the sheep. Similarly, we may go through great trials in life, but God is always there to help us.

According to Abraham Cohen, the rod is “a club with which to drive off beasts of prey which attack the sheep” (*The Psalms*, Soncino Books of the Bible, p. 68). David was undoubtedly skilled in using the rod and may have used it to kill a lion and a bear that attacked the flock he was watching (1 Samuel 17:34-37).

Shepherds also carried a staff. They probably used it to lean on when necessary, but it also served to keep the sheep on the right path. We can rely on God to protect us from what we are unable to face alone. In this context, Jesus Christ used the shepherd metaphor when he said: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.... I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me” (John 10:11, 14).

The next verse of Psalm 23 begins a second metaphor, that of God as Host: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You

anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows” (verse 5).

A host would anoint the head of a guest as a mark of special honor, a custom that continued in Christ’s day (see Luke 7:46). The overflowing cup symbolized the superabundance the host had in store for the guests. Jesus likened the kingdom of heaven to a wedding banquet (Matthew 22:1-2). Those who follow God’s way of life can enjoy unlimited blessings as guests in the kingdom of God.

Psalms 23 concludes, “Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (verse 6). The New Testament uses the same metaphor of dwelling in God’s house forever: Those who have been made righteous by the blood of the Lamb, Jesus Christ, “are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water” (Revelation 7:15-17).

Dwelling in God’s house and enjoying abundance go hand in hand. Notice that the passage in Revelation also uses the shepherd theme of the first part of Psalm 23. Throughout its pages, the Bible uses and combines various metaphors to express the great reward that awaits those who follow God’s way of life.

Psalms 23 rightly claims its place as one of the best-loved psalms. Its simple trust in God to lead the way, even through the darkest hour, and its joyous representation of God’s blessings can help strengthen the faith of anyone, even in the most trying of circumstances.

## 45. PSALMS: THEMATIC COLLECTIONS

### Different collections of Psalms

In general, the psalms do not follow each other in any discernible pattern. One psalm may be a prayer of petition, the next a song of thanksgiving and the next some other type. Similarly, the subjects they discuss may be unrelated.

Occasionally, a couple of psalms may have been placed together because of some connection. For example, Psalms 34 and 35 are the only psalms to mention the “angel of the Lord.” Psalms 111 and 112 are both acrostic wisdom psalms. Psalms 57, 58 and 59 — as the superscriptions show — were all sung to the same tune: “Do Not Destroy.”

In other cases, what are now two distinct psalms may have been one psalm originally. Psalms 9 and 10, for example, form one continuous acrostic poem. Also, Psalms 42 and 43 were probably one song in three stanzas, each stanza ending with the refrain: “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God” (Psalm 42:5, 11; 43:5).

Psalms 96–99 are Yahweh-Kingship psalms. Psalms 45–48 form yet another group of royal psalms: Psalm 45 is a royal wedding psalm, Psalms 46 and 48 are Zion hymns and Psalm 47 is a Yahweh-Kingship psalm. We will now examine three other groups of psalms: Psalms 113–118, Psalms 120–134 and Psalms 146–150.

### Praising God Psalms

Psalm 113 begins and ends with the inclusio: “Praise the Lord” (verses 1, 9). It establishes the theme of praising God from the beginning: “Praise, O servants of the Lord, praise the name of the Lord. Let the name of the Lord be praised, both now and forevermore. From the rising of the sun to the

place where it sets, the name of the Lord is to be praised” (verses 1-3). Psalm 114 illustrates how nature obeyed God in aiding his people Israel. It concludes: “Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob, who turned the rock into a pool, the hard rock into springs of water” (verses 7-8).

David directed the Levites to organize a temple choir “to sing joyful songs” (1 Chronicles 15:16-22). A singer was admitted to the choir at the age of 30 (1 Chronicles 23:3-5), following a five-year apprenticeship, and served for 20 years.



The next three psalms all end with the phrase “Praise the Lord,” which in Hebrew is one word — *hallelujah*. Psalm 115 calls upon Israel to trust God: “O house of Israel, trust in the Lord — he is their help and shield. O house of Aaron, trust in the Lord — he is their help and shield. You who fear him, trust in the Lord — he is their help and shield” (verses 9-11).

Psalm 116 praises God’s graciousness and his righteousness: “The Lord is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion. The Lord protects the simplehearted; when I was in great need, he saved me” (verses 5-6).

Psalm 117 is the shortest chapter in the Bible, yet it summarizes the essence of this set of psalms: “Praise the Lord, all you nations; extol him, all you peoples. For great is his love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. Praise the Lord” (verses 1-2).

Psalm 118 emphasizes God’s mercy. It begins: “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever. Let Israel say: ‘His love endures forever’” (verses 1-2). And it concludes in like manner: “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever” (verse 29).

## Psalm of praise to the law

Psalm 119 has many unique and inspiring features. It is 176 verses long, which is more than double the length of any other psalm. It is easily the longest chapter in the Bible.

A complete eightfold acrostic psalm, it is broken into 22 stanzas, each containing eight verses, corresponding to the 22 letters of the Hebrew

alphabet. Each verse in the first stanza begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *aleph*; each verse in the next stanza begins with the second letter, *beth*; and so on throughout the psalm.

The length of this psalm is said to have saved the life of one man. George Wishart, who lived in Scotland in the 1600s, was sentenced to be hanged. Custom allowed the condemned to choose a psalm to be sung, and George chose Psalm 119. Before it was three-quarters through, a pardon arrived, thus sparing his life!

The purpose of Psalm 119 is to declare the joy and peace that come from obeying God's law. The psalm continually emphasizes the blessings that come from walking in God's way. It begins: "Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the Lord."

All 176 verses of Psalm 119 have similar form to the verse above, consisting of two parallel parts. This uniform quality of the poem emphasizes that the law is sure and reliable.

Psalm 119 is probably the most highly structured of all the poems in the Bible. Some of the individual stanzas have a definite subtheme within them. Verses 97-104, for example, show how, by studying and meditating on God's law, the psalmist has gained more understanding than his teachers.

Several key words recur within the psalm. These include: *torah* (law), *mitsvah* (commands), *dabhar* (word), *piqur* (precept) and *derekb* (way). They are nearly always connected immediately with God, often by means of the possessive pronoun: your law, your way or your commands. In this form, they help illustrate God's revelation of himself. Almost every verse contains a key word. These key words reinforce the theme of the majesty of God's law.

Psalm 119 is a wisdom psalm. Like Psalm 1 and the latter part of Psalm 19, it idealizes the law and distinguishes sharply between the blessings of those who keep it and the curses that befall those who stray from it.

In addition to its intrinsic value, Psalm 119 also prepares the way for greater understanding of certain New Testament truths. For example, the apostle Paul's declaration, "So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good" (Romans 7:12), is reminiscent of Psalm 119:172: "All your commands are righteous."

Consider also verse 105, which says: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path." In the New Testament, the apostle John described the pre-existent Christ as "the Word." He wrote: "In [the Word] was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness" (John 1:4-5).

## Prayers of petition

Much of the time when we pray, we have something to request. There is nothing wrong with this. Jesus told his disciples to ask God to supply their needs (Matthew 7:7-11). Similarly, the most common type of psalm is the prayer of petition in which an individual or a community asks God for help with some particularly difficult situation.

Prayers of petition are distinguished by two elements: a complaint and a petition. In the often lengthy complaint section, the individual describes the problem to God. Even though God knows our needs before we pray, he still wants us to tell him our troubles. The apostle Peter tells us, “Cast all your anxiety on [God] because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7). In the petition, the individual calls upon God to act, to intervene, to help. This is the purpose of the prayer.

Psalm 44 is typical of the communal prayers of petition. It begins with the community recalling God’s goodness to Israel in previous generations (verses 1-3), and the people expressing their faith in God (verses 4-8). Then comes the complaint. The people describe how, despite their faithfulness, God has allowed them to be persecuted by their enemies (verses 9-22). They cry out: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered” (verse 22).

This type of community prayer should inspire us when we are wrongly persecuted. Jesus said, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:10). We can, however, still pray for deliverance. The community in Psalm 44 certainly did. “Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever. Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression? We are brought down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground. Rise up and help us; redeem us because of your unfailing love” (verses 23-26).

These words, asking God why he is sleeping and pleading with him to awake, may seem strong, but God allows for such emotion. In fact, other psalms are stronger still. Psalm 74, for example, is a communal petition that continually reproaches God for not intervening when enemies attack his people. It starts: “Why have you rejected us forever, O God? Why does your anger smolder against the sheep of your pasture? Remember the people you purchased of old, the tribe of your inheritance, whom you redeemed — Mount Zion, where you dwelt” (verses 1-2).

The community tells God the atrocities he has allowed: “Your foes roared in the place where you met with us; they set up their standards as signs.... They burned your sanctuary to the ground; they defiled the dwelling place of

your Name” (verses 4, 7). The community reminds God of his great deeds in the past (verses 12-17). The people point out that the enemy has blasphemed his name (verse 18). And they call upon God to act, to intervene: “Rise up, O God, and defend your cause” (verse 22).

In the New Testament, the church earnestly prayed to God on behalf of the apostle Peter (Acts 12:5). God responded by miraculously enabling Peter to escape from prison (verses 6-11). The communal petitions show that God’s people as a whole can interact with God emotionally — pleading with him, reproaching him, expressing frustration with him — but still affirming their faith in him.

The individual petitions, which are more frequent in the Psalms, demonstrate that individuals can also plead their causes to God. When David fled from Absalom, he complained to God about his situation: “O Lord, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me” (Psalm 3:1). He then recalled God’s previous responses to his pleas for help and confidently petitioned God to help him again: “Arise, O Lord! Deliver me, O my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked” (verse 7).

This form of petition, asking God to destroy one’s enemies, is called an *imprecation*, and such psalms are called imprecatory psalms. The imprecatory psalms must be understood within the context of the old covenant. Christians today should not pray for God to destroy our enemies. Jesus taught: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43-44). We appeal for God to send his Son, Jesus Christ, to return to the earth and end all wickedness and misery.

Most prayers of petition are not imprecatory psalms, but pleas for help, or for deliverance. David consistently petitioned God when he was in danger: “Guard my life and rescue me; let me not be put to shame, for I take refuge in you” (Psalm 25:20).

Despite often starting in a tone of despair, the prayers of petition characteristically end on an upbeat note. In Psalm 54, David begins by complaining to God about the enemies that have risen up against him and sought his life (verses 1-3). At this point, David is desperate. But after pleading with God (verse 5), David feels confident about the outcome: “I will praise your name, O Lord, for it is good. For he has delivered me from all my troubles, and my eyes have looked in triumph on my foes” (verses 6-7). The next three psalms have a similar pattern, beginning with despair, but ending with expressions of trust in God.

The very act of praying can lift our spirits. Christian men and women



throughout the centuries have found that expressing their fears, doubts, frustrations and anger honestly in prayer to God is a large part of the solution in resolving their emotional turmoil.

Prayer is a natural vehicle for expressing emotion. Listen to David in this psalm: “I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me. I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail, looking for my God. Those who hate me without reason outnumber the hairs of my head; many are my enemies without cause, those who seek to destroy me” (Psalm 69:2-4).

David has sunk into depression. He pleads to God, “Rescue me from the mire, do not let me sink; deliver me from those who hate me, from the deep waters” (verse 14). David expresses extreme anger at his adversaries verses 19-28). But again the psalm ends in praise of God (verses 30-36).

One important type of petition is the request for forgiveness. The supreme example is Psalm 51, but there are several others. In this type of psalm, the complaint is replaced by a confession of sin. In Psalm 38, David cries to God for mercy: “O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath” (verse 1). David acknowledges his sin: “My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear. My wounds fester and are loathsome because of my sinful folly” (verses 4-5). The psalm ends as it began — with a heartfelt appeal to God (verses 21-22).

David knew what a blessing forgiveness is: “Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered” (Psalm 32:1). Then David recounts his personal experience: “Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord’ — and you forgave the guilt of my sin” (verse 5).

David knows he can confidently proclaim, “The Lord’s unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him” (verse 10). This is a tremendously positive message. God does respect our earnest confessions of sin and prayers for forgiveness; he does forgive our sins.

Forgiveness is also available on a national level. The composer of Psalm 130 understood that sin infects everyone, but that God can forgive everyone’s sin: “If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared” (verses 3-4). The composer concludes: “O Israel, put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins” (verses 7-8).

## Songs of Ascents: Psalms 120-134

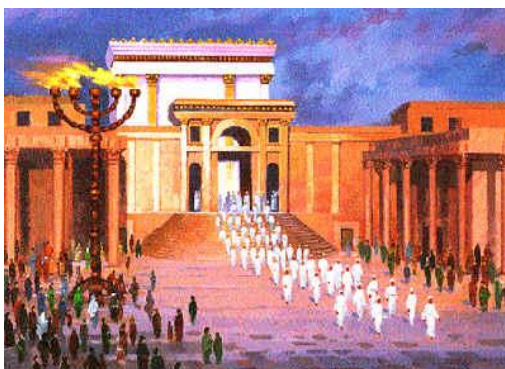
These 15 psalms are each titled “A Song of Ascents” [Hebrew: *shir bamma’aloth*]. We do not know precisely what this term means. Mitchell Dahood writes: “[This term] has been explained by some as a ‘Pilgrim Song’ sung by pilgrims as they ‘went up’ to Jerusalem for the great annual feasts. Cf. Exod xxiii 17; Deut xvi 16; I Kings xii 28; Matt xx 17; Luke ii 41f. Others hold that these psalms were sung by the returning exiles when they ‘went up’ to Jerusalem from Babylon” (*Psalms III: 101 – 150*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 17A, p. 195).

Later, these psalms were connected with the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem. At the water-drawing ceremony there, the Levites stood “upon the fifteen steps leading down from the court of the Israelites to the Women’s Court, corresponding to The Fifteen Songs of Ascent in the Psalms; upon them the Levites used to stand with musical instruments and sing hymns” (*The Mishnah, Sukkah* 5.4). The Feast of Tabernacles commemorated Israel’s period of wandering in the wilderness. As part of their observance, families built small booths (*sukkot*) in the streets and on the rooftops and shaded them with palm and willow branches and other greenery. The Hebrews lived in these booths during the week of the Feast.

Jerusalem (Zion) is prominently mentioned in these psalms: “Our feet are standing in your gates, O Jerusalem” (Psalm 122:2); “Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion” (Psalm 125:1); “When the Lord brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed” (Psalm 126:1); “May the Lord bless you from Zion all the days of your life” (Psalm 128:5); “May all who hate Zion be turned back in shame” (Psalm 129:5); and “The Lord has chosen Zion, he has desired it for his dwelling” (Psalm 132:13).

Peace is an important concept in the Songs of Ascents. Two psalms end with the blessing: “Peace [*shalom*] be upon Israel” (Psalm 125:5; 128:6). Psalm 122 is a prayer for the peace of Jerusalem. The apostle Paul later gave a similar blessing to the church: “Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16).

God’s protection is another theme of these psalms: “The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore”



(Psalm 121:8); “As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people both now and forevermore” (Psalm 125:2) and “Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain” (Psalm 127:1).

The pilgrimages to Jerusalem for the festival seasons were important events in the lives of the ancient Hebrews, serving to remind the people of their covenant relationship with God.

Two consecutive psalms mention the blessing of children: “Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one’s youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them” (Psalm 127:3-5) and “Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your sons will be like olive shoots around your table” (Psalm 128:3).

The Songs of Ascents are short: They average about seven verses, whereas in Psalms as a whole, the average psalm length is about 16 verses. But for all their brevity, they are profoundly inspirational. The returning exiles sang: “Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the Negev. Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him” (Psalm 126:4-6). The last verse became the basis of the famous Protestant hymn “Bringing in the Sheaves.” Similarly, a popular Hebrew folk song is based on Psalm 133:1, which proclaims: “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!”

Psalm 134 provides a fitting conclusion to this collection: “Praise the Lord, all you servants of the Lord who minister by night in the house of the Lord. Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise the Lord. May the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Zion” (verses 1-3).

## **Hallelujah Psalms: Psalms 146-150**

The last five psalms begin and end with the phrase “Praise the Lord” (*hallelujah*). Some scholars consider the previous psalm to end in a doxology concluding the fifth book of the Psalms: “Let every creature praise his holy name for ever and ever” (Psalm 145:21). The last five psalms would then form an epilogue to the Psalter as a whole, corresponding in number to the five books of the Psalms.

All these hallelujah psalms are hymns of praise. Psalm 146 praises the God who “upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free, the Lord gives sight to the blind, the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down, the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow” (verses 7-9). The

next psalm exults in God's omnipotence: "He sends his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly. He spreads the snow like wool and scatters the frost like ashes" (Psalm 147:15-16).

Psalm 148 calls upon everything to praise God: "Praise him, all his angels, praise him, all his heavenly hosts. Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars" (verses 2-3). Psalm 149 emphasizes that God's people have particular reason to praise their Creator: "Let them praise his name with dancing and make music to him with tambourine and harp. For the Lord takes delight in his people; he crowns the humble with salvation. Let the saints rejoice in this honor and sing for joy on their beds" (verses 3-5).

Psalm 150 brings to climactic conclusion this fanfare of praise. This last psalm is a doxology for the whole Psalter, for all five books of the Psalms. After the initial "Praise the Lord," it gives 10 commands in climactic parallelism to praise God in different ways and with a variety of musical instruments (verses 1-5). Then comes the majestic finale, in which the congregation sings, "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord" (verse 6).

## 46. PSALMS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The book of Psalms had an immense influence on New Testament writers. They have many quotes from several Old Testament books, but none more so than from Psalms. From the Psalms, they drew on the wealth of material that God had inspired pertaining to Jesus Christ.

When Peter and John had been ordered (unsuccessfully) by the Sanhedrin not to preach Jesus Christ, the just-started New Testament church prayed to God for the continuing boldness of the apostles. In their prayer, they quoted Psalm 2:1-2 and applied it as a prophecy of what had happened to Jesus Christ.

The psalm speaks about the nations conspiring and the people plotting vain things, and about kings and rulers gathering together against the Lord and his anointed. The church cried to God, “Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed” (Acts 4:27).

Those who had witnessed the life of Jesus and had been convicted of his teachings saw that the second Psalm applied to Jesus as the anointed, the Messiah. The word Christ is a title meaning “anointed”; Jesus was the Christ, the Anointed One.

Viewing the second Psalm in the light of Jesus’ life, the New Testament writers understood verse 7 as a reference to Jesus as the Son of God. In both Acts and Hebrews, the saying, “You are my Son; today I have become your Father,” is applied to Jesus as the Son of God (Acts 13:33; Hebrews 5:5).

The followers of Jesus noticed that several psalms predicted events in Jesus’ life. Such psalms became known as “messianic psalms.”

Psalm 22 is a typical messianic psalm. Matthew and Mark record Christ's agonizing plea from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34). These words were the beginning of one of David's psalms (Psalm 22:1). The New Testament writers understood that David's words concerning his own situation applied even more fully to Christ's suffering. In addition to the direct quotations, there are numerous allusions to this psalm in the New Testament.

For example, David said: "All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: 'He trusts in the Lord; let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him'" (verses 7-8). Matthew, Mark and Luke record the actions of Christ's enemies: mocking him, shaking their heads at him and telling him to save himself, since he claimed to be the Son of God (Matthew 27:39-44; Mark 15:29-32; Luke 23:35-39).

One striking example of how David's words applied to Jesus Christ is Psalm 22:18, which says, "They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing." The apostle John showed how this prophecy was fulfilled by the soldiers who divided Christ's clothes into four parts and cast lots for his tunic (John 19:23-24).

Psalm 69 is another messianic psalm. Jesus Christ himself said he was hated without a cause, "but this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: 'They hated me without reason'" (John 15:25). Christ was referring to Psalm 69:4.

When one rereads this psalm in light of the events in Christ's life, it is obvious that several other verses apply to Christ, even if not quoted in the New Testament. For example: "I endure scorn for your sake, and shame covers my face. I am a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my own mother's sons" (verses 7-8).

When Jesus cast the money changers from the temple, saying, "How dare you turn my Father's house into a market?" (John 2:16), his disciples remembered the scripture (Psalm 69:9) where it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me" (John 2:17).

Other messianic psalms include Psalms 110 and 118. These psalms, like many other parts of the Old Testament in which there are prophecies concerning Christ's first coming, were used by the apostles and evangelists as they preached the gospel.

## **Psalms in praise and worship**

The Psalms are not only of historical interest in understanding how the ancient Israelites worshiped God — they greatly influenced the New Testament church in how it worshiped and praised God and his Son, Jesus

Christ. Moreover, the legacy of the Psalms continues to influence worship services in the church today.

Jesus told his disciples, “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44). The apostles were thoroughly familiar with the book of Psalms and quoted from it frequently. Of the 263 times the Old Testament is quoted by the New Testament writers, 116 quotations are from Psalms.

Even when not directly quoting the Psalms, the apostles and evangelists were often influenced by them in the expressions they used. Ralph P. Martin tells us that the early church, like Jesus himself, “turned to the Psalms for language in which to express their deepest emotions” (“Worship,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, p. 1125).

Undoubtedly, the early church created psalms in which they praised Jesus Christ. Donald Guthrie notes, “Many scholars have considered that Philippians 2:6-11 and Colossians 1:15-20 were originally hymns which had been composed and used before being incorporated into the respective epistles” (*New Testament Theology*, p. 343). Other hymns of the early church may have included 1 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 1:1-3 and 1 Peter 3:18-22.

The Psalms had been central to the Jews’ worship of God for centuries, providing the inspiration for their prayer patterns. These prayer patterns, in turn, were used by the early Christian communities. David E. Aune writes: “The Jewish *bodayah* (‘thanksgiving’) pattern of prayer, which characteristically began with the phrase ‘I/we thank you,’ is frequently found in the NT and early Christian literature (Luke 2:38; Heb 13:15; Rev 11:17-18). This type of prayer is also frequently used [by] Paul to introduce petitions and intercessions (Rom 1:8; cf. Phil 4:6; Col 4:2; 1 Thess 5:16-18)” (“Early Christian Worship,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6, p. 980).

As you read the epistles, you will come across sayings based on the doxologies in the Psalms. A doxology is an ascription of praise to God by the congregation. For example, Psalm 72 concludes: “Praise be to the Lord God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvelous deeds. Praise be to his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen” (verses 18-19; see also Psalm 41:13; 89:52; 106:48). A typical Christian doxology similarly attributes various characteristics — especially glory — to God and/or Christ, and includes phrases such as “forever” or “for ever and ever.” It usually concludes with an “Amen.”

Here are some examples of doxologies in Paul’s writings:

- “Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen” (1 Timothy 1:17).

- “For from him [God] and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen” (Romans 11:36).
- “To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen” (Romans 16:27).

Other New Testament writers also used this format:

- “To him [Jesus Christ] be glory both now and forever! Amen” (2 Peter 3:18).
- “To the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen” (Jude 25).
- “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb [Jesus Christ] be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!” (Revelation 5:13).

Another area in which the Psalms have continued to influence Christian worship throughout the centuries is that of congregational singing. In the sixth century, when Benedict set up a monastic order, he commanded the monks to chant all 150 psalms each week. A thousand years later, Martin Luther established a church hymnal in the language of the people. He wrote a number of hymns himself, the most famous being “Ein’ feste Burg ist unser Gott” (“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”), which is based on Psalm 46. And Psalm 23, in its numerous arrangements, remains a long-lasting favorite in many denominations.

Paul’s encouragement to the New Testament church, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Colossians 3:16), is as important today as ever. During the song service, a congregation offers its praise to God and strengthens its relationship with Jesus Christ. Singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs helps unify the congregation in an inspirational endeavor that draws it closer together as the Body of Christ.



## 47. EXPLORING PROVERBS

### What's in a name?

In the Hebrew Bible, this book begins with the words *Mishlei Shlomoh Ben-David*, meaning “Proverbs of Solomon son of David.” The Hebrew title for the book is simply *Mishlei*, meaning “Proverbs,” which is the title in English Bibles.

### Outline

Proverbs begins with a prologue (1:1-7) that gives the purpose of the book: to impart wisdom. Then follows a series of speeches concerning wisdom (1:8–9:18). After that, there is little story flow, even within an individual chapter. However, there are several separate collections of proverbs:

- The “proverbs of Solomon” (10:1–22:16).
- “Sayings of the wise” (22:17–24:22).
- Further “sayings of the wise” (24:23-34).
- “More proverbs of Solomon” (25:1–29:27).
- The “sayings of Agur son of Jakeh” (30:1-33).
- The “sayings of King Lemuel” (31:1-9).
- The book concludes with an acrostic poem praising the virtues of a noble wife (31:10-31).

### How to read this book

Proverbs is the foremost book in what is known as wisdom literature. Wisdom literature does not place primary emphasis on such topics as repentance, grace, mercy, love, faith, prayer, eternal life or similar subjects

regarding salvation. Wisdom literature contains sound advice of practical use in day-to-day life.

In Proverbs, we find two common ways that wisdom is expressed: the saying and the instruction. Most sayings are just one verse long. For example: “A wise son brings joy to his father, but a foolish son grief to his mother” (10:1) or “A generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor” (22:9). These sayings are not laws. As Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton write, “The truisms of Proverbs are not absolute promises, but general principles based on careful observation of the human experience” (*A Survey of the Old Testament*, p. 290).

An instruction might extend over an entire chapter — chapter 7, for example — or it may only be one or two verses long. Instructions can provide positive direction, such as: “Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine” (3:9-10). Or they can be prohibitions, such as: “Do not gloat when your enemy falls; when he stumbles, do not let your heart rejoice, or the Lord will see and disapprove and turn his wrath away from him” (24:17-18).

## Learning about God

Since the primary concern in Proverbs is not theological, the book does not speak much about God. Nevertheless, Proverbs emphasizes that wisdom and knowledge are grounded in respect for God. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., comments: “The fear of the Lord was the dominating concept and organizing theological principle in wisdom literature. It was the response of faith to the divine word of promise and blessing just as it had functioned in the days of Abraham and Moses” (*Toward an Old Testament Theology*, p. 170).

## Other topics

Proverbs addresses many vital subjects, but the information on any one topic is scattered throughout the book. Otto Eissfeldt writes, “The contents of the sayings and wisdom poems which make up the book...cover the whole realm of life in all its vicissitudes — government and civil life, trade and justice, crafts and agriculture, family and slaves, work and holiday, joy and sorrow” (*The Old Testament: An Introduction*, p. 476).

## What this book means for you

The principles encapsulated in Proverbs apply to all people. As Abraham Cohen explains: “No passage is addressed exclusively to the Hebrew. The tone of the Book is strikingly universalistic throughout.... Its teaching is applicable to all men everywhere and is true of life generally and not of any particular people or land” (*Proverbs*, Soncino Books of the Bible, p. xiv). Proverbs is the handbook of practical living, valid for all ages.

## 48. PROVERBS: WORDS OF WISDOM

### **Purpose: Proverbs 1:1-6**

Solomon's wisdom exceeded that of everyone before him. The book of Proverbs is a remarkable distillation of that wisdom. Its purpose is clear: "For attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair; for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young" (verses 2-4).

### **Wisdom speaks: Proverbs 1:7-33**

Proverbs is written from the standpoint of a father instructing his son. It contains many instructions on avoiding immoral women and on living happily with a wife. Even wisdom (Hebrew: *chokhmah*) and folly (*kesiluth*) are personified as women. Of course, the principles conveyed — avoiding immorality, deriving enjoyment from your marriage, seeking wisdom and spurning folly — apply equally to men and women.

Solomon first warns against falling prey to the enticement of sinners (verses 10-19). No matter how alluring the life of the criminal looks, its end is a violent death: "These men lie in wait for their own blood; they waylay only themselves! Such is the end of all who go after ill-gotten gain" (verses 18-19).

Then Solomon portrays wisdom as a woman speaking in the street. In a parallel structure, wisdom twice reproaches the foolish for not listening to her (verses 24-25, 29-30) and then announces their consequent doom (verses 26-28, 31-32).

## A poem to wisdom: Proverbs 2

This Proverbs is an intricately structured alphabetizing poem, 22 lines in length to correspond with the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. After the introductory address, “My son,” the poem is divided into six stanzas: verses 1-4, 5-8, 9-11, 12-15, 16-19 and 20-22. The first three stanzas begin with aleph, the first letter of the alphabet; the last three begin with lamed, the letter that starts the second half of the alphabet.

Moreover, the first lines of each of these stanzas summarize the poem: “If you accept my words...then you will understand the fear of the Lord... Then you will understand what is right and just... Wisdom will save you from the ways of wicked men... It will save you also from the adulteress... Thus you will walk in the ways of good men” (verses 1, 5, 9, 12, 16, 20). This sort of formal structure is typical of wisdom literature and serves a practical purpose: It makes the point — that wisdom is invaluable — easier to remember.

## A code of ethics: Proverbs 3

Solomon now gives a series of commands, each two verses long, about honoring and trusting God and about love and faithfulness (verses 1-12). Then follows another hymn praising the virtues of wisdom (verses 13-24). Wisdom’s value is so high that “she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold” (verse 14).

The Proverbs also contains a series of prohibitions (verses 27-32) against harming one’s neighbor. These ethical teachings go far beyond the literal demands of the law: “Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act” (verse 27). This ethical principle was expounded by the apostle James: “Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins” (James 4:17). The book of Proverbs does more than give sound advice — it teaches a way of life.

## Get wisdom: Proverbs 4

Solomon tells how his father, David, encouraged him to seek wisdom when he was a young boy (verses 1-9). He again stresses: “Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding” (verse 7). Then Solomon contrasts the way of wisdom with the way of the wicked (verses 11-19). He encourages his son to keep his words with all of his being (verses 20-27).

## Do not commit adultery: Proverbs 5

This Proverbs is an intentionally graphic poem, warning against adultery.

Its metaphors strike home: “For the lips of an adulteress drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword” (verses 3-4). Description and implicit warning turn to explicit prohibition: “Keep to a path far from her, do not go near the door of her house” (verse 8). The apostle Paul later commanded: “Flee from sexual immorality” (1 Corinthians 6:18). This principle applies to every aspect of life: Get as far away from sin as possible.

The poem also gives positive instruction: “Rejoice in the wife of your youth.... May her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love” (Proverbs 5:18-19). God intended a husband and wife to find enjoyment in each other. We will later expound this theme in our commentary on the Song of Songs.

### **Introducing major themes: Proverbs 6:1-19**

Three short passages introduce themes that are developed further in the later part of the book: the foolishness of being surety for a friend (verses 1-5), the folly of laziness (verses 6-11) and the hatred God has for evil (verses 12-19). The last point is illustrated as a list of seven things that are detestable to God: “Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers” (verses 17-19). Notice that three of these involve use of the tongue — another important theme.

### **Warnings against adultery: Proverbs 6:20-7:27**

Solomon likens sleeping with another man’s wife to scooping fire into one’s lap or walking on hot coals (Proverbs 6:27-29). A starving thief might be pitied, but a man who has committed adultery will not be shown any mercy by a jealous husband (verses 30-35).

Proverbs 7 is another long poem warning against adultery. This poem uses an envelope structure — it begins and ends by exhorting the young man to hear his father’s instruction (Proverbs 7:1-5, 24-27). In between, Solomon describes how an immoral woman plies her craft: “I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes and cinnamon. Come, let’s drink deep of love till morning; let’s enjoy ourselves with love! My husband is not at home; he has gone on a long journey” (verses 17-19). Again, the result of immorality is vividly portrayed: “With persuasive words she led him astray; she seduced him with her smooth talk. All at once he followed her like an ox going to the slaughter” (verses 21-22).

## Wisdom calls out again: Proverbs 8

In another chapter-length poem, Solomon again personifies wisdom as a woman proclaiming truth to those who would listen. Wisdom here makes some dramatic claims: “By me kings reign and rulers make laws that are just; by me princes govern, and all nobles who rule on earth.... The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old; I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began” (verses 15-16, 22-23).

## Wisdom and folly: Proverbs 9

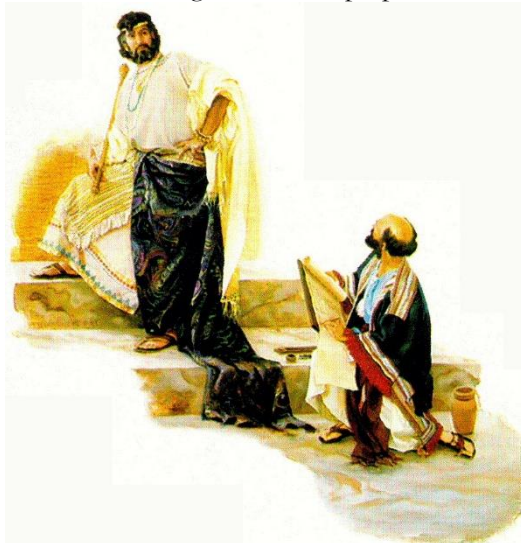
Solomon now personifies both wisdom and folly. First, wisdom prepares a feast of meat and wine on a furnished table served by maids for all people who are willing to forsake folly and go in the way of understanding (verses 1-6). Folly offers her followers a short-cut: “Stolen water is sweet; food eaten in secret is delicious!” (verse 17). Yet this shortcut leads to death (verse 18). Notice also that folly can offer only bread and water, but wisdom offers meat and wine. There is ultimately far more satisfaction in going the right way.

## Major themes of Proverbs 10-29

We do not have enough space to discuss all the diverse subjects contained in these chapters, so we will limit ourselves to several of the more frequently mentioned topics.

We begin with a piece of sound financial advice that is often ignored: “He who puts up security for another will surely suffer” (11:15). If you guarantee to pay if someone else defaults on a financial agreement, be prepared to kiss that money good-bye. And if you do this on behalf of a stranger, then you have only your own folly to blame when things go wrong. As two of the proverbs say, “Take the garment of one who puts up security for a stranger” (20:16; 27:13).

This does not mean that it is wrong to be surety for a friend, but it is risky. It is better to consider it a gift. If you are co-signer on a loan, you are taking chances.



Judah offered himself as surety for his brother Benjamin (Genesis 43:8-9). He later offered to become Joseph's slave in an attempt to ensure Benjamin's safe return (Genesis 44:32-33). These courageous actions resulted in the joyous reunion of Joseph with Judah and the rest of his brothers. This example illustrates that the proverbs are not absolute laws, but wise instructions and general principles.

## **Respect for God**

This theme occurs right from the beginning of the book: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (1:7). Both knowledge and wisdom are intimately connected with a respectful fear of God: "The fear of the Lord teaches a man wisdom" (15:33); and "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (9:10).

Fearing God leads to the godly attribute of hating evil: "Fear the Lord and shun evil" (3:7); "To fear the Lord is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech" (8:13); and "Through the fear of the Lord a man avoids evil" (16:6).

Those who fear God do not need to fear any human: "He who fears the Lord has a secure fortress, and for his children it will be a refuge. The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life" (14:26-27). Fearing God is to be preferred to having great wealth with trouble (15:16) because "the fear of the Lord leads to life: Then one rests content, untouched by trouble" (19:23) and "humility and the fear of the Lord bring wealth and honor and life" (22:4).

## **The value of wisdom**

In addition to being the major theme of the first nine chapters, the value of wisdom is discussed throughout the rest of the book. Solomon writes, "How much better to get wisdom than gold, to choose understanding rather than silver!" (16:16). In fact, seeking wisdom is wise: "He who gets wisdom loves his own soul; he who cherishes understanding prospers" (19:8).

## **The value of work**

Another theme introduced earlier is the certainty of the sluggard, or lazy person, ending in poverty (6:6-11). Many proverbs repeat this message: "Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth" (10:4); "A sluggard does not plow in season; so at harvest time he looks but finds nothing" (20:4) and "The sluggard's craving will be the death of him" (21:25).

Two longer passages reinforce this point. One shows that sluggards will find the most outrageous excuse not to work and cannot be convinced of their folly (26:13-16). The other describes the property of the sluggard —

broken down and overgrown with weeds and thorns — and warns that lack of diligence inevitably results in poverty (24:30-34).

Conversely, the diligent thrive: “The sluggard craves and gets nothing, but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied” (13:4); “He who works his land will have abundant food” (12:11); “All hard work brings a profit” (14:23); “The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty” (21:5); and “Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings” (22:29). The apostle Paul also understood the value of work: “If a man will not work, he shall not eat” (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

## **Wealth and poverty**

Proverbs has much to say about riches and poverty. Even though wisdom, understanding and knowledge are far more precious than wealth (8:10, 19; 16:16), riches do have value: “The wealth of the rich is their fortified city, but poverty is the ruin of the poor” (10:15); and “The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender” (22:7).

Money is a power, and it can be put to good use. However, the rich must not become so engrossed with material wealth that they neglect their spiritual responsibilities. In the end, it is not riches but righteousness that is important (11:4). Of course, like everyone else, the rich must meet material obligations to God: “Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops” (3:9). They should also remember the poor: “He who gives to the poor will lack nothing, but he who closes his eyes to them receives many curses” (28:27).

The proverbs are therefore in agreement with the law — human beings should love God (Deuteronomy 6:5) and neighbor (Leviticus 19:18). The proverbs stress that the most important thing in life is not wealth but one’s relationship with God: “Rich and poor have this in common: The Lord is the Maker of them all” (22:2); and “Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death” (11:4).

## **Correction and reproof**

The book of Proverbs has stern warnings for scorners and scoffers who refuse to accept rebukes: “A wise son heeds his father’s instruction, but a mocker does not listen to rebuke” (13:1); and “A mocker resents correction; he will not consult the wise” (15:12). Scorners are those fools who mock at making amends for sin (14:9), make light of justice (19:28) and are proud and arrogant (21:24). The wise person will drive out the mocker, and strife will cease as a result (22:10). In the end, “penalties are prepared for mockers, and beatings for the backs of fools” (19:29).



Rebuke, or reproof, is a theme dealt with extensively throughout Proverbs. The Hebrew word for reproof, *tokhachath*, is used 16 times in Proverbs and only eight times in the rest of the Old Testament. Wisdom despairs at those who refuse her rebuke (1:25, 30). Those who ignore correction lead others astray (10:17) and are stupid (12:1). In addition, those who hate correction will die (15:10).

On the other hand, those who heed correction are prudent (15:5). They shall gain understanding (15:32) and be honored (13:18).

The other side of the coin is instruction. The Hebrew word for instruction, *musar*, occurs 30 times in Proverbs and only 20 times in the rest of the Old Testament. A wise person will listen to the instruction of both parents: “Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction and do not forsake your mother’s teaching” (1:8).

Instruction is more precious than silver (8:10) and is the way to wisdom: “Listen to my instruction and be wise” (8:33); and “Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise” (19:20). Instruction leads to life: “He who heeds discipline shows the way to life” (10:17). Correction and instruction are part of a Christian’s life. We must learn to accept correction when we are at fault. We must also continually receive instruction as to how we can better live God’s way of life.

## **Gossip and talebearing**

Slanderous words are quickly believed by people who listen to talebearers. Such words do not just make a superficial impression — they corrupt the innermost being of the listener. Whereas, “without gossip a quarrel dies down” (26:20), a talebearer causes strife. Simply put, “A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret” (11:13).

Specifically, we should not make other people’s sins public knowledge: “He who covers over an offense promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends” (17:9). How much grief has been caused by not applying this one basic principle! God tells us to avoid talebearers and gossips: “A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a man who talks too much” (20:19).

## **Using the tongue**

Lying is condemned in no uncertain terms: “Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment” (12:19); “The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in men who are truthful” (12:22); and “Like a club or a sword or a sharp arrow is the man who gives false testimony against his neighbor” (25:18).

Nor are we to boast about our achievements: “Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; someone else, and not your own lips” (27:2). Often, the best course of action is to keep silent: “When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise” (10:19); “Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent” (17:28); and “A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control” (29:11). Proverbs emphasizes that “an evil man is trapped by his sinful talk” (12:13) and “a fool’s mouth is his undoing, and his lips are a snare to his soul” (18:7).

## Using the tongue

We can use the tongue positively, however. All those who give righteous instruction are commended: “The lips of the righteous nourish many” (10:21); “Kings take pleasure in honest lips” (16:13); and “A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver” (25:11). However, the righteous will rebuke, if necessary, rather than flatter a person (28:23).

Throughout the book of Proverbs, the words of the righteous and the wicked are contrasted: “The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but violence overwhelms the mouth of the wicked” (10:11); “The tongue of the righteous is choice silver, but the heart of the wicked is of little value” (10:20); “Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing” (12:18); “The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouth of the fool gushes folly” (15:2); and “The Lord detests the thoughts of the wicked, but those of the pure are pleasing to him” (15:26). In short, “the tongue has the power of life and death” (18:21).

## The sayings of Agur: Proverbs 30

Chapter 30 of Proverbs contains the sayings of Agur, the son of Jakeh. We know nothing else about this man, but the wisdom within this chapter shows him to be an unusually astute observer of life.

He summed up the proverbs on riches and poverty by saying: “Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God” (verses 8-9).

A number of Agur’s proverbs are organized into sets of four observations. He notes that four things are never satisfied: “the grave, the barren womb, land, which is never satisfied with water, and fire, which never says, ‘Enough!’” (verse 16). He also identifies four things that the earth cannot bear: “a servant who becomes king, a fool who is full of food, an unloved woman who is married, and a maidservant who displaces her mistress” (verses 22-23).

Four things Agur mentions as too amazing for him to understand: “the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a maiden” (verse 19). And four things Agur observed as moving with stately bearing: “a lion, mighty among beasts, who retreats before nothing; a strutting rooster, a he-goat, and a king with his army around him” (verses 30-31).

These sayings have a “there are three, no there are four” type structure, which puts the emphasis on the last item. For example, Agur’s real fascination is in regard to “the way of a man with a maiden”; and his real admiration is for a king at the head of his army.

### **The sayings of Lemuel: Proverbs 31:1-9**

King Lemuel may have come from the kingdom of Massa in northern Arabia. The Hebrew word translated “oracle” in Proverbs 30:1 and 31:1 is *massa*, which some scholars translate as the place Massa. Proverbs 31:1-9 contains a mother’s advice about the responsibilities of a monarch.

In two short sentences, Lemuel’s mother enunciates one of the king’s most important duties: “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy” (verses 8-9). If the kings of Israel and Judah had applied this one principle, God would not have needed to send prophet after prophet to denounce the gross injustices perpetuated in those nations.

## **49. PROVERBS 31: PORTRAIT OF A GODLY WOMAN**

By Sheila Graham

For thousands of years, God-fearing women have looked to the noble, or virtuous (KJV), woman of Proverbs 31 as their ideal. Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, probably had this role model of the virtuous woman in the forefront of her mind from earliest childhood. Most Jewish women did, for this poem was traditionally recited in the Jewish home every week on the eve of the Sabbath.

But what about today's woman? Of what value can this ancient poem be to the diverse, complex life-styles of women today? To the married, to the single, to the young, to the old, to those working outside the home or inside the home, to women with children or without children? It is more relevant than you might at first expect — although it is also too good to be true.

When we examine this ancient biblical ideal of womanhood, we do not find the outmoded stereotyped housewife occupied with dirty dishes and laundry, her daily life dictated by the demands of her husband and her children. Nor do we find a hardened, overly ambitious career woman who leaves her family to fend for itself.

What we find is a strong, dignified, multitalented, caring woman who is an individual in her own right. This woman has money to invest, servants to look after and real estate to manage. She is her husband's partner, and she is completely trusted with the responsibility for their lands, property and goods.

She has the business skills to buy and sell in the market, along with the

heartfelt sensitivity and compassion to care for and fulfill the needs of people who are less fortunate. Cheerfully and energetically she tackles the challenges each day brings. Her husband and children love and respect her for her kind, generous and caring nature.

But with all her responsibilities, first and foremost, she looks to God. Her primary concern is God's will in her life. She is a woman after God's own heart. Let's examine the characteristics of this remarkable woman — a role model for Christian women today.

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“A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies.” The Hebrew word *chayil*, translated here “noble,” means a wife of valor — a strong, capable woman with strong convictions. This description of the ideal wife does not agree with those who associate femininity with weakness and passivity.

“Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value.” Her husband trusts her management of their resources. Her industriousness adds to the family income.

“She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life.” This woman does not do right only when it is convenient and profitable. Her actions are not based on how she is treated by others or by what others think. Her character is steady. She is reliable and dependable.

“She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands.” This woman enjoys working so much that she plans ahead for what she needs in order to accomplish her responsibilities.

“She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar.” She does not settle for the mediocre—this trait is portrayed by a woman who goes the extra mile for quality items.

“She gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family and portions for her servant girls.” Though the woman described here has servants to take care of many of the household duties, she sets the pace. She understands that good managers have a responsibility to take care of those under their authority. That is one of her top priorities.

“She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.” Every woman doesn't have to go into real estate and horticulture — the principle here is that this woman uses her mind. She does not act on a whim, but logically analyzes a situation before making a decision. Her goals are not only short term — she envisions the long-range benefits of her decisions.

“She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks.”

We get a picture of a woman who vigorously goes about her duties. She keeps herself healthy and strong by proper health practices — good diet, adequate rest and exercise. Many people depend on her.

“She sees that her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night.” She takes pride in doing a good job and knows that her merchandise is good. Night or day, no one worries that her responsibilities are not taken care of.

“In her hand she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers.” She sets an example of skill and industriousness. Whether this woman would be a computer programmer, a concert pianist, a mother, or all three, she develops her talents and hones her skills through education and diligent application.

“She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy.” Although it’s good to donate to needy causes, this means far more than writing a check. This woman shows personal concern. She visits the sick, comforts the lonely and depressed, and delivers food to those in need.

“When it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet.” Providing clothing for the family is one of her responsibilities. She takes this seriously, and plans ahead. She does not practice crisis management.

“She makes coverings for her bed; she is clothed in fine linen and purple.” This woman has high standards and dresses properly for the occasion.

“Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.” This man does not have to spend half his time trying to straighten out problems at home, and his success in the social world comes partly from her support, just as her success comes partly from his support. The original woman of Proverbs 31 couldn’t phone her husband for his opinion on matters. She made many of the day-to-day decisions about their property and goods. He trusted her to manage the estate efficiently.

“She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes.” This woman runs a business from her home. Her efforts and industry add to the family income.

“Strength and honor are her clothing; she shall rejoice in time to come” (NKJV). Not only does this woman benefit each day from her wise and diligent actions, long-term lifetime benefits and rewards lie in store for her.

“She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.” This woman is educated and has the facts. She knows what she is talking about. Whether about her job, her personal values or her opinion on world events, she is able to express herself intelligently, tactfully and diplomatically. People

come to her for good advice.

“She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.” She is an organized, energetic person who carries out her responsibilities.

“Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her.” This woman is not a doormat, slavishly trying to appease and please her family, no matter how unreasonable their demands. She is honored in her home. Here we gain an insight into the character of her husband as well. He teaches their children to respect her and the virtues she personifies.

“Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all.” High praise for this extraordinary woman — a role model for women of all time.

“Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.” Here is the key to this woman’s effectiveness. Her priorities are determined by God’s will, not her own. She is concerned about what God thinks, rather than with what other people think. Physical beauty and clever conversation are admirable qualities. But if a woman’s beauty and charm are the extent of her virtues, what happens when time and the trials of life take their toll? This woman does not depend on beauty and charm for her success. She recognizes her need for God.

“Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.” This woman is actively doing, not merely talking. She does not boast about her plans for the future or her successes of the past. They are obvious.

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Does this woman sound too good to be true? She is. The woman described here is *an idealized woman*, a composite of many capable women. After all, not all people have the same skills. Some women’s strengths are in music or art. Others may be in mathematics, teaching or business. Some are better managers and organizers than others. While some women may excel at coming up with ideas, others may be more skilled at creating or producing what has been invented by someone else. No one excels at everything.

Some women work for several years after high school or college before marrying. Others, for one reason or another, do not marry at all. Does this mean that unmarried women cannot be Proverbs 31 women? No. Although this chapter describes a married woman, marriage and motherhood are not prerequisites for the successful Christian female’s life. The essential characteristics of the Proverbs 31 woman can be applied to the the single woman, too.

The model woman described in Proverbs is a composite portrait of *ideal*

womanhood. The focus of this portrait is a woman's relationship with God, not her specific abilities or marital status. The Proverbs 31 woman realizes that regardless of her natural talents or acquired skills, or all her accomplishments, her strength comes from God.

Who is a virtuous woman today? Proverbs 31 tells you that it is the woman who puts God first. The ideal woman of Proverbs 31 should encourage all women everywhere. Cultures change, but this woman's God-inspired character still shines brightly across the centuries.



## 50. THE NUMBERS GAME

Some people insist on forcing contrived numerical patterns into the biblical text, which lead to spectacular, but unwarranted, conclusions. Such methods should not be used to establish doctrines, personal or church traditions, or to calculate precise dates for the future fulfillment of prophetic events. Nevertheless, the Hebrews did use alphabetical and numerical patterns for structural purposes, and discovering those patterns will help us to appreciate the skill with which they imparted their wisdom.

In several ancient Near Eastern languages, words and letters had numerical value. An inscription of King Sargon II (727-707 B.C.) states that the king built the wall of Khorsabad 16,283 cubits long to correspond with the numerical value of his name. This type of using words as numbers is known as *gematria*, from the Greek word *geo-metria*.

Gematria also occurs in Hebrew wisdom literature. For example, there are precisely 375 proverbs in the collection of “The proverbs of Solomon” (Proverbs 10:1–22:16). In Hebrew, the name of Solomon consists of four letters: SH, L, M and H. The numerical value of this name is  $300 + 30 + 40 + 5 = 375$ . According to 1 Kings 4:32, Solomon spoke 3,000 proverbs. It would seem that Solomon, or someone else later, deliberately made a collection of 375 of the Solomonic proverbs to correspond to the numerical value of Solomon’s name. In both the wall at Khorsabad and the collection of proverbs, the use of gematria places a “personal stamp” upon the work.

There is a similar phenomenon in the book of Ecclesiastes. The main text of Ecclesiastes, ending at Ecclesiastes 12:8, is 216 verses long (followed by a six-verse epilogue). In the Hebrew Bible, the first word in the book — *dibbrei*, meaning “the words” — has a numerical value of 216.

Moreover, the opening statement of Ecclesiastes — *habbel habhalim bakkol*

*babel*, translated “Meaningless! Meaningless!... Everything is meaningless” in the NIV — also has a numerical value of 216. This statement of purpose is found in Ecclesiastes 1:2 and 12:8, at the beginning and the end of the main text. So the numerical values of both the thesis statement and the first word of Ecclesiastes correspond to the number of verses in the main text.

Addison G. Wright — working with another expert on wisdom literature, Patrick Skehan — elaborated on this material in “The Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited: Numerical Patterns in the Book of Qoheleth,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, vol. 42, 1980, pp. 38-51. From these patterns, and from other evidence based on the analysis of key phrases, Dr. Wright suggests that the epilogue was deliberately written six verses long to form a book of two parts, each part being 111 verses long. According to Dr. Wright, the first part of Ecclesiastes ends with the eighth and final occurrence of the phrase “vanity and grasping for the wind” (Ecclesiastes 6:9, NKJV). There are 111 verses from Ecclesiastes 1:1–6:9.

Historically, many interpreters have used gematria irresponsibly to invent fanciful interpretations foreign to the text. But even though we should be skeptical concerning claims of numerical patterns, this does not mean they can be dismissed without examination. But numerical details are usually matters of artistic appreciation, not of secret meanings hidden in the text.

Concerning Dr. Wright’s analysis referred to above, Roland E. Murphy states:

While numerical patterns are usually associated with arbitrary flights of fantasy, it should be noted that the above observations are relatively sober, and deal with key phrases and verses. Second, the likelihood that the verbal and numerical patterns are merely coincidental is minimal, since the observations reinforce each other. Third, the numerical patterns are in a different line of reasoning altogether from the literary analysis indicated by the repetition of key phrases in many instances, and yet they lend confirmation to it. Finally, this formal structural analysis, whatever imperfections it may have, is in general harmony with many logical analyses of the book. (*Ecclesiastes*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 23A, p. xxxix)

The Hebrews delighted in using artificial devices, such as acrostics or alphabetizing poems, as a way of imposing additional structure in their wisdom literature. We should not, therefore, be surprised to find that they also used numerical patterns for similar purposes. Unlike the fanciful numerical theories of certain interpreters, the numerical patterns discovered by scholars such as Skehan and Wright do not lead to finding some strange “hidden meaning” in the text. But these patterns should give us a deeper appreciation of how the text was written.

## 51. EXPLORING ECCLESIASTES

Solomon boasted: “I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them” (Ecclesiastes 2:4-5).

### What’s in a name?

The book begins, “The words of the Teacher [Hebrew: *Qoheleth*]” (1:1). In the Greek Old Testament, the word translated “teacher” is *Ekklesiastes*, from which the English title for the book is derived. The Hebrew title is *Qoheleth*, which probably means “one who calls together an assembly” or “one who addresses an assembly.” *Qoheleth* is usually translated as “the Preacher” or “the Teacher.”

Who was Qoheleth? Roy B. Zuck writes: “Some scholars argue that the anonymous author [Qoheleth] called himself ‘son of David, king in Jerusalem’ (1:1; cf. vv. 12, 16; 2:9) to give his book a ring of authority as having been written in the tradition of Solomonic wisdom. Others (including me), however, argue that the author is indeed Solomon” (“A Theology of the Wisdom Books and the Song of Songs,” in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck, p. 244).

### Outline

After the first two chapters, Ecclesiastes does not have an obvious story flow. Rather, it is a collection of proverbs and short passages. However, some scholars believe that the book does have a discernible structure based on form rather than content. Although not vital to understanding the book, the outline presented below — based on Addison G. Wright’s observations

regarding the occurrence of key phrases (“The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, vol. 30, 1968, pp. 313-334) — illustrates the formal details that the Hebrews delighted in when writing wisdom literature.

After a prologue concerning the profit of toil (1:1-11), the body of the book is then divided into two main parts. The first part (1:12–6:9) consists of eight sections (1:12-14; 1:15-17; 1:18–2:11; 2:12-17; 2:18-26; 3:1–4:6; 4:7-16; 5:1–6:9), each ending with a phrase such as “meaningless, a chasing after the wind.”

The second part of the body is divided into two sections. The first section (6:10–8:17) is further divided into four subsections (6:10–7:14; 7:15-24; 7:25-29; 8:1-17), each ending with a phrase such as “man cannot discover anything” or “this only have I found” [Hebrew: *matsa*, translated “discover” elsewhere]. The second section is also divided into four subsections (9:1-12; 9:13–10:15; 10:16–11:2; 11:3-6), each ending with “no man knows” or a similar phrase.

The main part of the work concludes with a poem on youth and old age (11:7–12:8), which ends as the book began: “Everything is meaningless” (12:8; see 1:2). Finally, an epilogue (12:9-14) comments on the book.

## How to read this book

Like the book of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes is wisdom literature. Ecclesiastes acknowledges the value of wisdom: “Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing and benefits those who see the sun. Wisdom is a shelter as money is a shelter, but the advantage of knowledge is this: that wisdom preserves the life of its possessor” (7:11-12).

Ecclesiastes imparts wisdom in many areas of life, including law and justice: “When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, the hearts of the people are filled with schemes to do wrong” (8:11).

But the special emphasis of Ecclesiastes is relating the *limits* of wisdom. First, wisdom is often ignored or forgotten: “The wise man, like the fool, will not be long remembered; in days to come both will be forgotten” (2:16). Solomon remembered when a poor man saved a city by his wisdom, yet soon this man’s deeds were forgotten. Solomon concludes: “‘Wisdom is better than strength.’ But the poor man’s wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded.... Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good” (9:16, 18).

Second, wisdom cannot eliminate chance misfortune: “The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all” (9:11).

But the ultimate limit of wisdom is death: “Like the fool, the wise man too must die!” (2:16). Kenneth R.R. Gros Louis writes that the “Preacher...boils everything down to two great realities, to the essentials — death and chance” (“Ecclesiastes,” in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, ed. Kenneth R.R. Gros Louis, p. 278). Wisdom ends at death: “In the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom” (9:10).

## Learning about God

“What a heavy burden God has laid on men!” (1:13). Here is a key to this book. Solomon reflected on his material possessions, seeing them as empty and unable to provide meaning to his life. Many of his musings are somewhat cynical.

Admittedly, he acknowledges God’s sovereignty: “I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it” (3:14). Solomon also realizes that the proper attitude toward God is awe and respect: “Guard your steps when you go to the house of God... Stand in awe of God” (5:1, 7).

Solomon even admits: “I know that it will go better with God-fearing men, who are reverent before God. Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow” (8:12-13). But, despite all this, Solomon is wistful that God’s gift to humans is “to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him” (5:18).

Solomon accuses God: “God gives a man wealth, possessions and honor, so that he lacks nothing his heart desires, but God does not enable him to enjoy them, and a stranger enjoys them instead. This is meaningless, a grievous evil” (6:2). Those who cannot see beyond themselves, even if they had the wisdom of Solomon, are bound to have a distorted view of God.

## Other topics

**Friendship:** There is great value in finding a true friend: “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!” (4:9-10). And the best friend a person can have is a loving spouse. The best a man can enjoy in this life is to “enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life” (9:9).

**Righteousness:** The book of Proverbs emphasizes a general principle — the righteous prosper. Ecclesiastes concentrates on the exceptions to this principle: “In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: a righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked man living long

in his wickedness” (7:15). Solomon continues, “There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: righteous men who get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve” (8:14).

**Work:** Proverbs emphasizes that it is the diligent in life who prosper — laziness leads to poverty. Ecclesiastes, however, discusses work not as a means to an end, but as an end in itself. Solomon says, “My heart took delight in all my work” (2:10). He states emphatically, “A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work” (2:24).

Even though work brings some satisfaction, Solomon still considers it to be toil under the sun (2:11, 18) because its satisfaction is fleeting. Solomon bitterly observes: “A man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune” (2:21).

## What this book means for you

The Jews traditionally read Ecclesiastes at the Feast of Tabernacles. At this time of year, God’s people are commanded, “Eat the tithe of your grain, new wine and oil, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks in the presence of the Lord your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name” (Deuteronomy 14:23). The Feast of Tabernacles was a meaningful time to read Ecclesiastes, the book that tells us: “Nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in his work all the days of the life God has given him under the sun” (8:15).

But the pleasures of eating and drinking ultimately satisfy no one. Several days of feasting help convince one that the physical does not satisfy. As Ecclesiastes emphasizes, death will shortly bring an end to pleasure anyway. Robert Gordis comments, “Koheleth’s insistence upon the enjoyment of life flowed from a tragic realization of the brevity of life” (*Koheleth—The Man and His World*, p. 93). At the Feast of Tabernacles, the Israelites were told to live in temporary accommodations (Leviticus 23:39-43). This illustrates the temporary nature of human beings.

Ecclesiastes gives a wealth of advice about how to make the most of this life. Yet an exasperated, despairing emptiness pervades the book. And, ironically, this is its greatest contribution. Ecclesiastes highlights the need we all have for something beyond anything this physical life can offer — to that which is made possible only by Jesus Christ (John 4:7-14).

## **52. ECCLESIASTES: THE VOICE OF EXPERIENCE**

### **Thesis: chapter 1:1-2**

Solomon packed more experience into one lifetime than most people dream of. He built the great temple in Jerusalem and numerous other projects. He studied and taught about many aspects of nature: animals, birds, reptiles, fish and plant life (1 Kings 4:32-34). He had 700 wives and 300 concubines. He wrote songs and spoke proverbs, many of which are preserved in the book of Proverbs. Toward the end of his life, Solomon looked back on what he had learned. He recorded his observations in what is now known as the book of Ecclesiastes.

One might expect Solomon to have been satisfied and grateful as he reflected on a life of achievement. In fact, he was frustrated and bitter. Solomon revealed his thesis in the opening statement “Everything is meaningless” (verse 2), which also occurs toward the end of the book (Ecclesiastes 12:8), forming an envelope structure. Solomon’s work expounds his view that everything is futile. This is true when we leave God out of the picture.

### **The cycles of nature: chapter 1:3-11**

First, Solomon poses a question: “What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?” (verse 3). Solomon believes there is none, and considers nature to be a wearisome series of cycles. David had observed the cycles of nature with wonder and joy:

“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of

his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.... In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun, which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other” (Psalm 19:1-6).

Solomon observes the same phenomena, but his observations are tinged with cynicism:

The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course. All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again. All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. (Ecclesiastes 1:6-8)

Where David sees a wondrous renewal, Solomon sees futility. Solomon proclaims: “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun” (verse 9).

## Reflections on life

Solomon had asked what a man’s work was worth (Ecclesiastes 1:3); now he answers his question: “I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind” (verse 14). Solomon had become the wisest person on earth. But his wisdom did not bring happiness: “For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief” (verse 18).

Solomon then sought pleasure in wine, women and song. He experienced every physical sensation he could: “I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure” (Ecclesiastes 2:10). But pleasure did not bring him happiness either: “Everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun” (verse 11).

Solomon knew that “wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness” (verse 13). However, being wise, he also knew that “the wise man, like the fool, will not be long remembered.... Like the fool, the wise man too must die!” (verse 16). The melancholic mood here is emphasized in Hebrew both by the meter and by the Hebrew word *‘eikb*, which is an exclamation of pain or grief.

Solomon was bitter that, having had every advantage in life, he had no advantage in death. This bitterness increased until he ended up hating even life itself (verse 17).

Solomon had embarked on great building projects. The kingdom of Israel had prospered and reached its highest point during his reign. Solomon hated



leaving all he had labored for to his successor, who might be a fool (verses 18-19). This he considered a great misfortune (verse 21).

However, not all of Ecclesiastes is negative. Solomon acknowledged that “a man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work” (verse 24). He also knew that God blesses the good person but not the sinner (verse 26). But in the light of eventual death for all, Solomon viewed even this as “meaningless, a chasing after the wind” (verse 26).

### **Time and toil: chapters 3:1-4:6**

Then follows another passage on seasons and cycles in life. Solomon observes, “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven” (Ecclesiastes 3:1). Solomon lists how everything has its appropriate time, beginning with the issue uppermost in his mind: “a time to be born and a time to die” (verse 2).

Considering that many people find lists in the Bible quite boring, it is interesting to note that the list in verses 1-8 is one of the more commonly quoted sections of Ecclesiastes and formed the lyric for a popular song in modern times.

Solomon asks again, “What does the worker gain from his toil?” (verse 9). This question introduces another passage on work. Solomon repeats what he has said before: People should enjoy their labor, their God-given task, and should eat, drink and enjoy themselves (verses 10-13). But only God’s works last forever (verse 14).

From discussing the fleeting nature of human works, Solomon proceeds to claim that humanity is eventually no better than the animals: “Man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return” (verses 19-20). Not only are the wise and the foolish equal in death, but so are people and animals!

Since death is the eventual end for all, Solomon concludes that there is nothing better for people than to rejoice in their work, in their brief portion of life (verse 22).

Solomon had observed oppression and injustice and made this bitter conclusion: “I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive. But better than both is he who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 4:2-3). In this cynical mood, he considered that “all labor and all achievement spring from man’s envy of his neighbor” (verse 4).

### **Various observations: chapters 4:7-6:9**

Solomon spoke about the futility of selfishness and of the value of friendship (Ecclesiastes 4:8-12). He warned against making hasty vows

(Ecclesiastes 5:1-7). He told how the acquisition of money and material goods does not bring lasting satisfaction (verses 10-17). Then he repeated that there was still nothing better than to busy oneself with work and enjoyment, for then one would not think on the brevity of one's life (verses 18-20).

God gave Solomon riches, wealth and honor, but Solomon was still frustrated: "God gives a man wealth, possessions and honor, so that he lacks nothing his heart desires, but God does not enable him to enjoy them, and a stranger enjoys them instead. This is meaningless, a grievous evil" (Ecclesiastes 6:2).

Again, Solomon asked bitterly, "What advantage has a wise man over a fool?" (verse 8). The first half of the book concludes: "This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind" (verse 9).

### **Which is better? chapters 6:10-7:14**

Now Solomon uses a series of "better than" statements to present his teachings. The first one begins conventionally enough: "A good name is better than fine perfume" (Ecclesiastes 7:1). The Hebrew is just four words long — *tobh shem mishemen tobh*. The two *tobhs* ("good") form an envelope for the other two words. There is also a wordplay on *shem* ("a name") and *mishemen* ("than oil"). The whole construction is ideal for conveying a standard piece of wisdom: A good reputation is of greater value than material goods. But the second half of the verse strikes a different chord entirely: "And the day of death better than the day of birth" (verse 1).

Solomon's obsession with death continues: "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart" (verses 2-3).

Even in this depressed state of mind, Solomon was able to continue imparting wisdom: "It is better to heed a wise man's rebuke than to listen to the song of fools" (verse 5); "The end of a matter is better than its beginning, and patience is better than pride" (verse 8); and "Wisdom is a shelter as money is a shelter, but the advantage of knowledge is this: that wisdom preserves the life of its possessor" (verse 12).

### **Further reflections: chapters 7:15-11:6**

Solomon's bitterness toward life is also reflected in his own failure to form a satisfactory marital relationship. He says, "I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains" (Ecclesiastes 7:26). Solomon apparently did not have a happy relationship with any one of his 700 wives or 300 concubines.

Solomon did not deny the possibility of others finding happiness in

marriage. However, only once in Ecclesiastes does he mention any joys he felt a wife might bring, and even then he qualifies his statement by saying that all such joys are ultimately futile: “Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun — all your meaningless days” (Ecclesiastes 9:9).

Nor does Solomon deny that at some point those who fear God will be better off than those who do not (Ecclesiastes 8:12-13). But he still dwells on the certainty of death: “All share a common destiny — the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean.... This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all...they join the dead” (Ecclesiastes 9:2-3).

Therefore, Solomon recommends getting all you can from this life: “For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing” (verse 5); and “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom” (verse 10).

Again, Solomon affirms the value of wisdom but states bitterly that it is disregarded: “‘Wisdom is better than strength.’ But the poor man’s wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded.... Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good” (verses 16, 18).

At times, Solomon lists one proverb after another, with little or no connection between them. However, many of these diverse proverbs have one thing in common — they show the negative effects of certain courses of action. Solomon often illustrates the dire consequences of folly, but he rarely inspires readers with the good consequences of wisdom.

We shall examine one proverb typical of the style found throughout Ecclesiastes: “If clouds are full of water, they pour rain upon the earth. Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where it falls, there will it lie. Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap” (Ecclesiastes 11:3-4).

First, notice the envelope structure — the first and last parts of the proverb concern the clouds, and the middle parts concern the wind uprooting a tree. The proverb shows that natural events are going to occur whatever you do, so there is no excuse to stop working just because you think the weather may turn bad.

What makes this proverb so typical of Ecclesiastes is the mood it conveys. A proverb imparting wisdom is placed in a pessimistic setting — natural disasters occur no matter what you do.

## **Youth and old age: chapters 11:7-12:8**

Toward the end of the book, Solomon repeats his advice to enjoy life

while we can, but to remember always how vain and fleeting it is. He says: “However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all. But let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. Everything to come is meaningless” (Ecclesiastes 11:8).

Solomon says to the young man: “Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment.... For youth and vigor are meaningless” (verses 9-10).

Solomon emphasizes this last point with his concluding passage. He first makes the positive statement, “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth” (Ecclesiastes 12:1).

Following this brief instruction is a long metaphorical description of the reason behind it — because you are going to deteriorate, die and decay! This description is bitter, but beautiful in its bitterness:

“Before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain...when the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags himself along...before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well” (verses 2-7).

The passage as a whole includes metaphors for loss of sight, teeth, hearing and sexual desire, followed by eventual death. Solomon ends his description: “And the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it” (verse 7).

Solomon believes he has now shown the utter futility of everything. In Ecclesiastes 12:8, Solomon, the Teacher, concludes with the same words as he began with: “Meaningless! Meaningless!... Everything is meaningless!”

## **Epilogue: chapter 12:9-14**

The last six verses form an epilogue to the book. This passage, which was probably added later, refers to “the Teacher” in the third person. The epilogue draws some conclusions about the book as a whole. It tells us that the Teacher, Solomon, was wise and that the words of the wise are like goads or prods.

In spite of the pessimistic attitude, which we should avoid, there is much wisdom we can learn in Ecclesiastes. The author of the epilogue now reflects on Solomon’s experience and draws a sober conclusion: “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (verse 13).

## 53. THE LIMITS OF WISDOM

In this series, we have commented on the tremendous value of wisdom. The wisdom literature, especially Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, gives us many insights into our daily lives. Yet wisdom alone cannot solve all our problems. This is vividly illustrated by the life of Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived.

Solomon was not some thinker who shut himself off from the world. Instead, he used his wisdom to do great works. He says of himself: “I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards” (Ecclesiastes 2:4).

The reign of Solomon was the height of Israel’s power and glory. However, after Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, ascended to the throne, his lack of wisdom soon resulted in the kingdom of Israel being divided and Solomon’s work being undone.

Perhaps Solomon foresaw this when he said: “I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun” (verses 18-19).

Wisdom did not bring Solomon fulfillment in life. He said, “For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief” (Ecclesiastes 1:18).

Solomon’s fault lay not in seeking wisdom but in his approach to life. He sought wisdom for himself, trying to find meaning, purpose and fulfillment in his own existence, apart from a higher reality. His focus was self-centered.

His wisdom led him to realize the fleeting nature of life. Even though he had much wisdom, he knew he was going to die, just like everyone else: “Like the fool, the wise man too must die!” (Ecclesiastes 2:16).

Solomon also lacked the character to do what he knew was right. He realized the importance of treating others respectfully, but did not always consider the welfare of others. For example, he taxed his people heavily to spend money on his lavish private projects. He also advised others to fear God, yet he turned his own heart away from God.

As a result, Solomon was alone, without any close personal relationships. Apparently, this was true even with his 1,000 wives and concubines (Ecclesiastes 7:28). In the end, God tore the kingdom of Israel away from him (1 Kings 11:11).

Solomon was unwilling to make the sacrifices necessary to live the way of life that brings happiness. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ taught a way of life based on a value higher than wisdom — love. Jesus taught that the two great keys to spiritual well-being are to love God and to love fellow humans. Paul, an early follower of Jesus, wrote, “If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge...but have not love, I am nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:2).

The hope of all who follow Christ is not in this life. No one who is overly concerned with this life can achieve lasting happiness. That was Solomon’s mistake. That is the limit of wisdom, of practical advice regarding this life. Jesus told his followers:

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear.... See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.... But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:25-33).

Christ’s followers look beyond the concerns of this life, to eternal life and happiness in the kingdom of God (Colossians 3:1-2).

## 54. EXPLORING THE SONG OF SONGS

### What's in a name?

“The song of songs, which is Solomon’s” (KJV) is a translation of the Hebrew name of this book: *Shir Hashirim ‘asher Lisb\*lomoh*. Most English Bibles title the book “Song of Songs” or “Song of Solomon,” although sometimes it is titled “Canticles.” The latter title derives from the Latin *Canticum Canticorum*, which means “Song of Songs.”

### Outline

No definitive outline for this book exists. The text does not even identify who speaks which lines. Marvin H. Pope writes, “In proportion to its size, no book of the Bible has received so much attention and certainly none has had so many divergent interpretations imposed upon its every word” (*Song of Songs*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 7C, p. 89).

Some scholars view the book as a drama, but their opinions diverge considerably as to the number of participants, the number of acts and the plot of the drama. Others regard the book as several poems formed into a unity, but here, too, opinions diverge as to the number of poems and how they fit together.

### How to read this book

Traditional Jewish thought considered this book an allegory of the Lord’s relationship to Israel. Similarly, early Christian interpretations saw it as an allegory of Christ’s relationship to the church. Recently, scholars have

emphasized a natural reading of the book as celebrating the love between a man and a woman. This love, however, can be viewed as typifying the relationship between God and his people. Roland E. Murphy writes:

The primary intention of Canticles deals with human sexual love — the experience of it, its delights, and its power. It is an expansion of the wonder perceived in Prov 30:19, ‘the way of a man with a maiden,’ and expressed also in Prov 5:18-19.... It would be extravagant, however, to claim that the literal historical sense exhausts the meaning of Canticles. The history of interpretation in both Jewish and Christian traditions shows that the communities in which the book was received found other levels of meaning. (*Wisdom Literature, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature*, vol. 13, p. 104)

## Learning about God

Although God is not directly mentioned in Song of Songs, we can infer much about him from the book. Behind the couple who exultantly rejoice in each other’s love lies the God who, from the beginning, intended for a man to leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, so that man and woman “become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24).

We usually remember God as the God of righteousness. But God is also the creator of beauty. God wants us to enjoy his creation, to appreciate beauty, to delight in his gifts for us. And one of God’s most beautiful gifts is that of sexual love in marriage.

## Other topics

Song of Songs speaks of the power of sexual love: “Love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away. If one were to give all the wealth of his house for love, it would be utterly scorned” (8:6-7). And this power strengthens the bond between the couple: “My lover is mine and I am his” (2:16).

But above all, sexual love is a precious and beautiful gift: “Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land. The fig tree forms its early fruit; the blossoming vines spread their fragrance. Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me” (2:12-13).



## **What this book means for you**

For those who are married, this book has particular, and delightful, meaning: The marriage covenant is not a covenant of unwilling obligation, it is a covenant of unbounded joy. Karl Barth writes, “The Song of Songs is one long description of the rapture, the unquenchable yearning and the restless willingness and readiness, with which both partners in this covenant hasten towards an encounter” (*Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3, part 1, p. 313). But for all Christians, married or single, Song of Songs illustrates the church’s joyous anticipation of the marriage to the Lamb, Jesus Christ (Revelation 19:7-8).

## **55. SONG OF SONGS: A LOVER’S PARADISE**

### **The bond of love**

One of God’s greatest gifts to humanity is the special bond of love between a husband and wife. From the beginning, God intended for a man to leave his parents “and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24).

Some of Solomon’s wisest advice concerned the pleasures of marriage: “May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer — may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love” (Proverbs 5:18-19). The Song of Songs is an exposition of these verses; it exemplifies the way a husband and wife should express their love toward each other.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul viewed the love between husband and wife as a type of the love between Christ and the church: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church.... Husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church” (Ephesians 5:25, 28-29).

Viewed in this way, the Song of Songs should encourage us by illustrating the great love Christ has for us. Likewise, it should provoke us to express our love toward him — both in our words and in our actions. For the most part, however, our commentary focuses on what a married couple can gain from this book.

## Invitation to paradise

Song of Songs is first and foremost lyrical love poetry. It was written in a cultural environment far removed from our own. After all, what Western woman today would feel complimented if you compared her teeth to a flock of shorn sheep (Song of Songs 4:2), her temples to the halves of a pomegranate (4:3) or her hair to a flock of goats (4:1)? Yet within the environment in which Song of Songs is set, these words had positive connotations. They expressed admiration, affection and love.

In the Song of Songs, the lovers try to re-create paradise. The word paradise is derived from the Greek *paradeiso*, meaning “garden.” This Greek word predominantly occurs in two places in the Septuagint: in Genesis 2–3, describing the Garden of Eden, and in Song of Songs.

Numerous words related to a garden, rarely used in the rest of the Bible, appear in Song of Songs: myrrh, budded, nard, pomegranates and lilies. The setting is the spring: “The winter is past; the rains are over and gone” (2:11), and the book is traditionally read during the Passover season. In this spring setting, the lovers invoke imagery of flora and fauna to transport themselves to paradise.

Even when we cannot understand some of the specific figures of speech used in Song of Songs, we can appreciate the intentions and emotions they convey. This is made clearer by the use of such simple endearments as “darling,” “lovely,” “beautiful,” “handsome” and “charming.” Expressions such as “How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful!” (1:15) anyone can understand.

## Using the senses

In the Hebrew, an abundance of alliteration enhances the poetic effect. Words are selected not just because they refer to beautiful things, but because they sound beautiful. Francis Landy writes:

The Song appeals to the sensual ear as much as to the intellect; the reader may be baffled by the words and still respond to their emotional and physical connotations; in fact the difficulty reinforces this appeal to an uncritical pleasure. The poem has an enchanting quality, whatever the precise meaning of the words, that derives in part from its musical quality, its function as voice; and in part from its imaginative play with the beauty of the world, corresponding to our own reverie on the sensations with which it continually surrounds us. (“The Song of Songs,” in *Literary Guide to the Bible*, edited by Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, p. 306)

While our ears may be confronted with sensuality from the way the poetry sounds, the sensations dominant in the text itself are sight, smell and taste. Sight is used for conscious admiration, but smell and taste capture the intoxicated moods of the lovers.

When God created the heavens and the earth, plant and animal life and, finally, man and woman, he saw that his creation was very good (Genesis 1:31). Song of Songs is a lesson in using our senses to appreciate the beauty and splendor of God's creation.

## **Esteeming your partner**

From beginning to end, the lovers sing each other's praises. The woman shows her esteem for the man: "Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest is my lover among the young men. I delight to sit in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my taste" (2:3).

To those who ask, "How is your beloved better than others...?", she boldly proclaims: "My lover is radiant and ruddy, outstanding among ten thousand.... His appearance is like Lebanon, choice as its cedars. His mouth is sweetness itself; he is altogether lovely. This is my lover, this my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem" (5:9-10, 15-16).

Likewise, the man esteems his wife above all else: "Like a lily among thorns is my darling among the maidens" (2:2); and "My dove, my perfect one, is unique" (6:9).

Esteem breeds confidence, and the lovers in Song of Songs have complete confidence in each other. The woman says, "My lover is mine and I am his" (2:16). Again, she says, "I am my lover's and my lover is mine" (6:3). She knows her husband's love for her: "I belong to my lover, and his desire is for me" (7:10), and "His left arm is under my head, and his right arm embraces me" (2:6).

## **Affection and tenderness of love**

No matter how great those times are when lovers express their intense passions for each other, it is simple, unadorned affection and tenderness that binds a marriage together. Notice the man's continuous displays of affection toward his wife: "How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful!" (1:15); "Like a lily among thorns is my darling among the maidens" (2:2); "You have stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes" (4:9); and "You are beautiful, my darling, as Tirzah, lovely as Jerusalem" (6:4).

The woman remembers her husband's words of affection; they mean a lot to her: "My lover spoke and said to me, 'Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come with me'" (2:10). She returns her husband's affection: "How

handsome you are, my lover! Oh, how charming!” (1:16). Simple words are often the most effective. Clearly, you need not be a great poet to express how much you love your spouse. Nevertheless, as Song of Songs also shows, a little poetic praise can go a long way.

## **Yearning for each other**

Look how the woman yearned for her husband: “All night long on my bed I looked for the one my heart loves; I looked for him but did not find him. I will get up now and go about the city, through its streets and squares; I will search for the one my heart loves. So I looked for him but did not find him” (3:1-2). She then asks the watchmen if they have seen her lover (3:3). Eventually she finds him and holds him fast, not letting him go (3:4).

In each of these four verses, the woman refers to her husband as “the one my heart loves.” In a similar passage, the woman says, “I opened for my lover, but my lover had left; he was gone. My heart sank at his departure (5:6). The woman yearns to be with her husband, to encompass him (see also 1:13). Moments spent away from him are painful for her. Similarly, the man yearns for his wife: “Show me your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely” (2:14).

Like the woman who is not ashamed to search publicly for her husband and proclaim her love for him (3:3; 5:8), Christians also, as the Israel of God, should not feel embarrassed to be known as people who are actively seeking Jesus Christ. We should praise God daily in our prayers, expressing our love and gratitude to him. As the lovers in the Song of Songs are clearly enraptured with each other, so we should be enraptured with God’s love for us. As the apostle John wrote, “We love because [God] first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

The Song of Songs presents an idealized relationship, the way things should be in a marriage and in our relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If we are not careful, we can drift away from God. Similarly, husbands and wives can slowly drift apart. The Song of Songs can help rekindle that first love (Revelation 2:4). It can inspire us to improve our marriages and our relationship with God.

## **The ultimate paradise**

As mentioned before, the Song of Songs looks back to the Garden of Eden. But the ultimate paradise awaits all those who follow God. Jesus Christ promised, “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (Revelation 2:7). The apostle John was given a vision of this paradise:

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal,

flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:1-2).

Here, Christ’s faithful servants shall be with him forever: “The throne of God and of the Lamb [Jesus] will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.... And they will reign for ever and ever” (verses 3-5). The Song of Songs, with its imagery of paradise, is a rich metaphor for our glorious ultimate relationship with Jesus.

Song of Songs ends with the woman desiring her husband’s presence, “Come away [“make haste” KJV], my lover” (8:14). Similarly, Revelation ends with the church’s anticipation of Christ’s return: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20).

## **Song to the Shulammitte**

Song of Songs celebrates the intimate relationship between a husband and wife. Both lovers praise each other’s body in an unashamedly frank manner. In one delightful passage, the man expresses his appreciation of the Shulammitte woman by describing her features in poetic ascent from her feet to her head (7:1-9). The Shulammitte may be dancing before him as he praises her (6:13).

“How beautiful your sandaled feet, O prince’s daughter! Your graceful legs are like jewels, the work of a craftsman’s hands” (7:1).

The man considers his wife a prince’s daughter. The intensifying phrase “the work of a craftsman’s hands” refers initially to the jewels, but also applies to the Shulammitte’s God-given graceful legs or thighs.

“Your navel is a rounded goblet that never lacks blended wine. Your waist is a mound of wheat encircled by lilies. Your breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle” (7:2-3).

Again, the intensifying phrases refer primarily to the metaphors (“goblet,” “mound of wheat,” “two fawns”). But they also, by analogy, apply to the body parts those metaphors represent. Euphemistic expressions disguise some of the eroticism in Song of Songs, but even at its most erotic and intimate, the poetic description is highly dignified. The poem throughout elevates, uplifts and inspires. This is a man’s personal eulogy to his wife’s beauty.

“Your neck is like an ivory tower. Your eyes are the pools of Heshbon by the gate of Bath Rabbim. Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon looking

toward Damascus. Your head crowns you like Mount Carmel. Your hair is like royal tapestry; the king is held captive by its tresses” (7:4-5).

The lover moves from describing the more intimate areas of the Shulammite’s body, seen by him alone, to praising the neck, face and hair generally visible to everyone. This is why his similes concern well-known landscapes and admired architecture such as the pools of Heshbon and the tower of Lebanon. The royal image at the beginning of the poem recurs here. The crowning attribute of this prince’s daughter could hold a king captive.

“How beautiful you are and how pleasing, O love, with your delights! Your stature is like that of the palm, and your breasts like clusters of fruit” (7:6-7).

As the lover now beholds his wife in her entirety, he expresses further admiration: “I said, ‘I will climb the palm tree; I will take hold of its fruit.’ May your breasts be like the clusters of the vine, the fragrance of your breath like apples, and your mouth like the best wine” (7:8-9).

Now that his eyes have been satisfied with the sight of his wife, the husband engages the other senses as he kisses and caresses her. His beloved is a fair and pleasant delight indeed!

## **56. THE PROPHETIC MEANING OF DANIEL 2 AND 7**

By Paul Kroll

Do Daniel 2 and 7 predict events of our day, such as the rise of the European Community? Where might the United States and Russia fit into this scheme? Let's begin with a brief summary of Daniel 2 and 7.

Daniel 2 describes a dream of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of the Babylonian empire, which Daniel the prophet interpreted. Nebuchadnezzar had seen an enormous statue. It had a head of gold, arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, and legs of iron — with feet of iron and clay (2:31-33). A “cut out” rock struck the statue on its feet and caused it to fall down into a broken heap. The wind swept away the debris and the rock that struck the statue “became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth” (2:34-35).

In Daniel 7, it is Daniel who has a dream. He sees four beasts coming up out of the sea that look similar to the following animals (with certain strange additions): a lion, a bear and a leopard. The fourth beast was terrifying and didn't look like any natural animal. This beast had ten horns and large iron teeth (7:4-7). Daniel then saw a vision of the Son of Man, to whom was given “authority, glory and sovereign power” and “all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him” (7:13-14). His dominion was to be everlasting, and his kingdom would never be destroyed.

In each case the vision was clearly interpreted. Daniel explained to Nebuchadnezzar that the statue's parts — the head, chest and arms, belly and thigh, legs and feet — represented four successive world-ruling kingdoms



(2:36-36). When the last of the four kingdoms is ruling the earth, “the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed” (2:44). This kingdom will “crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever” (2:44). This is the kingdom to be established by the “rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands” (2:45). Nebuchadnezzar is told that this “will take place in the future” (2:45).

In chapter 7, Daniel said: “I, Daniel, was troubled in spirit, and the visions that passed through my mind disturbed me. I approached one of those standing there and asked him the true meaning of all this” (7:15). The interpretation Daniel was given of his dream corresponds to the meaning of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in chapter 2. The four beasts are four kingdoms. The fourth beast is different from the other three and most terrifying (7:15). In this vision, the ten horns (who are ten kings) arise at the “end time” when “the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High” (7:27). This becomes an everlasting kingdom. (Daniel 2 and 7 add some other details, such as the mention of “another king,” but the above gives a general outline of these chapters.)

It is agreed by almost all scholars that Daniel 2 and 7 set forth four empires as ruling one after another. These are the empires of the Babylonians, the Medes and the Persians, the Greeks and Macedonians and the Romans. These four worldly empires of ungodly resistance are overthrown by a fifth “empire” that will be established on earth to enforce God’s righteousness, peace and mercy. As mentioned earlier, this fifth empire is established by the “rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands” (Daniel 2:45), or the Son of man in Daniel 7. This Messiah, this Rock, will destroy all earthly empires and will rule the final kingdom of righteousness with the saints.

Most of the material in Daniel 2 and 7 is rather straightforward historical narrative. In terms of major “world-ruling” empires around the Mediterranean and extending through the Fertile Crescent to present-day Iran, Daniel 2 and 7 record what we know of history. What has not yet happened from a this-worldly political point of view is that the “fifth kingdom” of the Messiah has not been established in any obvious, world-crushing way. The New Testament seems to place this occurrence at the time of Jesus’ return in glory (1 Corinthians 15:23-27; Revelation 11:15-18 with 19:6-16).

Christians have speculated since at least the early second century about the time and manner of the “end time,” the destruction of this world’s kingdom, and the coming of Jesus in glory. And here is where they have erred: Those who have engaged in speculative prophecy have almost always

seen “the end” as coming in their time in a visible manner. They have looked at the events occurring in their day and have tried to fit them into what is described in Daniel 2, 7 as well as the book of Revelation. That “the end” has not arrived and the Messiah (Jesus) has not come in some world-shattering way is proof that all such speculative prophecy has been in vain and wrong, based on a wrong premise.

With hindsight as our guide, we see that it does little if any good to speculate about how or *when* “the end” of the “kingdom of this world” might occur. (In fact, such speculation, when dogmatically stated, can damage people’s lives.) Therefore, to ask how this or that nation — such as the United States — “fits into” biblical prophecy is to ask a question that cannot be answered with any guarantee — or perhaps should not be asked. It is, in a manner of speaking, a non-question, an illegitimate question. It is asking for something that God did not choose to give us. He has told us that “this world” will be overthrown, but he has not told us exactly how or when.

With that in mind, we take a broader view of biblical prophecy. It avoids the setting of dates or any attempts to set out a “blueprint” of prophecy that would explain current world events in an apocalyptic manner. Rather, the church puts its faith in the *fact* of Jesus’ future coming in glory. It leaves the “how” and “when” to the authority, wisdom and purpose of God (Matthew 24:36; Acts 1:6-8).

## **57. HOSEA: THE GREAT REVERSAL OF THE GREAT I-AM**

By John E. McKenna

### **Part 1**

The Book of Hosea is the first book of the Book of the Twelve, the so-called Minor Prophets of the Old Testament. Hosea is given primary place among these prophets for good theological reasons. His prophecy (750-730 B.C.) is second chronologically behind Amos (about 760 B.C.), but Hosea is first because of the fundamental notions he works with to explain Israel's past as the people of God and to foretell its future.

This explanation and proclamation involves the great reversal of the Great I-AM with Israel as his people, the object of his divinely passionate attention in a world that is his creation.

The eighth century before Christ was a watershed in the history of Israel. Before this time, prophets did not write down their ministries. No books are attributed to Elijah or Elisha.

The vitality of the eighth-century prophets is bound up with the way they saw beyond Israel's punishment for breaking the covenant between Israel and God. They saw a new world coming in the latter days that is and will be the destiny of God's people with their Lord.

They wrote down their ministries as if to say: "We see that you will not obey. You have not listened, even from the beginning of our covenant with God. But the Day of the Lord will come, when you will hear, and you will be

his people. Time will prove that we are the true prophets of the Lord.”

Fundamental to Israel’s sin history is the breaking of the covenant established by the Great I-AM of God through Moses at Mt. Sinai.

When God appeared to Moses in the incident of the burning bush, Moses asked God what his name was (Exodus 3:13, Revised Standard Version). “God said to Moses, ‘I am who I am.’ And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I am has sent me to you’” (verse 14).

Hosea 1 introduces us to the problem the Great I-AM has with his people. Hosea 1:1 is a historical introduction that places the prophecy before the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C.

Hosea 1:2-2:1 introduces us to the fundamentals of this problem. The marriage between the prophet Hosea and his wife, Gomer, a temple priestess, is to be used as a metaphor to describe the relationship between Israel and the Lord God.

The prophet embodies the Word of God whose message he must bear to his people. God is to Israel as Hosea is to Gomer.

Other metaphors are also used in the book. Hosea 11:1 will render the covenant in terms of a father-and-son relationship. The love of a father for his son may also be used to explain the nature of the covenant relationship between God and his people. But the marriage relationship is primary to the prophecy of Hosea.

The marriage produces three children. The names of these children signify the nature of the history of the covenant between God and Israel. In the Semitic world, names were vital.

The first boy born to Gomer is named Jezreel (Hosea 1:4-5). It is a play on words with the name of Israel. The end of the kingdom of Israel is prophesied to come just as surely as King Jehu once massacred the followers of the Baalim in the Valley of Jezreel (2 Kings 9-10).

Jezreel means “God will sow.” Much bitter irony is inherent in this name. Jacob means “bent,” and Israel means “God will straighten.” Israel was once bent, and now the God of Jacob will sow his judgment with what must be straightened again. Like the Baalim of Tyre and Canaan, the Lord will remove Israel from the land.

The second child is a girl. She is named “Not-Pitied.” This name belongs to the beginning of God’s determined passion to struggle with his people in order that they might come to know him for who he truly is. We may refer to Exodus 34:6-7. Even after Sinai, Israel prefers a golden calf to the great I-AM of her Exodus from Egypt.

She can reject her husband. But to live without the deep compassion of

God for humanity is to not know the love of God that shapes the beginning of every true marriage. It is to believe that conception belongs to something other than the Living God's care, compassion and holy love for that which has been conceived.

On the other hand, it is to be pitied to know the womb-like character of the Lord God's care for his conception of Israel. This is the Hebrew meaning of the word for pity.

The third child is a boy, who marks the completion of the accusation the prophet makes against Israel.

The boy is named "Not-My-People," the reversal of the covenant name given Israel in relation to the Lord (Hosea 1:9a). Ratification of the covenant concluded with the proclamation that Israel belonged in marriage to the Lord God (Exodus 19-24).

He declared her to be "His People." Not to be "His People" is to join other nations in their opposition to the Creator and Redeemer of the world. It is to bring down on their own heads the curses inherent in the covenant between God and the world.

The reason for naming the boy "Not-My-People" is explicit. Because you have named me, says the Lord, "Not-I-AM," I have named you "Not-My-People." The reference must be to Exodus 3:14 and the Self-Naming God (I am Who I AM) of Israel's deliverance from Egypt.

Scholars have observed in Hosea 1:9b that the people called God "Not I-AM," using the word found in Ex. 3:14. But our Bibles still read this way: "Then the Lord said, 'Call him Lo-Ammi, for you are not my people, and I am not your God.'"

I read the Hebrew as follows: "Call his name 'Lo-Ammi' (Not-My-People), because you are not my people, since I am 'Not-I-AM' to you."

The point is that behind the names of God for the biblical world lies the great I-AM of the ministry of Moses at Sinai with the people of God.

The fundamental sin of Israel in covenant with her Lord is to turn the great I-AM that God is with her, into something that does not exist.

This temptation allowed Israel to marry the name of Yahweh Elohim (translated Lord God in English Bibles) to the Baalim of the Canaanite world. It is this syncretism that allowed her to break her marriage vows with the Holy One.

We should feel the finality of the divorce if we are going to appreciate the vitality of the restoration of this marriage. Only then may we understand the depths of our opposition toward the Creator and Redeemer of our lives.

Only then may we hear a real word of redemption for our lives. God and

God's salvation cannot be divorced from one another, and in time Israel will know him for who he truly is.

That is the time in which Hosea sees, according to the Wisdom of God, the ultimate destiny of Israel.

We shall try to follow the way the prophecy announces both Israel's judgment and her salvation in the latter days. Israel will not be forever Jezreel. She will become "Pitied" again. She will become "My-People" again.

Because of her future I title this study "The Great Reversal of the Great I-AM of God." The prophecy sees a future for Israel as a time when God will be known for who he truly is with her, when she will be his people, and they shall enjoy majestically the fruits of their marriage to one another.

In the latter days, the purpose of the covenant relationship between the Lord God and Israel will be fulfilled among the nations. His people will possess real knowledge of God. This knowledge will be understood among the nations.

We can learn much of the Lord God when we take the time to reflect upon this great reversal of Israel's fortunes.

## **Part 2**

In the beginning of our study of the book of Hosea, we saw how the I-AM of God in Israel's Exodus (Exodus 3:13-14) lies behind the development of the prophetic vision of the People of God.

We saw how the People of God became Not-My-People because they turned the I-AM of God into the Not-I-AM and made way for themselves to "marry" their idols to the names of God in the Old Testament.

Hosea's marriage to the temple priestess Gomer and the three children she bore him portrays God's judgment upon Israel.

The final consequence of this judgment will bring about, in the latter days of the history of God's People, a great messianic salvation for Israel. It is with the grace of this judgment and the judgment of this grace that we can see the book's shape and substance for us.

If we consider chapters one to three as an introduction to the whole of the vision, then we notice that both judgment and salvation are bound up with one another in the mind of the author with a passionate and personal commitment to the covenant between God and his people.

God and Israel are in relationship with each other just as Hosea and Gomer are married to one another. The reversal of their broken marriage is surprisingly described throughout the book. Though an oracle of judgment is announced, Israel's ultimate salvation is proclaimed (Hosea 2).

Then the call of Israel to hope in her God is made with great anticipation (Hosea 3). We cannot understand the judgment apart from the salvation proclaimed in the book. We cannot understand the reversal of her fortunes foretold in the book apart from this judgment.

How can we learn to think the modes of judgment and salvation in the being of God's great I-AM? How may we develop some meaningful concept of the message of this prophet to the People of God?

After this introduction to the prophecy of Hosea, we begin to read two judgment speeches. They are addressed first to all Israel and her corruption of the covenant with her God (Hosea 4) and secondly to Israel's priesthood (Hosea 5:1-7).

To come to an appropriate understanding of the judgment, we may study Hosea 4:1-3: "Hear the word of the Lord, you Israelites, Because the Lord has a lawsuit against you: There is no faithfulness, there is no covenant love, there is no knowledge of God in the land. Instead there are only curses, lying and murder, stealing and adultery. All the boundaries are broken, and violence follows bloodshed. Because of this, the land mourns, all who live on it waste away. The beasts of the fields, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea are dying" (my translation).

This judgment speech begins with a call to attention. The exhortation is important in Israel. Deuteronomy 6:4 ("Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One!") also calls Israel to attention. Without hearing the word of God, his people will not obey.

Once the attention is obtained, the covenant lawsuit is announced against the nation. In it God will act through the message of the prophet as a prosecutor of his people. The irony is not lost upon the prophets. His people will be convicted and punished through the very prophets they refuse to hear.

This is because they have turned the great I-AM of God into a Not-I-AM, according to what we have read in chapter one: "There is no truth or faithfulness, no covenant loyalty or love, and no knowledge of God throughout the nation living on God's promised land."

These three terms mark the reason for the judgment just as, in the introduction to the prophecy, the names of Gomer's children marked the curse of God upon the monarchies of Israel and Judah.

- 1) There is no truth, no ultimate reality upon which Israel can rely. She is doomed for desolation.
- 2) There is no covenant love (*besev*) in the land. Scholars have studied this term thoroughly. It is the fundamental concept by which the promise of God in covenant with his people

will be kept.

He took it away from Saul's house, but promised never to remove it from the House of David (2 Sam. 7:13-14). It is with the freedom of the Lord God's divine passion to keep the promise made once to Abraham that the term achieves its significance. The whole history of Israel is bound up with its meaning (see Psalm 136).

There is no knowledge of God in the land. Knowledge of God is knowledge gained in an intimate and saving relationship with him. This knowledge cannot be divorced from the wisdom by which the Lord gives himself to be known in covenant with his people.

When they turn the great I-AM that he truly is into the Not-I-AM that he is not, then whatever they possess as knowledge is no knowledge. It is but the dumb and deaf dreams of idols and idol makers. It is also the stuff that allows the Torah of God, given through Moses at Mount Sinai, to go unheeded.

That is what the list of sins against Israel are—deafness to the Torah of the People of God. There was a prohibition against swearing and cursing in the Law. There was a prohibition against lying and deceiving in the Law. There was a prohibition against murdering, thievery and adultery in the Law.

When all these are broken, what can the land do but mourn, and when the land mourns, what happens to those who live upon it? They waste away. Beasts of the fields, birds of the heavens and fish of the seas die.

In his lawsuit against his people, we are plainly taught that all of the creation suffers under the curse upon God's people. When Israel is cursed, the whole world suffers. The creation itself is made to bear witness to this judgment.

The covenant lawsuit of the Lord God against his people does not result merely in a lack of knowledge about him, from lack of loyal love for him, from lack of a faithfulness that belongs to his truth's faithfulness, but it results in the demise of the whole world.

When Israel is punished, the whole world knows death rather than life.

The profundity of this judgment must be announced throughout the society of ancient Israel. Beside the people, priest, prophet and king must understand the thoroughness of its accusation against all Israel.

Thus we read the progress that is made with the writhing repetitions of judgment that whirl on throughout the rest of the chapters of the book's accusations against Israel.

Though all of society protests, still Israel is judged. Hosea announces in no uncertain terms the reasons for the judgment against people, priesthood,



prophet and royal rule alike.

All of them together shall experience not only the thoroughness of the judgment, but surprisingly also the faithfulness, the holy love and the wisdom of God in his covenanted interaction with Israel.

Without this kind of judgment, there will be no salvation of the God who would be known among his people. In the latter days he will be known for who he truly is.

It seems that the judgment is absolutely devastating, but it also is not the last word from the Lord God.

There will come again the salvation of the Lord God for them. There will be real knowledge of God in the land. There will true loyal love for God among his people.

Faithfulness and holy love will be wed in Israel once again. Israel will know in the latter days the deep and profound love of God for her. He will win her back to himself. We shall look into the nature of this passion in the salvation speeches we find in Hosea for Israel in our next study.

### **Part 3**

We have shown in the last two studies how Israel turned the great I-AM of the Lord her God into the Not-I-AM that allows her to break her covenant vows to Yahweh and marry herself to her idols.

For this sin against her covenant-making God, the People of God bring down upon themselves the fire of his judgment against their evil opposition to him. The children of the marriage of the prophet Hosea to the temple priestess Gomer bear names that embody the divine judgment against Israel.

We have also studied the nature of this judgment. When the great I-AM who covenants with his people is denied his real presence with Israel, the result is disobedience throughout the land.

Instead of faithfulness, loyal covenant love and real knowledge of God in the land, there are false swearing of oaths, murder, stealing, adultery and ecological crises in Israel.

Yahweh's case against his people is won with evidence not even the heavens and the earth can deny.

Ignorance of who God truly is in his acts toward his people mean for Israel a complete breakdown of her existence and eventual exile from the land at the hands of the Assyrian Empire.

But we have also seen that this judgment is not the last word of the prophet. Hosea also knows of a salvation that is the ultimate word of the Lord for Israel.

In fact, it is the point and counterpoint resolution of divine judgment and salvation that is marked by the whirlwind of God's word blowing through the land. The holy passion of the divine judge is experienced with a purpose that rests ultimately in the promise he will keep with his people. We may study this passion by looking at the love songs in the Book of Hosea (Hosea 11:1-11 and Hosea 14:1-8).

Hosea 11:1-11 involves a change in the main metaphor of marriage in the Book of Hosea. It relies on the father-son relation rather than the husband-wife relation for speaking about the covenant between God and Israel.

It sees Israel being delivered as a son from his slavery in Egypt. The whole history of the People of God in covenant with the Lord is rehearsed in this complaint of a father over his son.

Even though the Lord brought Israel forth as his son from Egypt into the land, yet the boy would not return to his Father's love. Even though the fire of the sword was upon him, Israel did not turn to his Father.

And then we read this:

"How can I give you up, O Ephraim!

"I will deliver you, O Israel!

"How can I give you up as I did Admah?

"Or treat you as I did Zeboim?

"My heart writhes within me!

"With compassion, I long to be with you!

"I will not be angry with you!

"I will not turn and destroy Ephraim!

"For I am God and not a man,

"The Holy One in your midst!" (author's translation).

For me, these texts are some of the most powerful verses in the Old Testament. They show us the great I-AM in covenant with his people. In his divine and holy freedom he decides to save Israel, as if Israel were his son, even though his son is only and always the rebel toward him.

This verse demonstrates the loyal love of the Lord God in covenant with his people and the great pathos in God's divine determination to save Israel as his people, in spite of their disobedience.

The salvation of Israel is rooted in the divinely free will and holy passion of God as Father for Israel his son. God is not only present with Israel in the history of the world, but also present with Israel as the son of his holy love.

Here, Israel's fortunes are turned at last to the great I-AM. The same lion that devours his people in judgment shall gather them back together with a roaring love that none shall be able to deny.

The other love song appears in Hosea 14:1-8. Here words of love are put into the mouth of Israel.

“Wipe away our iniquity and embrace us with goodness that the peace offering may be the fruit of our lips.”

As the bride of the Lord God, Israel is to enjoy union and communion with her husband. In this way, their marriage will be restored. The covenant promise will be fulfilled.

These are words of love that remind us of one of the greatest love songs—the Song of Solomon.

Hosea declares that Jezreel will become once again the Lord’s Israel. Not-pitied will become Pitied. Not-My-People will become My-People. The Not I-AM shall be at last the great I-AM the Lord her God—all this with a love that drops down from the heavens to drench like the morning dew the thirsty land of the People of God.

It is possible to read verse 5 of this love song in the following way: “I-AM is as the dew with Israel!”

In this way, we might hear the usual translation “I will be as the dew to Israel” as the great reversal of the great I-AM with Israel. The Lord with his people would be as the dew is to the land.

According to the words of Hosea’s prophecy, this means that Israel will blossom in her covenant with her God. She shall be fruitful in his loyal love. She shall be healed in the shadow of his goodness, enriched in the beauty of his passion for her.

She shall know and be known by the great I-AM who is the Creator and Redeemer of the world. She shall be found embraced by his promise. The Ephraim that could not be given up is freed from her idols.

“O Ephraim, what more have I to do with idols?” (Hosea 14: 8)

The day will come for the People of God when, freed from their idols and idol-making, freed from her betrayal of her husband, she will know the joy of union and communion with her God.

She will bear the Messianic promise. She will know no more the idols of her disobedience against the Lord, but rather she will bear the fruit of their covenanted love for one another.

This fruit will be as of the olive tree. It is a fruitfulness that comes when the great I-AM, the Lord God who is with her, fulfills his vows to her. Perhaps this is the greatest love song in the world.

These love songs teach us, even in the midst of the divine judgment, the source of the relentless freedom with which God pursues the one he loves.

In this covenant, God is for his people with such fearsome love that,

beyond all the punishment of his judgment against her, they will experience the great promise of the Lord. The great I-AM will not be denied. In the world, Israel shall become his faithful wife.

The whirlwind of this judgment and salvation in the Book of Hosea ends with an exhortation that calls attention to the role of wisdom in the prophecy of the history of Israel:

“Who is wise? He will discern these things.

“Discerning, he will know them,

“For the ways of the Lord are right,

“And the righteous walk in them,

“But transgressors stumble in them” (Hosea 14:9).

The question asks the readers to be wise in such things as the book contains. The prophet would have his readers understand the future to which his ministry would point the People of God.

The righteousness of God in covenant with his people will be confirmed. His people will become fully justified. The wicked will stumble in the Lord God’s judgment against the unrighteous. They will perish. Wisdom and holy passion will come together so that Israel will experience in the latter days the joy of God’s redeeming love.

Next, we will consider the relation of wisdom to prophecy.

## Part 4

We have seen in the previous three studies that the Book of Hosea is to be read in the light of the great reversal of the Great I-AM, the Lord God of Israel.

Because his people turn the I-AM into the Not-I-AM, they become the Not-My-People, the Not-Pitied and the Jezreel rather than His People, Pitied and True Israel.

They have rejected their Redeemer and Creator. The prophecy of Hosea is thus a vision of this reversal of Israel’s fortunes. We saw how the marriage relation between Hosea and Gomer embodied this prophetic word of Yahweh with Israel. We saw how the holy passion of the Lord God roars like a whirlwind through Israel to destroy her in the Promised Land.

His judgment is devastating. He gives his people into the hands of the Assyrian armies. Israel as his bride is to be taken into exile by her enemy, with whom she has willingly committed adultery.

She does not know the grace or loyal love of Yahweh Elohim. We saw how with one judgment speech after another the prophecy applies to the whole of Israel’s affluent society, people, priest, prophet and king alike.

Without knowledge of the loyal love of the Holy One, Israel will not remain in the Promised Land.

Yet, judgment in Israel is not the last word. The judgment is ministered with a view to the keeping of the ancient promise. This view is given to us in the form of salvation oracles and love songs that follow the announcements of the judgment.

We are asked to hear the music of the Great I-AM himself with his Israel. Like the marriage relationship and the like the relationship between a father and his son (Hosea 11), the One who is divine shall ultimately deliver and save his people (Hosea 11:9-10).

If he can roar in judgment against his people, he can roar for Israel's salvation. Thus, Israel is to know both the judgment and the salvation of the One God. Prophecy is to be understood in the light of the great reversal wrought by the Great I-AM in covenant with Israel.

Hosea concludes with a call that embraces the sage in Israel (Hosea 14:9). Who is wise? Let him realize these things! Not without wisdom shall the prophecy be understood.

True wisdom in Israel is that which knows the ultimate salvation of the people of God. This is the wisdom of the messianic hope of the prophets in Israel.

Beyond God's judgment are the acts of his loyal love and salvation. In the final days, he will be known as the great I-AM that he truly is.

Consider the role of this wisdom tradition in the prophecy of ancient Israel. Scholars have struggled to relate biblical wisdom to biblical prophecy in a clear theology. Two great German Old Testament theologians, Walter Eichrodt and Gerhard von Rad, were criticized for the manner in which they related the wisdom tradition to their understanding of Old Testament theology.

Since then, many have sought for a center around which a theology might be built that would include more naturally the wisdom and the prophetic traditions among the people of God.

It has not been an easy center to discover. Part of the reason may be credited to the way biblical theology in the early 20th century responded to the systematic theologies of the 18th and 19th centuries.

People had grown weary with the abstract notions of God developed in the so-called Age of Enlightenment.

They sought to realize afresh the dynamic God of the Bible, the God who acts in the history of his people.

That became the focus of the biblical theology movement—the acts of

God in history. But when this focus denied that the being of God could be identified with what we can know of him in his acts, then a loss of relationship was experienced from which we have not yet recovered.

I liken this loss to the fundamental sin of Israel against her Lord and God. We have in this manner turned the Great I-AM the Lord God into something that he is not.

Only because God is who he truly is may we look for his salvation. The church, like Israel, must come to realize that in the Savior we are not merely given a little knowledge about God, but we have been given the knowledge of God that can only be given and actually has been freely given by God himself.

In Jesus Christ we are not given merely knowledge about God, but knowledge of who the Lord God is in his own being and nature. Thus, we must understand that the Messiah of Israel as the Lord Jesus Christ, the Great I-AM that the Lord is with his people, reveals the Father Almighty, maker of the heavens and the earth.

It is in this spirit that we may realize the things Hosea once called the people of God to understand.

We have been given those transcendent relationships that allow us, as he makes us into his people, to know him for who he truly is, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as the one true God of all things created.

The nature of the great I-AM is such that divine and human realities have been made in himself to correspond with one another so that the creation and the Creator are made to reflect each other.

The wisdom of the Creator and the Redeemer of the world is to be realized in this one person. The Great I-AM of the burning bush and the Great I-AM of the Incarnation are the same as the revelation of the Lord and God of all creation.

Both the Old and the New Testaments are to be understood according to these transcendent relations established for us by God in Christ.

To acknowledge this is to understand the final exhortation in Hosea: Who is wise? He will realize these things!

What do we make of all this?

God is not merely “out there” somewhere, intervening occasionally from the “far away heavens.” God is our all in all, the root and substance of our being.

“In him we live and move and have our being,” Paul wrote. And despite our sin and rebellion, God’s love is faithful. He comes to us in redemption and salvation to restore us to wholeness—to oneness with him.

He calls on us, as he did to Israel, to believe in him for who he truly is so that we may be restored to who we really are as his own children.

We can trust in God's love. He is ever faithful, and through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we can know him for who he truly is in Jesus Christ, the perfect revelation of the Father. Praise be to God!

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## 58. THE MESSAGE OF HOSEA 11

By Michael Morrison

Hosea 11 illustrates God's persevering love for his children – a love so strong that it continues despite rebellion, a love that leads God to restore his people after he has punished them.

Hosea 1-3 illustrates God's persevering love for Israel by using the real-life drama of a husband who loves his wife so much that, despite her adulteries, he works to restore the marriage. Each of these three chapters illustrates the theme. In chapter 1, verse 2 sets forth the metaphor and alludes to Israel's unfaithfulness, vv. 4-9 describe Israel's punishment and alienation from God, and vv. 10-11 promise a restoration. In chapter 2, verse 2 sets the scene, vv. 2, 5, 8 describe unfaithfulness, vv. 3, 6, 9-13 describe punishment, and vv. 14-23 promise restoration. In chapter 3, v. 1a sets the scene of restoration, vv. 1c, 3c allude to unfaithfulness, v. 4 to punishment, and v. 5 to restoration.

Hosea 11 illustrates God's persevering love using a parable built on the metaphor of a father's love for a rebellious son. The theme is developed in a similar way: unfaithfulness and rebellion, punishment and restoration. The message, as it is developed in Hosea 11, is like a four-act drama in which Hosea is the only actor, speaking for God.

### **Act 1: The case against Israel (vv. 1-4)**

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images. It was I who taught Ephraim



to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them.

The scene is that of a court in which the father is testifying against his rebellious children. (“Son” is singular in v. 1, but subsequent verses use plural pronouns for Israel.) He recounts his love for them, citing actions such as calling them out of slavery (v. 1), teaching them to walk (3a), and comforting them when they fell (3b-c). But the response was persistent rebellion (2) and ingratitude (3c).

Act 1 ends with more evidence of the father’s love: leading the sons with leniency (4a-b), making life easier for them (4c-d), and, to top it off, humbling himself by leaning down to attend to their needs (4e). Mention of these actions of love serves two functions at the end of Act 1: First, they are the father’s self-defense, indicating that he was a loving parent and that the sons’ rebellion was not caused by poor parenting. Second, they soften the emotional tone from accusation to love, making the punishments of Act 2 seem more severe in comparison, subtly preparing for the remorse and compassion of Act 3.

## **Act 2: Punishment pronounced (vv. 5-7)**

Will they not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent? Swords will flash in their cities, will destroy the bars of their gates and put an end to their plans. My people are determined to turn from me. Even if they call to the Most High, he will by no means exalt them.

The scene is still the courtroom, and Hosea is still speaking for God, but now he plays the role of a judge giving a sentence on the rebellious children. The benefits the Father had given Israel will be reversed. Whereas God had taken Israel out of Egypt (v. 1), now Israel will be sent back into Egypt (5a). Whereas they had persistently gone away from God (2a-b), they now will return (*shub*) to Egypt because of their refusal to return (*shub*) to God (5c). Whereas they sacrificed animals to Baalim (2c), they themselves will be killed (6a). Whereas they burned incense to idols (2d), their cities will be consumed (6b-c). Whereas they were not grateful for God’s easing their yoke (4c-d), they will be put back under the yoke of slavery (7b). Whereas they did not acknowledge that God shortened their pain through healing (3c), their pains will not be removed (7c).

The sentencing proceeds in an alternating pattern: punishment (5a-b), reason (5c), punishment (6), reason (7a), and punishment (7b). The last phrase of Act 2, “none shall remove it,” gives a note of finality to the sentence, as if the judge had banged the gavel.

### **Act 3: Anguish of the Father/Judge (vv. 8-9)**

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboiim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim. For I am God, and not man — the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath.

Acts 1 and 2 presented God in two roles, first as Father and then as Judge. But there is a tension between those two roles, and Act 3, in the emotional peak of this four-act drama, airs the inner turmoil of the Judge who has to pronounce such an awful punishment on his dearly loved children. In an American courtroom, a judge's emotional anguish might be confined to a back room, but in an Israelite open-air court in a public meeting place, the anguish would be evident to all who were present. A respected member of the community, as judge, was being forced, as his duty to the community, to publicly expel, disown and punish his rebellious children. He pronounces the sentence, bangs his gavel and begins to weep.

How can he cast his children completely away? (8a-d). Though they are rebellious, they are still his children. The Judge has a change of heart; he becomes compassionate again and resolves to stop short of complete destruction (8e-9b). Why? Because he is God, not a human (9c). He is not bitter or vengeful (as a human might be), because his love endures forever. Because he is faithful, the Israelites are not destroyed (cf. Malachi 3:6). The punishment that Israel is to experience is designed for redemption and rehabilitation, not destruction. God, since he is holy, loves his people and keeps his commitment to them; he cannot be unfaithful as a human might be. He is beyond reproach or accusation; he is qualitatively different in motive and emotion. His holiness is inextricably linked to his love and his desire to redeem. He has a holy purpose for the nation as he works in their midst (9d). Therefore he will not return (*shub*) to destroy them (9e). The punishment will be, in judicial terms, commuted.

### **Act 4: Resolution of the dilemma (vv. 10-11)**

“They will follow the LORD; he will roar like a lion. When he roars, his children will come trembling from the west. They will come trembling like birds from Egypt, like doves from Assyria. I will settle them in their homes,” declares the LORD.

How can Israel be both destroyed (v. 6) and not destroyed (v. 9)? How can God's compassion be reconciled with the punishment he has already pronounced? The final act in this drama presents a solution to this dilemma.

Acts 1 and 2 were clearly judicial in nature; Act 3 becomes less typically like a court of law. Act 4 becomes even less judicial in nature, but if we wish to continue the judicial theme, here we find the Judge explaining how the commuted sentence will be an effective way to deal with the wayward children.

Though the nation's cities and fortresses will be destroyed (v. 6), the people will continue to exist, although in captivity (5, 7). After a period of captivity, the children will return humbly to their homes (11). They "shall go after the LORD" (10). The Hebrew word for "seek" is not used in v. 10, perhaps because physical movement is meant more than spiritual. But it does seem significant that the people are mentioned first; they are taking some initiative to return to God. And God will lead them like a lion (10 b-c). Though Hosea describes God as a destructive lion in 5:14 and 13:7-8, here the image is more like that of a protective lion leading the cubs to a new den. (In several places Hosea uses a word in both a positive and a negative context.)

Whereas in the original Exodus, the Israelites went out with a high hand, this time they will return trembling (11:10d-11a; "in fear," says 3:5). Whereas they had flown like a dove to Egypt and Assyria searching for help (7:11), now they will fly like a dove back to God (11:11b). And God will return them not just to houses, but to "homes" (11c). They will be rehabilitated. Other sections of Hosea (such as 1:10-11, 2:14-23, and 3:5) describe the restoration in greater detail, but this is sufficient for the drama of Hosea 11. The tension has been resolved. The rebellious children have been both punished and rehabilitated; the Judge has fulfilled his roles as faithful parent and as upholder of standards of conduct. The drama ends with a note of finality: I will do this, "says the LORD."

## Epilogue

Hosea's drama has taken four slices of history's timeline to illustrate God's continuing love for his people. Act 1 is from the past; Act 2 is about the near future. Act 3 presents God's current emotions, and Act 4 gives a glimpse of the future. Through these four segments of history, we see some of the complexity of God's relationship with Israel. God's love prevails.

This is a message the Israelites needed to hear. Destruction was just around the corner for them because they had rejected God and his covenant. But this did not mean that God would cast them away forever. There was hope. Yahweh is not a God of destruction – he is a God of salvation – in the past, in the present and in the future. God can accomplish what humans

cannot; he can achieve his holy purpose even in a rebellious people. The God who loved them in antiquity still loved them and would continue to love them. (The implication is that even God's punishment is motivated by love.) There would be a restoration not only of the nation, but also of the people's relationship with the Father.

The meaning of Hosea 11 is that God continues to love his people. An application of this truth to today reassures us that God continues to love us. Even though we may have rebelled and rejected God, he continues to love us. If he allows punishments to come, we can have confidence that such trials are not vindictive – they are intended to be restorative. Though we may backslide or fall away for many years, we can have confidence that God wants to restore the relationship and its blessings. This is a message needed by those who despair that they have lost their love, neglected the faith or fallen back into the captivity of sin.

Hosea 11 reminds us that God's love does not depend on *us* – it depends on him, and he is dependable. Let us skim through the chapter and adapt some of the principles for Christians today: God initiated his love for us (cf. v. 1); since our actions did not initiate it, our actions cannot terminate it. While we were yet sinners, he provided for us a Passover and a way out of sin's bondage (1b). Though some of his people refuse his invitation, though they seek the world and its values, he continues to invite them (2a). He has taught us how to live (3a), he has rescued us from some of our folly (3b), yet many people fail to recognize him as Savior (3c).

Yet, despite this inadequate response, God still loves his people with compassion, and he still eases their burdens and supplies their needs (4). Though humans may be unfaithful, God is consistently reliable. To help them understand how much they've been given, the gifts may be taken away for a while, and they may return to bondage (5-7). But God allows such trials only with anguish (8a-d). He still has concern and compassion and a commitment to his people (8e-f). He is holy, not carnal; his holiness does not allow him to discard his desire for his people (9). So, as they repent and turn to follow him once again, God will roar with pride and protection (10). They will humbly come and God will restore them to their place in his kingdom (11).

All of us can be encouraged by Hosea's reminder of God's undying love for his children.

## **Ethical implications of Hosea 11**

Hosea 11 is a metaphor or parable primarily about God's behavior toward his people. If we wish to infer some principles about *our* behavior, we should

start with an acknowledgement that our observations will be tentative and limited.

We can see that God punishes his people for disobedience. Some of their sins are briefly mentioned (sins relevant to the father-son analogy), and we may infer that we should avoid such behavior. But punishment usually comes after instruction and warning, not before. It seems best to base ethical concepts on scriptures that give instruction or direct commands rather than try to infer them from metaphorical accusations.

We can also see that God continues to love his people despite their disobedience. We might infer that we should act as God does, but this is not always a safe inference. We know which attributes we should imitate from *other* scriptures. We should base our ethical understanding on those other scriptures, not on Hosea 11. Hosea 11 is only an illustration that might be *adapted* for ethical instruction.

After stating those cautions, I would like to comment on three ethical principles illustrated in Hosea 11.

1) We should acknowledge God. Hosea accuses Israel of worshipping idols (11:2). It is well known that idolatry was a serious sin against God; this requires little explanation. However, Hosea also accuses Israel of the sin of not knowing that God healed them (v. 3c). Why is ignorance a sin? The Israelites should have known their national traditions about God's role in the nation. They claimed to know (8:2), but Hosea criticizes them for a lack of knowledge (2:8, 4:1, 4:6, 5:4, 8:14, etc.). The problem was not just a failure to know God in the sense of having a relationship with him, it was also not knowing the *fact* that he was the giver of their blessings. The Israelites gave the credit to idols (2:5, 2:12) and to themselves (12:8). Acknowledging God as Giver is fundamental to our relationship with him. As Paul criticized the gentiles, "although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him" (Rom. 1:21). Being a provider is one of God's Fatherly functions, and it is good for us to be aware of the source of our blessings.

2) If we punish, it should be done in love, for rehabilitation rather than vengeance. This is true for parental discipline and for congregational discipline. Hosea 11:2 shows us that warnings (calling the children back to right conduct) should come before more severe discipline; love should be shown throughout. Before punishment, the wayward children should be assured of love and desire for reconciliation, just as the Israelites were given a promise of restoration.

3) We should always desire reconciliation and restoration, whether of rebellious children or fallen Christians. The latter situation is perhaps the

most significant contemporary ethical implication of Hosea 11. How we ought to hope for the restoration of those who have fallen away! How can we cast them away? It is only with anguish that we can see them even temporarily separated from God's people. How can we be content while they are falling short of God's blessings? Our hearts should burn within us for the return of the lost sheep. We should consistently call them back to the right path. We should continue to teach that God is the source of all blessings, of every good gift, of the spiritual healing and nourishment that we all need, of the help that we need with our burdens.

Our Father always desires to pick us up when we stumble and fall, and we, as his children, should have the same desire and the same actions toward wayward children. No matter how far they stray, no matter what false gods they serve, we should yearn for their rehabilitation and restoration. We should never "write off" or forget someone who falls away, even someone who becomes bitter and turns against us. Though they go into exile away from the church, though they become captive to the bottle or the dollar, we must let them know that restoration is possible. And more than possible! Restoration is earnestly *desired* by us and by our Father. And as we make it known, we encourage it to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Return to the Lord and follow him, and he will restore us to our homes in his kingdom. Our hopes and hearts need to be in the eventual restoration of our brothers and sisters.

## 59. THE JONAH SYNDROME

“How I Learned to Stop Worrying  
and Meet the Assyrians”

By Neil Earle

“Show proper respect to everyone; love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king” (1 Peter 2:17). This is a great code to live by, but much easier said than done. And why? Perhaps because our jaded society tends to make us suspicious and fearful of people different from ourselves, and that can’t help but short-circuit human relationships.



Numerous studies show that the gospel is carried to new people most effectively by personal contact. Fuller Seminary’s mission expert Charles Van Engen has written: “The world is ever more a stew-pot of people of very diverse cultures, religions and world-views working and living side by side.” For this reason, Van Engen argues, “the local body of believers is the primary agent for crossing cultural barriers and experiencing reconciliation in Christ.”

Your Muslim or Buddhist neighbors may question your religion, but they cannot overlook the fact that you, John or Joanne Q. Christian, are different from other people on

the block. Or at least we should be.

This is why at a time when Christians are asked to consider the importance of personal evangelism to the basic mission of the church, we need to reacquaint ourselves with the book of Jonah. As we seek to reach out to the world on a more personal level, the experiences of this Old Testament prophet can at the very least help show us how *not* to do mission.

## Called to mission

Romans 15:4 tells us that everything written in the past, that is, in the Old Testament, “was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope.”

What is immediately hopeful about Jonah’s story is that it shows us in stark terms that the source of genuine mission and outreach springs from the kindness and mercy of the great heart of God. Near the end of the book of Jonah, God asks Jonah the core question: “Should I not be concerned about that great city?” (Jonah 4:11).

That gets to the heart of effective biblically based mission. Yes, indeed. God was concerned about the cities of Jonah’s day as he is concerned about the people in our cities today.

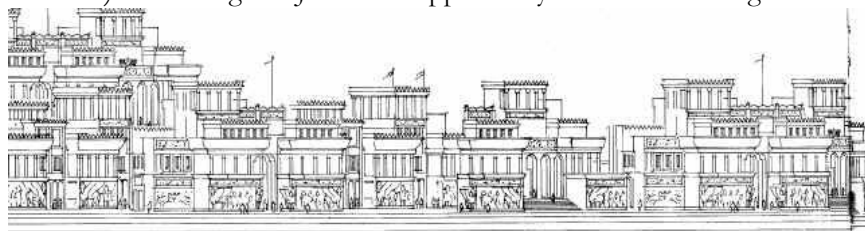
The biblical witness is consistent. Abraham pleaded for the life of Sodom (Genesis 18:23-32). Jeremiah urged his countrymen in Babylon to “seek the peace of the city.” Jesus wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44), and Jonah ... well, Jonah had some lessons to learn.

God had a challenging new assignment for Jonah, one that totally upset the prophet’s comfortable worldview: “The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me’” (Jonah 1:1). Jonah’s reaction was far from exemplary— “Welllllllll... Not me, Lord — find someone else, please!”

## ‘Calculated terror’

What is going on here? A little background helps. Up till now Jonah had been a successful prophet. His ministry had gone well.

Sometime in the long and prosperous reign of King Jeroboam II (c. 793-753 B.C.) God had given Jonah the opportunity to announce the good news





that Israel would expand its borders (2 Kings 14:23-25). As a native of Gath-heper, a town in the area later known as the Galilee, Jonah was overjoyed to proclaim that his nation would expand northward. Perhaps this expansion would secure a buffer zone between Israel and the dreaded Assyrians to the north.

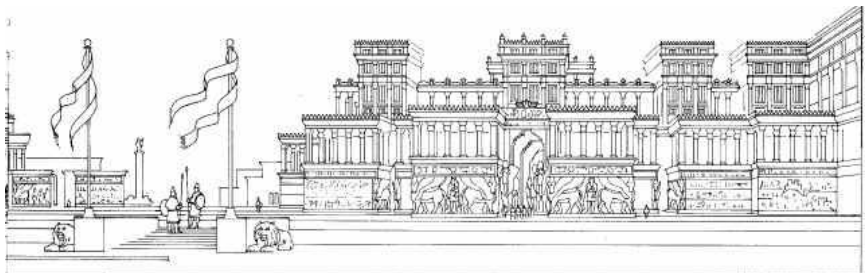
The Assyrians — now there was a name to reckon with. These fearsome practitioners of the art of war had already made their reputation with raids into Israelite territory in the previous century. Assyria’s King Shalmaneser III (858-824 B.C.) had received tribute from Israel around 841 B.C., and Adad-Nirari was banging at the gates of Damascus in 804 (Lasor, Hubbard and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, page 207). Cunning and cruel, Assyria’s swift-moving legions were the most dreaded military force in Jonah’s day and Nineveh was the capital of Assyria!

The Assyrians believed in a policy of calculated terror. The Assyrian king Ashur-Nasir-Pal II (883-859 B.C.) inscribed his tactics on a stone monument: “I stormed the mountain peaks and took them ... with their blood I dyed the mountains red like wool.... The heads of their warriors I cut off, and I formed them into a pillar over against their city, their young men and their maidens I burned in the fire” (Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past*, pages 202-203).

Ugh! How gruesome can it get! And God was asking Jonah to preach to these people? Impossible. Inconceivable! Jonah, like everyone else in the Ancient Near East, was all too familiar with the sins of Nineveh, its “evil ways and ... violence” (Jonah 3:8). This was too much for Jonah to handle. “A mission to Nineveh, to the Assyrians? Lord, you must be kidding,” we can almost hear Jonah saying.

## Fight and flight

In times of stress, psychologists tell us, we react with either fight or flight. Perhaps Finegan’s words give us a partial insight into Jonah’s flight reaction to God’s calling: “But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that



port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord” (Jonah 1:3).

What a strange turn of events. A prophet trying to escape God’s presence by leaving the territory of Israel! And the irony is he leaves from the exact same seaport where God will send the apostle Peter to start the gentiles on the road to salvation (Acts 10:5-6).

So now the lessons from Jonah begin to accumulate. For openers, the prophet seems to have had a rather limited concept of God. Whether from a panicky fear of the Assyrians or from the shattering of his comfortable assumption that God was working only with Israel — he hightailed it to Tarshish, perhaps in the Western Mediterranean.

He was about to learn that God was a lot bigger than the Mediterranean. He would be faced with the uncomfortable fact that this God he served loved all people — yes, even the dreaded Assyrians.

The action continues: “Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up” (Jonah 1:4).

Where was Jonah during this storm? Incredibly, he was in the hold of the ship fast asleep (verses 5-6). What was going through his mind? Was he totally uninterested in the fate of the ship or — as seems more likely — was he still in shock over God’s shaking up of his neat and tidy division of the world into good guys and bad guys?

Some expositors picture Jonah down in the hold in utter shock, perhaps curled up in a fetal position. Perhaps it was fear and loathing toward the Assyrians, or perhaps it was the trauma of a shattered worldview, but Jonah was in deep, emotional disturbance.

We can almost hear him pondering down in the darkness of the cargo hatch: “Isn’t Israel God’s nation? Aren’t they a special treasure above all nations (Exodus 19:5)? Why is God sending me to the wicked Assyrians? No, no, it can’t be ... can it? ... Does God love Israel’s enemies as much as he loves Israel?”

Deep down, Jonah may have suspected that this was the case (Jonah 4:2-3). But he has to work out this shattering new formula in his mind. Jonah had misread his country’s history. God had called Israel to be “a kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:6). Their founding father had been commissioned for an international mission of mercy — “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:3).

## **Missing the boat!**

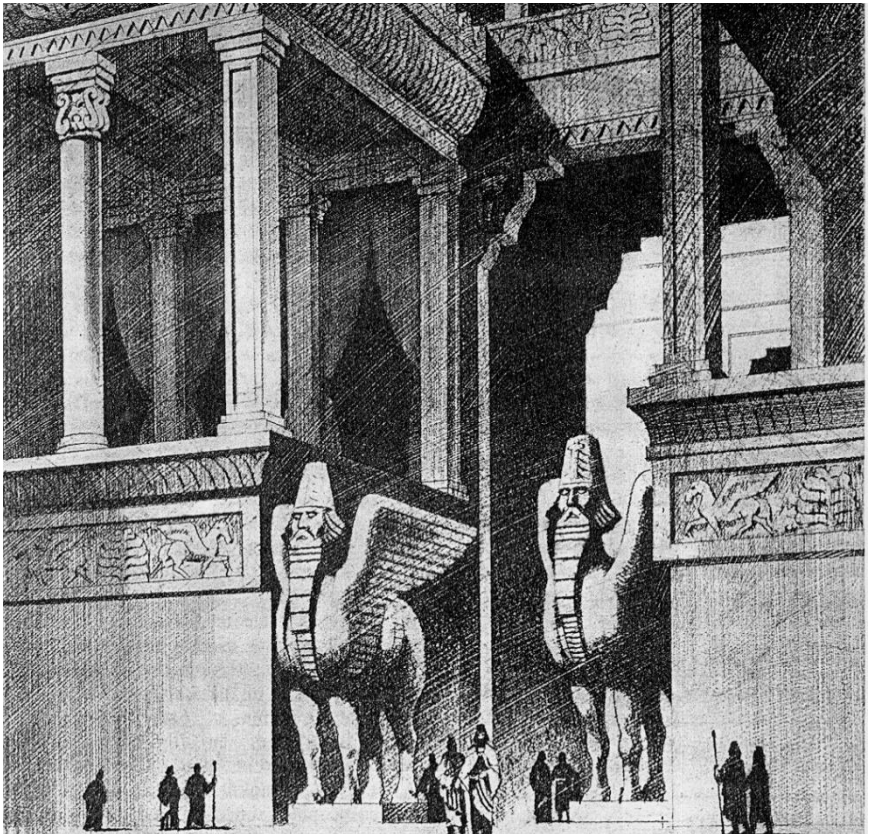
Israel was to be a missionary nation (Isaiah 49:6). Jonah was being

challenged to stretch his thinking; to be inclusive, not exclusive; to be generously ecumenical, not religiously self-satisfied; to be sharing the light, not narrowly looking down on others.

Jonah may well have known all this, but he needed time to process the shock. He may have been on a vessel but he was missing the boat. No wonder he is too distracted to notice that they're all about to drown!

And here is where the narrative gets deliciously ironic. The gentile sailors are terrified of the storm. They have “done something religious” — they have been calling out to their gods, a common procedure when in trouble (Psalm 107:23-37). The captain shakes Jonah awake: “How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish” (Jonah 1:6).

Nope. Jonah remains obdurate. When it becomes clear that all this is his fault, he self-righteously boasts: “I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land” (v. 9). This would sound comical if so much was not at stake. The pagan sailors could well have asked:



“If your God created the sea why did you think you could escape him on a boat?”

Ah — a logical question. But Jonah isn’t thinking logically. Neither do we in times of great mental and emotional turmoil. You can almost visualize Jonah thinking of his next move, his mind moving at the speed of light. He responds impulsively: “Throw me into the sea. All this is my fault!”

Incredibly, those pagan sailors refuse. They have more respect for human life than the so-called man of God. Ironic, isn’t it? Finally, events force them to do the deed, but with great reluctance. They do it respectfully, reverently, invoking God’s name (v. 14). So look who’s religious!

Further, when the storm subsides they offer sacrifices to God (v. 16). What potential converts these rough seamen might have made. But Jonah is oblivious to such thoughts. Into the sea he goes. Tragically, he chooses self-extinction rather than accept God’s mission.

We all know what happens next. Mercifully, God wasn’t through with his servant yet. A great fish swallowed up Jonah, the man of God. A man of God, all right, but a man who had head knowledge without corresponding heart knowledge.

But he was still Yahweh’s servant and, with his back to the wall, inside the great fish, Jonah prayed a beautiful prayer of repentance (Jonah 2:1-9). Notice the lessons here. His “death” in the sea reconciled the sailors to God (Jonah 1:16). His “resurrection” from the belly of the fish would result in the salvation of Nineveh (Jonah 3:10). In all of this, the recalcitrant Hebrew was an amazing foreshadowing of the Messiah, also from Galilee, Jesus the Christ (Matthew 12:40).

## **The still, small voice**

But the repentance of Nineveh brought out the worst in this hot-headed prophet. Habits of a lifetime are not so easily overcome. He resented God’s grace and mercy (Jonah 4:1-3) and erupted with one of the most ironic requests ever made by a biblical rarity: a successful prophet: “Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live” (Jonah 4:3).

God does not respond in kind (just as well for Jonah!). In this experience and in the incident with the worm and the vine (verses 5-8), God twice approached Jonah in the soothing tones of a skilled Counselor: “My friend Jonah, come on now, be reasonable. Do you have a right to be angry about all this? Don’t you see what I’m doing here?” (Jonah 4:9-10).

What great lessons for us today, we New Testament Christians who are continually challenged to keep growing, to keep breaking new ground in our

relationship with God. Perhaps we can all relate to Jonah — a sincere servant of God with a successful track record who still had so much to learn about the depths of God’s goodness and grace.

Yes, we need to stay humble before God’s overwhelmingly unfathomable love. God’s mission of mercy is for everyone who will hear — including the Assyrians. It is so splendidly all-encompassing.

This supreme reminder from the book of Jonah was stated more powerfully by another prophet, Isaiah. He too passed on a message about the greatness of God, about his loving concern for all people, all nations. And he reflected: “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:9).

### **God goes ahead of us**

Perhaps Jonah was so busy being a prophet to Israel that he forgot the purpose of his nation’s existence — to be a nation of priests to the whole world, regardless of color, creed or birth. Perhaps his involvement in his own country’s liturgy and service — the true religion of God — had blinded him to the fact that God looks on the heart.

The sinning Assyrians, idolaters, not commandment-keepers, found that God could be reached through attitudes of repentance and faith rather than religious ritual. Yes, even heathen sailors could turn to God once given a chance. You never know where God might be working.

These are profound lessons to ponder as the challenging 21st century unfolds. God wants us to expand our horizons, to be always ready for new opportunities that lie around us. From Jonah we learn that God is always ahead of us — the Creator of all wants to be the Redeemer of all (Ephesians 1:9-10).

In that hope we can recommit ourselves to the mission of making disciples — “of all the nations” (Matthew 28:18-20). God is already there ahead of us just as he was already working with ancient Nineveh before Jonah appeared, just as he later prepared the ground for Philip (Acts 8:26-40).

God wants us to succeed in our mission, for really the mission is his. He wants to use us to help spread more of his light to a dark world and...avoid the Jonah Syndrome.

## 60. AMOS 7 – WHEN MERCY FAILS

By Michael Morrison

Amos 7 addresses the role of mercy in God's judgment. The book of Amos begins by announcing punishments on nations near Israel (1:3-2:5). Each prophecy begins with a stereotyped introduction that includes the words "I will not turn away." Then, punishments are pronounced on Israel – primarily for social injustice and false worship (2:6-6:14). The theological theme of these earlier chapters may be summarized by saying that God judges his people and punishes disobedience.

Amos 7 focuses on a related issue. The first two visions (7:1-6) introduce an element of mercy; punishment can be relented. Amos pleads with God for mercy, and it is granted. Amos' shift from "forgive" (7:2) to "cease" (7:5), however, subtly weakens the argument for mercy.

In the third vision (7:7-9), the vision requires explanation, and the explanation involves punishment. If the reader expected Amos to ask for mercy again, he finds instead that Amaziah interrupts and emphasizes the punishment (7:10-11). After two visions of mercy and a third vision in which mercy is missing, a logical question for the reader would be: Will God no longer have mercy?

Verses 10-17, the story of a confrontation between Amos and the priest of Bethel, provides an answer. Although at first it seems that the story interrupts the visions, it is literarily connected with them, especially the third vision.

Verses 8-9, the conclusion of the third vision, provide an emotional high point and a pivot for the chapter. Words in vv. 8-9 are repeated in vv. 10-17:

“midst of my people Israel...midst of the house of Israel” (vv. 8, 10); “high places...sanctuaries...sanctuary...temple” (vv. 9, 13); “Isaac...Israel...Israel...Isaac” (vv. 9, 16, etc.); “house of Jeroboam...house of El...house of Israel...house of El...house of the kingdom...house of Isaac” (vv. 9, 10, 12, 16); “Jeroboam...Jeroboam...king’s” (vv. 9, 10, 12); “sword...sword...sword” (vv. 9, 11, 17). These recurring words connect vision three to the story of the confrontation between Amaziah and Amos.

Another indication that the confrontation account is connected to vision three is vision four (8:1-3), which is structurally similar to vision three. Among other similarities, these visions share the statement that God will not pass by Israel anymore (the opposite of the mercy shown in visions one and two). Visions three and four also share a use of symbols, explanations by the Lord of those symbols, and a poetic pronouncement of punishment. The Amaziah story is not at the end of a series of three visions, but rather is sandwiched between the third and fourth visions, visions of certain punishment rather than mercy. The Amaziah story must be seen in the context of those visions. The story itself emphasizes the certainty of punishment. Near the beginning of the story, and at its very end, is the clause, “Israel shall surely be led away captive from his own land.” First said by Amaziah, later confirmed by the Lord, this clause reinforces the sense of certainty.

The Amaziah story contrasts with visions one and two – in a way that visions three and four do not – in the role that intercession plays. Intercession, given a prominent role in visions one and two, has no counterpart in visions three and four. In visions one and two, the prophet intercedes with God on behalf of Israel, and God listens. Visions one and two could have presented God’s mercy simply as part of his inherent nature, but instead they present mercy as a response to the prophet’s intercession. In contrast, Amaziah makes no attempt to intercede for his people. He refuses to listen.

Amos has saved Israel twice, but Amaziah rejects the intercessory role of Amos. Amos asks God to cease, and Amaziah tells Amos to cease. Amos speaks for the Lord; Amaziah speaks for the king. Amos asks for mercy for the people; Amaziah’s request is for the king. Amos is not profiting from his prophecy, but Amaziah is acting in self-interest.

Amaziah represents the king. He reports to the king (vv. 10-11) and he says that the city and sanctuary are the king’s (v. 13). Amaziah’s complaints (vv. 10-11, 13) are political rather than religious. Both king and false priest oppose God’s prophet. They represent the whole nation, as shown by the

parallelism of v. 9 (“of Isaac...of Israel...of Jeroboam”) and v. 11 (“Jeroboam...Israel...land”), Amaziah’s equation of Bethel with the king and kingdom (v. 13), and the fact that punishment is pronounced not only on Amaziah (v. 17a-e) but also on the whole nation (v. 17f).

The confrontation provides a setting for Amos to argue his authenticity as a prophet, but that is not its primary purpose. Amos’ authenticity is claimed in 1:1-2, 3:1, 3:8 and throughout the book. The story of Amos’ occupation and calling is in 7:14-15 primarily to contrast with Amaziah’s role as professional priest of the king and the kingdom. Whether Amos represents God is not in question here; what is highlighted is the fact that Amaziah rejects Amos.

Verse 13, the climax of Amaziah’s message, acts as a pivot point within the confrontation account. Amos turns it against Amaziah in v. 16. The punishment in v. 17 is prefaced by “therefore”; the reason was given in v. 16: Punishment will come because the nation, represented by king and priest, has rejected the preaching of God’s prophet. They exiled God’s prophet, so God will exile them. When people refuse to listen to God’s messengers, they have cut themselves off from correction. Their problems will only get worse. God has mercy as long as there is hope for change for the better, but mercy loses its purpose when the prophets are expelled from the land.

Israel’s problems were made worse by the temple at Bethel, which gave Israel the name of the Lord and the veneer of religion, but failed to address the people’s injustice and immorality. As long as Israel rejected the true prophets and listened instead to their own counterfeits, God could not teach them anything. So the deceptive places of worship would be destroyed (7:9). And, as we find later in the book, God would take even his name away from them (8:11).

This section of Amos (7:1-8:3) has two emotional climaxes. Vision one begins the section with a conciliatory tone (“forgive”); vision two (“cease”) is less conciliatory, more neutral. Vision three starts neutral (“setting a plumb line” = judging) and quickly turns condemnatory. The Amaziah story then reduces the emotional tone with some narrative indicating a reaction to the third vision and a request for the prophecies to stop. Then the story builds authority (God told me to do this) and delivers a strong pronouncement. Vision four follows with a graphic comment about many dead bodies being thrown out.

The Amaziah story serves several functions: 1) It explains that punishment has become certain because the prophet and his message have been rejected by the king-sponsored religious authority. 2) It contrasts Amos’



intercession for the people with Amaziah's acting on behalf of the king. 3) It gives an emotional interlude that accentuates the graphic punishment pronounced in the fourth vision.

### **Application today**

The primary theological message of the chapter is that God does not continually extend mercy to those who have hardened their hearts to reject his message and his messengers. Whether this principle applies in the new covenant is a question for further theological discussion, but the implication from *this* chapter is that people should listen to God's inspired messengers.

God speaks to us today in two ways: through the Bible and through contemporary religious leaders. The Bible gives us a standard of right social conduct and worship. It announces that disobedience, including a refusal to trust God, will be punished. It also announces that mercy is generously available. God is merciful as long as we are willing to listen. However, if we reject the message (expel it from our kingdom, so to speak), there is not much hope for improvement, and mercy does not achieve its purpose. Our families will suffer, our inheritance will be given to others, we will die in an unclean condition, and our decision means that we will be outside of God's kingdom (cf. v. 17). If we want mercy, as we all should, we must remain willing to listen.

Another ethical implication for individuals can be seen by noting the responsibility of civil and religious leaders, represented by Jeroboam and Amaziah, for their communities. The leaders' decisions can cause the people to suffer. The individual may not be able to choose a different civil leader, but the individual can choose a different religious leader and can choose whether to follow the state religion. The individual has a responsibility to discern true leaders from false, true correction from false assurances of safety. Amos 7 does not tell us *how* to discern true ministers from false, but it reminds us that we should. We must be willing to listen to preachers and teachers of God's truth, who have the responsibility of applying God's word to contemporary situations. If we want mercy, if we want God to continue working in us, we must listen to God's messengers.

## **61. LIFE WITH GOD IN THE BOOKS OF MOSES**

Series by Michael Morrison

In the second century, a Christian leader named Marcion suggested that we should get rid of the Old Testament. He created his own version of the New Testament in which he had only Luke's Gospel, and several of Paul's letters, but he removed all the quotes from the Old Testament. His idea was that the Old Testament God was an inferior being, the tribal god of the Jews.

Marcion was excommunicated for spreading this idea, and the early Christian church started to form its own canon of Scripture, including four Gospels, and all the letters of Paul, including the quotes from the Old Testament. Ever since then, the Christian church has kept the Old Testament as part of the Bible. The Old Testament gives us a context that helps us understand who Jesus was, and what he did for our salvation.

Nevertheless, some Christians have trouble with the Old Testament. It just seems so different than the New Testament. All that history and all those wars don't seem to have much to do with Jesus, or with Christian life today. There are laws and regulations on one hand, and on the other there is Jesus and Paul, who seem to be talking about something quite different. We have ancient Judaism on one hand, and Christianity on the other.

Some Christians emphasize the Old Testament more than others do. Some keep the seventh-day Sabbath, the dietary laws of the Old Testament, and perhaps some Jewish annual festivals. They have misunderstood what

the Old Testament is for us today.

Other Christians are more like Marcion – they never read the Old Testament. Some are even *anti*-Jewish. In Nazi Germany, prejudice against Jews was unfortunately supported by the church, and went along with a dislike for the Old Testament. Not everyone who ignores the Old Testament is anti-Jewish, but that is where it led some people.

The Old Testament Scriptures speak of Jesus Christ (John 5:39; Luke 24:27). We need to hear what they have to say. One point they make is not just about Jesus specifically, but about God’s larger purpose with humanity, the reason that Jesus came to save us. The Old Testament, as well as the New, tells us that *God wants to live with us*. From the Garden of Eden to the New Jerusalem, God’s goal is that we will live with him in harmony.

## In the Garden

Genesis 1 describes the creation of the universe by a stupendously powerful God, who simply speaks everything into existence. God said, Let this happen, and it did. He gave the command, and it happened.

In contrast, Genesis 2 describes a God who gets his hands dirty. He enters the creation, forms a human being from dirt, plants trees in the garden, talks with the human, and fashions a companion for the man.

Neither story gives us the full picture, but together they reveal different aspects of the same God. Even though God has the power to create by command, he chose to be personally involved in the creation of humanity. He spoke to the man, brought animals to him, and orchestrated events so the man would take delight in his new companion.

It’s a God who had both stupendously divine powers, and a God who is a lot like a human – a being who is both human and divine; that is the way that this God is revealing himself to be, from the very beginning.

Although Genesis 3 reports a tragic turn of events, it also reveals more about God’s desire for humanity. After the first humans sinned, “Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden” (3:8).

The all-powerful God had become like a human, making noise as he walked in the garden. Though he could appear instantly if he wished, he chose instead to meet the man and woman on their level, at their speed. This did not seem to surprise them; God may have walked and talked with them for many days.

They had no fear before this, but now they were afraid, and they hid.

Although they were shrinking away from the relationship, God did not. He could have easily left in a huff, but he did not abandon what he had made. The God who planted “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” also knew what they would do with it.

There were no lightning bolts or displays of divine anger. God asked the man and woman what they had done, and they answered. He then told them the consequences they would experience as a result of what they had done. He still interacted with them on a personal level, making clothes for them (3:21), and he took steps to ensure that the humans would not live forever in their state of alienation and shame (3:22-23).

Genesis mentions that God continued to interact with certain individuals: Cain, Noah, Abram, Hagar, Abimelek, and others. Of special importance for us is the promise he made to Abraham: “I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant...to be your God *and the God of your descendants after you*” (17:1-8). He promised an ongoing relationship with the people.

## Calling a people

Many of us know the basic story of Exodus: God called Moses, brought plagues upon Egypt, brought Israel through the Red Sea to Mt. Sinai, where he gave them the Ten Commandments. But we often overlook *why* God did these things.

He revealed his plan to Moses: “I will take you [plural] *as my own people*, and I will be your God” (Exodus 6:7). This is a statement of personal relationship. In the personal covenants made in that culture, marriages were formalized with the words, “You will be my wife and I will be your husband.” Adoptions (done usually for inheritance purposes) were made with the words, “You will be my son and I will be your father.”

God said, “*Israel is my firstborn son*... Let my son go, so he may worship me” (4:22-23). God was giving the people not the status of slaves, but the status of “son” – being part of the family, with inheritance rights.

God offered a covenant that included many blessings: “If you obey me..., you will be for me *a kingdom of priests* and a holy nation” (19:5-6). God was offering to give the people direct access to him – but the people told Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die” (20:19). Like Adam and Eve, they were afraid.

Moses went up the mountain for more instructions from God (24:18). Then come several chapters about the tabernacle, its furniture and the worship. But amidst all this detail, we should not overlook the purpose: “Have them make a sanctuary for me, and *I will dwell among them*” (25:8).

From the Garden of Eden, through the promises to Abraham, through

the calling of a people out of slavery, and even into eternity, God wants to live with his people. The tabernacle was a place for God to live with his people, to be accessible to them. God told Moses, “I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God... I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of Egypt *so that I might dwell among them*” (29:42-46).

## Face to face with God

Although the Israelites shrank back, God continued to interact with his people through Moses acting as a mediator. “The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend” (Exodus 33:11). “Face to face” does not literally mean that Moses saw two eyes, a nose and a mouth. Moses “heard the voice speaking to him from between the two cherubim above the atonement cover on the ark of the covenant law. In this way the Lord spoke to him” (Numbers 7:89).

Was God inside the ark? Some later Israelites seemed to think that he was, but the writers of the Bible knew that God created the heavens and earth, and he was bigger than the universe (Deuteronomy 26:15). But the writers also wanted to say that this incredibly big God was also living with his people. Although he was everywhere all at once, he was also present in a special way in certain places and working with certain people.

Moses told the people, “The Lord spoke to you face to face out of the fire on the mountain” (Deuteronomy 5:2-4). “The Lord your God...is among you” (Deuteronomy 6:15). “The Lord your God moves about in your camp to protect you” (Deuteronomy 23:14). After the people entered the Promised Land, they were “to seek the place the Lord your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his Name there for his dwelling... There, in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your families shall eat and shall rejoice” (Deuteronomy 12:5-7).

Moses told God, “You, Lord, are with these people and...have been seen face to face... and you go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night” (Numbers 14:14-15). God says, “I, the Lord, dwell among the Israelites” (Numbers 35:34).

When God passed the baton of leadership to Joshua, he told Moses what to tell him: “The Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you” (Deuteronomy 31:6-8). That is a promise for us today, too (Hebrews 13:5). That is why God created humanity from the very beginning, and why he sent Jesus to save us: We are his people. He wants to live with us.

## 62. LIFE WITH GOD IN THE BOOKS OF HISTORY

Israel's history can be summarized by the word *failure*.

In the books of Moses, God's relationship with the Israelites is described as a covenant, a relationship in which promises of loyalty are given. However, the Bible describes numerous failures on the part of the people. They did not trust God, and they grumbled about what he was doing. When they tried to do things their own way, they experienced pain, sorrow, strife and death. This pattern of distrust and disobedience is found throughout Israel's history. The people had brief periods in which they were faithful to God, but they often fell into idolatry.

The bright spot in Israel's history is the faithfulness of God. The repeated failures of the people serve, by contrast, to emphasize how God was repeatedly faithful to them despite the many times they rejected his love for them. He was a success.

This gives us great confidence today. Since God did not reject his people back then, he will not reject us, either, when we have times of failure. We may experience pain and sorrow as the result of bad choices, but we don't ever need to be afraid that God will stop loving us, no matter how far astray we may go. He is always faithful.

### **Promise #1: a leader**

During the period of the judges, Israel saw the cycle of disobedience – oppression – repentance – deliverance. After each leader died, a new cycle

would begin. After several of these cycles, the people asked the prophet Samuel to give them a king, a royal family, so one of his descendants would always be available to lead the next generation.

They had already seen plenty of evidence that children of a good leader were not necessarily good leaders, but they wanted leaders they could see, rather than one they could not. They did not want to wonder who the next leader was going to be.

God told Samuel: “They have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you” (1 Samuel 8:7-8). God had been their unseen leader, but the people did not trust him. God therefore provided a person to be a mediator, a representative, who could rule the people on God’s behalf.

Saul, the first king, was a failure, because he did not trust God. Samuel then anointed David as king. Although he had significant failures in his life, his overall desire was to worship God. After he had achieved some peace and prosperity, he offered to build a great temple for God in Jerusalem. It would hopefully be a symbol of permanence not only for the nation, but also for their worship of the true God.

In a Hebrew play on words, God said, “David, you will not build me a house. It will be the other way around: I will build *yom* a house, the house of David. It will be a royal dynasty that will last forever, and one of your descendants will build the temple for me” (2 Samuel 7:11-16, my paraphrase). God used the covenant formula: “I will be his father, and he will be my son” (verse 14). He promised that David’s dynasty and kingdom would last forever (verse 16).

But not even the temple lasted forever. The dynasty of David fell—religiously and militarily. The people were conquered, taken into exile, and there was no king.

What had happened to God’s promise? These events showed that we cannot look to a physical temple. It is a mistake to trust in human leaders. What we need is Jesus, the true temple in which God lives, the true mediator who is always faithful to God, the Son of David who is God made visible.

The promises given to Israel find their fulfillment in Jesus. He is the focal point of God’s relationship with his people. The security that the people wanted is found only in a person who is permanent, and permanently faithful. The history of Israel points us to something greater than Israel, yet is also part of Israel’s history.

## **Promise #2: God's presence**

God had lived in the tabernacle: “I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling” (2 Samuel 7:6). The temple was built as a new dwelling place for God, and “the glory of the Lord filled the temple of God” (2 Chronicles 5:14; 6:2). This was symbolism, because the people knew that even the heavens were not large enough to contain God (2 Chronicles 6:18).

God promised to live among the Israelites forever, if they obeyed him (1 Kings 6:12-13). But since they did not obey, he decided “to remove them from his presence” (2 Kings 24:3) — that is, to send them into captivity in another land. Since the temple symbolized God's presence with his people, the destruction of the temple and the forced removal of the people symbolized how far the people had strayed from God.

But God had not abandoned his people. He promised that he would not let their name disappear (2 Kings 14:27). They were able to repent and draw near to him even in a foreign land. God had given them the promise that if they returned to him, he would return them to their land, symbolizing a restoration of the relationship (Deuteronomy 30:1-5; Nehemiah 1:8-9).

## **Promise #3: a homeland forever**

God promised to David, “I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning” (1 Chronicles 17:9).

The promise is surprising, because it comes in a book that was written after Israel had been taken into exile. The Jews who returned to Judea knew that they were still being oppressed by wicked people (Nehemiah 9:36-37). They knew that this was not the end of the story.

The history of Israel points beyond itself—it is a promise awaiting fulfillment. The nation needed a leader who was descended from David, and yet greater than David. They needed the presence of God not just symbolized in a temple, but made real to each person. They needed a land not just with temporary peace and prosperity, but a transformation of the entire world, so that there would be no oppression at all.

Israel's history points to a future reality. But there was a reality in ancient Israel, too. God had a covenant with Israel, and he was faithful to it. They were his people, even when they were disobedient. Although many of the people went astray, many others did not. Although they died without seeing the promises fulfilled, they will live again to see the leader, the land, and best of all, eternal life in the presence of their Savior.



## 63. LIFE WITH GOD IN THE PSALMS

Although a few of the psalms survey the history of God's people, most of the psalms describe *an individual's* relationship with God. We might think, Well, that was just for that particular person – it is not necessarily a promise for anyone else.

However, these poems were included in the song-book of ancient Israel, and people were therefore invited to participate in the relationship that was described in these songs. They indicate that God's relationship was not just with the nation as a whole, but also with individuals in that nation. Everyone could take part.

### **Complaining, not explaining**

But the relationship was not always as smooth as we might like. The most common type of psalm was the lament – almost a third of the psalms bring some sort of complaint to God. The singers described a problem, and asked God to solve it. This was rarely a polite, objective description: it was wailing and complaining. It was exaggerated, full of emotion. Psalm 13 is an example:

How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts  
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?

People knew the tune because it was sung frequently. Even those who

were not personally distressed were invited to join the lament, perhaps as a reminder that some of God's people were in distress. They looked to him for intervention, but they did not know when it would come.

This is part of our relationship with God today, as well. Although God has acted decisively in Jesus Christ to defeat our worst enemies (sin and death), he does not always take care of our physical problems as quickly as we might like. The songs of lament remind us that we may experience difficulties for a long time, and yet we continue to look to God to resolve the problem.

Some psalms even accuse God of being asleep:

Awake, and rise to my defense!  
Contend for me, my God and Lord.  
Vindicate me in your righteousness, Lord my God;  
do not let them gloat over me.  
Do not let them think, "Aha, just what we wanted!"  
or say, "We have swallowed him up." (Psalm 35:22-25)

The singers did not really imagine that God was asleep at the bench of justice. These words are not intended to be an objective explanation of reality. Rather, they are descriptions of the person's emotions—in this case, frustrations. The national songbook invited people to learn this song, to express the depth of the feelings. Even if they did not currently face enemies like this, the day might come when they would.

And so the song cries out for God to take vengeance:

May all who gloat over my distress  
be put to shame and confusion;  
may all who exalt themselves over me  
be clothed with shame and disgrace. (verses 26-27)

In some cases, the words are "over the top"—way beyond what we'd expect to hear in church:

May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see,  
and their backs be bent forever....  
May they be blotted out of the book of life  
and not be listed with the righteous. (Psalm 69:23, 28)

Happy is the one who seizes your infants  
and dashes them against the rocks. (Psalm 137:9)

Did the singers mean these words to be taken literally? Perhaps some did. But there is a more gracious way: We "should understand their extreme

language as hyperbole—emotional exaggerations by which the psalmist... wants God to know how strongly he feels about the matter” (William Klein, Craig Blomberg, and Robert Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 285).

The psalms are full of emotive language. They exaggerate a person’s frustrations into cosmic battles with raging seas, carnivorous animals, and even death itself. The Israelites were invited to sing along, thinking of their own difficulties even as they sang of far greater ones.

In our relationship with God, we are encouraged to acknowledge the depth of our feelings, and to give the matter into God’s hands.

## Giving thanks

Some of the songs of lament end with promises of praise:

I will thank the Lord because he is just;

I will sing praise to the name of the Lord Most High. (Psalm 7:17)

It might sound like the person is bargaining with God: If you help me out, then I will praise you. But in reality, the person is *already* praising God. The request for help is an implied statement that God is able to do what he is asked. The people are already looking to him for the intervention they need. They expect to return to the place of worship on the next festival and sing songs of thanksgiving. They know those tunes, too.

Even those who are grieving are invited to learn the psalms of thanksgiving and praise, because there will come times in their life when these songs express their emotions as well. We are invited to praise God even when we are personally in pain, because other members of the community are in times of joy.

Our relationship with God is not just about us—it’s about us being participants in the people of God. When one person rejoices, we all rejoice, and when one is suffering, we all suffer. The psalms of lament and the psalms of rejoicing are equally appropriate for us. Even when we have many blessings ourselves, we lament that many Christians are being persecuted for their faith. And they sing psalms of joy, too, confident that they will see better days ahead.

Psalm 18 is an example of thanksgiving after God has provided a rescue. The superscription explains that David sang this “on the day the Lord rescued him from all his enemies”:

I called to the Lord, who is worthy of praise,  
and I have been saved from my enemies.

The cords of death entangled me;  
the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me....

In my distress I called to the Lord....  
The earth trembled and quaked,  
and the foundations of the mountains shook....  
Smoke rose from his nostrils;  
consuming fire came from his mouth,  
burning coals blazed out of it. (Psalm 18:3-8)

Was David drowning in a flash flood and saved by a volcanic explosion? No—exaggerated language like this is found throughout the psalms. All the people of God are invited to join in the song whenever they are saved from their distress—no matter whether their enemies are invaders, neighbors, animals, or drought. The point is not in the specifics, but in the overall sweep: We praise God for whatever he does to help us.

## Praise songs

The shortest psalm illustrates the basic outline of a hymn: a call to praise, followed by a reason:

Praise the Lord, all you nations;  
extol him, all you peoples.  
For great is his love toward us,  
and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.  
Praise the Lord [*Hallelu Yab*]. (Psalm 117:1-2)

Some of these poems praise God for the creation; some praise him for his love for Zion; some praise him for ruling his people. Psalm 96 combines several motifs:

Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness;  
tremble before him, all the earth.  
Say among the nations, “The Lord reigns.”  
The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved;  
he will judge the peoples with equity. (Psalm 96:9-10)

God’s people are invited to incorporate these emotions as part of their relationship with God: feelings of awe, admiration, and safety. Do God’s people always have these feelings of safety? No, the songs of lament are a reminder that we do not.

One interesting thing about the book of Psalms is that all these different types of psalms are mixed together. Praise and thanksgiving and lament are all intertwined, reflecting the fact that God’s people experience all of these. Our relationship with God is not limited to the good times—it includes the depths of sorrow as well as the heights of joy. God is with us wherever we go.

## Royal psalms

A few of the psalms concern the kings of Judah, and may have been sung every year at a public pageant. Some of these we now apply to the Messiah:

I will proclaim the Lord's decree:

He said to me, "You are my son;  
today I have become your father.

Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance...."

Therefore, you kings, be wise;  
be warned, you rulers of the earth.

Serve the Lord with fear  
and celebrate his rule with trembling. (Psalm 2:7-11)

The ancient Israelites sang this about their own king. It was an exaggeration for him, but true for Jesus. All the psalms find their fulfillment in Jesus. As a human, he experienced our sorrows, our fears, our feelings of abandonment, as well as our faith and praise and joy. We praise him as our King, as the one God uses to bring salvation to us.

The psalms invite our imagination, and our participation as the people of God.

## **64. LIFE WITH GOD IN THE PROPHETS**

In ancient tribal societies, if a man wanted to adopt a child, the ceremony was simple: “I will be to him a father and he will become my son.” The marriage ceremony was similar: “She is my wife and I am her husband.” No paperwork was needed (most people couldn’t read). In front of witnesses, they just stated the relationship they had with each other, from both sides, and those words made it official.

### **Like a family**

When God wanted to state his relationship with ancient Israel, he sometimes used similar words. “I am Israel’s father, and Ephraim is my firstborn son” (Jeremiah 31:9). He is stating the terms of the relationship: like parent and child.

God also uses marriage as a description of the relationship: “Your Maker is your husband. ...as if you were a wife” (Isaiah 54:5-6). “I will betroth you to me forever” (Hosea 2:19). It was like husband and wife, a family relationship.

More often, the relationship is phrased in this way: “You are my people, and I am your God.” In ancient Israel, “people” was a relationship word. When Ruth told Naomi, “Your people will be my people” (Ruth 1:16), she was promising a new and permanent relationship. This was where she belonged.

## Reassurance in time of doubt

When God says, “You are my people,” he (like Ruth) is stressing relationship more than ownership. “I am bonded to you; you are like family to me.” God says this more often in the prophets than in all the previous writings put together.

Why is it stated so often? Because the relationship was threatened by Israel’s lack of loyalty. Israel had ignored their covenant with God and worshipped other gods. So God had allowed the northern tribes to be conquered by Assyria, and the people taken away. Most of the Old Testament prophets lived shortly before or after the nation of Judah was conquered by Babylon and taken away as slaves.

The people wondered, Is it all over? Has God abandoned us?

The prophets respond with repeated assurances that No, God has not abandoned us. We are still his people, and he is still our God. The prophets predicted a national restoration: the people would return to the land and, most importantly, return to God. The future tense is often used: “They will be my people, and I will be their God.” God has not abandoned them—he will restore the relationship. He will bring it about, and make it better than before.

## Isaiah tells the story

“I reared children and brought them up,” God says through Isaiah. “But they have rebelled against me.... They have forsaken the Lord; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him” (Isaiah 1:4). As a result, the people were sent into captivity. “My people will go into exile for lack of understanding” (Isaiah 5:13).

It looked like the relationship had come to an end. “You have abandoned your people,” Isaiah says in 2:6. But it was not permanent. “My people who live in Zion, do not be afraid.... Very soon my anger against you will end” (10:24-25). “I will not forget you” (44:21). “The Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones” (49:13).

There will be a huge regathering: “The Lord will have compassion on Jacob; once again he will choose Israel and will settle them in their own land” (14:1). “I will say to the north, ‘Give them up!’ and to the south, ‘Do not hold them back.’ Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth” (43:6).

“My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest” (32:18). “The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces.... In that day they will say, ‘Surely *this is our God*; we

trusted in him, and he saved us” (25:8-9). And God says to them, “*You are my people*” (51:16). “Surely they are my people, children who will be true to me” (63:8).

Isaiah uses the terminology of marriage: “Your Maker is your husband—the Lord Almighty is his name.... The Lord will call you back as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit” (54:5-6). “For a brief moment I abandoned you,” God says, “but with deep compassion I will bring you back” (54:7).

This is good news for everyone: “Foreigners will join them and unite with the descendants of Jacob” (14:1). “Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say, ‘The Lord will surely exclude me from his people’” (56:3). “The Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples” (25:6). They will say, “This is our God...let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation” (25:9).

## **Jeremiah tells the story**

Jeremiah combines the family metaphors: “How gladly would I treat you like my children and give you a pleasant land.... I thought you would call me ‘Father’ and not turn away.... But like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you, Israel, have been unfaithful to me” (Jeremiah 3:19-20). “They broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them” (31:32).

He says that the relationship is over: “These people do not belong to the Lord. The people of Israel and the people of Judah have been utterly unfaithful to me” (5:10-11). “I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries” (3:8). “The Lord has rejected them” (6:30). “I will forsake my house, abandon my inheritance.... I hate her” (12:7-8). “The Lord does not accept them; he will...punish them for their sins” (14:10).

But this is not a permanent rejection. Throughout the book of Jeremiah, he continues to call them “my people.” “Is not Ephraim my dear son, the child in whom I delight?... My heart yearns for him; I have great compassion for him” (31:20). “How long will you wander, unfaithful Daughter Israel?” (31:22).

He promises to restore them: “I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them” (23:3). “I will bring my people Israel and Judah back from captivity” (30:3). “I will bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the ends of the earth” (31:8). “I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (31:34). “Israel and Judah have not been forsaken by their God” (51:5).

Most importantly, God will change them so they will be faithful: “Return,



faithless people; I will cure you of backsliding” (3:22). “I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord” (24:7). “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts” (31:33). “I will give them singleness of heart and action.... I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me” (32:39-40).

God reminds them of the relationship promise he made to the nation in the days of Moses. He had told them: “Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people” (Jeremiah 7:23; see Exodus 6:7). He repeatedly promises a renewal of that relationship: “They will be my people, and I will be their God” (24:7; 30:22; 31:33; 32:38). “I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they will be my people” (31:1).

This is equivalent to making a new covenant with the people: “I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah” (31:31). “I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them” (32:40). They will respond: “Yes, we will come to you, for you are the Lord our God” (3:22). “They will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest” (31:34).

Jeremiah saw that the Gentiles would be included, too: “As for all my wicked neighbors who seize the inheritance I gave my people Israel, I will uproot them from their lands.... And if they learn well the ways of my people and swear by my name...then they will be established among my people” (12:14-16).

### **Ezekiel tells a similar story**

Ezekiel also describes God’s relationship with Israel as a marriage: “When I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your naked body. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign Lord, and you became mine” (16:8). He swore an oath: “On the day I chose Israel, I swore with uplifted hand to the descendants of Jacob and revealed myself to them in Egypt. With uplifted hand I said to them, ‘I am the Lord your God’” (20:5).

In another analogy, God describes himself as a shepherd: “As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered” (34:12-13). He modifies the relationship formula to suit the analogy: “You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God” (34:31).

He predicts that the people will return from exile: “When I gather the people of Israel from the nations where they have been scattered...they will

live in their own land” (28:25). “Then they will know that I, the Lord their God, am with them and that they, the Israelites, are my people” (34:30).

God will change the people’s hearts: “I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God” (11:19-20).

“I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God” (36:27-28). “I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land” (37:14). “I will save them from all their sinful backsliding, and I will cleanse them. They will be my people, and I will be their God” (37:23).

The relationship is also described as a covenant: “I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you” (16:60). “The people of Israel will no longer stray from me, nor will they defile themselves anymore with all their sins. They will be my people, and I will be their God” (14:11).

He will live among them: “My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people” (37:27). “This is where I will live among the Israelites forever. The people of Israel will never again defile my holy name” (43:7).

## **The minor prophets**

Hosea also described a break in the relationship: “You are not my people, and I am not your God” (1:9). Instead of giving the words of a wedding, he states the words of a divorce: “she is not my wife, and I am not her husband” (2:2). “The people have broken my covenant and rebelled against my law” (8:1). “Because of their sinful deeds, I will drive them out of my house. I will no longer love them” (9:15).

But as with Isaiah and Jeremiah, this was an exaggeration. Hosea immediately adds that the relationship is not over: “In the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ they will be called ‘children of the living God’” (1:10). “In that day,’ declares the Lord, ‘you will call me “my husband”... I will betroth you to me forever” (2:3-4).

“I will show my love to the one I called ‘Not my loved one.’ I will say to those called ‘Not my people,’ ‘You are my people’; and they will say, ‘You are my God’” (2:23). “I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them” (14:4).

Joel has similar words: “The Lord was jealous for his land and took pity on his people” (2:18). “Never again will my people be shamed” (2:26).

Amos also says, “I will bring my people Israel back from exile” (9:14).

“You do not stay angry forever,” says Micah. “You will be faithful to Jacob, and show love to Abraham, as you pledged on oath to our ancestors in days long ago.”

Zechariah gives a good summary: “Shout and be glad, Daughter Zion. For I am coming, and I will live among you,” declares the Lord. (Zechariah 2:10). “I will save my people from the countries of the east and the west. I will bring them back to live in Jerusalem; they will be my people, and I will be faithful and righteous to them as their God” (8:7-8).

“I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, ‘They are my people,’ and they will say, ‘The Lord is our God’” (13:9).

Gentiles will be included: “Many nations will be joined with the Lord in that day and will become my people” (2:11).

“On the day when I act,” God says, “they will be my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as a father has compassion and spares his son who serves him” (Malachi 3:17).

## **Summary**

The Old Testament presents a story that is not finished. It presents a tension that is not resolved. It awaits a Messiah who will bring it all together in himself.

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Most of the artwork was done by Ken Tunell while he was employed by Grace Communion International. Artwork on pages 16, 40, 112, 165 was done by James Tissot. The photo on page 5 is by NASA. Mike Wimmer did the illustration on page 55. Basil Wolverton did the illustration on page 104.

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